

SPECIAL REVIEW
**THE NEW DICTIONARY OF BIRDS AND
THE PROPOSED WORLD LIST**

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A new dictionary of birds. A. Landsborough Thomson (Editor). 1964. London (Nelson) and New York (McGraw-Hill). 928 pages, illustrated, 10 × 7½ in. \$17.50.

Today, some 20 months after its publication and arrival in my dilatory hands for review, little remains to add to what others have already written about this splendid, useful volume. While I appreciate the English fondness for tradition that led the B.O.U. to repeat the title as a "tribute to the memory of Professor Alfred Newton, F.R.S.," I submit that "encyclopedia" describes the present compendium far more accurately than "dictionary." And as its editor points out in his introduction, the work is "in no sense a revision of that classic." It was not designed to nor does it in any way replace Newton's scholarly tome, which will always have an honored place in every ornithologist's working library.

I have not read the entire *New dictionary*—it was meant for consultation rather than steady reading—but I have kept it close at hand and have referred to it on every possible occasion since receiving it. I am impressed first of all by the book's almost unbelievable consistency in style, which bespeaks a monumental task of editing to eliminate the individual idiom so successfully from the contributions of some 170 different authors in 22 countries throughout the world. Secondly I am delighted to find the minimal but still discoverable inaccuracies, such as the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher boldly captioned "Eastern Kingbird" (p. 315), the long-disproved claim that the Ruffed Grouse drums "by striking its wings against its breast" (p. 400), and the perpetuation of the mis-spelling "*mocino*" (pp. 674, 839) despite the contributor's published note that "*mocinno*" is correct. These simply prove that the incredibly productive and impeccably correct Sir Landsborough is really human. Thirdly I have yet to seek within its pages any information the work should reasonably contain without finding it at least mentioned, and usually treated most competently.

For a volume that presents its contents alphabetically, this one places an undue emphasis on classification. It devotes a good 40 pages to some 25 well cross-referenced entries on the subject, ranging from Adaptation to Taxonomy and Zoogeography, some of only a few lines, others (Nomenclature, Name, Genetics) rating 3½ pages each. An additional 7½ pages of the introduction tabulate the orders and families recognized (just why is not entirely clear to me) and explain their adoption somewhat defensively (perhaps because their sequence differs from that of the current British list?). The editor's own 3-page article on Classification contains the following relevant passage (p. 129):

One must not seek to stereotype systematic thought and thus to deter progress; but with such diverse views on the part of specialists, it is for most purposes of ornithology desirable to standardise—at least for a time—one particular system. That followed in the present work down to the familial level, and set out at the beginning of the volume, is the now widely adopted system of Peters, based on Wetmore.

While I couldn't agree more whole-heartedly with the first 13 words (which

the rest of the first sentence contradicts), I must point out that the system has not been heretofore "widely adopted," and it is definitely not that of "Peters based on Wetmore," but what for convenience we may call the "crows-last" sequence, characterized essentially by its placing the crow group in the place of honor at the summit as the most highly evolved of all birds.

Ernst Hartert is usually credited with originating this sequence (though in reverse order), but in Heft 1 of his *Die Vögel der Paläarktischen Fauna* (November, 1903, p. 1) Hartert acknowledges that he is adopting the sequence followed by R. Bowdler Sharpe in his *Handlist* (1899 *et seq.*), which in turn Sharpe took from the classification he proposed in 1891. Here the passerine sequence has the Corvidae in the lead, as in Sharpe's volume 3 of the "Catalogue of birds in the British Museum" (1877). Sharpe nowhere gives any reason for starting with the crows, but I have heard it said that it was because they happened to be in the cases nearest his office at the British Museum. Whether this be true or is merely "*ben trovato*" as Sharpe himself would have said, I can't think of a better reason than simple physical convenience.

The followers of Sharpe and Hartert staunchly defend keeping the corvids at the top of the list on the basis of the crows' alleged high intelligence. This blatant anthropomorphism apparently stems from W. K. Parker's (1872, *vide* A. Newton, *A dictionary of birds, Introduction*, p. 118, 1896) claim that "The Crow is the great subrational chief of the whole kingdom of the Birds; he has the largest brain; the most wit and wisdom . . ." And truly crows do show a number of "human" characteristics. Some can be taught to talk, others are prone to steal and to hoard things, and the jackdaw is reputed to play with fire. But mynahs and parrots make much better talkers than crows, and parrots also pick things up with their grasping feet to eat and to inspect—which is how some think man developed his intelligence. So why not place the parrots in top place, as Bonaparte did in 1850? Or how about the titmice, which have learned to decap milk bottles and can be taught to tell fortunes? Or the House Sparrow or the Starling, both of which have set fire to human dwellings by carrying lighted cigarets to their nests in the eaves?

