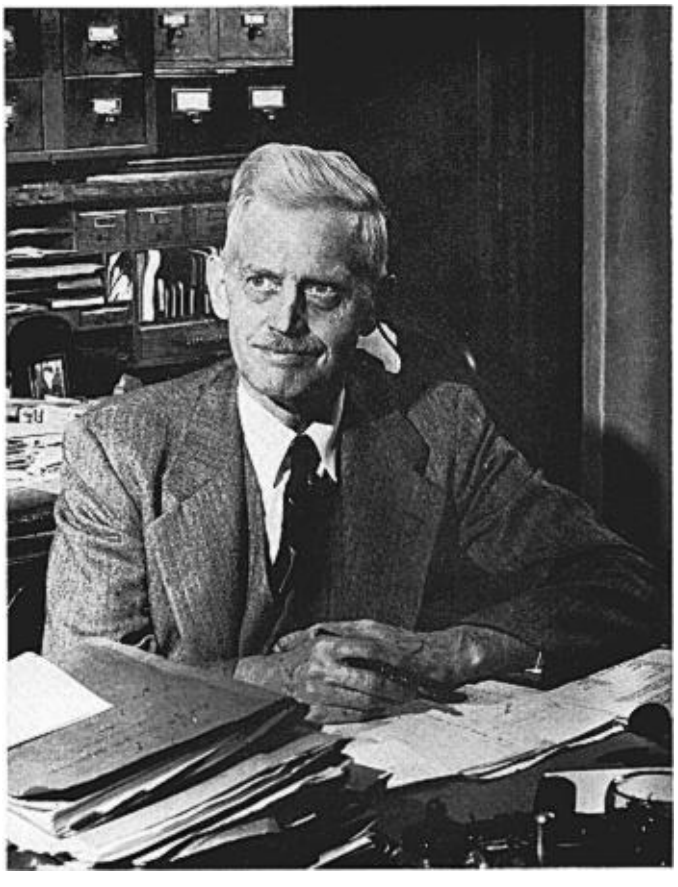

James Paul Chapin

1889–1964

# IN MEMORIAM: JAMES PAUL CHAPIN

HERBERT FRIEDMANN

JAMES PAUL CHAPIN was born in New York City on July 9, 1889, the son of Gilbert Granger and Nano (Eagle) Chapin. Although he was born in central Manhattan, less than a mile from the museum with which he was to be associated all his professional life, his boyhood was spent in Staten Island. At that time, and, indeed, for many years later, this large island at the ocean end of New York harbor was still quite rural and afforded constant opportunities for observations of nature. Here Chapin developed his lifelong interest in nature, and, together with friends of similar bent, such as Howard H. Cleaves and Alanson Skinner, he came under the influence of William T. Davis, a Staten Island naturalist and author of a book of more than purely local interest, *Days afield on Staten Island*. At the age of 15 Chapin was elected to membership in the Natural Science Association of Staten Island, a society that was, to a large degree, a reflection of Davis's enthusiasm and an extension of his personality and interests. It was before a meeting of this society, on October 21, 1905, that Chapin read his first scientific paper, presenting some observations on the behavior of a captive jumping mouse.

This society and the related Staten Island Association of Arts and Science each issued a little monthly journal, which became the media for Chapin's earliest notes on local birds and mammals. From 1904, when he published a short note on a Starling, then a fairly "new" bird in Staten Island, to 1909, no fewer than 32 notes by Chapin appeared in these two journals, his contributions to which were terminated by his departure for the Congo in May, 1909. Even after his return from the long sojourn in the Congo, and after his military service in World War I, Chapin continued to live in Staten Island, and to take an active interest in its local societies. Although he eventually moved to Manhattan he retained a close connection with the then recently established zoological park and similar institutions in Staten Island.

Chapin graduated from high school at the age of 16 but considered himself too young to enter college and undertook a year's work in the department of preparation of exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History. This proved to be a momentous decision, as it inaugurated a lifelong contact with that great institution. The following year he entered Columbia University, where he majored in the biological sciences. Even at that time he had developed the habit of keeping voluminous notes in his neat handwriting, illustrated with careful and well-drawn pictures and diagrams. For years afterward he occasionally used these college lecture notes as convenient references.

