



WALDO LEE McATEE
(1883-1962)

Photograph taken in September, 1930.

IN MEMORIAM: W. L. McATEE

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WALDO LEE McATEE was born at Jalapa, Indiana, on January 21, 1883, and died at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on January 7, 1962.

In that span of nearly 79 years there were crowded the events of a highly productive, diversified, and professionally distinguished career. McAttee had outstanding proficiency in several fields of natural science, was exceptionally competent in the use of the written word, and untiring in his efforts to promote what he believed to be the right. His sincere convictions and his steadfastness in defending them left no room for doubt of his positions. This approach prevailed not only in his scientific and literary endeavors, but also in his relations with contemporaries.

In preparing this narrative of his life and work advantage was taken of copious records left by McAttee himself. Although he did not maintain a diary in the ordinary sense, he did have a habit, meticulously followed through the years of his maturity, of jotting down on scraps of paper any passing thought that appeared significant. Many of these comments were dated and they covered a wide range of subject matter. These were kindly made available by his widow, Mrs. Fannie McAttee, and Dr. Francis Harper generously contributed information gleaned from his association with McAttee at Chapel Hill near the end of the latter's career. McAttee also prepared, in 1945, five concisely worded statements covering aspects of his life. These and other contributions, some privately published, some typewritten or mimeographed, and still others set forth in handwriting, served as source material. Quotations therefrom appear frequently in this text and to that extent this is an autobiography.

Waldo Lee McAttee was the first child of John Henry McAttee and Anna Morris McAttee. Though of English and Scottish extraction, his immediate ancestors were citizens of the United States. Those of his father came from Virginia and those of his mother from the Carolinas early in the 19th century. Besides Waldo there were five other children, two boys and three girls, two of whom died early in life.

While Waldo was still a small boy the family moved to Marion, Indiana, and it was in that vicinity that he spent his teenage years. Being the first grandchild, young McAttee became a close companion of his maternal grandfather and, together, they spent many happy days fishing and roaming along the Mississinewa River. To these experiences, no doubt, can be traced the boy's love for the out-of-doors, since the industrialized environment of the western part of Marion and the markedly different outlook of his boyhood companions were not conducive to the career which followed. Later, commenting on that stage of his life, he had this to say: "We were

at times as poor as anyone could be but it was never felt by me (and my brother agrees). . . . It was accepted as a fact of life, and we went on as best we could, each in his own way."

McAtee's serious study of bird life began at the age of 16 when he received great stimulus from lectures delivered in Marion by Dr. Frank M. Chapman. He rose early in the mornings to look for birds in the nearby orchards and woods and began keeping careful records of observations made. While looking ahead to possible attendance at college he was inspired by his English teacher, Miss Frances Benedict, and by Professor W. A. Irwin, both of the local high school staff. It was Professor Irwin who loaned McAtee 200 dollars to tide him through his last semester at the University of Indiana as he was carrying a heavy load of class work. The repayment of this loan was the first obligation met by the young man after graduation, when he received employment in the U. S. Biological Survey. Throughout his college career, financial needs were met by waiting on tables, starting furnace fires on cold winter mornings, and later, through income from a teaching fellowship and as curator of birds at the University of Indiana Museum.

It was on September 13, 1906, that Waldo Lee McAtee and Fannie E. Lawson of Oxford, Indiana, were married. From this marriage three children were born, Jack, who died in infancy, Alice Elfreda (Mrs. Alice E. Winthrop), of Washington, D. C., and Robert Bruce, of Arlington, Virginia.

McAtee's career in the government service began in 1903 when, between his junior and senior years at the University of Indiana, he received a temporary appointment as a "biological expert" in the Bureau of Biological Survey. After graduation in 1904 he was offered a regular appointment. The thesis supporting his degree of Master of Science, obtained in 1906, was "Horned Larks and their relation to agriculture" which had been published as Bulletin 23 of the Biological Survey. Then began a thirty-year career of distinction in and devotion to the science of economic ornithology, of which McAtee rightfully became dean. For several years he was recognized as the leader of the Section of Economic Ornithology and, in 1921, he was appointed chief of the newly created unit of Food Habits Research, which had been designated as a Division in the Bureau largely through his untiring efforts.

