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AN APPRECIATION OF ALLAN BROOKS, ZOOLOGICAL ARTIST: 1869-1946

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With the passing of Major Allan Brooks the Cooper Ornithological Club has lost one of its most distinguished honorary members and one of its warmest friends. Biographical details of his useful and fruitful life have already been summarized elsewhere in the *Condor* by no less an authority than Mrs. Allan Brooks (40, 1938:12-17). It is aimed here merely to pay a slight tribute to our lost friend as an illustrator of wild life, especially of birds.

Allan Brooks was no less conscious of the recent departure of graphic and plastic art forms from once accepted standards than of the entirely valid reasons for his own refusal to conform to it. Being incapable of entertaining any emotional reaction to nature unidentified with a literal translation of truth, he had nothing in common with so-called art modernism, and being primarily a naturalist he was unfitted and unable to participate in the vogue for abstract expression. That a graphic presentation of truth is its own justification and that it fulfills a necessary and laudable purpose impossible of attainment by means of any purely impressionistic or emotional treatment seemed to him logical enough. That the demands of science, and especially of natural history, can adequately be served by no other rendering he considered of sufficient clarity to make imperative the necessity of his ministering faithfully and solely to truth.

In order to capture the essence and spirit of the wilderness reflected in its free denizens he found it essential to seek his models in their native horizons. No museum or laboratory specimen, no listless or broken-spirited captive can be forced into natural and characteristic posture, expression, behavior, or even color, and the data necessary to correct and competent portraiture are not to be had vicariously. Since his early youth, when he began professionally to hunt ducks and geese for the market, Major Brooks had spent virtually his entire life in outdoor pursuit of first-hand knowledge regarding the life-histories, habits, behavior, structure and distribution of North American birds and mammals; and for over fifty years he had maintained his studio, laboratory and home in direct and intimate touch with the inspirational source of his art.

Among notable workers in the difficult and exacting field of animal art there has probably never been one who served a more prolonged or more assiduous apprenticeship to nature, or who gleaned from the wilds a greater fund of authentic and vital information. There doubtless have been few if any artists confining their talents exclusively to zoological subjects who have made the results of their artistry so completely subservient to actual contacts in the open field, and there is certainly no other instance of an artist so firmly establishing himself as a respected colleague among the systematists and academicians of vertebrate science. The wealth of working material he brought together for his own use, no less than the vast amount he collected for others, together with the volume and high quality of both his artistic and scientific output

testify to the zeal with which his long tenure of field service was so fruitfully employed and so abundantly rewarded. Chief among his working tools was a great collection of bird skins housed in a separate building at his home in the Okanagan. Supporting this material he had brought together from every important faunal area in the United States, Canada, and parts of Alaska, sketch books and illustrated note books filled with both line and color studies of animate and inanimate nature alike. Carefully done botanical

