

FRANK MICHLER CHAPMAN, 1864-1945

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY

NEITHER passage of time nor growth in the number of ornithologists can ever deprive Frank M. Chapman of his unique niche. It is statistically conceivable that the main characteristics of his temperament, tastes, and abilities might again find combination in a single individual. But the period in which he lived can never return, and a human product is the result of a lifelong chain of interaction between personality and environment.

Some men seem destined to fulfillment in only one field, and lucky are they who find it. Chapman, because of his well-rounded mind and his gift of effective concentration, would probably have succeeded in almost any. The late Dr. T. Gilbert Pearson once expressed the matter, tersely even if inelegantly, by saying: "Throw him penniless on Broadway, and in ten years he would own both sides of the street." Besides being sensitively attuned to nature, music, poetry, and the graphic arts, Dr. Chapman was, indeed, an extremely astute business man, and a writer whose flair for journalism is revealed by penetrating editorials in practically every issue of 'Bird-Lore' throughout several decades. He was also a man of the world, in the best sense of that term, and one who with complete composure could express himself tactfully and forcefully in any company and in the face of any audience. Few who knew him only in latter life, after the delicate balance of his health had made him wary and even subdued, could realize the extent of his native bodily vigor, his skill in games, and his keenly competitive zest for sports. In school days, he has stated, he was never passed in a foot race, and his coach promised him the accolade of becoming a ten-second man if he would carry into college his fervor for the hundred-yard dash.

Chapman also had a rare talent for friendship, although it must be admitted that he chose his intimates with excessive eclecticism. He could be winning and charming to a quite exceptional degree, and yet the fact that he might receive and enlighten a chance inquirer with utmost courtesy and helpfulness was no assurance that he would as freely open the curtains of his spirit under other circumstances.

There was something suggestively Latin in that trait of Dr. Chapman's, even though it was derived from North European germplasm. Those of us who have shared some of his familiarity with Hispanic Americans know how very well acquainted it is possible to become with our friends in the republics to the south without learning anything

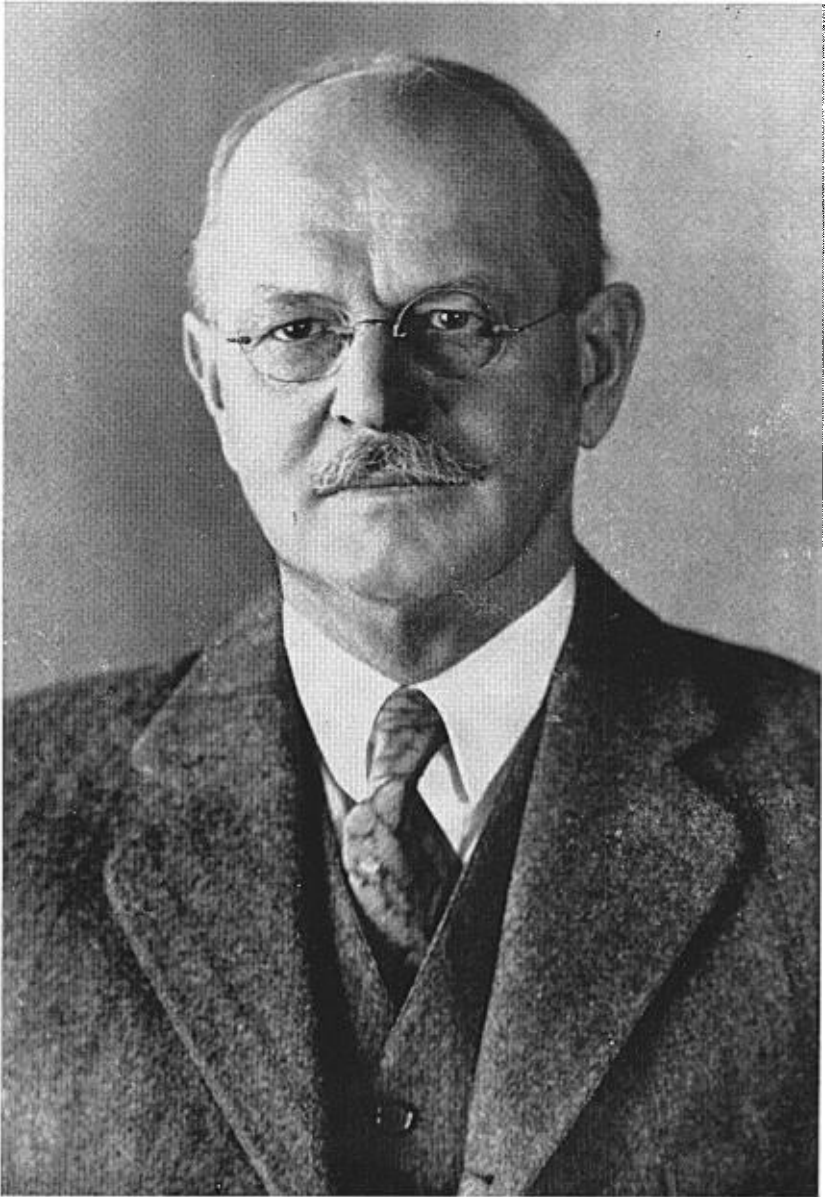
whatsoever about their families. But this fact has the great compensation that, if and when you are honored by being admitted to the home, you achieve at once a peculiarly favored standing with the members of all generations.