As has been the fate of others in the governmental service, administrative duties and other tasks made increasing demands on McAtee's time and, in 1936, he was appointed Technical Advisor to the Chief of the Biological Survey, and Research Specialist, a position he held until near the close of his period of service. His retirement became effective on September 30, 1947, but he was designated a collaborator for one year there-

after, during which he completed his manuscript on "A dictionary of American birds," a project mentioned later in this text.

Even a sketchy recital of all the accomplishments associated with McAtee's governmental career would tax the limits of this document. It was he, however, who developed, in this country, the science of research on the food habits of vertebrates from a primitive beginning with an uncharted future to a status of scientific excellence never dreamed of at its inception and never equalled since.

He pioneered studies of the food of waterfowl and, on the basis of field work in more than a score of states, assembled and published information on the propagation of plants beneficial and attractive to these birds. On the basis of studies of the fruiting seasons of plants carried out at herbariums throughout the country, coupled with the knowledge gained through stomach examination, he authored a series of Farmers' Bulletins to aid in the attraction of terrestrial birds. In the field he gave attention to such matters as the relation of birds to the codling, gypsy, and brown-tailed moths in the Northeast, the rice crop in the South, fish hatcheries in the Midwest, and oysters on the Pacific coast. The concern of some bird protectionists was even aroused by his conclusions that sapsuckers did inflict damage on wood products and that fruit-eating birds were, at times, in need of control. His established reputation led to European travel in 1927, in the course of which natural history institutions from Stockholm to Budapest were visited. Through consultation and personal inspection he assembled information on such diverse subjects as the propagation of game birds, research in avian economics, and (for the Bureau of Entomology) the identification of insects, particularly Hemiptera, of which he was the Acting Custodian at the U. S. National Museum at the time. He also was called upon, from time to time, to serve as acting chief of the Biological Survey.

Notwithstanding the evident distinction reflected by these assignments (and there were many others) McAtee's greatest contribution to ornithology was his organization of research in the food habits of vertebrates. It was he, practically alone, who conceived and expanded the program of stomach analysis as a working tool in the science. That meant the acquisition of modern laboratory equipment, the assembling of adequate reference collections, the indexing and cross-indexing of the data from examined material, the assembling and cataloging of pertinent published information, the correlation of laboratory and field findings and, finally, making this information available to the public through appropriate bulletins.

McAtee was a persistent and critical reader. He also had a highly retentive memory which, no doubt, served as a basis for his proficiency

and versatility in mature life. The written and printed word was, for McAtee, a normal method of communication. His writing came easily and was lucid and scholarly, and his serious contributions were never verbose or trivial. For those reasons he was frequently called upon for editorial duties. In connection therewith he compiled a leaflet on "Preparing scientific manuscripts for the Biological Survey." This and later reprints had wide circulation in that agency and also were distributed in the Soil Conservation and National Park services.

He was the first editor of, and contributed substantially to, the first 51 numbers of the *Wildlife Review*, an abstracting publication inaugurated by the Biological Survey in 1935 largely through McAtee's foresight and initiative in meeting the budding science of wildlife management. He also was the founding editor of the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, serving for more than five years. He contributed generously to the critical review sections of *The Auk* and other periodicals, particularly with regard to the literature of economic ornithology.

One cannot present, within the space here allotted, an adequate statement of McAtee's published and unpublished writings. Fortunately, however, with his usual foresight and sense of obligation, McAtee prepared in 1959 a mimeographed, numerical summary of his writings. This document, entitled "Literary Testament," is in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, together with the majority of the works listed in it. Provision was made for the deposit of these writings in the Rare Book Room where, as he stated, "they would be available to library-approved persons."

