EDMUND SELOUS—AN APPRECIATION

By MARGARET MORSE NICE

"JOY in all wild life and its surroundings, with another joy in Darwin and a social-shunning disposition—and an intellectual love of truth, too"—thus Edmund Selous summed up the "shaping and driving forces" of his life (4 : V). This great naturalist who died last year in England at the age of seventy-six, loved birds passionately, observed them with scientific fervor, and wrote of them magnificently.

Selous' method of approach to his problems showed four chief characteristics: observation — tireless and heroic; studied independence of contemporary naturalists; interpretation of his findings in the light of Darwin; and an intense hatred of killing.

He was a past master of the science of bird-watching—"patient, devoted and inexhaustible observation," as H. J. Massingham describes it (6 : V); he was able both to see and to describe accurately what he saw. He despised general statements, insisting on "minutest details, in fact, gathered from a number of observations" (4 : 184), for he contended that birds' "habits were as scientific as anything else about them" (6 : XI).

"Everything should be new to you," he writes (1 : 249), "there should be no such thing as a fact till you have discovered it. Note down everything as a discovery, and never mind who knew it—or knew that it was not so—before."

He warns us that "there is a great tendency to see an animal do just what it is supposed to do, and this tendency does not conduce to keen and interested observation" (2 : 79). Again he tells us, "Uniformity of action is in proportion to paucity of observation" (4 : 152). "The real naturalist should be a Boswell, and every creature should be, for him, a Dr. Johnson" (3 : 323).

With Thoreau, Selous might have said: "Solitude was sweet to me as a flower. . . . I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." He tells us, "I am as much of a hermit as I am mercifully permitted to be." (3 : 114), and in the desolate Shetlands he exclaims:

"Would God that my home were here, that I might make a life-long and continuous study of the wild sea-bird life about me! What more should I want, then? except, indeed, a better climate, which is not a matter of culture. Of all that civilization has to give I value nothing much (that I can get) except books, and those I might have here, at least in a moderate profusion, 'the hundred (or so) best' ones—of my own choice *bien entendu;* the devil take any other man's" (3 : 110).

Not only did he avoid the company of ornithologists, he intentionally refrained from reading of their observations, even in the

sphere of life-history. In his last book, where he is discussing territory in a chapter entitled "Are birds really landed proprietors?", he mentions the fact that a male sometimes builds a nest before the arrival of a mate, and then inserts the following footnote:

"As told by Eliot Howard in his *The British Warblers.* I well remember how this interested me when I read it years ago, and I think it was what first stirred up my mind to serious reflection on this subject. But, both largely before and almost entirely afterwards, I have abstained from reading anything on field ornithology in order to be able to base my conclusions entirely on my own observations. As I have no doubt lost much by this, I hope I have gained something, too. It is, I think, a justifiable reason, if the only one, to account for my still being ignorant, except through repute, of the conclusions arrived at by the same high authority in his *Territory in Bird Life.*" (6 : 179).

Selous was a confirmed Darwinian. His interest in bird behavior is impregnated by his earnest search for evolutionary evidence and he refers continually to natural selection and sexual selection, in one place mentioning "the evolution of habit (which for me is the soul of field observation)" (6 : 284).

Selous' love of wild life was so intense that he was uncompromising in regard to all killing of wild creatures. He protests against projects to destroy Starlings in their roosts, asking, "Is there nothing to love and admire in these handsome, lively, vivacious birds?" (2 : 161). In another place he states, "There is something, I verily believe, in a gun and cartridges, that dries up all poetry in a man's heart" (3 : 193). As to sportsmen and game-keepers, he says, "Pheasants are their true gods. To kill them last, they would kill everything else first" (2 : 157).

Particularly bitter are his attacks on museums and collectors.

"For myself, I must confess that I once belonged to this great, poor army of killers, though, happily, a bad shot, a most *fat*igable collector, and a poor, half-hearted bungler, generally. But now that I have watched birds closely, the killing of them seems to me as something monstrous and horrible; and, for every one that I have shot, or even only shot at and missed, I hate myself with an increasing hatred" (1 : 335).

Few of us would agree with his severest strictures, yet he does not hit wide of the mark when it comes to some collectors of eggs and skins. Also, he is not alone in questioning the value of lavish display of mounted birds. In schools, for instance, some educators strongly believe in the superiority of pictures over specimens; the picture awakens interest in the bird in the wild, while the specimen may suggest to the child the desirability of getting more specimens.

"I believe," writes Selous (3 : 147), "that these poor stuffed groupings of bird family life, for each of which a whole live family has to be killed, and which have been so much praised, are really nothing but an evil, or, at least, that there is no good in them at all comparable to the evil."

Selous is right in his protest against the large endowments for the study of dead birds against practically nothing for the study of live ones. He contends that "there should be in every county a certain number of properly qualified field naturalists as substantially supported in the investigation of life as our fold[1] ones are in all that belongs to the encouragement of its destruction as a necessary step towards the miserable, unaspiring goal of taxidermical exhibition" (6 : 150).

