

OUTRAM BANGS AND THE CREATION OF A WORLD-CLASS BIRD COLLECTION AT HARVARD'S MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY

By William E. Davis, Jr.

Outram (pronounced *ooh-tram*) Bangs was a very lucky man: he found a job in later life that was exactly suited to his personality and the way he wished to spend his time; and through his position as a curator of birds at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), he gained an international reputation in ornithology. He was also fortunate to live during an era in ornithology that suited well his temperament and ambitions.

Outram Bangs was born on January 12, 1863, in Watertown, Massachusetts, which was then a rural area of farm, fields, and forests. He was named after his great-uncle, Sir James Outram, and Outram was his mother's middle name (Barbour 1932). Outram and his brother Edward, who was two years older, roamed the local countryside as boys, making collections of birds' eggs and nests as well as small mammals that they procured with sling-shots (Peters 1933a). Although their interests remained focused on mammals until the turn of the century, both Edward and Outram were elected to the Nuttall Ornithological Club on March 15, 1880. Batchelder, in his history of the Club (1937), comments on the inseparable Ned and Outram, and of the latter says:

None among us had the inspired vision even to dream what the latter had before him. We knew him as a youthful boxer, as a keen quail-shooter, we saw his dazzling waistcoats, but no wild imagining could have pictured the all-embracing systematic knowledge of birds and the great collections of his building, that together have added to the fame of a great museum. [Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), Harvard University]

Outram Bangs was to have a career of long and distinguished service to the Nuttall Club. He was a member of its governing council from 1897 to 1930, and was nominated for vice-president (but not elected) in 1919, following the death of president William Brewster (Davis 1987).

His career at the MCZ is even more outstanding, and it was at the MCZ that Outram Bangs was to carve himself a niche in ornithological circles and provide a legacy that extends to the present day. Outram attended Noble's School in Boston, entered Harvard College in 1880, and graduated in 1884. Presumably he made connections at the MCZ during his undergraduate years. After college he tried working but apparently found it distasteful, and since he came from a well-to-do family, he turned his attention to his first love — collecting birds and mammals with his brother. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, he

devoted his energies to the study of the mammals of eastern North America, trapping and hunting from Nova Scotia to Florida and hiring collectors to supplement his own efforts. He published his first paper in 1894 on mammalogy, and by 1900 had published more than 70 papers, of which fifteen were about birds (Porter 1943). His formal connection with the MCZ began in 1899, when the MCZ Visiting Committee raised \$5000 to purchase the Bangs brothers' mammal collection of about 10,000 skins and skulls (Barrow 1995). Following the sale of his collection, Outram was duly appointed Honorary Assistant in Mammalogy. He was already changing the focus of his energies to birds, and in addition to curating the mammal collection, functionally took over the curatorship of birds from William Brewster. Brewster was nominally the curator, but put most of his energies into amassing his own private collection of birds. This was consistent with the attitude of Alexander Agassiz, who was concerned about reducing expenses (Brewster received no salary) and thought that there was an overemphasis on acquiring specimens in the MCZ (Barrow 1995). When Outram began formally working at the MCZ (also at no salary) in 1899, the bird collection stood at slightly over 30,000 skins. When he died in 1932, the collection was at about a quarter million, making it about equal in number to the U.S. National Museum (Smithsonian) collection, and ranking behind only the collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which at the time may have been the largest collection in the world (Peters 1933b).



Photograph of Outram Bangs reproduced by permission of the Museum of Comparative Zoology Archives, Harvard University.

