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100 Years Ago in The Auk



From the review (1888, *Auk* 5: 414) of G. Trumbull's "Names and Portraits of Birds Which Interest Gunners with Descriptions in Language Understanding of the People" (1888. New York, Harper and Brothers. viii + 222 pp. [no price given]):

"**Vernacular Ornithology.**—This is a wonderful world of checks, balances, compensations, and reactionary running-gear. For example, the A.O.U. Committee has upset all the technical names of birds that could thus hardly be dealt with, and Mr. Trumbull has set up all the vernacular names that could be treated understandingly. Thus ornithology fattens and flourishes, as on loaves and fishes; for has not our author wrought a veritable miracle; namely, the filling of a 'long-felt want'? (Not that any one has actually felt that want until the void has been filled; but it existed, and only needed filling to be felt and grow by what it fed upon. Even ornithologists, however hopelessly mired down in the mazes of their 'shoptalk,' as our irreverent friend terms their technical vocabulary, may find in this book much to their profit. Seeing that theirs is not the only language that is weighted with synonymatic woe, they may take heart again. Many of them have 'viewed with alarm' as the politicians say, the great load of wordy rubbish that our science carries; the spectacle of a bird with half a dozen generic, a dozen specific names, and several dozen combinations of these two terms has a chastening effect upon the mind. But now, with risen spirits, we can 'point with pride,' like statesmen, to the synonymatic confusion worse confounded which our mother tongue offers to console us, if not to absolve us from our sins. For here we have a thousand and more names for three-score birds! *Et tu Brute*, Mr. Trumbull?

"But to be serious, as befits the rich embarrassment with which the author endows us, let us examine this remarkable work. It treats all the gamebirds of Eastern

North America—the natatorial, gallinaceous, limicoline and paludicole birds ordinarily pursued, for sport by 'that helpless but interesting creature, "the true sportsman,"' or for profit by 'our gunners, a class of men who earn a livelihood by shooting birds.' These we find to be sixty-one in number. They are first named in strict accord with the rules and regulations for such cases and provided by the A.O.U. Committee, the dogmas of which deathless doers of deeds nomenclatural are accepted by Mr. Trumbull with orthodox humility. Then comes a brief description, in language 'understood of the people,' together with a statement of habitat in each case, the range being usually drawn from the same fountain of infallibility whence the sacred scientific names issue: for in the beginning was the word, and the word was with the Committee. With these data comes a portrait in each case—a striking silhouette, or symphony in black and white, struck by the well-known hand of Mr. Edwin Sheppard, who has made better likenesses of more birds than any other American artist now living. Having thus marked down his bird, so to speak, Mr. Trumbull proceeds to bag his game with a wealth and ingenuity of device that excite our unbounded admiration. It is truly an infinite variety that neither age can stale nor custom wither—a bounteousness, a plentitude, a very plethora, the fullness whereof is exhaustless. Allah is said to be invoked by the pious Mussulman under ninety and nine aliases, and history but repeats itself in the myrionymy of the game birds of America. A thousand names, for three-score birds, by a single prophet!" . . . —E.C.