

## OTHER

**Pilgrims of the Air: The Passing of the Passenger Pigeons**

By John Wilson Foster. 2014 / 2017. Notting Hill Editions. 230 pages, 14.99 GBP, 29.95 CAD, Cloth.

*Pilgrims of the Air* is an extended contemplation in the history of ideas, searching out the myriad paths that lead to an understanding of arguably the most famous extinction of an avian species. Scientists still work to puzzle out definitive answers to the questions of why and how the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratoria*), once numbering in the billions, could within a century cease to exist. On the surface, it's a well-known tale, but the full understanding has proven and still proves elusive. John Wilson Foster is a man of as many parts as the story he relates, and the esoteric Notting Hill Editions is a curiously appropriate vehicle for the telling of this story. Born in Ireland, educated there and in the United States, Foster taught in Ireland then at the University of British Columbia before returning as profes-

sor emeritus to the National University, Galway. He has been engaged in historical, cultural questions his entire career, authoring several critical studies on Irish politics and culture. But he also has extensive experience as a naturalist and birder in several parts of the world and editor of *Natural History of Ireland* (McGill-Queen's University Press), published in 1997, primary catalysts for this essay.

And it is an essay: Notting Hill Editions specializes in printing non-fiction essays characterized by excellence of writing and, as the press puts it, "the virtues of brevity, soul and wit". The extinction of a species is hardly a source for wit, but brevity (in the best sense) and soul are evident here. Foster has a poet's clear-eyed capacity to collect and summarize numerous themes in

his exploration here, including attitudes toward nature exhibited by the Aboriginal peoples, several tribes of whom held Pigeon Dances (pp. 51ff), and the Europeans, beginning with the Puritans, who came to settle the lands we call the United States of America. Although he dips even further back to Aristotle, his primary focus is on the long, 19th century lead-up to the early 20th century decades during which the Passenger Pigeon disappeared and subsequent attempts to determine what happened. The beginnings of science in America, and especially the history of natural history, are traced through the works of such early naturalist explorers as John Lawson, Mark Catesby, Peter Kalm, and Alexander Wilson. The efforts of these and other men resulted in extensive knowledge of “Pigeon Country” (Chapter 7), and the pigeons did indeed travel the country, true nomads in search of sources of food. Fossil evidence and distribution maps for their favoured mast tree, the beech, and also the oaks, revealed their extensive range. To a degree, asserts Foster, the fate of the birds was tied to the fate of the trees and the heavy deforestation of the colonial period (p. 107).

We are all familiar with the images of Passenger Pigeons blocking the sun for hours as they flew overhead, but Foster provides extensive descriptions of accounts over the years. We learn of the complex patterns of the birds’ movements in time and space, their nesting sites, which could cover hundreds of hectares and contain millions of birds, the destruction these sites wreaked on the forests, and, perhaps most curiously, of the habit of males and females taking turns on the nest. This meant that at feeding time, the vast flocks leaving the nests were composed in turn of males and females, which proved a vulnerability in the face of extensive hunting.

And how extensive the hunting was! The most disturbing part of the story is Foster’s detailed accounts, in Chapter 9, “Such Dreadful Havock”, and Chapter 10, “Flesh and Feathers both for Use and Ease”, of the settlers’ capacity to kill anything within range of a gun. This went beyond providing food: any romantic notions of the hunter going off in the woods seeking food for his family are dispelled forever by the rapacious, wanton, almost joyous delight in killing for its own sake. Add to this the industrialization of the killing, discussed in Chapter 12, “Things Future and Things Past”, the improvements in communication (such as newspapers, railways, and the telegraph) that facilitated year-round

locating and reaching nesting sites and moving the resulting huge loads of birds to processing plants in the cities, coupled with ongoing destruction of habitat as settlement moved west, and the wonder is that Passenger Pigeons lasted as long as they did. Naturalists are not excluded here, their collecting practices coming under scrutiny, although these were minor compared to the almost universal hunting everywhere the pigeons appeared. As pigeon numbers declined, attention turned to other bird species, such as plovers, curlews, and auks, often valued only for their feathers. A telling image is provided of one ornithologist doing some birding in New York City and identifying over 40 species: all from the feathers in ladies’ hats (pp. 164–165).

But the ornithologists were slow to pick up on what was happening in the field, their awareness lagging behind the decline of the Passenger Pigeon. Their extinction was difficult to accept and the final passing of captive Martha in 1914 “took ornithologists by surprise and exposed the meagerness of their knowledge” (p. 212). The serious study of Passenger Pigeon natural history was made on the few specimens remaining in captivity. This theme of the ornithologists’ belated role opens and closes the book, an instructive reminder of the potential importance of that role and the very human fragility underlying it.

Almost by definition, the essay is a ‘popular’ medium, in the best sense: a well-written, engaging, thought-provoking, enlightening narrative. Small in dimensions, comfortable in the hand, pleasingly designed, sewn binding including a red-ribbon bookmark, the book is an interesting artifact in itself. Field naturalists will find it of value, especially those with a historical bent. My only criticism is around the back matter: no index or notes, likely standard for Notting Hill, and a list of “Select References” that frequently did not include authors and titles mentioned in the text. I can’t resist mentioning one of these, a certain Howitt (p. 114), whose observations of the flight of Passenger Pigeons over Guelph, Ontario, in the 1860s, were recounted in an article published in 1932 in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* (Howitt 1932).

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#### Literature Cited

Howitt, H. 1932. A short history of the Passenger, or wild, Pigeon. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 47: 27–30. Accessed 23 May 2018. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/89295#page/41/mode/1up>.