

Rename the buzzard

The intellectual importance of an early ornithologist

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Tim Birkhead

THE WONDERFUL MR WILLUGHBY

The first true ornithologist
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“Aquila anataria”, from the *The Wonderful Mr Willughby*

Tim Birkhead’s mission in this absorbing biography is to establish, or more precisely to re-establish, Francis Willughby’s importance in the history of zoology and in particular of ornithology. Willughby is chiefly remembered today, insofar as he is remembered at all, as the friend and junior collaborator of John Ray, whose monumental works *The History of Plants* (1686–1704) and *The Wisdom of God* (1691) helped to secure his later reputation as the leading natural historian of his day, and make him a key figure in the seventeenth-century scientific revolution in England. But Ray also edited and published three works partly or wholly attributable to Willughby, who had died in 1672 aged thirty-six: *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* (1676), on the title page of which Ray nonetheless gets the larger billing; *The History of Fishes* (1686), a genuinely collaborative effort though a complete failure in sales terms; and *The History of Insects* (1710), where Willughby is not even identified as the author. It was on the basis of his research for these works that in his own day Willughby was regarded by many as the more original and creative thinker, but Ray still took most of the later credit.

The story of their fluctuating comparative reputations over the past 300 years is a fascinating and instructive episode in the history of science and one Birkhead traces with great sensitivity to both their achievements. It turns out that Ray owes much of his ascendancy today to the adulatory biography by Canon Charles Raven (1942), which was itself a deliberate reaction against earlier judgements; Raven sought to relegate Willughby to the rank of an “enthusiastic amateur” – and he was indeed an “amateur” in the original sense of that term, a virtuoso rather than an academic. But with the advantage of access to the more recently discovered and very extensive Willughby family archive, Birkhead is now able to demonstrate the range and depth of Willughby’s own work and reveal his true contribution.

Birkhead pieces together the story of Willughby’s early education in Cambridge (relying partly on his surviving commonplace book), his developing friendship with Ray and their subsequent journey together across the Continent (for which Ray’s notebooks are our principal source, since Willughby’s have all been lost – another distorting factor in the evidence). This expedition was a revelatory joint enterprise, which provided much of the material, the methodology and the ideas for their later groundbreaking studies in natural history. They conceived the grand ambition of providing a comprehensive survey of all the known plant and animal species: these would

consist in detailed descriptions, based on actual specimens collected and supplemented where possible with illustrations; identification guides to the different species – a forerunner of the “field marks” in modern guides; and, crucially, schemes of classification that would set out the relevant interrelationships of species and so provide the first modern taxonomy.

Birkhead details their discoveries with infectious enthusiasm and a strong sense of personal engagement: they dissected a bittern, so Birkhead obtains a dead one to dissect too (and notices some feather details they seem to have missed); he investigates the whispering gallery in Gloucester Cathedral whose acoustics they had examined; he tries out their system of using dichotomous keys to identify a bird they were unfamiliar with (the pin-tailed sandgrouse) and gets a surprisingly good result; and he vividly describes the moment when he discovers Willughby’s egg collection in a long-neglected “cabinet of curiosities”, the eggs inscribed by Willughby himself in his distinctive hand (and then, characteristically, wonders why Willughby didn’t make more use of these in his species descriptions in the *Ornithology*). At every point Birkhead is probing and evaluating Willughby and Ray’s research findings and methods, usually in admiration at their pioneering efforts (for example, the first proper descriptions of the red grouse, common scoter and spotted crane), but sometimes in bafflement at their missed opportunities (why didn’t they observe caged birds to answer their own questions about seasonal changes in plumage?) Here and elsewhere he shares the restless curiosity of his subject.

