# ABOUT BOOKS:

## A MEMORIAL AND A MEDITATION

*Mark Lynch*

***The Great Auk***. Errol Fuller. 1999. Harry N. Abrams. 448 pages.
***Hope is the Thing With Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanishing Birds***. Christopher Cokinos. 2000. Tarcher/Putnam. 360 pages.

"One death is a tragedy – a million deaths a statistic." Josef Stalin, *The Great Auk* (p.120).

How can we make sense of the human-caused extinction of a species? How should we react? How do we choose to remember an extinct species?

These are difficult and deep questions that anyone with an interest in natural history must ponder from time to time. Humans are complex and seemingly illogical creatures when it comes to death. We will feel acutely depressed about the loss of a family pet while hardly blinking an eye over the horrible massacre of thousands of other humans in central Africa. When we read accounts of the Great Auk or the Dodo, we may react with outrage, fatalistic cynicism, depression, plain sadness, regret for not being able to tick that species on our world list, or any combination of these emotions. Errol Fuller and Christopher Cokinos have wrestled with the big topic of the meaning of human-caused extinction in two very different ways.

Errol Fuller is a British painter with more than a passing interest in extinct birds. Previously he has authored the well-known *Extinct Birds* (1987, Facts On File) as well as *The Lost Birds of Paradise* (1995, Swan Hill Press). Both books are now out of print. In his latest book he has singled out the Great Auk as the subject of his considerable passion.

"The Great Auk has always been peculiarly fascinating. Quite why is difficult to say" (p.18).

In this coffee-table-sized monograph, Fuller has pieced together a picture of the Great Auk by compiling a vast collection of illustrations of eggs and mounted specimens, combined with accounts, stories, and biographies. It is as if he obsessively sought out every object still extant that had to do with the Great Auk and has included it in this single volume. The results can be a little overwhelming.

Included in the book are many of the familiar tales of this woebegotten alcid often found in other books. For example, he writes about the sad story of one of the last Great Auks that was caught alive on the island of St. Kilda and was thought to be a witch. But Fuller does not stop with a simple rehashing of what has been written

before. He piles on detail after detail as if the sheer weight of information can bring back the auk. He titles an entire chapter simply "1844" and recounts thoroughly what is known about the death of the last Great Auks. Included is a full color photograph of the exact rock ledge on Eldey Island where the last auks were killed. In another gruesome coda to the story, the eyes and internal organs of these last auks are still preserved in a jar at the Royal Museum at Copenhagen. Of course, Fuller provides a half-page crisp black and white photograph of these bizarre specimens.

Fuller then catalogs every piece of artwork and illustration of the auk that he could find, beautifully reproducing many of these. Included are a few of his own heartfelt and more expressive paintings. He has relentlessly sought out any object that pictured the Great Auk, so we see Great Auk T-shirts, Great Auk salt-and-pepper shakers, and even a Great Auk tattoo.

All of this is just a lead-in to the bulk of the book. Fuller documents and illustrates every skin, stuffed specimen, mummy, and collection of bones and eggs of a Great Auk that are known from this century. A veritable Catalogue Raisonné of an extinct bird.

"A detailed list of 80 or so stuffed birds might seem excessive. The reason for it is simple. Each of these auks represents a little tragedy of its own" (p.120).

Included in each entry is the specimen number, a detailed account of the provenance, all references to that specimen, what is known about the origin of the specimen, and an account of the specimen's present location and condition. Also included is either a photo or illustration of the specimen or a picture of the person associated with that skin or egg. There is little doubt that Fuller intends this to be the definitive and exhaustive work on the Great Auk. Personally, I found it mind-numbing. Staring at the seemingly hundreds of color illustrations of auk eggs, I succumbed to sensory overload. All I could think about was how much they looked like Jackson Pollack paintings, especially the Earl of Derby's egg (p.282).

Fuller rounds out the book with the biographies of all the naturalists and curators who have been important to the natural history of the Great Auk.

There is little doubt that this book is a stunning achievement of research and passion. I do not think this expensive monograph is for the casual natural history reader; there is just too much technical information. There is something so obsessive and personal about Fuller's unending and relentless parade of facts combined with state-of-the-art reproduction of illustrations that the book seems to transcend being a simple monograph and becomes instead a piece of conceptual or performance art. It is as if Fuller wants this book to be a shining monument to memorialize the passing of a lost species. After all, the book *is* about the size of a small gravestone.

How different in intent and attitude is Christopher Cokinos' ***Hope is the Thing With Feathers***. Cokinos is a writer, poet, and professor of English at Kansas State University. He is also a birder and passionate environmentalist. It is Cokinos' skill at vivid writing and self-examination that makes this volume one of the most important books on extinction ever written.