The published material deposited there in January, 1959, was the product of his literary efforts from 1899 to 1958. Of scientific papers, including reviews and obituaries, there were 896; anonymous conservation sketches, 51; letters to editors, 46 (81 others in this category apparently never were published); literary effusions, 165, of which 117 were poetry; language and folklore articles, 96; and "esoterica," 16, a total of 1,270. In addition there were mimeographed documents not regarded as publications. Of these, Biological Survey Leaflets (only a partial set) comprised 38; contributions to *Wildlife Review* (abstracts), 6,053; special articles, 38; and notes and news, 225. Also deposited was a manuscript entitled "Fifty Years of Natural History Publication, 1899-1950," embracing a chronological list and annotated index of his writings. McAtee often resorted to "private publication of leaflets and brochures, both scientific and literary, and . . . to assure that a few copies, at least will be available to bookworms, they have been sent to several leading libraries. The Indiana State [Indianapolis] and Indiana University [Bloomington] libraries have nearly, or quite complete sets." McAtee explained that much of his writ-

ing had not been published and that "nearly all of it, together with my correspondence file, has been sent or (by bequest will be) deposited in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress in Washington." His stock of reprints of scientific papers was sent by bequest to the Chicago Museum of Natural History and, of all others, to the Harvard College Library at Harvard University.

So much for the sheer volume of McAtee's published articles. Fortunately, we have, in a statement prepared in 1946, an interpretation of what he considered his more important contributions. He felt that his "Food habits of the grosbeaks" (1908) was his best report on the food of a group of birds and his "Woodpeckers in relation to trees and wood products" (1911) his greatest effort in the field of applied economic ornithology. "Plants useful to attract birds and protect fruit," published in the *Yearbook* of the Department of Agriculture for 1909, was the first of a series on related subjects, and 1911 saw his first paper on wild duck foods and their use in attracting waterfowl. A similar approach was employed in papers devoted to upland game birds, and, related thereto, was what McAtee referred to as his favorite publication in this series, "Biological balance on the farm," where, "freed from officious editing, I was able to state basic principles in simple language."

In the field of taxonomic entomology McAtee authored or coauthored some two score publications dealing largely with the order Hemiptera. He also contributed significantly to taxonomic botanical literature, and, in 1918, there appeared his "A sketch of the natural history of the District of Columbia," published by the Biological Society of Washington.

A natural sequel to McAtee's extensive experience with the food preferences of vertebrates was his thinking on the subject of protective coloration and related considerations, which led to much theoretical controversy. His culminating document on that topic appeared in the *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections* in 1932 under the title of "Effectiveness in nature of the so-called protective adaptations in the animal kingdom, chiefly as illustrated by the food habits of Nearctic birds." This was based on his analysis of the food items found in 80,000 stomachs of birds examined in the Biological Survey laboratory and involved nearly a quarter of a million food items.

A product of related thinking was his book-size "A critique of Darwinism" which never cleared the desk of a receptive publisher, but excerpts therefrom were privately printed in 1948 under the title "Contradictions in Darwinian sourcebooks."

Another project that originated as a sideline to his field studies of waterfowl and other birds was his compilation of the vernacular names of North American birds. This manuscript, which he completed during the

closing days of his tenure with the Fish and Wildlife Service, recorded some 67,000 terms used by scientists and laymen and the two-volume work was expected to embrace some 3,000 printed pages. Apparently lack of financial support prevented its being published by the University of Chicago, a co-sponsor. This manuscript has been deposited in the Department of Rare Books of the John M. Olin Library at Cornell University.

Little known to many of McAtee's friends in scientific circles were his studies and writing on "Hoosier" folklore and dialect of his native Indiana. In 1960 he published a list of 56 articles he had contributed to these subjects during the period 1917-1959.

At Yuletide we always expected and usually received, in some form, a bit of McAtee's literary genius. As a rule it came as a small brochure, neatly printed, with its message either in prose or poetry. True, there were thoughts on conservation and anecdotes on Nature; they were what one would expect. But more revealing were the fragments of his personal philosophy and gems of pastoral poetry one would scarcely have associated with McAtee, the dedicated scientist.

