

A PLEA FOR THE CONTINUATION OF ELLIOTT COUES'  
ORNITHOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY.

BY CASEY A. WOOD.

No one can consult any of the Instalments of Coues' Bibliography without a mental doffing of the hat to a truly great man. The years of patient drudgery involved in that tremendous undertaking seem to dissolve in the amazement excited by the universal exhibit of the author-compiler's scholarship and erudition. Had Coues lived and if conditions had been favorable, he would, doubtless have carried to completion his ambitious scheme of a "Universal Bibliography of Ornithology." In this connection one is reminded that, as everybody knows, Coues was under considerable obligation to his friend Professor Alfred Newton, of Cambridge, England, for assistance, advice and encouragement in the preparation of his Bibliography. One of the treasures of the E. S. W. Library of Ornithology in McGill University is an autographed copy from Newton to Dr. Elliot Coues, "with the compiler's kind regards," in 1872, of "Extracts from the Record of Zoological Literature, Vols. I-VI., containing the portions relating to AVES from 1864 to 1869." This compilation proved of great help to Coues in assembling data for his great work; and the copy in question is full of his marginal notes and bracketed paragraphs indicating the transference of numerous references whose verbiage one may readily recognize in the pages of the Instalments. There is ample evidence that when Coues decided he would be unable to finish the work so happily and successfully begun he did his best to engage the activities of others to that end. I submit the account of one of these efforts,—that unfortunately ended in failure—in the form of a letter that came into my possession with a presentation by the author of the Instalments "to his friend W. Ruskin Butterfield." This communication deals with an arrangement two years before his death, by Coues with Ruskin Butterfield, to proceed with and complete the publication of the Bibliography, so far as it concerned British birds. For this undertaking, Coues offers every assistance in his power, including

the use of his collection of unpublished notes. Following is the letter:—

1726 N Street,  
Washington, D. C. Dec. 15, 1897.

DEAR MR. RUSKIN-BUTTERFIELD:

I am glad to learn by yours of November 20th. that the pkge. reached you safely and its contents were found as described in the receipt you have signed.

I appreciate your kind expressions. If you feel under any obligation to me the debt can best be discharged by making the best use of the materials; and I shall be amply repaid by the successful issue of the arrangement now subsisting between us. *Perge modo!* I have given you five years, but suppose that it is a wide margin, and shall hope to see results in a year or two.

You seem to be setting the machinery in motion already, and I hope it will work smoothly. I would suggest that as my printed bibliog. is so large a basis of your work, you begin with that, cutting and pasting every little title on your uniform cards, arranged chronologically, alphabetized by authors under each year. If you do this first with the British instalment, and then do the same with everything "British" you find in my other instalments, and incorporate these batches of printed titles together in one chronological series, you will find yourself already a long way on your road toward the end—or to 1879 at any rate. Then your several thousand titles, each on its own card will stand before you in proper sequence, every new title you acquire to stop a gap in the series will drop into its proper place, and you can continue the series from 1879 onward to present date. All this will be merely mechanical labor, involving no research, and you can do it anywhere, at any time. After that your real bibliographical labors will begin.

Let me set up a danger signal at the start, by adducing my favorite maxim: "*Error lurks in wait on every transcription.*" Do not copy my MS titles. If my long, narrow little title-slips in manuscript do not fit the size and shape of the cards you use, better paste a fold over one end, then undertake to copy them. They will not look neat and tidy, so handled, but chances of error will be appreciably lessened; also you will save yourself much needless penwork.

I trust that the remarks, which as a rule accompany my titles, will commend themselves to your judgment, and be available for your own purposes—both those in print already and those in MS that have not yet seen the light. It was always my aim to make them as concise and precise as possible, but some are quite extensive in the cases of rare, curious or standard titles—as Bewick, White, McGillivray, etc., etc. I shall be glad to know that, as a rule, you find these terse characterizations just and sound, so that you can perpetuate them in the new work, and perhaps also use their general tenor, scope and purposes as something of a guide to your own work in this respect.

The copy of *Pass. dom.* paper which I sent you is defective, but only lacks one leaf of introductory matter devoted to abuse of the Sparrow in this country and explanative of the batch of titles which follows. So your copy lacks nothing that you need to use; which is fortunate, as I have but one other in my possession.

Thanks for your kind offer. I think of no special book or paper that I need, but if you happen to have at any time some quaint or curious publication that you can spare of course I should be pleased with such an addition to my library.