His story begins while out birding in Kansas. He spots two feral parrots and is immediately struck by their astonishing and alien brilliant color set against the landscape with which he is so familiar. Later, he is amazed to learn that historically a parrot species, the Carolina Parakeet, actually did live in Kansas. Thus begins an enormous journey for Cokinos that is by turns physical, emotional, and spiritual. He sets out not only to research six species of birds that have become extinct in North America, but in the way of a pilgrimage – to visit those spots where these birds last existed. Cokinos writes about the Passenger Pigeon, the Carolina Parakeet, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the Heath Hen, the Labrador Duck, and the Great Auk. Along the way, his thoughts, reactions and questions are carefully recorded. It is through reading his inner dialogue of discovery that readers find themselves examining their own feelings about what the extinction of a species means.

Cokinos sums up his intentions in this way: "So I have tried to write not only a natural history, but something more – a chronicle at once personal and historical, a collection of factual narratives that engage where we stand now in relation to the birds gone and the birds remaining. We may never restore vanished birds through the promise of cloning. That may remain a Hollywood fantasy. But we can restore – we can *restory* – these vanished birds to our consciousness" (p.3).

By conjuring up a vivid portrait of these birds from the eyes of someone in today's world, Cokinos wants us to certainly mourn these species' passing. Thus emotionally motivated, we must get out of our chair and do something. Cokinos wants to make clear the necessity of "redefining hope from wish to work" (p.335).

Cokinos has done an amazing amount of original research for this book. The American Antiquarian Society awarded him a residency in 1998. This gave him access to an incredible collection of original source material. You may think there is nothing new that could be written about the Passenger Pigeon, but Cokinos always seems to look for the new angle. For instance, he speaks with Mary Kruse, the daughter of Press Clay Southworth, the man who actually shot the last wild pigeon. She shows Chris a scrapbook of articles that Southworth kept about the pigeon, including a 1968 letter he wrote to *Modern Maturity* about his experiences with the last Passenger Pigeon. Cokinos' sensitive writing reveals Press Clay Southworth as not some red-necked executioner, but as a caring person who took a strange specimen he found on his farm in the way everyone took a specimen in those days before optics became popular. Cokinos later tries to find the location of this farm where the incident took place, and as dusk falls, meditates on extinction.

In the chapters on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Cokinos talks with Nancy Tanner, now eighty-two, whose husband James Tanner did most of the seminal field research on the species and is revealed as a hero. The effect of these investigations is both to make the extinctions more real and vivid, not just a depressing statistic, and also to bring a species extinction into the realm of everyday human experience. Through his first-person monologues, Cokinos always

seems to get to the heart of the matter, the deep questions and experiences we all have. For instance, he talks about the "the forgetting-of-self that comes from looking" (p.8) that anybody who has lost himself or herself birding can identify with.

Some personal incidents recorded in the book are poetically transcendent. Cokinos visits curator and ornithologist Town Peterson at the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas with the purpose of looking at Carolina Parakeet skins. Peterson starts by showing Cokinos a tiny brown feather and asks him if he knows what it is. Peterson reveals it to be a feather from a moa. Later, while examining the parrot skins, a tiny bright green feather comes loose. Momentarily Cokinos, caught in a "matrix of awe, grief, disgust and desire" from handling the dead parakeets, is sorely tempted to keep the feather for his own. He imagines everything he could do with the wisp of a feather at home, including talking about it at dinner parties. Finally, for several reasons, he decides to put the feather down. It is a very human and very complex moment.

Cokinos' choice of illustrations for the book, all modestly black and white, are often unique. Some of the photography emphasizes the human connection to these birds' lives. In one chapter we see an amusing photograph of a certain Mr. Bryan and his pet Carolina Parakeet, Doodles. Doodles is perched right in front of his face and looks like he is ready to plant a kiss. Another photograph shows ornithologist Alfred Gross tenderly holding a Heath Hen in his lap. There are two stills from James Tanner's amazing films made of a nesting pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. These films were made at tremendous physical effort by the ornithologists who were desperately trying to document and hopefully save a disappearing species. We begin to understand that although humans certainly caused these species extinctions, there were also people who cared deeply for these birds.

Certainly there are also unabashed villains in these extinction stories. Ornithologists try to keep the Singer Tract in Louisiana, where some of the last few Ivory-bills breed, from impending industrial development. James F. Griswold, Chicago Mills chairman of the board, simply tells them: "We are just money grubbers." "We are not concerned, as are you folks, with ethical considerations" (p.102). Later in the book, Cokinos takes a walk in what is left of the Singer Tract amid the ruins of the Chicago Mill Lumber Company. The irony is palpable.

At the end of the book, Cokinos writes about the Great Auk. It is interesting to compare his more personal writing in these chapters with Errol Fuller's monumental tome. Cokinos visits some of the old breeding islands of the auk on a wild trip in a Zodiac. Finally back ashore, he writes what can only be called a prayer: "What we have lost – and what we have now – oblige us to savor and save what we have" (p.335). It is a testament to Christopher Cokinos' writing that we believe this is still possible.

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