Among these Yuletide greetings were delightful accounts in prose of events of McAtee's youth and of things long gone by, suggested by such titles as "Snyder's Bayou," "Where Jack Frost Gets his Flowers," and "Conner's Mill." Among the verses one found "To the Arbutus," "Voices of the March Wind," "A Road Through Southern Pines," and many others. In a lighter vein I recall a few lines of "A Memory Rhyme" somewhat reminiscent of the poetry of another Hoosier, Eugene Field:

Sugar, salt and indigo,
Sugar, salt and indigo,

Thus I sang it as I ran,
Sent as mother's little man,
To the store for thus and so,
In the days so long ago.

Probably the last of McAtee's publications to appear while he lived is a small two-leaf brochure, "Poetry: Its Kind and Climax," sent as compliments of the Yuletide 1961. In its captivating English it reveals McAtee's appreciation of the art of poetry, an understanding of which few of us realized he possessed.

Fully aware of McAtee's writing abilities, but unaware of all he had done, I once suggested to him the recording, before it was too late, of biographical anecdotes pertaining to members of the Biological Survey, based on his many years of contact with them. The answer came back: "Probably I have written all I have to say about the Biological Survey, but it is for posterity. In October 1951, I sent to the Library of Congress notes on 103

persons connected with the Survey; and, in February 1953, notes on field trips including happenings and personalities. This totalled 374 long-hand pages and mentioned 392 individuals. These went to the Manuscript Division and were restricted for use until any individual treated was dead."

McAtee became an Associate Member of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1903, while still an undergraduate student at the University. He was elected to Membership (now Elective Membership) in 1910 and became a Fellow in 1913. For 18 years (1920-1938) McAtee served energetically and faithfully as Treasurer of the Union. In 1939 he was elected to the Council for a three-year term and, in 1942, he acquired the status of Fellow Emeritus. As in other matters, McAtee's decisions in organizational affairs of the A.O.U. were based on his convictions of what was right, even though they often represented a minority opinion. Throughout this period he was a frequent contributor to *The Auk*, particularly on subjects in his chosen field of economic ornithology.

It would appear that the last meeting of the Union attended by McAtee was that held in Boston in 1940. From that point on several factors conspired to lessen his contacts with the Union. Reorganization in the Fish and Wildlife Service minimized McAtee's connection with matters pertaining to economic ornithology, and contacts with others engaged in the same or related fields of research became less frequent. More important, however, was the fact that the Union, through the passing of those members with whom he had long associated, had become less intimate and appealing. Gradual and inevitable as this change was, it had a depressing effect on McAtee, and he felt that his lack of association with affairs of the Union might be misinterpreted. As was his wont, he put these reflections in writing and in December, 1953, near the end of his 71st year, he prepared a mimeographed page which was sent to his friends, reciting sadly the progressive loss, by death, of numerous esteemed members of the Union. This, he said, was the underlying reason for his lessened attendance at meetings. "These were the people who made the Union for me. . . . When all of these and others akin, were gathered about the council table or festive board, the young observer was introduced to another world, and sadly he now reflects a world that has vanished. . . . In hearty, fraternal spirit, these old-time A.O.U. companions can not be excelled. They were the Union; they remain the Union, for me."

During his Washington career McAtee had been a member, at one time or another, of more than 30 organizations, most of which were of a scientific character. For many years he took active interest in those devoted to ornithology and entomology and contributed frequently to their journals. Of these the A.O.U. was, of course, his first love, yet, in later life, he was a moving spirit in the formation of the Wildlife Society, of which

he was a charter member and first secretary-treasurer, founding editor of its *Journal of Wildlife Management*, and an honorary member until death. His interest in matters pertaining to folklore and dialects was reflected in his membership in three societies furthering such research.

Of a semisocial nature were his connections with the Washington Biologists' Field Club, with headquarters at Plummers Island in the Potomac River above Washington. He was inducted into it soon after his arrival at the Capital in 1905, became its secretary in 1909, and its vice-president from 1911 to 1916. He relates that "most of the members were older than I and a teacher-student relationship was natural. . . . With so many specialists among its members and guests the study of the flora and fauna of Plummers Island and the nearby Potomac shores became an objective of the Club and the area was more intensively observed and collected over than perhaps any other in the land. Extension of the range of organisms were common. . . . I assembled these records from the literature and for years at annual meetings of the Club I gave reports of progress."