Although responsible for curating the birds and mammals of the MCZ, he lived in the shadow of William Brewster, who retained the title of Curator of Birds until his death in 1919. Outram's title was changed over the years — Assistant in Charge of Mammals in 1904, Curator of Mammals in 1911, Curator of Mammals and Birds in 1919 — but it was not until 1924 that he finally became the official MCZ Curator of Birds, a title which described what he had been doing for more than a quarter century (Peters 1932a). In addition, he had chronic difficulties with the MCZ Director, Samuel Henshaw, who came to that office in 1904, several years after Alexander Agassiz had decided to step down. Henshaw, "who, by training and temperament, was utterly unfitted" for the job, and whose appointment was described as "one of Mr. Agassiz's extraordinarily stupid acts" (Barbour 1935), remained as Director until 1927, when he was forced to retire at age 75. Apparently enraged by the decision, he is reputed to have burned a sizable number of MCZ documents, and he never reentered the MCZ during the remaining 14 years of his life (Winsor 1991).

Outram's troubles with Henshaw show up from time to time in letters to Henshaw, and suggest that Outram was a rather sensitive soul, and one who would not tolerate insult. Their troubles began early, as a 1904 letter indicates:

Dear Mr. Henshaw

I am very sorry I carelessly left the door of the bird room open yesterday. I believe this is the only time I ever did such a thing, and I am so particular about such that I have often gone up stairs again to be sure I had shut the doors.

As to your other accusation, that I took birds belonging to the Museum and left no record, I did nothing of the sort. . . . Not a bird belonging to the Museum was disturbed in any way. If anyone said that I did such a thing they simply said what was not true.

I also yesterday compared some West Indian hummingbirds in company with Austin Clark, with material in the bird room, bringing out my own skins and taking them back again. This — to compare any of my birds with birds in the museum — Mr. Brewster told me to do whenever I wanted to. Still if there is going to be any fuss made about it I shall never put my foot in the bird room again.

In a March 1, 1909, letter to Henshaw (MCZ Archives), Outram offered his personal collection of bird skins to the MCZ, with the proviso that he would have space available to write, work, and keep his papers and books, and have free access to the Museum bird collection and the right to work on it. He valued the collection at \$20,000, and described it as "about 23,000 skins (all picked with no rubbish)." The gift and stipulations were apparently accepted, but despite the fact that the MCZ got his considerable curatorial services for

nothing, as well as the birds, troubles with Henshaw continued to flare up from time to time, as illustrated in a October 17, 1914, letter to Henshaw:

There is some misunderstanding about birds in some way. I certainly took no birds belonging to the Museum. In fact I took no birds at all. . . . However this may be I had taken a good deal of interest in the col. of birds in the Museum, and had named and identified many things that came in. I had also been instrumental in getting quite a lot of stuff there, but as I hate rows and petty jealousy more than any thing else in the world I shall never again touch a bird skin belonging to the Museum or enter the bird room under any circumstances whatever, Except once, and that will be to collect up a lot of my own things that are there.

Once again his threat to leave the Museum went unfulfilled, and he continued to play the dominant role in the Bird Department. Outram was a meticulous person who insisted in keeping the collection of birds tidy with bird skins arranged in neat rows in their trays. He was also meticulous about preparing bird skins. This obsession with neatness and order produced an MCZ bird collection that was eminently user-friendly.

Outram worked together with his wealthy friend John Eliot Thayer to hire collectors to help build the MCZ collections, and together they attracted other patrons, including John Phillips, who is best remembered for his four-volume *The Natural History of Ducks* (1922-1926). The burgeoning collections — particularly of the 1920s — drew a number of local ornithologists with their collections, mostly Nuttall Ornithological Club members including Thomas E. Penard and Frederic H. Kennard. This renaissance was aided by the generous patronage and support of Thomas Barbour, who was to become the next Director of the MCZ, and the generous bequest of William Brewster. Outram responded by undertaking the ambitious plan of acquiring specimens of all the world's genera of birds, and by 1932 the MCZ had all but 49 of the then-recognized genera (Barrow 1995). Outram Bangs was largely responsible for converting the MCZ bird collection from mediocre to world-class. In addition, he was the mentor and teacher of James Lee Peters, who would replace him as Curator of Birds.

