

WILLIAM VOGT IS ONE OF THOSE frustrating people who influenced people and events but never received the credit his contributions merit. He left several books, institutions, ideas, and numerous friends, but little in the way of fame. Many of the organizations for which he worked have no memory or records of him. This probably reflects more on the organizations' lack of continuity than anything else, but it makes a biographer's task difficult. I have tried to distill a brief life of Vogt and an assessment of his impact from scattered obituaries, conversations with friends, his books, and even from half-remembered gossip from co-workers. Much of what I have learned cannot be documented at present, but I suspect that anyone with the patience to find and shuffle through the archives of such organizations as Planned Parenthood, the Pan American Union (now Organization of American States), and Ducks Unlimited may find the material for a full and important biography for a man who, as much as anyone, awakened the world to the dangers of overpopulation, limited resources, and environmental degradation.

William Vogt was born on May 15, 1902, in Mineola, Long Island, New York. He was the son of William and Belle Doughty Vogt. Sometime in his youth he caught polio, which left him with a considerable limp but which did not otherwise slow him down. He graduated from Bard College having majored in journalism, and edited the college's literary magazine. Vogt then worked as a reporter but gradually acquired an interest in birds and conservation. He joined the small group of young men who formed the Bronx Bird Club, which served as an inner circle in the Linnaean Society of New York and as the training ground of many of the foremost names in American ornithology, such as Joseph Hickey, Allan D. Cruickshank, and Roger Tory Peterson. The group's annual Christmas Bird Counts were usually rounded off by a visit, still armed with field-glasses, to Minsky's Burlesque House.

Ernst Mayr, then a curator of birds at the American Museum of Natural

William Vogt: a pilgrim on the road to survival

David Cameron Duffy

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History, organized a seminar series in which Vogt and many others participated. As part of the seminar, Vogt did a field study of the Willet, later winning the Field Research Prize of the Linnaean Society. Vogt also co-authored a paper on an invasion of Dovekies with Robert Cushman Murphy, an association that was shortly to prove beneficial to Vogt.

At the same time, Vogt served as the godfather, or perhaps the midwife, of modern bird-watching. A young painter from Upstate New York had come up with a new system of identifying birds and had developed the concept into a field guide. Convinced of its value, Vogt made the rounds of publishing houses until Houghton Mifflin showed the good sense to agree to publish Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*.

At some point, Vogt went to the office of Robert Moses, New York City's director of parks, to complain about something. Moses, a terror to those who opposed him, not only failed to take offense but, impressed



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with Vogt, offered him a position as head of a refuge at Tobay, the wildlife sanctuary at Jones Beach. Vogt served from 1932 - 1935 and his house there became a place of legend among local bird-watchers. It was a former hunting shack that Vogt and his wife transformed into something livable, if never luxurious. The main room, with book-lined walls, was dominated by a circular table across which a distinguished set of visitors talked about ornithology and conservation. Francis Lee Jacques, the painter, and ornithologists such as Austin Rand, John J. Elliot, and, of course, the Bronx Bird Club boys were frequent visitors.

The isolation of the house may have become oppressive after a few years. This was during the Depression, and getting to Tobay was increasingly difficult for young birders with limited means. Vogt had edited *Bird-Lore*, of the National Association of Audubon Societies, while at Tobay, so it seemed a logical progression for him to return to New York and serve as a field naturalist and lecturer for the Associ-

ation from 1935 to 1939. During this time, he prepared a booklet on water conservation called "Thirst for Land," a forerunner of his later interests in conservation.

At Mayr's suggestion, Vogt began the *Bird-Lore* breeding bird surveys that now serve as an important record of avian population trends. In 1939, Vogt had a major dispute with the President of the Audubon Society, John H. Baker. Rumor has it that Vogt attempted a coup d'etat. If so, it failed. Robert Cushman Murphy found Vogt a job in Peru as consultant to the Peruvian guano company (Compañía Administradora del Guano). His New York friends called him "Don Guano" and Frank M. Chapman, head of the bird department at the American Museum of Natural History, commented that Vogt's job was "to augment the increment of the excrement."