In a reflective mood McAtee also commented that "perhaps to one like myself, for whom Nature heals all troubles of the spirit, the greatest boon was the comparative quiet of the island and the adjacent mainlands. There was spent many a happy hour and pleasures experienced which, in recollection, outweigh contrasting experiences arising from the frailties of human nature."

Contrary to the belief of some, McAtee had many friends and confreres in scientific and literary circles. True, those whom he held in high regard were those who met his exacting and unique standards of personal relationships. Dominant and immutable among these criteria was his concept of equality of individuals, regardless of whom they might be. As expressed on one occasion: "I see no practical theory but equality, for each man is superior in some way, knows more about something than any other. No man can be universal: all are partial (in their accomplishments). Companionship should be based on community of ideals and mutual tolerances in sufficient respect, not on fictitious class levels."

And again: "Never a lover of the limelight, the older I grow the more I detest being put in a position where I am supposed to know more or to be in any way superior to others. However that may be in fact, I wish the outward appearance, at least, of complete equality. . . . The feeling of equality has always been strong and kept me from ever kowtowing or ingratiating. If the alleged great wished to treat me as an equal, it was all right on that basis; if not, relations ended. This tended to alienate me from those in authority, for few of them remain unspoiled by it."

McAtee's feeling of equality among men was so pronounced that he disliked and avoided, as far as possible, being thrust into positions where

he was supposed to exert leadership over others. He did not mind organizing meetings and presiding temporarily where the effort was needed in the promotion of a worthwhile endeavor, but, once things moved forward, he was prone to remain in the organizational background. His long years of service in the A.O.U. and the role he performed in the creation of the Wildlife Society attest to this. Giving each his best, he logically might have become its president, had he been so inclined. That this trait was inborn, one might conclude from an incident of his youth. He related that: "A boy's brigade was organized in Marion, Indiana at the time of the Spanish-American War and they made me some sort of a squadron leader. I performed in one parade, after which my wooden sword and paper cocked hat were deposited, as soon as might be, behind a nearby billboard."

McAtee's aversion to the limelight, which, in youth, had the simple aspect of shyness, must be considered in appraising the man and his philosophy. He freely admitted that he was unsociable by nature. He did not enjoy parties as a child, and, with few exceptions, during high school and college days, particularly if small talk and frivolities were their main characteristics. On the other hand, he thoroughly enjoyed association with kindred spirits whom he found at the semi-social meetings of ornithologists or those gathered at Plummers Island or on the golf course. The annual Christmas bird census, conducted for many years by the triumvirate of E. A. Preble, Alexander Wetmore, and McAtee was always a cherished event, social as well as scientific.

It must be admitted, however, that McAtee's aversion to anything savoring of flattery or "political nicety" precluded his rising to the highest levels in governmental administration. When the suggestion was once made by a superior that he should become more of a "mixer" with those in power and attend receptions and the like, the answer was an unequivocal "no." It simply did not gibe with his outlook on life. To him hypocrisy was the ultimate in anathema. Yet, deserved approbation expressed, as he said, "by those qualified to speak, has not been unwelcome, but any approach to flattery or lionizing has been resented."

McAtee's reactions to sincerity and pretense extended beyond personalities and into the realm of activities or programs for which no single individual might be responsible. Such occurred at the time of his retirement from the government service and preparations made for the usual (and somewhat perfunctory) "party." Feeling that the occasion did not carry the sincerity implied "Mac" would have none of it and the idea was dropped.

However, there was a sequel which illustrates the point just mentioned. Through planning by a group of close friends, McAtee, later, was the

recipient of a bound volume of laudatory letters, a pair of field glasses, and a letter of credit at a book shop, presented to him at a quiet gathering at an obscure restaurant in the "Loop" area of Chicago. This was an occasion after his own liking and his appreciation was manifest.

