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BIRDS OF THE LATIN POETS**

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by Ernest Whitney Martin

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# The Birds of the Latin Poets

BY

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TO

**HENRY RUSHTON FAIRCLOUGH**

**PROFESSOR OF LATIN IN LELAND STANFORD JUNIOR UNIVERSITY**

**TRUE FRIEND AND TEACHER**

Yet have I loved thy voice  
Frail echo of some ancient sacred joy.

—SANTAYANA.

O Wanderer from a Grecian shore,  
Still, after many years, in distant lands,  
Still nourishing in thy bewilder'd brain  
That wild, unquench'd, deep-sunken, old-world pain  
Say, will it never heal?

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Quis volucrum species numeret, quis nomina discat?  
Mille avium cantus, vocum discrimina mille.

—*Anth. Lat.* 733.



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## PREFACE

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In the following pages I have attempted to present, in their own words, a tolerably full picture of the Roman attitude toward bird life as reflected in their greatest poets. To this end I have recorded, side by side, the important and the commonplace.

My collections of material are, I believe, fairly comprehensive down into the second century of the Empire. The thread is picked up again in the *Latin Anthology*. The appended index of the loc. cit. shows exactly what ground has been covered. These collections were begun in my undergraduate days and saved as marginalia at a time when some slight technical skill in taxidermy and ornithology made college and university possible for me. Omissions, errors, and the gap in the later poets may, of course, be checked from the *Archiv*, when finally completed.

Considerations of space and the check-list arrangement have made it necessary to omit, in the main, citations from the prose writers and references to birds in general. This general restriction of scope has led to other omissions as well, notably the sources and parallels from Greek literature. The poets of both peoples, after all, were but drawing from a common fund of traditional lore, the whence and wherefore of which had become obscured in many places by the lapse of untold years. This is particularly true in matters of astronomic lore, in augury, and in the various myths of metamorphosis. However, as to the Greek background, the curious reader may satisfy himself to weariness by turning to Thompson's indispensable *Glossary of Greek Birds*. As a ready aid to such readers I have given with each Latin bird-name a parallel synonym in Greek.

I have omitted for the most part any full discussion of astronomical and mythological problems. Such new light as may eventually be thrown upon these two clouded phases of the ancient view of bird lore will come, I think, from gleanings here and there in comparative literature, folklore and anthropology. In order that we may more fully appreciate the continuity of literary tradition and folk observation in this field, we must have a series of studies covering mediaeval and modern European literatures. A detailed study of the birds in the English poets is, perhaps, our most immediate need. Such a survey will command a very large field of

readers. As my own contribution to this larger purpose, I may say that in three more years I hope to be able to tell the full story of the birds in our own American poets.

For the most part the Greeks and Romans held the same viewpoint as regards the birds about them. The latter still kept, as their chief exponents of bird song, the nightingale, swallow, halcyon and swan, with all their inherited myths and lore. But, in addition to this, the uninitiated, I believe, will be surprised at the really wide range of observation and sentiment which is encompassed by the Roman poets in this little corner of nature's realm. The consistent Roman attitude toward the song of birds is, to the modern reader, perhaps the most striking thing to be noted. It is simply this: that they nearly always felt a tone of sadness in the songs of their favorite song birds, where we are inclined to feel joy and ecstasy.

This prevalent Roman feeling is due, in my judgment, to the widespread ancient belief in the metamorphosis association. Their favorite birds were not thought of merely as birds *per se*, but rather as human beings who had been changed into the birds in question. The nightingale and swallow were still Philomel and Progne. This is probably the clue to the rather curious choice of the swan and halcyon as typical song birds. This Roman point of view is the key to the interpretation of the rather frequent literal descriptions of actual metamorphoses scattered through the Latin poets. Horace, assuming before our eyes the form of a swan, is an example of this peculiar usage. This attitude of mind is the basis of several epithets and derivations. Thus, as I still believe, *luscinia* is best taken as derived from *\*luges-cinia*. The wide use of *querulus* and related words takes on a new significance when once this basic attitude is taken into consideration.

As we shall see, practically the same species were noted and recorded in the spring and fall migrations; but, in this matter, similar geographical and climatic conditions were contributing elements.

In the matter of identification of species I have of course attempted nothing new. My single year in Italy, occupied largely with the technique of our craft, left scant time for woods, meadows and riverside. Besides, this is the task of years for a finished expert in the birds of Europe. Thrown back, therefore, upon the books, I have tried to catch the prevailing traditional identifications; and in their quest I have spent many pleasant days with Gesner and his kind. However, there still remain a few siftings in the final nomenclature, to be made from the little hints of place, season, color and habit, scattered through the remains

of literature and art. These will break up some of the generic names into the probable species which the poets unconsciously had in hand.

Professor W. Warde Fowler has shown us the method with his observations on the crows, ravens and doves. And more recently, Boraston's article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 31, on the *Birds of Homer*, has made clear the possibilities of this manner of approach. It must be done, preferably by a native, on the ground; and it may well be the task of some future Italian Thoreau or Burroughs.

Most American village boys know at least the common local birds. But this living contact has been ignored in the rather colorless treatment of the Roman birds in our annotated editions. Possibly, therefore, the reader will be interested in the literary parallels from our American poets. For this particular phase of our study it would have been sufficient for the purpose in view to have taken only the greater poets of the last century, with such minor writers as are included in the later Anthologies of, let us say, Stedman and Sladen.

But as the work grew I became more and more interested in our older poets; so that, as a matter of fact, I have gone through the dusty pages of some hundreds of our all but forgotten earlier writers, and have included also the host of minor poets saved for us in the early anthologies of Kettell, Griswold, Duyckinck and many others. For the literary ornithologist in the earlier periods of our literature, from William Morrell and Jacob Steendam down to Philip Freneau and a generation beyond, there are many peculiar little antiquarian problems. Our birds were then as yet largely unnamed. Alexander Wilson in 1814 listed only two hundred and eighty-three species of North American birds; with Dr. Coues in 1882 the number has grown to nearly nine hundred. Throughout these earlier periods English influence is very strong, and one must be ever watchful for skylarks, mavises, rooks, throistles and nightingales. For the last mentioned, Anne Bradstreet, our first poetess, had a special penchant.

Naturally, in bringing together American and Roman birds, I have attempted no close scientific paralleling of species; I have tried rather to group the birds which have aroused similar reactions in the feelings of their poetic observers. Hence Roman nightingales have suggested American mocking-birds and even whippoorwills, while larks have been answered by bobolinks, and starlings by meadowlarks.

This hunt through our own poets was undertaken first, in order to find out just how much of the ornithological tradition of the classics had percolated, as it were, through time and distance to our own shores. It