So it was in a sense with Dr. Chapman. Associates in various walks of life knew him for years as a pleasant, somewhat grave and reserved neighbor or colleague, without really knowing him at all. When, however, of his own volition he led one across the threshold of his confidence, all earlier hint of aloofness disappeared, and the relationship thus established was not likely to be interrupted. It is fortunate that most of the younger ornithologists whom Dr. Chapman attracted to the Department of Birds in the American Museum of Natural History—the center and focus of his whole being for more than half a century—sooner or later felt and accepted the wordless invitation.

The temperament here but feebly reflected may suggest a trace of introversion. This is perhaps a just conclusion, for Chapman harbored strong and not always well-founded prejudices, mostly concerning matters of no great significance. Many a man who had earned the high regard in which he was generally held seemed to have been entered, nevertheless, in Chapman's private *Index Expurgatorius*. It may be that the unconscious offender had had the misfortune, perhaps for the only time in his life, of putting the wrong foot forward while Chapman's critical eye was on him. "The Chief," as some of us called him in the Department of Birds, was fully aware of his own foibles. He would even smile assent when he was told that his approval of a man was a valued endorsement but that his disapproval often meant nothing at all. "I know it," he would usually reply, but without any urge to analyze, reconsider, and reconstruct his impression.

Another side of the same quirk in his make-up was shown by his occasional overestimation of the competence, if not the character, of men and women of whom he was fond. In short, it would not be unfair to state that in personal relations Dr. Chapman's judgment and emotions inclined to jump into the same pan of the scales. To the friends he had chosen, he was loyal. If they were younger associates, he had an unfailingly warm and generous interest in them, their families, finances, and everything else that concerned their welfare. The fact that they were his friends was an almost too-sufficient basis for approval and harmony.

This attitude was restricted, however, to the personal rather than the scientific realm of ideas. Many of us recall an A. O. U. meeting at Cambridge, Massachusetts, during which at least two of the junior ornithologists of Dr. Chapman's own staff, in a discussion of an



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evolutionary problem, very determinedly took a point of view quite at variance with his own. Chapman defended his thesis two-fistedly but he was obviously delighted at the source of the opposition, and he ended by drawing a moral from the independent thinking and lack of regimentation in the Bird Department over which he presided.

Still another inclination that might be considered a weakness in Dr. Chapman's disposition stemmed from the very affection in which he held his younger co-workers, and expressed itself in a somewhat old-fashioned paternalism that was now and then likely to be taken as an interference with individual freedom of choice. A youth who was a key worker in his great ornithological campaigns in South America might, for example, marry and still wish to continue in the same career, but Dr. Chapman's own sense of responsibility as to the risks permissible to one who had taken a bride was so definite, and even so obdurate, that it sometimes proved impossible to work out a *modus operandi*.

Dr. Chapman was always a fundamentally shy individual, despite his assurance before an audience. Physically, he was just under average stature, but well formed, perfectly erect, and sprightly in movement. He had a pronounced habit of rising to his toes when speaking from a platform. He always retained a good proportion of his teeth and his light brown hair, baldness not progressing beyond the "high forehead" stage. His eyes were hazel, with a certain concentration of pigment into fine spots in the iris. They could be equally expressive in kindness and in an almost beady aloofness. He wore an unruly—one might say gnarled—moustache. His voice was well modulated and pleasing. His political leanings were mainly conservative, although he left the traditional Republican fold to follow his admired friend, Theodore Roosevelt. He was a frank Anglophile, and there have been those who accused him of consciously adopting a British intonation, but it is interesting that his English friends thought of him as speaking excellent "American." He had plenty of iron in his essentially gentle nature, as indicated by countless instances of self-control. When he discovered in his thirties, for example, that smoking and inhaling from 60 to 80 black Cuban cigarettes a day was lowering his efficiency, he gave up tobacco abruptly and permanently. To the end of his life he enjoyed wines—always sweet—and, to the horror of his family and other intimates, *sweet* cocktails. He also consumed an inordinate quantity of ice-water with his meals.