The writings of Selous are unique, for they are largely the published diaries of his observations. He insisted: "So long as I can publish at all I will not recount scantily what—in so far as it has seemed to me evidential—I have observed more fully. I value my notes as they are, not as turned into something else" (6 : XVI). Consequently his books are uneven in value—sections of absorbing interest alternating with long-drawn-out accounts of happenings that at times tempt the reader to echo the author's own plaint "How barren is this watching—how little it leads to." (4 : 85).

He had a genius for detail, but lacked interest in organizing and summarizing his discoveries. Each book is provided with an elaborate index, but reading would have been facilitated by more chapter titles and shorter paragraphs. A list of scientific names of the birds treated would prove a boon to readers outside the British Isles. The text of the first four books is full of quotations from Latin, German, French, and English writers (*not* ornithologists), so that one wonders at the author's wide acquaintance with literature.

Selous' earlier books—the first three and also the one published in 1927—show him at his best: his marvellous capacity for sympathetic watching, engaging telling of the doings of his subjects, and his wonderful descriptions.

Bird Watching and *The Bird Watcher in the Shetlands*, in my opinion, are the most notable and most charming of all his works. In the first he describes vividly the dance of the Great Plovers and ceremonies of Wheatears (which evidently have to do with territory questions), and gives entrancing accounts of Eider Ducks, Shags, and Guillemots.

Fascinating tales of Kittiwakes, Puffins, and Oyster-catchers appear in *The Bird Watcher in the Shetlands*, with many fine passages of inspired, poetical writing. Let me quote a few sentences:

In describing the Fulmar's flight he says, "And thus the dream and joy of glorious motion, this elemental spirit of a bird, floats and flickers along, cradled in air, looking like a shadow upon it, sweeping and gliding, rising and falling, in circles of consummate ease" (3 : 121).

[1]Selous habitually used the word "fold" in referring to museum ornithologists, who, he imagined, regarded him as "outside the fold."—EDITOR.

The Arctic Skua (which Americans call by the atrocious name of Parasitic Jaeger) delighted him. "By its general grace and beauty, by its sportings and piracies, its speed of flight and the rushing sweeps of its attack, this bird must ever live in the memories of those who have known it: but, most of all, it will live there by the inspiring music of its cry" (3 : 14).

"Oh, that cry, that wild, wild cry, that music of the winds, the clouds, the drifting rain and mist—like them, as free as them, voicing their freedom, making their spirit articulate . . . let it live forever in the memory of him who has sat upon the great ness-side, on the dividing-line of sea and sky, and heard it pealing so clearly, so cheerly, so gladly wild, so wildly, madly glad" (3 : 161).

Bird Life Glimpses is concerned wholly with English birds. It contains interesting observations on Rooks visiting their nests in winter, on the peculiar methods of fighting among Green Woodpeckers, Snipe, and Partridges, the peck order with Stone Curlews and Mistle Thrushes, and beautiful descriptions of the flight of Nightjars, of the doings of Peewits, and of nest relief with Herons, but most splendid of all is the tale of the aërial evolutions at night and morning of the Starling.

Here is part of one paragraph:

"And now, more and faster than the eye can take it in, band grows upon band, the air is heavy with the ceaseless sweep of pinions, till, glinting and gleaming, their weary wayfaring turned to swiftest arrows of triumphant flight—toil become ecstacy, prose an epic song—with rush and roar of wings, with a mighty commotion, all sweep, together, into one enormous cloud. And still they circle; now dense like a polished roof, now disseminated like the meshes of some vast all-heaven-sweeping net, now darkening, now flashing out a million rays of light, wheeling, rending, tearing, darting, crossing, and piercing one another—a madness in the sky." (2 : 141).

Realities of Bird Life is an important and valuable book, incorporating as it does considerable material that had formerly appeared in journals. We are told of various birds in England, Holland, Sweden, Brittany, and the Shetlands; we read striking instances of polyandrous behavior in Shags, and are fascinated by descriptions of the family life of the Avocets.

The most important feature of this book consists in its contributions to the matter of sexual selection. Selous describes how a female Kentish Plover clearly preferred one of two suitors, how female Blackcocks exercise choice among many males, how the Redshank deliberately exhibits all his beauties to his mate, and, most important of all, how the Reeves choose the most gorgeous of the Ruffs, utterly ignoring the "males of immature nuptial plumage." The Ruff does not fight to win the Reeve. "He darts and springs and kicks and whirrs his wings like a frantic creature"

upon the arrival of a new male on the displaying ground. "Such is the much-talked-of fighting of the ruff, starting up out of nothing, coming to nothing and counting as nothing—for the most part meaning nothing too" (4 : 261).

The Ruffs display their beauties to win the approval of the Reeves in best Darwinian sexual-selection style. "A wonderful drama, truly, of bird-life thus unfolding itself before me in the early, bright, but bitterly cold morning, whilst learned ornithologists, all the world over, lie sleeping in their pleasant beds." (4 : 254).

Selous' two latest books lack the charm of the earlier ones, and the style is difficult. Mr. Massingham in his Introduction to *Evolution of Habit among Birds* says:

"The trouble with Mr. Selous is that his thought is too rich, just as his conclusions are too original, his temper too individual and his expression too much overloaded for us either quite to understand or to stomach what he has to say. At its worst, his style is bewilderingly intricate and congested; at its best, it can be exhilaratingly, magnificently eloquent, with something of the rugged beauty of a Doughty."