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Shortly after Chapin had completed his second year at Columbia an event took place that had far-reaching effects on his future. King Leopold II of Belgium presented a collection of ethnological material from the Congo to the American Museum, and the president and the board of the museum used this occasion to further their good relations with the Belgian government with the first suggestion that an American expedition make a biological survey of Belgium's great central African colony. This was the start of the American Museum Congo Expedition. The plans for this expedition developed rapidly and Herbert Lang, of the museum's department of preparation, was chosen to be the leader, since he had previous experience as a collector in East Africa. Lang accepted the new assignment but did not want to go alone. Chapin, then 19 years old, was asked if he would be willing to interrupt his university studies to go to the Congo for one to three years. This was an unusual situation for a young man to face, but Chapin decided to accept the challenge and the lure of adventure and unknown potential discoveries that the Congo had to offer.

As it turned out, the tenure in the Congo stretched to a total of nearly five and a half years, one of the longest uninterrupted field assignments in the history of museum expeditions. Lang and Chapin sometimes separated for as much as a year, each working in a different area, but they got on together extremely well. It was a most fortunate choice of personnel as both were industrious, alert, and devoted to the work they were sent to do. Few major expeditions have enriched our knowledge of so many areas of biology as greatly as did the Congo Expedition. The mere bulk of the collections amassed would be impressive alone, but these specimens were all accompanied by meticulous and elaborate field notes, making the results far more meaningful. After the return of the expedition, a summary of the results showed 5,800 mammals, 6,400 birds, 4,800 reptiles and amphibians, 6,000 fish, over 100,000 invertebrates, 3,800 anthropological specimens, or a total of over 126,000 specimens, plus 9,890 photographic negatives and 300 water color paintings of the colors in life of many of the animals obtained, and many volumes of field notes.

In 1919, a few years after his return to New York, Lang (*Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, vol. 39, p. xxii) wrote, of the expedition, that after about four years of active collecting:

> . . . the problem of transportation became our chief concern. Over two hundred loads were stored in Medje, the same number in Niangara, besides specimens for several hundred more in Avakubi. In Faradje alone over six hundred loads awaited removal to Stanleyville, the nearest shipping center, by a sixty-five days march, more than half of which led through dense forest; river transit was out of the question since native dugouts could not be used for objects affected by water. Restrictive measures connected with sleeping sickness had closed the Nile route and the precarious

condition of communication in the northeastern Uele made it necessary for the expedition to fashion from the raw material everything needed for packing purposes. . . . As the natives recruited in this region would not carry for more than six days, and in the forest only a couple of days, before returning to their respective villages . . . during five years' field work over 38,000 porters were engaged by the Congo Expedition.

The expedition had traveled about 15,000 miles on foot without accident or serious sickness in a region then considered to be very unhealthy. It was one of the truly great biological expeditions of all time, and it is understandable that Chapin found a lifetime of work in the study of its results.

Coming home from the Congo Expedition Chapin found Europe embroiled in World War I; indeed he was afraid for some time that some of the irreplaceable collections he had made with such effort might never reach New York because of submarine predation on shipping. Fortunately the collections arrived without loss, and Chapin settled down to begin studying them and also to resume his university education. However, with the entrance of the United States into the war, military service interfered, and Chapin, because of his fluency in French, became a billeting officer of the army in France from 1917 to 1919. A still earlier short field trip to the Canadian Rockies also caused a temporary pause in the study of the Congo material, as did a short trip to Panama in 1923. In 1930 Chapin was assigned to an expedition to the Galapagos Islands on the yacht "Nourmahal," and four years later he went to Polynesia on Templeton Crocker's yacht "Zaca" for about half a year. On this trip he, F. L. Jaques, and others collected material for some of the splendid groups in the museum's Hall of Oceanic Birds.