By all the standard criteria—anatomical, morphological, distributional—the crows are a rather generalized group that belong somewhat low on the passerine family tree. And this is where Wetmore and W. DeW. Miller placed them in their first version (*Auk*, 43: 337, 1926) of what has become known as the "Wetmore classification." At the top they placed the nine-primaried oscines terminated by the fringillids because, as Wetmore later (*Smiths. Misc. Colls.*, 139: 22, 1960) explained: ". . . this group is the modern expression of a main core or stem that through the earlier Tertiary period has given rise to more specialized assemblages . . . Further specialization is apparent in some parts of the existing fringilline assemblage that, if undisturbed, may lead to further differentiation . . ." The Wetmore sequence immediately became standard for all American works, the B.O.U. adopted it for their current (1952) British list, and James Lee Peters followed it through the seven volumes of his *Checklist* that he lived to complete. Those who were close to him, as was my privilege, knew that Peters intended to continue that sequence through the Passerines.

Apparently top position in the lineal sequence has become something of a status symbol to the proponents of corvid supremacy, who have shown a corvinely clever deviousness in keeping them there. At the XIth International

Ornithological Congress in 1954, a "European Sub-Committee to *decide* the sequence of Orders and Families within the Passerines" for use by European editors was appointed. The seven men on the committee were all European or European-schooled, imprinted by their earliest training with the crows-last sequence, and they recommended it unanimously. Though the committee contained no Wetmorean representative and its decision was intended to apply only to European works, Ernst Mayr (a member of the committee and a devoted follower of Hartert) applied the decision to the remaining Peters volumes, avowedly (*Breviora*, no. 58, p. 2, 1956) to "place the more primitive families near the beginning and the more advanced families near the end."

Very few Americans to my knowledge have approved this step, and no ornithologist in North or South America has used the sequence so far, other than those who have had to conform to editorial policy in preparing the final Peters volumes. In reviewing the first posthumous volume (IX) of what had been Peters' *Check-list (Bird-Banding)*, 31: 234, 1960) I prophesied:

Fortunately this summary associating of Peters' name with something he disapproved is not likely to prevail . . . I am certain that their passerine sequence will never be adopted by American born and trained ornithologists. Furthermore, I have a strong hunch that Peterson's field guides are going to be more successful in encouraging European adoption of the sequence Peters himself preferred.

This proved essentially true until the appearance of the *New dictionary*, which, as I suggested above, seems to go unduly far out of its way to give the sequence its approval, and which is the first work to justify so doing by claiming it (p. 19) to have "been agreed [on] by a *representative* committee appointed by the XI International Ornithological Congress" (emphasis mine).

Close on the heels of the *New dictionary* came a special review of the second volume of Charles Vaurie's *Birds of the Palearctic fauna* by Professor David Lack (*Ibis*, 108: 141-143, 1966), whose example I am following in treating the *New dictionary* so summarily and using my review thereof to express my views on another subject. Lack dismisses Vaurie's solid, sound, and careful work in a few short paragraphs that damn it with faint praise and express the reviewer's hope "that Vaurie's new book will not be the standard work for many years to come" because the author had the audacity to put some of the passerine families in a new and unfamiliar sequence. Lack then launches into a lengthy plea for an "authorised" classification of the world's birds to be prepared by the I.O.C.'s Standing Committee for Ornithological Nomenclature, "strengthened" by adding "the present editors of Peters"! He suggests so doing would accomplish for the non-taxonomists who are "confused" and "frustrated" by the "chaos" in current taxonomy, what the King James version did to standardize the Bible. Unfortunately the King James Bible was accepted by only a small percentage of the world's Christians (who make up less than one-quarter of the world's human population), and it took scholars almost three centuries after its appearance to incorporate in it changes shown desirable by subsequent researches—and which still are not read in the Anglican services!

Another amazing development in the light of my 1960 prophecy was the publication of a new and revised edition (1966) of the Peterson, Mountfort, and Hollom *Field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe* with the crow section shifted to the end of the book, except for the color plate which remains

where it was in earlier editions. This was done without the consent of the senior author, who is an avowed Wetmorean. Peterson assured me in conversation that he first learned of the change when he saw the new volume, and that it came to him as a complete and most unwelcome surprise.

Meanwhile Professor Lack, while president of the XIVth International Ornithological Congress, scheduled a meeting at Oxford to consider his proposal for the Congress to "set up a small committee to publish an internationally agreed world list of the orders, families, subfamilies, genera and species of birds . . . which national ornithological societies, editors of ornithological journals and others would agree in advance to follow." Notice of the meeting asked "those wishing to speak for or against the proposal" to submit their names to the Congress Secretariat; it also requested those who "on their own behalf or that of a national body or editorial board wish to signify assent without qualification" to submit their names without speaking. No provision was made for those who might have wished to signify *dissent* without qualification.