As might be inferred, Dr. Chapman was a man of restrained and seemly speech. His son tells us, nevertheless, how he once demonstrated that his tongue was normally bridled by choice rather than by

innocence. This was in Peru in 1916. His party had left Cuzco for a month's field work in the Urubamba Valley. Awakening in camp on the second morning, the leader discovered that the muleteer and all six pack animals had vanished. "When Pop found his outfit immobile," writes Frank Chapman, Jr., "he emitted a string of oaths of which any sergeant of Marines might have been supremely proud." The testimony is well qualified because it comes from a witness who rose from the ranks to a major's commission in the United States Marine Corps!

Few men enjoy as full a biographical record as Frank M. Chapman. In 1933, he published his own "Autobiography of a Bird-Lover," a substantial volume of 420 pages. This was followed by two other books from his pen that carried the story still nearer the end. Since his death, he has been the subject of a dozen or more memorial accounts, and still others are known to be in preparation. At least one of the memorials, namely that issued by the National Academy of Sciences, contains a practically complete bibliography of Chapman's publications, which comprise 17 books and some 225 articles in periodicals. In view of such readily available data, we may avoid repetition of the details of his scientific output, and at the same time limit other "vital statistics" to a minimum. The accomplishments of a man of science remain indefinitely accessible to those who need or wish to dig them out. Many characteristics of personality, on the other hand, must be set down by contemporaries.

The principal published accounts are:

- J. P. Chapin, 1945. Frank Michler Chapman. *Explorer's Journal*, 23: 8-9.
- W. K. Gregory, 1948. Biographical memoir of Frank M. Chapman. *Nat. Acad. Sciences Biog. Memoirs*, 25: 111-145, portrait.
- Ludlow Griscom, 1946. Frank Michler Chapman. *Audubon Magazine*, 48: 49-52, portrait.
- R. C. Murphy, 1945. Frank Michler Chapman. *Year Book American Philosophical Society*, pp. 354-361.
- R. C. Murphy, Guy Emerson, Elsie M. B. Naumburg, and John Kieran, 1946. An assemblage of friends pays tribute to Frank Michler Chapman. *Audubon Magazine*, 48: 179-182, portrait.
- R. C. Murphy, 1949. The first fifty years. *Audubon Magazine*, 51: 2-5. (While not primarily biographical, this article tells the story of Dr. Chapman's career as educator, conservationist, and founder of 'Bird-Lore'.)
- R. C. Murphy, 1949. Frank Michler Chapman. *El Hornero (Buenos Aires)*, 9: 113-117, portrait.
- Moriz Sassi, 1947. Dr. Frank M. Chapman. *Annalen Naturhistor. Museums in Wien*, 55: 207-209.
- J. T. Zimmer, 1946. Frank Michler Chapman. *Science*, 104: 152-153.
- J. T. Zimmer, 1946. Frank Michler Chapman. *American Naturalist*, 80: 476-481, portrait.

Published during Dr. Chapman's life, and in whimsical vein, is the following, which has biographical interest.

G. T. Hellman, 1939. Profiles: Boy Meets Bullfinch. *New Yorker*, March 11: 22-27, sketch portrait.

Frank M. Chapman was born in a country residence of charm and dignity in what is now West Englewood, New Jersey, on June 12, 1864. His father, Lebbeus Chapman, Jr., was a member of a New York law firm. His mother, Mary Augusta Parkhurst, was a "born musician," with a pronounced love of nature that expressed itself particularly in the care of a garden. The families of both parents had been in America since early colonial days and Chapman's ancestry so far as he knew, was English on both sides "except for one lone Irishman."

Chapman's musical inheritance is worthy of further brief comment. His son, a gifted singer, and his daughter-in-law, who is Miss Gladys Swarthout, of the Metropolitan Opera Company, regarded him as an almost infallible critic and commentator. He never pulled his punches when evaluating a performance; he had an incredible ear for tone and seemingly flawless judgment regarding music, old or new, that he had never before heard.