Thought Transference (or What?) in Birds consists of a very long series—unbroken by a single chapter heading—of instances of simultaneous flight on the part of many different species of birds along with the author's reflections upon each observation. Here the index is of the greatest service in making available this large body of fact. Selous shows the absurdity of the "leader" and "sentinel" notions as often held, and can find no adequate explanation of these phenomena except "thought transference." The best definition of this that I can find in the book is on page 115:

"What, with us, is rational intercourse, with conversation, which probably weakens emotion, may be with birds in numbers a general transfusion of thought in relation to one another, on the plane of bird mentality—such thought corresponding more to our feeling than to what we call such, for it is out of feeling, surely, and not *vice versâ*, that thought has evolved. This, then, may be the great bond between individuals of a species, probably acting through a sensation of well-being in one another's society which, when well developed, leads to gregariousness in rising degree."

Evolution of Habit among Birds is also a book with a message; instead of the emphasis being on the birds themselves as in the early books, it is on the "meaning of the present habits of birds" in relation to evolution. Here we are dealing with matters of opinion; what Selous considers certain evidence of evolutionary origins, others might explain in physiological and psychological terms with no hypotheses as to past history.

Besides these six books of original, scientific value, Selous was the author of two compilations of nature anecdotes (7 and 8), which have been reviewed in the last number of *Bird-Banding*.

He also wrote seven volumes of nature books for children, called the *Tommy Smith Series*, but these I have not seen. Another book *Alone with the Birds in Iceland* is still in manuscript; let us hope it will soon be published.

A number of valuable articles—"observational diaries"—on the Ruff, Carrion-Crow, Sparrow-Hawk, Sea-Eagle, Whooper Swans and many other species appeared in journals. Some of these are straightforward narrative, while others—especially those concerned with Iceland—have passages of thrilling beauty.

Unfortunately the best of Selous' work—his first four books—are out of print. It is greatly to be hoped that they will be reprinted.

In summing up the place of Edmund Selous among the naturalists of our times, Jacques Delamain in his excellent article in the July–September (1934) number of *Alauda* says there is too much *fantaisie* in him for his acceptance by pure scientists, and too much originality in his thought for popular success.

"Son apport à l'ornithologie, grandi par la valeur littéraire, empreint de l'amour et du respect de la nature et des êtres, restera celui d'un maître naturaliste de terrain, lucide et sûr dans l'observation, hardi et stimulant dans l'interprétation, et qui s'est passionnément efforcé de pénétrer le mystère de la vie."

Selous' strength lay in his "joy in all wild life" which expressed itself in his admirable bird-watching and the masterly telling of what he saw, but his weakness lay in too great concentration on Darwin, and the ignoring of other students in his field. If he had ringed birds he could have been sure of many things that, as it was, remained in the realm of conjecture (for instance, the matter of mating for life, which he believed to be the general rule). If he had read the best of contemporary life-history work, he might have found enough to study in the present-day meaning of the habits of birds, rather than speculating on their evolutionary history.

Selous was a genius, lonely, misunderstood, unappreciated—a tragic figure in his old age with his passion for the lovely wild things of the earth that are being relentlessly driven to their doom by cruel and indifferent man.

He has made brilliant contributions in two fields.

First as scientist, with his careful, exact records of bird behavior of many, many species. "They are my evidence and it is that which I am trying to get through to posterity . . . with only one advocate—truth" (6 : XVI).

Then as artist, for he shows us the glory and wonder of nature with breath-taking passages that quicken our pulses, fire our imaginations, and fill our hearts with love for the wildlings.

May his high and noble words help the wild creatures that were so dear to his heart.

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HOUSE SPARROW REPLACEMENT AND A SEVERE WINTER

By JOHN T. NICHOLS

BANDING of House Sparrows at a Garden City, Long Island, station was begun in January, 1930. On account of the trap-shy nature of this species, it was found that repeats and returns were not in sufficient amount to tell much of the movement of the birds at the station. The proportion of sparrows of the two sexes, unbanded, banded as adults, and banded as young, could, however, be determined by observation, and this proportion was found, during some forty months from the summer of 1930, when it was first made a matter of record, to the fall of 1933, to show a progressive change with continued banding, and also more or less definite seasonal fluctuations, such as males banded as adults in maximum proportion in June, July or August and again in November, December, or January. These fluctuations were interpreted, in terms of distributional or migratory movement, in a paper presented before the American Ornithologists' Union in the fall of 1933 and published in the January, 1934, issue of *Bird Banding*.

Then came the winter of 1933 to 1934, which was a decidedly abnormal one. After intermittently cold weather in December most of January was very open, but at the end of January a prolonged period of unusual cold with abundant snowfall set in, which lasted almost continuously to the middle of March, with a principal storm on the night of February 19th when the locality was blanketed with some fifteen or eighteen inches of snow, badly drifted. This

[1]For much of this bibliography I am indebted to M. Delamain's paper.