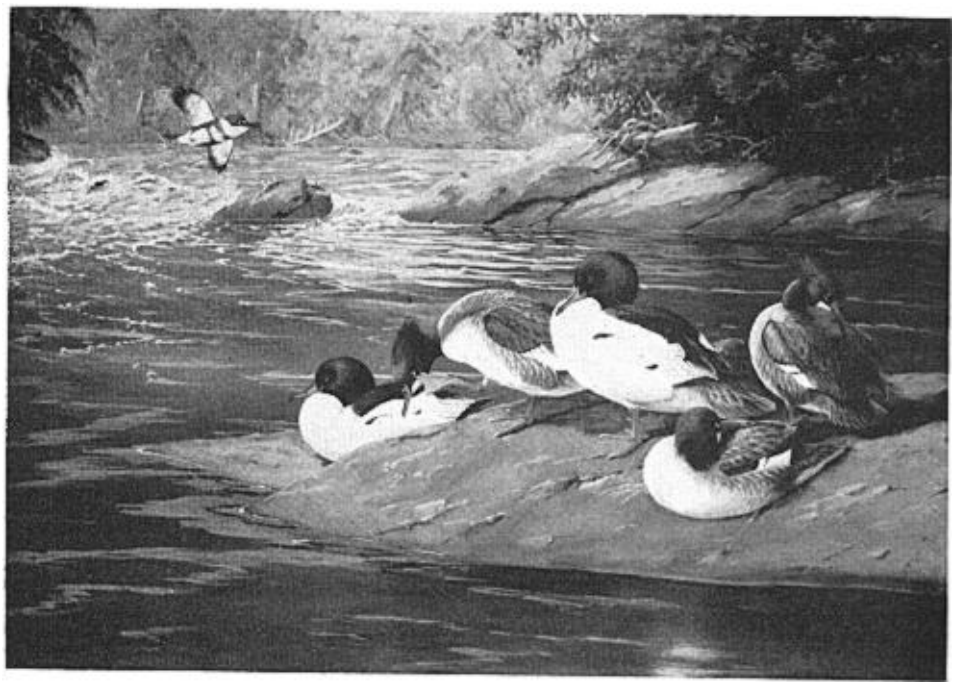

Fig. 28. Resting American Mergansers, one of Major Brooks' larger paintings, owned by R. T. Moore, Pasadena, California.

studies, sky effects, rocks, trees, cliffs, protruding roots, seascapes, and even storms abound with crouching grouse, alarmed shorebirds, clenched eagle talons, hawks in flight with dangling prey, stampeding coots, alert weasels, howling coyotes, leaping deer, and every conceivable bird or mammal in some natural posture sketched on the spot. Supplementing these definite records the artist was able to draw with ease and confidence on the full storehouse of a seemingly infallible memory.

It is not difficult for one who has had the opportunity of browsing through these field studies to understand why the artist's accumulated experiences have endowed him with such unimpeachable authority in the province of his specialty, or why he is able to speak through his compositions with such fluency and emphasis, especially to those students of ferine life whose own experience of it has been more than merely casual.

Brooks brought to his art deeply infixed sympathies, his insatiable enthusiasm for ornithology being a heritage from his father who was known from India to Canada for his activity in the science. In fact the son has been referred to as "a *block* off the old *chip*." At the age of five he was brought from India to the native England of his parents for his boyhood schooling, ultimately settling with the family in the far west of Canada. Here amid the mountains, lakes, plateaus and forests of British Columbia

the artistic toughening of the youth began at about the age of eighteen. His early struggles to record accurately details of his rapidly increasing knowledge of the surrounding wild life led him to follow his father in practicing the shorthand of draughtsmanship. Unlike that other master draughtsman of avian form, the late Louis Agassiz Fuertes, whose advantage of cultural contacts enabled him earlier to overcome technical difficulties and faults, Brooks in his far isolation was able to acquire a technic only through indefatigable self discipline. The factor that had stimulated him most in the

Fig. 29. Major Allan Brooks in the studio of his home at Okanagan Landing, at work on an oil study of the Golden Eagle.

struggle to attain a sound working knowledge of form and color, and which resulted in his ultimate mastery of great manipulative skill, was the self-depreciating and ever present consciousness of his utter lack of academic training.

To watch Allan begin a drawing was a surprising experience. Probably no artist in history ever practiced such a seemingly impossible method. No matter how difficult the pose or how strained the attitude of the bird he intended to portray he began at the tip of the bill and continued on around to encompass the entire form in a single line. No blocking in for him! The surprising thing is that the line was always correct and exactly as he intended the finished portrait to look. He so completely visualized his composition that it was as if he merely traced its outline. At times he dispensed with an outline entirely and attacked the paper directly with the watercolor brush. Such a portrait is that of the Verdin reproduced in Mrs. Bailey's "Birds of New Mexico." The drawing for the Violet-green Swallow in the same book was done with only the perched figure outlined. To view one of his larger and more pretentious pieces, as for instance, "Resting Mergansers," reproduced here, is to marvel at the mechanics of its creation, or to marvel at the picture alone.