As a boy, Chapman attended the Englewood Academy and, when graduated in 1880 at the age of 16, he chose not to go to college and took a position in the American Exchange National Bank of New York, of which his father had been counsel until his death four years earlier. The story of his banking servitude for six years has been told in his autobiography. Throughout this period he used his leisure for the observation of birds and gradually made contacts with many of the relatively small number of amateur and professional ornithologists of those days. The influence that finally determined the great break in his life came from the late Dr. A. K. Fisher, whom he always called his "ornithological godfather." In 1886 he resigned from the bank, much to the mystification of his associates. Using modest financial resources inherited from his father, he next laid the foundation of his subsequent career by field work in then unspoiled Florida.

In 1888, he was appointed assistant to the late Dr. J. A. Allen in the American Museum of Natural History, at a salary of fifty dollars a month. Ten years later, at the age of 34, he married Fanny Bates Embury, immediately thereafter taking her on a collecting trip in Florida. Later, they carried on in the field together in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the Bahama Islands, and elsewhere. Of Mrs. Chapman, who died about a year before him, he once wrote that "she made it the chief object of her life to advance the aims of mine." They had one child, a son, born in 1900.

In 1901, Chapman was promoted to the rank of Associate Curator in Dr. Allen's department of mammals and birds, and in 1908 he became Curator of Birds. In 1920, a separate department of birds was established, of which he was named Chairman, remaining at the helm until his retirement on June 30, 1942, at which date he had served the American Museum continuously for 54 years. Thereafter, he spent most of his time in Florida but came north to Nantucket for the summer of his 82d year, and died in New York on November 15, 1945.

Dr. Chapman's competence covered many fields, all of which have received recognition at considerable length from one or another of his biographers. He was a creative museum-builder, a life-long conservationist, a taxonomist and biogeographer, a student of bird behavior, and always an educator. His experience as an explorer, combined with his knowledge of Spanish and his diplomatic flair, admirably fitted him, while serving as Director of Publications of the American Red Cross, during the first World War, to be a special commissioner of the Red Cross in Latin America.

As a writer and lecturer, he won early the reputation of being the most articulate ornithologist of his generation. Because he was as much concerned with the habits and protection of living birds as with their classification and relationships, he exerted wide influence in creating popular interest. He was an outstanding member of the group of pioneer American naturalists responsible for what has sometimes been called "the discovery of the out-of-doors."

From his first sight of a Cardinal on a Georgia farm, as a lad of eight years, he maintained a life-long passion for birds which represented a rare blend of esthetic appreciation and scientific understanding. He said that birds were Nature's most eloquent expression of beauty, joy and freedom. Such a precept served a great purpose in inspiring children as well as adults to observe and record during a plume-hunting and cage-bird period, when need for protection by law and public sentiment was of critical importance.

Dr. Chapman always remained "young" and receptive to new ideas in ornithology, even into advanced age. He was himself a leader in so many branches of his expanding science, and he had such sympathy with even the humblest of his fellow-workers, that his encouragement of others and his educational example were unprecedented. As Lord Gray of Fallodon once said of him: "he is one . . . in whom knowledge quickens feeling, and that quickening of feeling gives a special gift of imparting the knowledge which he acquires to others."

Most important, probably, among Dr. Chapman's publications were his 'Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America' (1895, and subse-

quent editions) and the culminating reports on his prolonged studies in South America. These were 'The Distribution of Bird Life in Colombia' (1917) and 'The Distribution of Bird Life in Ecuador' (1926). He referred to the biota of the Andes as "a recent annex to the world." His problem was to ascertain the effects upon the distribution and evolution of birds that had been produced by the uplift in recent geologic time (and later modified by erosion and subsidence) of a vast mountain system with its central base near the equator, its summit reaching perpetual snow, and its wings extending continuously into the temperate zone. He presented not merely a faunal summary of his findings but also a geographical and ecological analysis, thus extending to South America the life-zone concept of North American naturalists. It is indicative of the intensive activity of Dr. Chapman that the Ecuador volume of nearly 800 pages is based upon the study of more than 13,000 specimens of birds from that Republic, as well as upon months of personal exploration covering thousands of miles of difficult terrain.