Birkhead is especially well qualified professionally to interpret Willughby’s scientific dilemmas and discoveries, having written about the latest advances in ornithological research in books such as *Bird Sense* (2014) and *The Most Perfect Thing: The inside (and outside) of a bird’s egg* (2016); and in *The Wisdom of Birds* (2008) he had already written a full-scale history of ornithology, with John Ray as its starting point and inspiration. The present book is a similar kind of scientific bio-

graphy, which traces the afterlife as well as the origins of the ideas discussed and so satisfies our natural curiosity about what we have since learned about the questions Ray and Willughby were puzzling over. Birkhead is well aware, however, of the pitfalls of “Whig” interpretations of history, whereby one posits a simple chain of intellectual progress from past to present, ignoring the very different historical contexts in which theories may be conceived, the evolving meanings of key terms – among them “science” itself, and the various dead-ends of failed speculations, which may nonetheless be revealing about the assumptions of the time. In the case of Ray and Willughby, one set of serious constraints was the theological beliefs they subscribed to – the theory of God’s intelligent design, for example, which specified a fixed and unchanging number of species and so ruled out in advance the possibility of evolution or extinctions; they may also have been more influenced than they themselves realized, I suspect, by their Aristotelian inheritance in the distinctions they made between land and water birds and their emphasis on the taxonomic significance of birds’ beaks and feet.

The book is enlivened throughout by maps, figures, line-drawings, timelines, tables of local and traditional bird names (can you tell a skout from a Greenland dove?), and attractive sections of colour plates. Birkhead finishes with a fine rhetorical flourish, pointing out that although Willughby had the scientific honour of having a fish, a bee and a whole genus of plants named after him, he still lacks the accolade of an avian eponym, despite the great importance of his *Ornithology* to the history of that subject. The European honey buzzard is one of the species Willughby was the first to describe and distinguish as a separate species, yet its present common name is a complete misnomer, since the bird is neither solely European nor a honey-eater (and possibly, the latest molecular studies suggest, not even a buzzard). Birkhead proposes that to celebrate Willughby’s outstanding contribution to his subject it be renamed “Willughby’s buzzard”.

Crows, grouse and hawks

ANDREW FORSTER

Terry Gifford, editor

TED HUGHES IN CONTEXT
430pp. Cambridge University Press. £75.
978 1 108 42555 1

Yvonne Reddick

TED HUGHES
Environmentalist and eco-poet
343pp. Palgrave Macmillan. £79.99.
978 3 319 59176 6

In *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry* (2016), Sam Solnick introduced Ted Hughes as the “most influential and divisive figure” in post-war British poetry and ecology. There is justification for both these claims. Hughes was not only one of the major poets of the twentieth century, he was at the heart of the British poetry scene, championing foreign language poets through *Modern Poetry in Translation* and the Poetry International festival (both of which he co-founded), and playing a key role in the development of creative writing courses though his close connection with the Arvon Foundation. Alongside these we can place his highly individual mythologizing of the natural world which, for Solnick, “left him vulnerable to criticism and even ridicule”, his role as Poet Laureate (1984–98) which often saw him cast as a conservative establishment figure, and his personal relationships with women, particularly Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill, which ended with the suicides of both and led to his being demonized by many feminists. As Jonathan Bate suggests in the punning title of his biography (*TLS*, February 19, 2016), Hughes’s life (as well as Bate’s book) was “unauthorised”. Twenty years after his death in October 1998, however, and eight years after the Ted Hughes archive at the British Library was opened in 2011, the critical industry around his work is still growing, engaged in clarifying both the nature and the richness of his literary legacy.

Ted Hughes in Context follows Terry Gifford’s less extensive *Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (2011). Thirty-two short and accessible essays consider both the context that Hughes wrote in – such as Steve Ely’s on the importance of Hughes’s native Yorkshire to his poetry, and Heather Clark’s on the mutual benefits of his literary relationship with Plath – and the enduring significance of his work. Place, style, gender, literary influences, and each of the genres (poetry, drama, fiction and criticism) that Hughes wrote in are all given space. The collection is necessarily sketchy, as each of these could fill a volume in its own right (and many of the contributors have already written books on the subjects of their essays here), but as a mapping of the range of Hughes’s work and influence, it is invaluable.