In spite of such interruptions it is possible to write that from 1909, when he started out for central Africa, until his death on April 5, 1964, Chapin's primary preoccupation was with the ornithology of the Congo. He returned there five times; in 1926–27 to the highlands of the eastern part of the country, where he became familiar with many mountain birds he had not met with in his long stay in the Uele and Ituri districts; in 1930 to Lukolela; in 1937 on a special and successful search for the Congo peacock, *Afropavo congensis*; in 1942 on war work for the Office of Strategic Services; and, after his retirement from the American Museum, he and his wife Ruth were in the Congo from April, 1953, to February, 1958, under the auspices of IRSAC (L'Institute pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale). During the last sojourn in the Congo, Chapin had the official title of "Chercheur Associé" in ornithology of IRSAC and was based in the highlands west of Lake Kivu, where he was given a house, a laboratory, and an assistant collector.

In 1942, during World War II, Chapin was sent by the Office of Strategic Services to Africa and to Ascension Island. At the latter place he made his well known studies of the unusual annual "calendar" of the Sooty Terns nesting there. This interrupted the work on his Congo report again, but, to the great good fortune of all concerned with the study of African birds, the report was finally completed in 1954. In a review (*Auk*, 71: 476–477, 1954) of the final volume of his "Birds of the Belgian Congo" I took occasion to write that:

> . . . in almost a peculiar sense this work represented the activity of a working lifetime. . . . The four stout volumes . . . are . . . more than merely the results of a long and devoted period of conscientious effort; they are the results, as well, of a way of living. . . . While, to the reader of these volumes much of the material presented may be largely matter-of-fact, to the author it must be evocative enough, of beautiful places it caused him to visit, of interesting personalities it brought him to know, and of events and discoveries of which he thereby became a participant.

Chapin personified African ornithology in the minds of his colleagues in the United States; no one in this country contemplated studying African birds without consulting him, and to no one was he less than a friendly and wise counsellor and guide. This aspect of Chapin's work in ornithology, which does not enter into any tabulation of his published contributions, but which had important results, was his role as a stimulator and prodder of others to find answers to specific questions. He carried on an incredibly voluminous correspondence and, in spite of the vast number of his letters, each was a very personal document. He never seemed to tire of discussing and explaining the topics involved in these messages, and it was largely due to the personal warmth that he instilled into them that so many of them evoked active and productive responses. While he was indefatigable in his urging and advising, he was sincerely appreciative and grateful for any new data or material that came to him as a result of his efforts. He made each correspondent feel that he was his personal friend, and if he were disappointed by the lack of response of some of them, he kept this to himself. He found time for all this and his regular duties as well by laboring long hours, six and sometimes seven days a week. Indeed on the day before his death, a Saturday, he spent a full day in his office at the museum.

Chapin's report on the birds of the former Belgian Congo, in four large volumes, containing 3,055 pages, 72 plates, and 328 text figures, may seem like a veritable reference library on the subject. Yet, surprising as this may seem to non-users of the work, it is, in some respects, a digest and a summary, and specialists in African ornithology may wish for more detailed presentation. In literally hundreds of species Chapin had to study in

detail long series of specimens from all parts of Africa, related to, but not necessarily identical with, Congo forms, and the copious notes and observations he must have made on these extralimital series are seldom included in his final work, and, where they are, they are reduced to terse statements. Museum ornithologists working with African birds may well deplore the fact that it was necessary to leave unpublished these notes with their extensive data and opinions on the characters and distribution of African species and subspecies, based on comprehensive study of the total African collections of all the major museums of the world. Fortunately, these notes are filed at the American Museum, where they may be consulted. Use of this mine of information should save present students not only much time and effort, but also should protect them from errors based on the less complete material available to them.

The four volumes of Chapin's great work are not only the most important single contribution to Old World ornithology made by an American investigator, but they are generally acclaimed by workers in Europe and Africa as the best regional work on the birds of any part of Africa. Some day in the future when the history of African ornithology may be written there will be stressed, I feel certain, three major mile-posts of progress—the completion of Reichenow's opus *Die Vögel Afrikas* (1900–1905), Sclater's *Systema Avium Aethiopicarum* (1924–1930), and Chapin's "Birds of the Belgian Congo" (1932–1954). The first two were still in the relatively arid stage of recording and arranging data; the last gave the life to the subject that it could get only from long study in the field as well as in the archives and the museums. The book-length introductory essay (391 pages) on African ornithology from a biological viewpoint, in Chapin's first volume, is still the best account of the subject and reveals the profound and broad understanding he brought to bear on his life work. Chapin once expressed in a letter that he felt he ". . . was mighty fortunate to be able to profit by the best half century that equatorial Africa ever offered to a naturalist, when the country was new, yet safe for travel."

