Words for birds: a lexicon of North American birds with biographical notes. By Edward S. Gruson. Pp. xiv + 1-305, illus. New York: Quadrangle Books, Inc. 1972. US $8.95.

At one time the scientific names given to animals and plants meant something. Features of shape, size, colour, or anatomy, for example, were recognised by descriptive terms such as *griseus, melanophris,* or *sulcirostris.* Geographical localities could be specified such as *chathamensis, novaezealandiae, westlandica* or even *pacifica.* Names might be given commemorating those who had found the original specimens or who deserved recognition by the author for some other reason: *bulleri, forsteri, hectori, huttoni,* and *pycrofti* are familiar to us. To-day, particularly in groups of marine or terrestrial invertebrates, names which mean little or nothing are bestowed freely without thought as to whether anyone so inclined will burn his midnight oil trying to discern the author's reason for his choice. How many people would realise that an animal called *Taihape karori* is, in fact, a shore-living marine amphipod (a " sandhopper " of sorts) originally described (by J. Laurens Barnard in 1972) from Eve Bay, Wellington Harbour and recorded from Whangaparoa Peninsula, Leigh and Gisborne. Examples have been given of irrelevant, absurd or unnecessarily complicated names (such as *Cancelloidokytodermogammarus (Loveninuskytodermogammarus) loveni* Dybowsky, 1926, the like of which we hope never to see again) and the inquirer is referred to *Methods and Principles of Systematic Zoology* by Mayr, Linsley & Usinger (McGraw-Hill, 1953) or to Blackwelder's *Taxonomy: a text and reference book* (Wiley, 1967) for further comments on this theme. Happily, with birds things seem to be different, largely, I imagine, because most species of birds were described in the days when naturalists not only had benefited from a classical education in the basic Greek and Latin with the accompanying knowledge of mythology but were able to commemorate obvious features of plumage, size, habitat, or geographic source, as well as honouring their collectors, friends or relatives.

R. B. Sibson has introduced us to something of the derivation of the names of New Zealand birds in Helen Oliver's *Annotated Index to some early New Zealand bird literature,* 1968. An earlier attempt to explain the meanings and origins of both the scientific and common names of British birds was made by R. D. McLeod in his *Key to the Names of British Birds* (Pitman, 1954). This book and the outstandingly-scholarly New Naturalist volume by the Rev. Edward Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds* (Collins, 1958), described as " an enquiry into the origin and distribution of some magico-religious traditions," provide many hours of fascinating delving for those interested in such things. I dealt some years ago (*Notornis* 8: 183, 1959) with a most informative specialized work on the origins of the names of parrots (*I name this Parrot,* by A. A. Prestwich, 1958), now in its second edition (1963) in which " brief biographies of men and women in whose honour commemorative names have been given." There are also two little-known articles on the derivation of the names of ducks (N. Kuroda, 1968. The explanation of the scientific names of the Japanese duck tribes. *Tori* 18 (84): 267-271; and 1971. The explanation of the scientific names of the duck tribes of the world. *Bull. Biogeogr. Soc. Japan* 27 (4): 19-36). Of a wider scope, at least in its geographic coverage, is Colonel Owen E. Wynne's *Names of*

Birds of the World. Key to Authors and those commemorated (Privately published at Fordingbridge, Hants, 1969). This book, of 246 pages, lists alphabetically, with a one line biographical note, all those people who have named a bird scientifically or who have been commemorated in a bird's name. Each of these books suffers its deficiencies or inadequacies. Such bibliographic tasks are both time consuming and frustrating to do and not without their pitfalls, but we must be indebted to their authors for providing so much of interest.

Edward Gruson's book, however, is something of all of these other books and more than any of them, in its own geographically-limited way, being the best, most readable, etymological, biographical and historical introduction to the names and naming of birds. It is all about " Eponomy " as Gruson calls it. The word refers to the habit of people naming species of birds to commemorate other people. Gruson points out that — " It is the person memorialized that interests me." However, I take issue with him over the word itself. I can't find it in my dictionary, American usage included. My *Webster Universal* tells me that an " eponym " is a " real or mythical person for whom a clan, family, nation, or place derives its name." Another great American work, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* tells me much the same and from the OED we learn that " eponymy " pertains to the practice of referring names to an " eponym," one who gives his name to a people, place or institution. The word is derived " by adaptation " from the Greek *eponomos* formed on *epi-* = " upon " + *onoma,* from *onuma* = " name " in the Aeolic dialect of Asia Minor. So there you have it. Perhaps " eponomy " *is* permissable. The point I make, however, is that when one starts off with a suspect derivation for what the book is all about, how true are the entries themselves ? Let us console ourselves because Gruson seems to be reasonably accurate even if nodding in his knowledge of which William Swainson was which.

