

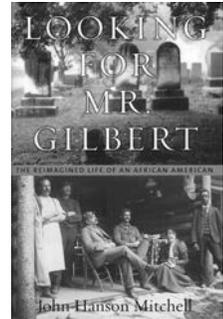
ABOUT BOOKS

The Invisible Man Goes Birding

Mark Lynch

Looking for Mr. Gilbert: The Reimagined Life of an African American. John Hanson Mitchell. 2005. Washington, D.C. Shoemaker & Hoard.

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”
Ralph Ellison



The topic of race and, more importantly, “racism,” doesn’t come up very much among birding circles in New England. There is no reason why it would since, at least in these parts, when you look at the crowd staring intently through their scopes at some avian rarity, it is, for the most part, a sea of “white” faces. It is an almost (but not quite) monolithic homogeneity that is strikingly unlike the rest of society around us. This fact of life of birding around here has always bothered me because it is so different from the other parts of my working and personal life. I find myself asking: “What is at the heart of this lack of diversity in New England birding? Is there something about the nature of birding or, as I suspect, in the way we present birding to the public, that does not encourage diversity?” I frankly cannot say I have any ready answers, though I do have some vague ideas. Of course, birders don’t want to talk much about anything other than tertial patterns and records of rarities anyway because it takes too much time away from chasing that next tick. The discussion of racial issues is also a minefield that no one is comfortable entering. And let’s face it, some of us bird to get away from all the bothersome complexities and troubles of living in the twenty-first century. Lastly, there is nothing more pointless, awkward, laughable, and in the end damning, than a bunch of white folks talking about race. But just once it would be interesting to hear a group of birders talking in a public forum about issues other than shorebird identification and hawk migration. Like issues of racism and sexism (yes, sexism) in birding.

Which is why I found John Hanson Mitchell’s book *Looking For Mr. Gilbert* so timely and interesting. While working on a book about land use, Mitchell comes across more than 2000 old glass plate photographs in the attic of a Lincoln estate. Mitchell is originally led to believe that the legendary ornithologist and founder of the American Ornithologists Union, William Brewster, took these photographs. But he later discovers that in fact it was Brewster’s “man servant,” Robert Gilbert, who took them. One taken in the wilds of Bethel, Maine, shows some classic Boston Brahmins seated on the porch of their cabin. To the left is what looks to be the cook and a guide. To the right stands an impeccably dressed (odd for the rustic setting), yet perfectly relaxed, young African American man. Mitchell immediately started to wonder who this person was, what his life was about, and what his relationship with Brewster was. Thus began a quest that lasted for twenty-five years, as Mitchell tries to piece together the historical traces of Gilbert’s life.

Robert Alexander Gilbert was born “probably” around 1868 in the valley of Broad Creek in Natural Bridge, Virginia, not far from Lexington. It was a rural area, and the residents were dirt poor. His mother had a sister living in Boston, and it is likely that this encouraged Robert to take a train to the South End when he was eighteen as part of the great African American migration north after the Civil War. He settled in on Suffolk Street in a house that is still there. Boston was then certainly a friendlier city for black people to live in. Though racism of course existed there at that time, it was of a less virulent and obvious form than that which existed in the south after the war. Gilbert initially worked at a series of occupations: bellhop, opera house usher, and steamship porter, all typical jobs open to people of color. But he then landed a job as a laboratory assistant to a scientist, James Chadbourne, who was working on memory in rats. Impressed by Gilbert’s intelligence and abilities, Chadbourne recommended him to William Brewster at Harvard University. Gilbert remained Brewster’s close associate from 1892 until the latter’s death in 1919.

Mitchell tries hard to tease out the facts about the exact nature of the relationship between these two extraordinary men. In Brewster’s numerous journals, Gilbert is mentioned often, typically in the context of the species of birds that Gilbert found or spotted for Brewster. But the ultimate details of what Brewster actually thought of Gilbert are not to be found anywhere in Brewster’s writings. As a matter of fact, throughout all the numerous journal entries that mentioned Gilbert, none make note of the fact that he is black, though letters written by friends and colleagues of Brewster often make mention of Brewster’s “colored friend.” This is typical of Brewster, who, when not writing about the details of birds, was always extremely stingy with any kind of personal information. Was their relationship simply that of employer and employee? Reading between the lines, Mitchell believes the relationship was much more than that. Though Gilbert cooked for Brewster, he also ate with him. Brewster and Gilbert spent countless hours and days together out in the field and at Brewster’s October Farm retreat on the Concord River. We also know that he often traveled on trains with Brewster, though the details of the seating arrangements are lacking. Mitchell comes to believe that Gilbert’s relationship with Brewster was more like that of a “companion,” a “factotum,” his right-hand man and then some. It is a relationship that was often seen at the turn of the century, but rarely now. On the most basic and banal level, we can clearly infer from Brewster’s journals that Robert Gilbert was an experienced and accomplished birder and natural historian, and that Brewster had total faith in his field skills.