The meeting was chaired ably and impartially by Jean Dorst of France. No secretary was appointed and, so far as I know, no record of the proceedings of the meeting was authorized or made—which was probably just as well. After introductory remarks by President Lack explaining his proposal, largely as outlined in his Vaurie review, Chairman Dorst called in alphabetical order on the dozen or so delegates who had formally requested to speak. When these had finished, a number of others in attendance spoke from the floor.

The discussion crystallized and brought into the open a number of salient points. First and most obvious, those who spoke in favor of the proposal were mostly, as Lack had predicted (*op. cit.*, p. 142), "those who prepare national lists, arrange museum collections or write books on bird biology," and those who spoke against it were chiefly taxonomists. Those who favored it were far from unanimous on the sequence to be adopted. Many favored using the "Peters" (i.e., crows-last) sequence, mainly because it is readily available in the only world check list in the process of publication. Another school recommended authorizing the current ordinal sequence, on which (they allege) little disagreement exists, and then listing the families alphabetically under each order, followed in turn by the genera and species, each also alphabetically. This "unheuristic" and "intellectually lazy solution," as Mayr (*L'Oiseau*, 35[no. special]: 93, 1965) calls it, to the mounting impasse was first suggested by R. E. Moreau (*Proc. Zool. Soc. London*, 137: 623-626, 1961), with the professed accord of "Philip Ashmole, Phil Hollom, Dr. David Lack, and Sir Landsborough Thomson." Still a third possibility suggested was to have the sequence decided by an independent committee not controlled by the XI Congress decision.

Opponents to the proposal advanced the following arguments:

1. A lineal classification designed to reflect phylogenetic development and relationships must be based on biological evidence, which is dynamic and continuously developing, and cannot be governed, much less stabilized, by dictatorial fiat.

2. The last two decades have seen a tremendous increase in taxonomic research, especially on relationships in the higher categories, that is certain to continue. Students are not only re-examining and delving more deeply into the anatomical evidence, long the main and soundest basis for classification, but are also using such exciting new tools as parasitology, ethology, serology,

and protein analysis. They are producing new concepts so rapidly that any classification purporting to reflect a universally accepted system today is almost certain to be altered and outmoded within a few years.

3. "Authorising" any one particular system, which really means requiring its acceptance and making changes in it difficult, if not impossible, will automatically discourage any thought and progress in systematics.

4. The suggested proviso exempting from agreement "specialist publications involving systematic and taxonomic revisions, and which should be kept continually under review, amendments being published by the Committee whenever necessary" is strangely naive. The list is proposed for the main purpose of discouraging change, which its very existence would unquestionably do.

5. Scientists since the days of the Inquisition have resented being forced to conform to any ideology with which they disagree, and particularly one imposed on them by an authority they had no voice in establishing.

Here I would point out that Professor Lack's alleged "chaos" in nomenclature "hindering biological research" and being "a frustration to the great majority of ornithologists, who are not taxonomists" is considerably exaggerated, even though "non-taxonomists," having by definition little to do with order and arrangement, must expect to be perpetually confused and distressed. It is convenient to be able to find a species in a reference book without looking it up in the index, as I for one have little trouble doing in Hartert, Ridgway, Witherby, Vaurie, or Peterson. For those who don't refer often enough to such standard works to be familiar with their sequences, most are adequately indexed, and it is no great imposition to ask a researcher to consult the back of the book for the page he wants. And "standardising" the sequence at this late date will in no way relieve the seeker capable of remembering only one system at a time of the bother of consulting indexes in the voluminous existing literature.

The meeting terminated (one delegate commented aptly that it disintegrated) after President Lack remarked that, in view of the amount of dissent voiced against his proposal and the manifest lack of harmony of opinion on the world list, he considered no action on it currently feasible. No motion was made, no committee appointed, and Chairman Dorst adjourned the meeting *sine die*.

By now those advocating the establishment of an "authorized world list" should be aware that if they truly desire, as R. W. Storer writes (*Condor*, 61: 153, 1959), "to effect a sequence which will be followed by most ornithologists, they would have a far better chance of achieving it if they used that followed by the A.O.U. and the B.O.U."—and I might add also adopted widely in continental Europe (including Russia), Asia (including China), and Africa. This sequence, which puts the complex of seed-eating fringillines in top place, is based on published objective biological evidence and represents the beliefs of most of the active workers in systematics today.

Above all, the way must be kept open always for the free expression of honest differences of opinion and for the development of logical systematic thought on sound biological grounds.

[While responsibility for all opinions expressed in this review is entirely my own, I have benefitted by the remarks and suggestions of Eugene Eisenmann, Kenneth Parkes, and Alexander Wetmore, each of whom spoke at the Oxford meeting, and of Pierce Brodkorb, Austin Rand, and George Watson. All read and commented on a draft of the review in preparation.—O.L.A., Jr.]