Gruson's real limitation for New Zealand or European readers is that he only deals with North American birds, some 800 of which are included. Although most of them are unknown to us, there is still sufficient in the lore and legend, mythical, factual or historical, surrounding these birds, their names and those who named them, to make quite fascinating reading.

Words for Birds is arranged in systematic order from the Loons (Gaviide) to Grosbeaks, Buntings, Finches and Sparrows (Fringillidae) with a bibliography and indexes of common, generic and specific names, and of people for whom birds were named. To take an example of what the book has to offer — under the American Wood Warblers or Parulidae, we find not only an explanation of the term " warbler " as well as of " Parulidae " but reference to each species of wood warbler; for instance, to " Bachman's Warbler. *Vermivora bachmanii.* See above [i.e. an entry under the Worm-eating Warbler, *Helmintheros vermivorus,* which tells us that *vermivorus* is Latin for " worm-eating," formed from *vermis,* " worm," and *vorare,* " devour "]. *bachmanii* For a biography of Rev. John Bachman, see page 95." There an imaginative life story of John Bachman, a " Southern worthy," friend and collaborator of the great John James Audubon is revealed, written with a nice touch for the humorous and unusual aspect of their work together. Other entries tell us that although Elliott Coues was thrice married he found time to write perhaps 1000 works on ornithology,

that Audubon was " a neurotic, passionate, creative genius " whose continual poverty with several bankruptcies drove his wife Lucy to working as a governess to rich families and himself to " eking out an existence as an itinerant portraitist." As Gruson comments, " This for a man who dreamt of being the Lost Dauphin." We are told something of the " mysterious Henry C. Palmer," one of Lord Rothschild's collectors originally commissioned to collect on the Chatham Islands and who is said to have been " obscurely murdered " on the goldfields of Australia. The story of Felix-Louis l'Herminier (1779-1837) is amongst others given to the reader and will serve to help those of us who can never remember how to spell or pronounce his name commemorated in Audubon's Shearwater, *Puffinus lherminieri.* William Swainson, the famed English naturalist who emigrated to New Zealand in 1841 receives a page and a bit under Swainson's Hawk but Edward Gruson, following a commonly-made mistake, muddles him (1789-1855) a little with William Swainson (1809-1884), Attorney-General, Member of the Executive and Legislative Council, writer and churchman, in attributing to him the teaching at Wesley College, Auckland, of Walter Lawry Buller who, himself, gets an entry under *Puffinus bulleri.*

Words for Birds bears comparison with Col. Wynne's *Biographical Key* for the North American part of which it is really a lively expansion. Although Wynne's *Key* must not be underrated, Gruson's book is more satisfying. In contrast to 1½ pages devoted by Gruson to John Bachman, Wynne has this entry: " BACKMAN [misspelt thus], Rev. Dr. J. (1790-1874) *Vermivora* 1834. Condor 1928, 30: 266 "; 1872 " Quadrupeds of N. America " 1854. Condor 1928, 30: 266 "; but Wynne goes further and has an entry for the authors of species as well so we find out something about one Widmann in the entry — " WIDMANN, O. (1841-1933) *Vermivora bachmanii* 1897. " Cat. Birds of Missouri " 1907. Auk 1954, 71: 456." Referring to the Buff Weka, *Gallirallus australis hectori,* Wynne has — " HECTOR, Sir J. F.R.S. (1834-1907) *Gallirallus* 1874. Dir. Geol. Surv. New Zealand. Dict. Nat. Biogr. 1907-11, 2: 236." Or to a kingfisher — " *gertrudae,* Halcyon 1924. Whitney, Gertrude, Mrs H. P. (q.v.) " and the cross-reference reads — " WHITNEY, Gertrude, Mrs H. P. (1877-1942) *Halcyon* 1924. nee Vanderbilt, purch. Rothschild Coll. 1932, mar. 1896." How nice it would be to have Edward Gruson telling us in his own particular style all about the many-facetted Sir James Hector, for whom an overwhelming amount of information is available, or giving us the inside story, for which there is good documentation also, of the Whitneys' part in the purchase and removal of the Rothschild collection from Tring to New York (see Murphy, R. C. 1932. Moving a Museum. *Nat. Hist.* 32: 497-511) as well as the history of the Whitney South Sea Expedition itself (see Murphy, R. C. 1924. The Whitney South Sea Expedition. *Nat. Hist.* 24: 538-553).

This treatment of the origins of the popular or vernacular names of birds and the explanations of classically-derived scientific names is really a delight even if one does have an odd quibble with the author from time to time. The only thing to do is to get *Words for Birds* and enjoy it, if indeed " words for birds " (" eponomy," " eponymy," what you will) intrigue you as much as they do your reviewer.

E. W. D.