The Peruvian guano islands and Vogt's trips to Peru appear to have prompted a fundamental turning point in his thinking. He went to Peru an ornithologist; he returned with an expanded vision of the need to regulate human populations and to avoid the continuing abuse of natural resources.

The guano birds of Peru were like no other birds. Millions lived in a narrow band of cold, rich water along the coast, feasting in flocks of hundreds of thousands on the anchoveta (*Engraulis ringens*). The islands teemed with life, with space so limited that thousands of eggs and young were lost as birds competed for nest sites. Nature was profligate with its wealth and the birds were equally profligate with their guano, which was shoveled into bags, barged to Peru's capital, Lima, and used as fertilizer in Peruvian and foreign agriculture. Every several years, however, the chain was broken. An oceanographic event called El Niño caused a warming of the inshore waters. The fish disappeared or migrated, and the birds died by the millions. Vogt's job was to find a way to prevent these millions of birds from dying, if possible, or at least reduce the effects of the devastation.

Vogt was present during the El Niño of 1941, one of the most severe recorded before the even more devastating 1982-1983 event. It is not hard to see how his thinking went from the teeming bird islands of Peru to the

teeming cities of man. If the birds could suffer abrupt disaster, following a period of plenty, could humanity afford to be so complacent?

His report on the guano birds survives only in Spanish. It is perhaps not as precedent-setting as many of us reading it now might think, accustomed as we are to assuming that ecology started in the 1970s. Never-

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theless, Vogt had a casual, working concept of the niche and competitive exclusion, of the necessity for long-term studies at scales appropriate to the organism's life span and to significant environmental perturbations, the complexity of food chains, and the role of disease and predation. His study would still be considered an excellent one today. Written in isolation as it was, with only a few key references, it is even more a monument to an outstanding field ecologist and is certainly one of the finest examples of the ecological state of the art in the 1940s.

During his time in Peru, Vogt traveled extensively, which led him to write on the dangers of erosion in the Andes. He also pointed out that while the Incas only expected to live off their arable land, modern Peru exported its produce as cotton and other crops, reducing food crops, requiring a greater nutrient input and increasing the risk of permanent soil damage. In his report on the Peruvian guano birds, he referred repeatedly to the idea that the environment's "resistance" increases with increasing human population, resulting in increasing environmental damage. The greater the resistance, the lower the carrying capacity and the greater the effort that must be put into food production or even survival. This was the theme he would preach for the rest of his life.

He returned from Peru and worked

for the Pan American Union, forerunner of the Organization of American States, serving as chief of the conservation section, doing surveys of the environments and agricultural potentials of Mexico, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. The contrast between educated, underpopulated Costa Rica and crowded, starving El Salvador reconfirmed the lessons of Peru. Costa Rica had not yet stressed its environment; El Salvador was already paying the price.

In 1948, he published *Road to Survival*, which summarized his thinking. He drew heavily from his studies of Peruvian guano birds, repeating parts of the introduction of the earlier report. The book was translated into nine languages and had a passing impact, but it is odd that he had been almost completely forgotten when the great 'eco-awareness' of the early 1970s revived many of the very ideas he had raised two decades earlier. None of the major 'ecocrisis' books of recent years mentions Vogt.

Vogt's tenure in his position was apparently cut short by his increasing advocacy of population regulation and birth control—uneasy topics for the Roman Catholic countries that form most of the New World and the Pan American Union. Vogt then became a freelancer. Supported by Fellowships from the Fulbright and Guggenheim foundations, he studied population problems in Scandinavia in 1950 and 1951. He returned to the United States to become national director of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. In 1960, he published *People: Challenge to Survival*, which dealt with the population explosion and resource degradation.

Vogt then moved to the Conservation Foundation and served as Secretary from 1964 until he retired. He then planned a series of visits to see friends in Latin America, but a stroke prevented this and, despondent and with greatly reduced mobility, he took his own life in 1969.

Today, William Vogt is remembered mostly by a few old friends, themselves distinguished scientists and conservationists. His work is known to only a few. Given the problems of overpopulation and environmental stress that confront us, it seems a shame to waste the insights of this pioneer. One would hope that the forgotten prophet may yet be heard. ■