THE PICTURING OF BIRDS

A Man in Whom Blended Art and Biology

WHEN Dr. Edward A. Wilson, back from his first Antarctic trip with Scott, visited New Zealand in 1904, thirty-five years ago, he formed a resolve to come back again. He saw in New Zealand a ruthless civilisation destroying a primeval forest and unique species of birds. As a zoologist, artist, and nature-lover, Dr. Wilson hoped to return to New Zealand so that he might become a force to mitigate the destruction of forest and bird—a destruction which was in some degree inevitable, but which had become far more ruthless than need be. He hoped to preserve the indigenous birds—those not already extinct—in their wild state, if possible; and also to use his artistry so that they should, in any case, be preserved in picture.

Although his scientific career had already made him incidentally a taxidermist, he valued the image of a bird on paper—the image true in form and colour—far above the stuffed specimens that gather dust in glass cases. As an artist, he valued his pictured birds, looking out from the art paper pages of books, far above the actual skins of birds as stuffed and set up by taxidermy. A stuffed bird is always to some degree a corpse. A pictured image of a bird is not a corpse but an inspiration.

It is true that artists sometimes work on stuffed birds in making their pictures, but the true artist does not work on stuffed birds alone, but on long study of the bird in life. In "Edward Wilson: Nature Lover" (by George Seaver) extracts from Wilson's journals and letters explain his angle of view on taxidermy and on the drawing and painting of birds. In his younger days as an artist in England he consulted such bird artists as Thorburn and Lodge, and studied the work of Wolf. Wilson wrote in his diary: "I simply don't believe stories about Wolf's drawing of *stuffed* skins, and turning them into living animals." The italics are Wilson's. They serve to emphasise the great gulf between taxidermy and artistry, as he saw it.

To explain how Wilson placed the drawing and painting of birds far above mere artist-technique, the following extract from one of his letters is sufficient. "Oh, it is a huge joy to even try to reproduce the effect that a grand or a lovable sight leaves on one's mind. When at last one picks out, from the number of animals and birds one has seen, that aspect which by preference one knows best, then whatever its attitude may be, or whatever it may be doing, there is in the drawing a grain or two from every animal of the same kind one has ever seen. I think it is wonderful how the idea of an animal (form, colour, character, and even the most usual surroundings) is all there at last, when one knows the animal well enough—little bits from years and years ago when one first saw the animal in a hedgerow—it is all there ready to come to hand when at last you say: "Now I am going to paint it."

The Job Called Him—In Vain.

This high plane artistry Wilson hoped, in 1904, to place at New Zealand's service, along with his biological science and his eminence in zoology. Lamenting New Zealand's vanished and vanishing birds, he wrote in 1904: "Anything that is written or drawn of them now will be infinitely valuable in another fifty years; they have not the man to do it in New Zealand. A chance for a solid piece of work, a work for all time, and one that would appeal to naturalists of every nation. I believe there's a chance for me to do it."

Unfortunately for New Zealand, when Dr. Wilson reached England later in 1904, his services, both as artist and as man of science, were requisitioned for English and Scottish work—for investigation of grouse disease in Scotland and for illustrating a standard publication on birds. Biographer Seaver writes that Wilson began in the Antarctic to develop his special skill in large sketches of birds in water colour. Wilson "perfected" it afterwards in Scotland when engaged upon illustrating the standard work on British birds, by which time his work was held by experts to equal (and in some few instances even to surpass) the work of Thorburn and Lodge. In Scotland he was busy at the same time assisting the Commission on the Investigation of Grouse Disease.

Thus a great artist and a great biologist was lost to New Zealand, though to this country he wished in 1904 to dedicate his services, feeling a great call here and also his fitness to answer it. Fate willed otherwise. He went again to the

(Continued on page 14.)