After Brewster died in 1919, Robert Gilbert went to work at the Museum of Comparative Zoology as a curatorial assistant to the then rising star, Thomas Barbour of the Malacology Department. “As Gilbert himself used to tell people, with subtle self-mockery — he had been willed to the museum with Brewster’s collection of bird skins” (p.189). When John Mitchell tries to track down anyone still at the MCZ who would have remembered Gilbert, he has this sadly revealing conversation with Richard Johnson, who had begun his association with the department as a teenaged volunteer in the 1930s:

Following my usual introductory method, I described my mission while Johnson eyed me cautiously, as if I were slightly mad. He was at first nonplussed by my quest and stood twisting a pen in his long fingers.

“A black man who was an assistant to Barbour?” he asked. “Here, in this museum?”

“Yes,” I said, “he is cited in papers and in his obituaries as assistant to the curator from the ‘30s up to 1941. That would be Barbour, no?”

“Yes, but a black man? A Negro curator in the 1930s. I doubt it. This is a natural history museum, you understand. Maybe he worked at the Peabody.”

He was referring to the anthropology museum that is housed in the same building (p.193).

So much can be read into this small exchange. A few folks remembered seeing a black person at lunches and meetings at the MCZ but assumed he was a porter or cook. When Gilbert died, the students and others who worked directly with him and did remember him wrote obituaries that inevitably contained painful and awkward references to his being “A Negro,” as if despite that, he made something of himself. This ignores the fact that, of course, there was an iron ceiling of race at the MCZ as there was at most museums in the United States. No matter how brilliant and how talented Robert Gilbert was, he could only rise up the ladder just so far and no more.

Robert Gilbert’s life was, of course, much larger than just his time spent with Brewster and at the MCZ. He traveled to France after World War I, was involved in several successful business ventures, and even ended up playing a small part in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *Tender is the Night*. Back in America he raised three daughters. He died on January 13, 1942, and is interred in the family grave in Cambridge Cemetery. Invisible even in death, his name is absent from the marker. Until John Mitchell, Robert Gilbert’s extraordinarily rich life was largely forgotten. Even all the photographs Gilbert took after the death of Brewster have been long since thrown out. Though a number of contemporary African American historians are working hard to similarly piece together other lost lives like Gilbert’s and give them the place in mainstream history they deserve, the task is daunting and time consuming, but always rewarding.

Looking for Mr. Gilbert is a unique history that is in part a detective story, as well as a memoir of Mitchell’s confronting the reality of what it was like to be a black man in the first half of the twentieth century. Any one of a number of African American historians and researchers perhaps would have handled this material differently, probably adding even more gravitas and academic perspective to Gilbert’s story. At times, Mitchell does seem the epitome of the well-meaning New England white liberal. But in the end his persistence, honesty, and caring elevates *Looking for Mr. Gilbert* above such easy labels. This is a book as much about Mitchell’s journey of discovery as it is about Gilbert’s rich life, and it is these two intertwined themes that make this a lively and compelling tale. It is important to emphasize that this book is in no way a ham-fisted polemic that bludgeons the reader with a message of racial

injustice. But the reader cannot escape the obvious fact that at every turn, race and racism determine the parameters of this story and what we can know and what we will never know about Gilbert's life.

This is also a book that about a truly unique and productive friendship that still remains frustratingly elusive in its personal details. We want to know so much more about Gilbert and Brewster, but we can only ever have tantalizing glimpses and suggestive hints. In a thoughtful, yet always interesting and personal way, Mitchell in *Looking for Mr. Gilbert* painstakingly pieces together the life of a fascinating person, and in the end enriches the history of ornithology in Massachusetts. Robert Gilbert was a true Renaissance man, who succeeded at being a photographer, natural historian, businessman, family man, and valued friend to a legendary ornithologist. Robert Gilbert was also a damned fine birder, and thankfully is no longer invisible. 🐦



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