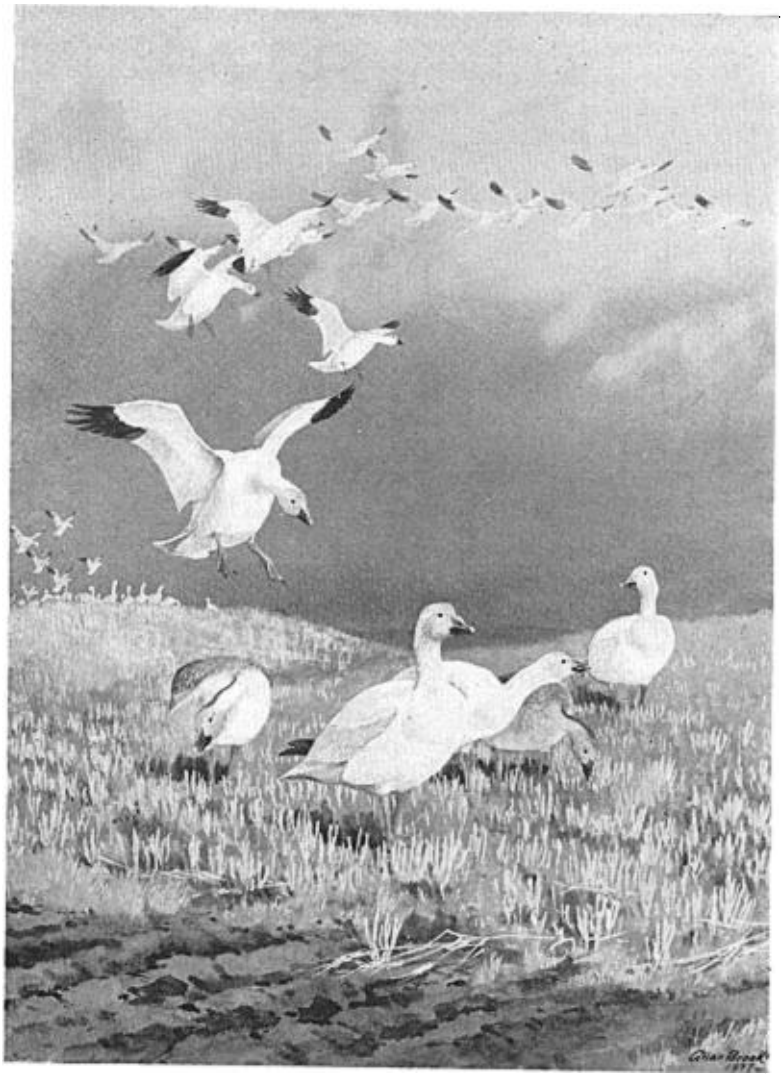

Fig. 30. Snow Geese alighting in a stubble field before a storm.

While those among his critics who are best qualified to appraise its true values fail to find his craftsmanship deficient in any quality that a formal schooling in the fundamentals could have imparted to it, it is obvious that the best British traditions of zoological art have not failed to lend refinement to his later approach. Like so many others of his craft he came early under the spell of that greatest of all animal painters, Joseph Wolf. He studied and greatly admired the work of Lodge and Thorburn as well as others, many of whom he knew personally. Every trip to England resulted in noticeable change and improvement in his work.

The present writer, too, has grateful memories of Wolf, as it was through A. H. Palmer's "Life of Joseph Wolf" that twenty-three years of close friendship with Allan

began. There had been a purely accidental foregathering of visiting vertebrate zoologists, ornithologists and others of that ilk in Berkeley and all had drifted over to Joe Grinnell's office in the old M.V.Z. building. Brooks had been there for some time working out one of his problems. All were invited to lunch at the large round table in the Faculty Club, and the visitors were paired off with members of Grinnell's staff. To his lasting good fortune the writer drew Allan as his host. Having just finished reading Palmer's book and being full of the subject, here was an opportunity to clear up certain puzzling questions regarding Wolf's published plates. Allan's reaction was one of great surprise that a mere man in the street should know anything about animal

Fig. 31. Bob-white in snow, a painting owned by Kerr's Sporting Goods Company, Beverly Hills, California.

painters and he offered a wager that no one else in the crowd had ever heard of Wolf. This was eagerly accepted and each in turn was quizzed to the effect that a bet was lost but a friend was won.

In his earlier years Allan knew and admired A. B. Frost both as a man and as an artist. They were many times in the field together and proved to be kindred spirits in more than just sportsmanship. On several occasions Allan expressed the warmest admiration for Frost's well known series of water fowl and upland game bird shooting prints so widely circulated thirty years ago and still collected. While there is of course no opportunity for a reflection of Frost's style in any of Allan's lesser published material, a few of his larger and more ambitious pictures are somewhat reminiscent of this artist. "Too Many Snipe" and "Redheads Swinging in Over Decoys" (figs. 34 and 35) are examples of this influence.