Wishing you perfect success, and at your further service, I remain

Very cordially yours,

ELLIOTT COUES.

The sequel of this correspondence is furnished by Mr. Butterfield in a prefatory note to 'A List of Books relating to British Birds, from the Library of W. H. Mullens,' by W. Ruskin Butterfield, from *Occasional Publication* No. 3, Hastings & St. Leonard. Natural History Society, Decr. 1908. Here it is:—

"In 1897 the late Dr. Coues entrusted to me the task of completing up-to-date, the portions of his bibliography relating to our native birds, and placed in my hands the additional material he had collected; moreover, he procured from Professor Newton, of Cambridge, the consent of the latter to assist me with advice, a favour of which I took full advantage. But I speedily found that I had embarked upon a task of no small magnitude. It was easy enough to deal with the books in my possession, but when these were finished it became necessary to visit the great libraries in London, and at length, from various circumstances, I found it difficult to continue."

In a recent reply to an inquiry, Mr. Butterfield writes:

"I handed to Major W. H. Mullens my notes together with the notes of the late Dr. Coues relating to the bibliography of British Birds, referred to supra. I took this course as there was no likelihood of my preparing a bibliography myself within a reasonable time, and I was anxious that use should be made of the notes. As you are doubtless aware, the bibliography by Major Mullens (and others) has appeared. The late Dr. Coues did not hand to me any bibliographical material except that relating to British Birds."

And that's that, but on reading these contributions to the history of ornithology one is impelled to ask, "Are there no Americans, who can or will assume the labor of completing the Instalments?"

We are well aware of the immensity of the task—the lingual difficulties, the large expenditure of time, money and energy,

the provision of specially trained assistants, and all the other considerations involved in such a far-reaching adventure, but where in the whole range of avian research may one find a more meritorious scheme? Coues had not, so far as I can discover among about 200 letters in the E. S. W. Library collection, any definite plan to continue the American bibliography. Evidently he believed that if he could not undertake the work himself, he had not only laid a solid foundation, but had built much of the superstructure, and that other artisans would surely add the necessary storeys. Consequently, I re-echo heartily Dr. Witmer Stone's hope (*Auk*, April, 1927 p. 270) that "some patron of American Ornithology will make it possible for a properly equipped compiler to carry on the work of Coues and aid the research of every student by placing before him, in chronological order all the papers on American birds from 1878 to date."

Let me add to the foregoing, that entirely to realize Coues' ambition, the patron in question should supply sufficient funds for the collection of *all* titles on the birds of the world, for the benefit of research students in every department of *general* ornithology.

Much of this work has been done here and there (*teste* Grinnell's extensive and valuable Pacific Coast bibliography) in various languages and when these piecemeal contributions have been assembled (and perhaps checked and annotated) they will materially lighten the labors of the corps of compilers engaged on the greater task.

In any event, the completion of the American section of such a work is not only a useful and desirable undertaking in itself, but it could at any time be absorbed in the proposed volumes on the bibliography of universal ornithology.

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[Dr. Wood's letters recalled to my mind a publication by Dr. Coues in 'The Osprey' (Vol. II, p. 39.) dealing in part with this same matter, and also some correspondence which I had with him on the subject of the 'Bibliography'. As the early issues of 'The Osprey' are not now easily obtainable a republication of his article may not be out of place. It is as follows:

"The bibliography of ornithology is a subject which occupied me for several years, in the seventies, and upon which I expended an enormous amount of labor, with mainly my own pen, with comparatively little ostensible result. In 1880 I had published four installments of my intended 'Universal Bibliography of Ornithology,' these being a few thousand titles relating to the birds of North and South America and Great Britain. In that year my machinery for doing the work broke down, and I found myself amidst the debris of the great work I had projected or partially accomplished, with many thousand manuscript titles on hand, and no prospect of their ever seeing the light. What I had been able to do was to set the high water mark of excellence in such work, and make a model for the bibliographer of the future, in those small portions of the whole undertaking which appeared in print. It was not only good work, but also extremely useful and sorely needed; and I think I never did anything else in my life which brought me such hearty praise "in mouths of wisest censure"—immediate and almost universal recognition, at home and abroad, from ornithologists who knew that bibliography was a necessary nuisance, and a horrible drudgery that no mere drudge could perform. It takes a sort of an inspired idiot to be a good bibliographer, and his inspiration is as dangerous a gift as the appetite of the gambler or dipsomaniac—it grows with what it feeds upon, and finally possesses its victim like any other invincible vice. Perhaps it is lucky for me that I was forcibly divorced from my bibliographical mania; at any rate, years have cured me of the habit, and I shall never again be spell bound in that way. But my own cure need not and will not deter others from trying bibliography for themselves; we must all buy our experiences, and are lucky if we do not pay too dearly for them. After all these years, during which the vast accumulation of unpublished titles slept on my hands, and during which I abandoned all hope of their utilization, I have just sent to a gentleman in England everything I own in manuscript relating to British birds, for the preparation of a new and up-to-date edition of that portion of my published bibliography. I trust he does not enter upon his bibliographical travail with too light a heart—if he does, may the Nemesis who overrules us all have mercy on his bibliographical soul! This raises another question, which may be put in this way: Where is the man who will undertake to bring my North American Bibliography up-to-date? The field is white to the harvesting of a splendid crop of titles of books and papers published on the birds of North America since my scythe has been rusting; and on the basis of what I garnered years ago any aspirant for fame who has the requisite qualifications and is not afraid of hard work can erect a monument more lasting than brass. Among the requisite qualifications, may be reckoned more zeal than discretion, youth, health, strength, staying powers, unlimited time at command, and access to the foci of ornithological literature in some large eastern city. All my material, both published and unpublished, shall be at the service of any such individual, with any such opportunities, and any such appetite for bibliographical immortality:

I will even throw my blessing into the bargain. What do I hear in answer to this advertisement: "Wanted a competent bibliographer of North American ornithology."?—E. C.

It happened that I had been for some time engaged upon a sort of index to ornithological papers and upon reading Dr. Coues article I at once wrote to him regarding this work and its relation to the bibliography that he was advocating. His answer follows:

November 17, 1897.

MY DEAR MR. STONE:

So you turn out to be one of those "what-d'ye-call 'ems" I went still hunting for in the Osprey. Well!

What you seem to have done is to make an index to the book you have not made. That sort of thing is not bibliography. What you want is titles of books and papers alphabetical by authors, or better in chronological order alphabetized by authors under each year, each title explained or amplified when necessary even with synopsis of its contents, then these contents, titles and authors, all indexed.

That is what my Bibliography proposed but as it broke down it was left indexless. You are the very man, I should judge, to take up and complete this work. Why not? Begin with 1879 when I broke down, on the exact model I have set, take every note or least article by title and author, to be found in any periodical, add all books published 1879 or later, and you would have the required bibliog. which I warrant you could get published. In that event whatever work you have already done on your incomplete card catalogue would come in. Otherwise it will probably never be utilized except for your private information.

If I could practically complete my bibliog. down to 1879 you should have little difficulty in bringing it down to date. I advise you by all means to do it. Study carefully the idea as set forth in the preface to my appendix in *Birds Col. Vall.* and also my remarks to the further installment in the *Hayden Bulletin* and write me again what you think about it. It goes without saying that I should be deeply interested in your work, would make you free to anything I have and give you all the assistance in my power. Produce the work and then we will attend to its publication.

Cordially yours,  
ELLIOTT COUES.

Another letter followed in which he said "By all means make a start and let consequences take care of themselves later on. Begin with 'Nulla dies sine linea' and the result will soon astonish and gratify you making you wonder how and when you managed

to do so much." He suggested beginning with the 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Club' and 'The Auk' and said: "I think the A. O. U. would print the result as an extra Index volume of 'The Auk,' the subject lately came up in Council and we agreed the work ought to be done but had nobody to do it."

The first index volume to 'The Auk' being by that time under serious consideration by a Committee I thought it best to devote my attention to other journals and in odd moments during the next two years I covered nearly all of the American journals in the library of the Philadelphia Academy writing out some 3000 titles and eventually brought the work down to 1900. Then lack of time brought the effort to a stop. Upon Dr. Coues' death I thought of his promise to send me the unpublished titles that he had accumulated and wrote to Mrs. Coues. She very kindly promised to send them but they could not be found. Whether they were preserved I do not know.

I had by this time been cured of *my* bibliographic mania and my hope is that someone else may contract the disease, that it may run a full course and that some good and generous doctor may prescribe for it in the form of financial endowment. If so I shall be pleased to offer my 3000 titles and *my* blessing as I repeat the Couesian advertisement of 1897 "Wanted a bibliographer of American ornithology!"—Witmer Stone.]