Fiona Sampson’s essay begins with the indi-

viduality of his writing. The brutality of the “risky, awkward archetypes” of *Wodwo* (1967) and *Crow* (1970) were unsettling in comparison to the “quiet sentiment” of the prevailing trends of British verse at the time, while his sometimes apparently scattergun approach to images, and his highly personal free-verse rhythms at the service of those images, are difficult to imitate. Sampson does, however, correctly identify a number of heirs to Hughes’s style, most obviously Alice Oswald, whose poems evince distinctly Hughesian rhythms and linguistic constructions. Of particular interest here is the impact Sampson attributes to Hughes on the wider landscape of British poetry – his range of activities, from translation and broadcasting to his support for the teaching of creative writing, “democratizing” poetry, changing “who wrote it, what they wrote and what got read”. This is picked up by Hugh Dunkerley, who in his piece on “Hughes and Creative Writing” focuses on the groundbreaking *Poetry in the Making*, based on a series of radio broadcasts for children and “continuously in print since 1967”, when it was published. Hughes’s ideas about time-pressured exercises to release the unconscious into writing have become the foundation for creative writing workshops.

Hughes was one of three poets considered by Solnick in his fine study (the others were Derek Mahon and J. H. Prynne); and an important focus of recent scholarship is Hughes’s relationship with environmentalism. According to Solnick, Hughes saw the roots of our current environmental crisis in the scientific abstraction that regarded the earth as a resource to be exploited, and attempted, in books such as *Crow* and *Cave Birds* (1978), to create new myths that might correct our relationship with the planet. But he also saw the



“The Hawk” by Kenny Hunter, a tribute to Ted Hughes

development of technology as inextricably bound in with evolution. In Hughes’s retelling of Ovid, for example, it may be open to question whether man turned away from the earth deliberately (as Jonathan Bate suggests), or whether technology is the product of that part of being human which caused him to turn away. Neither diminishes the need to heal our relationship with nature, which Hughes’s work states so powerfully.

One of the most popular subjects for study in what has become known as ecocriticism (literary readings from an environmentalist perspective), Hughes, for Solnick, “does not just fit with certain ecocritical positions, but also

helps constitute them”. Ecocritics such as Gifford and Leonard M. Scigaj gained impetus for their ideas on environmental poetry from their work on Hughes. Gifford’s book includes his own essay on “Hughes and Nature”, along with a piece by Yvonne Reddick on “Hughes’s Environmental Campaigns”, from anti-nuclear protests to attempts to prevent the pollution of rivers, particularly in his adopted county of Devon. Gifford highlights six stages of Hughes’s “greening”, from his boyhood explorations of nature, through the time he spent in the US early in his marriage to Plath and his reading of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, to his later involvement in raising

awareness of the relation between toxins and declining human fertility. By his own admission, Gifford’s six stages are a simplification of this aspect of Hughes’s work, which was both important to him and riven with contradictions.

Reddick’s own immensely readable *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and ecopoet* shows, through fresh readings of the poems, the significance of environmentalism for much of Hughes’s work, not just the obvious reflections on pollution in *River* (1983). For Reddick, the animal poems in Hughes’s first volume *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) are not, as has been suggested by Hughes scholars such as Keith Sagar, anthropocentric, but create moments of “creaturely communion” that are a crucial starting point for our relationship with animals. *Crow* is concerned with technology, warfare and environmental destruction, and Hughes’s experience as a hill farmer in Devon (which gave rise to his *Moortown* poems) is seen as a deliberate attempt to engage with environmentally conscious farming, rather than the escape from cosmopolitan literary life that Bate’s biography suggests.