His own research was decidedly nineteenth century in its orientation. He produced about 275 papers, primarily involving descriptions of new genera, species, and subspecies, together with taxonomic and nomenclature discussions (Peters 1933a). Even his best friends admitted that he would not “generalize or put a surmise on paper” (Barbour 1932), and he has been described as an “uninspired author who avoided making the kind of generalizations that might have made a more lasting mark on the literature of ornithology and evolutionary biology” (Barrow 1995). Outram had little formal training in biology and lacked an advanced degree, which may have made him hesitant to make those

generalizations. Many of these papers were published in the *Proceedings* of the New England Zoological Club, a "club" that Outram and four other naturalists created solely to give them a rapid publication outlet for their taxonomic papers. Like most of the traditional museums that had developed in the nineteenth century, the MCZ was oriented toward natural history, which meant collecting, describing, naming, and classifying organisms, and had been increasingly challenged and/or superseded by academic departments which were laboratory oriented and emphasized cytology, embryology, and genetics (Barrow 1995). Nonetheless, he developed a special interest in the birds of China, and during a 1925 trip to Europe, where he made visits to the important museums, he arranged to buy the J. D. LaTouche collection of the birds of China, which helped build the MCZ China collection to preeminence in the world (Peters 1933a).

His personality traits and character are somewhat enigmatic. He is referred to by his friends and mentors as "forceful," "kind," "genuine," "enthusiastic," "philosophical and calm." But he was also described as shrinking fearfully from speaking before even a small group, shunning honors and recognition, and as "painfully harassed as he stood in Sanders Theatre to receive the honorary degree which Harvard gave him" [1918] (Barbour 1932). None of the memorials mention his having any employment, and yet he managed the family cranberry business in Wareham, and although shy and retiring, he states in a September 22, 1910, letter about problems with the cranberry pickers, "They have struck on me once this year, but this year being a light crop around here, I could tell them to go to hell. Which I promptly did, and next day they were back again, and went on at my figures." Barbour (1932) recounts a story of a rush-hour episode on the Boston subway when a woman carrying a heavy bundle was jostled by a young man forcing his way on board: "Bangs was next to her, and like a flash his fist struck out and the man fell limp to the pavement." Kind, shy, and hating confrontation notwithstanding, it appears that the old Outram Bangs as a boxer and champion wrestler at Harvard still emerged from time to time.

Witmer Stone, editor of the American Ornithologists' Union journal *The Auk* for a quarter of a century, suggested that Outram had a better knowledge of the birds of the world than any other American ornithologist of the time. Certainly, his accomplishments at the MCZ support such a claim. But his letters preserved in the MCZ Archives demonstrate that he was more than just an ornithologist. They show him to be a broadly based naturalist, with references to "those big southern grasshoppers" which turned up in September; chasing that "long-bodied dragonfly"; having "done up another cigar box of insects and will send them to you next time I go to Wareham"; or "haven't found a single box turtle, but they will turn up." Perhaps his published work has a nineteenth century ring to it, and perhaps many of his subspecies and a few of his species have, or will disappear into the oblivion of synonymy as DNA-hybridization and other molecular techniques frame new a context for taxonomic ornithology.

But his more important legacy is the bird collection at the MCZ. With the passing of Outram Bangs the acquisition renaissance for the bird collections of the MCZ lost its momentum, although it would continue to a lesser degree under the curatorship of James Lee Peters.

Outram Bangs was one of those fortunate people who was able to do pretty much what he wanted to do in life — and make a substantial contribution at the same time.

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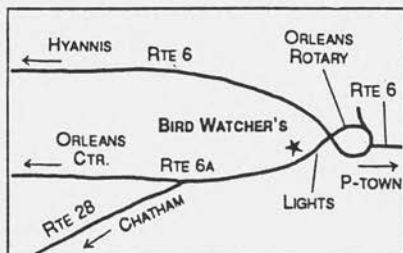
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