The strictly illustrative phase of the Major's work, by which alone it has been

Fig. 32. Parasitic Jaegers worrying Bonaparte Gulls.

possible for the public to adjudge his artistry, has been confined chiefly to formal ornithologica and to other books and periodicals. Favorably known examples of these are his plates in Phillips' "Monograph of the Ducks" and the long series of color illustrations a few years ago in The National Geographic Magazine. His more pictorial compositions have been denied a wide acquaintance by the demands of an ever increasing circle of private collectors who have at times kept him tied down when he yearned to be at taxonomic or other scientific activity. These pictures often contain a cunning narrative quality that may be accounted for in part by his almost clairvoyant understanding of animal behavior, and partly by a rare tact in the selection and treatment of accessories. The atmosphere of his background is never malapropos, and is often marked by a subtlety of contrivance that complements the portraiture without intrusion or detraction. Without subtracting in any measure from their pictorial values, his portrayals are never scientifically inexact, and without being "detective art that reveals every mystery and ransacks every shade" no details are slurred or eliminated, nor are the most inconspicuous of these ever laid down incorrectly. His adroit management of the difficult matter of feather structure, by which he was able in differing media to render widely varying texture, form, pattern and color, was no unimportant factor in his successful attainment of life and expression. This feeling for plumage enabled him to achieve these niceties of modelling and the grateful chiaroscuro that were lacking in his earlier drawing.

The sheer force of his naked draughtsmanship and the ease of his command of line are displayed to good effect in the extensive series of small pen and ink portraits done for Ralph Hoffmann's "Birds of the Pacific States." There is summarized in

this splendid group of drawings a knowledge of form, plumage, posturing and behavior characterizing some three hundred species and subspecies of birds. The casual effort with which many of the species have been placed in their characteristic environments, and the economy of line with which each bird is shown with its salient characters, suggest the etcher's virility of handling. Only heavy demands on failing sight prevented this veteran ornithologist-artist from venting his enthusiasms on copper. He had finished one plate and "found he could scratch a bit," but he would never let this writer see a print.

In color as in drawing Brooks allowed himself no deviation from actualities, and in his use of opaque wash, and later oil, as the media most often suited to his needs he was able to attain delicacy and warmth in his song bird pictures as well as the cold austerity demanded of the snowy owl and caribou. Held within the limits imposed by portraiture, in which his interest was chiefly centered, he took full advantage of the opportunity offered in big game composition for greater depth and a consequent wider range of pictorial treatment. When he found himself thus permitted to indulge in a

Fig. 33. Swamp sprites, a painting of Yellow-throats in opaque wash.

burst of feeling there was revealed a power of no mean order for landscape expression. In this connection there is recalled the first A.O.U. meeting held in Chicago where an extensive loan collection of bird pictures had been assembled for exhibition in the Field Museum. The writer had sneaked out of the formal meeting to examine the pictures unhindered by the crowd. Louis Fuertes was of the same mind and was found seated cross-legged on the floor in deep study before a Brooks picture that had been

Fig. 34. Too many snipe; a large picture in transparent wash, after the style of A. B. Frost, owned by M. Fleischmann, Santa Barbara, California.

Fig. 35. Redheads swinging into decoys, a companion piece to the painting shown in fig. 34.

Fig. 36. A flurry of Blue-winged Teal, a small color sketch for a large picture.

hung low down on a crowded screen. The friendly artist entered into an illuminating discussion of Brooks' work which he greatly admired. He said he envied Allan's facility in handling accessories, and remarked that his compositions without the birds would still be good pictures. He agreed that Brooks had about mastered the difficulties of his medium and that he had overcome the technical faults that had hurt his early work. These two artists later met and became fast friends, and after the death of Fuertes, Allan finished the series of plates begun by the former for Forbush's "Birds of Massachusetts."

Were not woodsman, hunter, trapper, explorer, stalker of big game, internationally recognized master of both the sporting and military rifle, and naturalist enough to betoken a life filled with action, color and achievement, there is still left soldier, scientist, author and artist! Competent, modest and proficient in all his endeavors, Allan Brooks succeeded in embodying and perpetuating the maxims of that wise and gifted protagonist of the truth and beauty of animal life, Joseph Wolf. The slogan of both was, "We see distinctly only what we know thoroughly."

Eagle Rock, California, March 20, 1946.