Among Dr. Chapman's distributional discussions, the most interesting to both biologists and geographers is perhaps that relating to discontinuous ranges of birds. Such distribution can not be explained by the absence of suitable intervening habitats, because in countless instances the latter now appear to exist. Rather, discontinuous distribution proves or strongly indicates effective barriers in former times, which restricted the representatives of numerous species to the limited and segregated ranges that they now occupy. Chapman dismisses the idea that the phenomenon of discontinuity is due merely to the bird's potential mobility and holds that, on the contrary, this very circumstance makes birds especially valuable indices of the forces that have produced faunal areas. He maintains that the casual establishment of isolated bird colonies is infrequent, and cites the fact that whole families, comprising about two hundred species that are common on the mainland from Guiana to Mexico, are yet totally lacking in the West Indies. Climatic changes due to glaciation and volcanic activity, which at some period may have exterminated the bird life of large areas, are offered as probable but at best only partial explanations.

In his latter years, Dr. Chapman spent several winters at Barro Colorado Island in the Panama Canal Zone, where he wrote his last two books and made the observations and experiments for a number of scientific papers. It was here that he worked out the life histories of Wagler's Oropendola and Gould's Manakin. In the report upon the latter, he employed new techniques of bird study, indicating the flexibility of his mind at the age of seventy years. Still later (1940),

his revision of the numerous races of a single species of South American Sparrow, 'The Post-glacial History of *Zonotrichia capensis*,' serves in its approach and organization as a model for any present-day ornithologist.

Scientific recognition of Dr. Chapman included honorary membership in many learned societies. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1921, and to the National Academy of Sciences the same year. Other honors included the award of the first medal of the Linnaean Society of New York, the first Elliot medal of the National Academy of Sciences, the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union, and the medals of the John Burroughs and Theodore Roosevelt memorial associations. In 1913, Brown University conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Science. He was an honorary member of the British Ornithologists' Union, the Deutsche Ornithologische Gesellschaft, the Club van Nederlandsche Vogelkundigen, the Sociedad Ornitológica del Plata, and the New York Zoological Society; a Fellow and Past-President of the American Ornithologists' Union, Past-President of the Linnaean Society of New York, and one-time Assistant Editor of 'The Auk.'

Five months after Dr. Chapman's death, on April 24, 1946, a memorial meeting was held at the American Museum of Natural History. The large hall was filled with his friends and colleagues and with admirers from all walks of life. Those who made brief but memorable addresses represented various relationships of his career. They comprised Dr. Leonard C. Sanford for the Trustees of the Museum, Mr. Guy Emerson for the National Audubon Society, Mrs. Elsie M. B. Naumburg for Dr. Chapman's own staff, Mr. John Kieran for amateur naturalists in general, Dr. Herbert J. Spinden for explorers, Lieutenant Commander Peter Scott, R.N.R., for the painters of birds and for ornithologists across the sea, and the Honorable Frederick C. Walcott, former United States Senator from Connecticut, who spoke as a fellow-worker with Dr. Chapman in the wilds of Magellanic South America. To close the meeting, which none then present will forget, Dr. Chapman's daughter-in-law, Gladys Swarthout, sang the Lord's Prayer, set to the music of Malotte.

The spirit of that assembly was expressed in words of the presiding chairman:

"However much we mourn the loss of Dr. Chapman, this is not to be regarded as a sad occasion. I recall very well the memorial meeting for Louis Agassiz Fuertes, whose death, due to accident, was as severe a blow as Dr. Chapman was ever called upon to sustain. Yet the great heart, the cheerfulness, the whimsicality and irrepressible sense

of humor so characteristic of Fuertes broke through the sorrow of his comrades who had assembled to think and speak of him. The joy and fun with which he bubbled in life survived to rob the occasion of some of its tragedy. Dr. Chapman always remembered that day as a most exalting experience.

"If Fuertes, whose life ended in middle age, could spread such a benison over the host of friends who had come together to honor his memory, surely Dr. Chapman, who lived happily and constructively to the age of 81, carrying out his research and his writings to within about six weeks of the end of his life, should leave us the same kind of memory. Therefore, I hope that I reflect the sentiments of everybody here today when I state that this is not a sad gathering but is, on the contrary, a triumphant assemblage of Dr. Chapman's friends, proud of their relationship with him, eager to emulate his example as a man and a naturalist, and determined to do all possible to further the love and understanding, and beneficent use, of the outdoor world, all of which he encouraged to perhaps a greater degree than any other man of his generation."

American Museum of Natural History, New York, January 6, 1950.