Space does not permit describing many of the discoveries, recounting the adventures, or tabulating the results of Chapin's many years of Congo studies, but one is so outstanding that it merits mention here even though it has already been told several times. In 1913 at Avakubi, Chapin obtained from a native hat a single secondary flight feather of an unknown bird, which, try as he did, he could not identify with any recorded species. In 1936, while working in the Congo Museum at Tervueren, Belgium, he happened to enter a little room where old or discarded specimens had been placed, and he was startled to see two mounted specimens of a surprising and completely unknown peacock-like bird from the Congo. It had been assumed by whomever had put them there that they were probably young

domestic peacocks someone had brought to the Congo, but at a glance Chapin realized that they were indeed Congo birds of a totally new species. He matched his lone feather with the comparable one in the wing of this bird and found them to be identical. It was a discovery of a large, major species, long after it had been assumed that no more surprises were to be expected from the Congo, a discovery recalling that of the okapi.

Chapin's tenacity in seeking the identification of his lone feather was typical of all his work. He was a perfectionist, but made such rigorous demands only on himself and not on others. He was a warm, outgoing person and was ever ready to praise the work of authors who demanded less of themselves. As a result he had a vast number of friends in the United States, in Europe, and in Africa. These friends gave Chapin much pleasure and cooperation. Probably the one of these friends who gave the greatest assistance to Chapin's Congo studies is Dr. H. Schouteden, the former director of the Congo Museum in Tervueren, Belgium, who made available both in Tervueren and, by a long series of loans, in New York, the vast collection of Congo birds amassed by that museum. In his description of the Congo peacock, Chapin expressed his thanks to Dr. Schouteden for permission to name and describe this outstanding discovery.

Chapin was also the recipient of numerous honors, including the Ordre de la Couronne of Belgium, 1930, Officer of the Ordre de l'Etoile Africaine, of Belgium, 1956, the second of the two medals awarded by IRSAC for notable service to the Institute, the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal of the National Academy of Science, 1932, a medal of the Explorers' Club of New York, of which he was president 1949–1950; president of the American Ornithologists' Union, 1939–1942; honorary member of the Cercle Zoologique Congolaise, British Ornithologists' Union, Deutsch Ornithologische Gesellschaft, Société Ornithologique de France; president of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1934–1956; president of the Staten Island Zoological Society, 1937–1946. Chapin received his A.B. from Columbia in 1916, A.M. in 1917, and Ph.D. in 1932. His degree was the first, and perhaps the only, doctorate ever awarded by Columbia for field ornithology. The survey of Congo ornithology comprising the first half of his first volume was the basis of his thesis.

On his return from the Congo in 1915 he became Assistant in Ornithology at the American Museum, rising through the grades to Associate Curator in 1923. He was retired prematurely, after 40 years of service, shortly before his 60th birthday, but kept on with his work as before.

While in France during the first world war Chapin met Suzanne Drouel, and to her he was married on October 31, 1921. This marriage ended in a divorce in 1939. Four children were born to them, Mary Louise, Suzanne Caroline (who died in childhood), James Drouel, and Pauline Thomas.

Chapin married Ruth Trimble, formerly assistant curator of birds in the Carnegie Museum, on September 5, 1940, and they worked together in New York and for five years in the Congo on their mutual ornithological interests, until his sudden death on April 5, 1964. Chapin's last years were clouded by deep concern over what was happening in and to the former Belgian Congo, which events he took as a very personal affliction. The last few years were also marred by poor health, but his spirit and interest remained bright and youthful to the last. He enjoyed corresponding with his many friends, usually embellishing the envelopes or the signature of the letters with little line drawings of birds and sometimes mammals containing in their calligraphic pattern the spelling of his name.

Chapin was a much-appreciated lecturer at ornithological gatherings, where his splendid speaking voice, informal and gracious manner of presentation, and invariably tactful and considerate remarks gave his audience a feeling of pleasure and confidence in what he had to say. He communicated directly to every person in the room.

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