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100 Years Ago in The Auk



From a review by David S. Jordan of the first edition (1886) of "The A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds" (1886, *Auk* 3: 394):

"It is true, as the authors of the 'Code' have insisted, that 'nomenclature is a means and not an end in science.' But the experience of ornithologists have [sic] shown us that in systematic zoölogy and zoögeography, this means is one absolutely essential to any end of importance. A system of nomenclature based on common fairness and common sense, and stable, because above the reach of individual whim or choice, is as necessary to success in this kind of work as a sharp scalpel is to good work in anatomy.

"So long as no rules superior to the caprice of the individual or the tradition of some museum are recognized, so long is systematic work a mere burlesque, and our schemes of classification anything but a mirror of nature.

"But besides the positive advances made by the ornithologists, from which others may profit when the time comes, there is something for us to learn from the results of their less fortunate experiments.

"An illustration of this may be taken from the last Check-list of Dr. Coues. This work is in many respects most valuable. In it, however, so much learning and labor has been expended in the mending and remodelling of scientific names, as fairly to bring purism in that regard to *reductio ad absurdam*.

"Hence the Committee on the new code, with Dr. Coues at its head, now declares that 'a name is only a name, and has no necessary meaning,' and therefore no necessarily correct orthography. After this experience, the work of strengthening the lame and halting words is hardly likely to be continued in other fields of science.

"Another illustration may be drawn from the excessive multiplication of genera, a stage through which ornithology has naturally passed, and which other sciences, profiting from this experience, may possibly be able to avoid."