Once established, McAtee's opinions and attitudes seldom were altered and compromises usually not considered. This, of course, had both advantages and disadvantages. One was never in doubt where McAtee stood, once he had expressed himself, but, certainly, there were times and circumstances when a softened front would have been helpful to all concerned, and a loss to none.

Although, as a boy, McAtee sang in the church choir with his parents, the fact that members of various congregations did not live up to their Sunday religion during the rest of the week was a strong factor in turning him against organized religion later in life. He also confided that the particular brand of religion under which he was raised: "has been a blight on my whole spiritual life. The core of its philosophy was that, if anything is pleasurable, it must be sin. Together with this was inculcated a stoicism which, as far as practicable, repressed all display of emotion."

Despite such a suppressive influence in his youth McAtee's basic philosophy concerning life and his relations with fellow men was sincere and wholesome. A few bits appear in comments recorded by him under varied conditions.

"The truly ethical and good are those who observe the golden rule without hope of reward or fear of punishment, who do what is right for its own sake." "Just as the phrase 'freedom to worship according to the dictates of one's conscience' implies also the freedom to worship not at all, so, with respect to faith, any sound philosophy must provide for lack of faith." McAtee's agnosticism is reflected when he stated that "the reluctance, or the fear to say 'I do not know' is a bit of immature psychology. It should be given up with mental growth."

McAtee's conservation "religion" was equally sincere and he practiced what he preached. Although compelled by official assignments to become a duck hunter, he never indulged in it as a sport and, at one time, commented, "I marvel at the persistence of the hunting urge in people with whom I agree about many things, but it seems to me that killing for sport is one of those things that should be sloughed off as civilization advances."

McAtee's choice of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, as a place of retirement in 1950 was based on his desire to live in a small town with an adequate library, particularly well-stocked in literary lines to which his tastes had turned increasingly. Technical books could be borrowed from Duke University only 10 miles away. It was there where he had jotted down many of the salty comments of which free use has been made in

this appraisal. Near the end, in softening words we find this: "My life in retirement has been so different from what went on before—a postlude of peace (or mostly so) that covers up the impressions of more turbulent years. . . . I treasure memories of good friends but mostly it is a vague blur, a good thing. I have come gradually to my philosophy of life, living each day by itself, with no worry as to either the past or the future" (May, 1961).

As a fitting and highly deserved recognition of his cultural attainments, McAtee received, in the evening of his career (June, 1961) an honorary degree of Doctor of Science from his Alma Mater at Bloomington, Indiana. Others honored with McAtee on the same occasion were Joseph Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis, Leland J. Haworth, member of the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission, and Matthew E. Welsh, the Governor of Indiana. The citation read: "Waldo Lee McAtee, son of Indiana and Indiana University, throughout a long life rich in scientific and scholarly achievements, you have carried to new heights the heritage of early Hoosier pioneers in science. Skillfully and enthusiastically you have directed your uncommon powers of observation and of reasoning to resolve mysteries in nature. Your Alma Mater welcomes you into new fellowship with the degree of Doctor of Science."

Whereas during youth and middle age, McAtee's rugged physique stood him in good stead in carrying on his strenuous program of work both in the laboratory and in the field, in the 40's several malfunctions laid him low for short periods. Also, a cataract had impaired vision to the point where, by 1935, reading was prevented with his right eye. In reflecting on factors that may have precipitated this condition he frankly admitted that it might be traced to a "blow across the temple with an iron bar received in a boyhood scrap injudiciously started in a blacksmith shop." Later, near tragedy was averted when medication checked a condition of uveitis in his left eye. His fatal illness in 1962 was caused by an inoperable cancer of the stomach. The end came after about a month's hospitalization. Funeral services were privately conducted, followed by cremation as was his wish.

McAtee was truly a naturalist of the "old order" and, in the opinion of some, the most versatile naturalist in the government agency where he served. He was a competent organizer of research, an energetic promoter of worthwhile programs, a methodical recorder of facts, a fluent and effective writer of both prose and poetry, an independent and courageous defender of his convictions and, in the words of a former high-ranking official of the Biological Survey, "McAtee was the most honest man I have ever known."

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