Reddick does not shy away from the paradoxes in Hughes’s environmentalism. His support of hunting, especially, seems to sit in stark contradiction of the empathy with animals in poems such as “The Stag”, and of his later calls for a Bill of Rights for animals. Of particular interest is the unpublished poem “The Grouse”, originally intended for *Birth-day Letters* (1998), in which Plath’s response to Hughes killing a sick bird is responsible for an epiphany that, Reddick says, Hughes was still considering in a late interview with Thomas R. Pero: “I realised I didn’t want to kill any bird or animal, ever again. And I didn’t. I stopped shooting. But I went on fishing”.

Jonathan Kramnick, Maynard Mack Professor of English at Yale University, has a reputation around American campuses for being the spokesperson for Literary Studies as a discipline. He wrote his first book on the history of the national literary tradition in England and has recently written in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about the importance of preserving disciplinary integrity. Kramnick’s position is notable at a historical moment when, even in the elite American Liberal Arts setting, it seems that English might not hold as a centre. Enrolments to English degrees are dropping sharply in the US, as they are in the UK too.

All this might point to Kramnick’s own work being on works most conventionally seen as canonical: Shakespeare or lyric poetry, say. But *Paper Minds: Literature and the ecology of consciousness* is less a discussion of any particular kind of literature than a series of essays focused on a range of tender, tactile scenes across the centuries: Robinson Crusoe hewing himself a desk and chair from wood before sitting down to write his account of the world; William Cowper, in his long poem *The Task* (1785), depicting a hare tamed to share a world with the man who makes her a bed of straw; Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* lingering on a girl wriggling potatoes from the ground while the landscape around her buzzes with consciousness. Writers as far apart on the historical map as Margaret Cavendish and Ian McEwan turn up in Kramnick’s account of thinking

Pigs in the forest

How literature gets tangled up in the world

CHRISTINA LUPTON

Jonathan Kramnick

PAPER MINDS

Literature and the ecology of consciousness
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978 0 226 57301 4

and getting tangled up with the world. His argument’s vanishing point may be the scene where Henry Perowne, the protagonist of McEwan’s *Saturday*, probes the exposed brain of his enemy with well-trained surgical fingers. Thinking about someone or something seems only a hair’s breadth away here from handling it.

Kramnick’s examples suggest a different kind of experience from the one generally associated with literature, which allows us to take stock at a distance of a world merely represented on the page. Conventionally, poetry of the 1700s presents us with a landscape seen from a distance. Reading novels allows us to keep our hands clean as we engage in all kinds of fantasies about the messy lives of others. Kramnick’s interest in literary scenes where

mental engagement becomes haptic is, in this sense, its own interesting, counterintuitive move. “The idea”, he suggests, “would be that to live in the world is to reach out to something that is nearby, with which or with whom one shares some space, space that precedes and shapes one’s actions.”

In fact, Kramnick’s essential point – about practices from animal husbandry to neurosurgery – turns out to have everything to do with his defence of his own disciplinary practice. The biggest argument in *Paper Minds* is for the way that literary critics (or, by extension, biologists, historians, or surgeons) reshape the world they think about. In Kramnick’s terms, literature is good at representing character’s mental enmeshment in earth and material and flesh precisely because these practices are like those that critics use – and teach students to use – as they write professionally about the world. Literary criticism becomes in this account a practical kind of handicraft at the level of the sentence.

As an argument about disciplinary practice, Kramnick’s case can be summed up like this: for the disinterested observer, a forest might seem a single entity, occupied by the various species who follow different tracks

through it and live on its different levels. But for Kramnick, the pig forest and the anthill and the human forest are actually distinct formal worlds, shaped specifically by the snouts and mandibles and hands that work and dwell in them. By analogy, the university emerges not as a common world but as a plural one, each of its objects of study the product of a specific set of disciplinary touches.

This argument raises the further question of whether disciplinary life is a version of Marx’s species-being; I think therefore I study therefore I am. For most people, even for most people who work in universities around the world, a discipline is not a world; it is not even a primary avenue of approach to the world. Even those trained to look only for poetry, acorns, or mineral content in their forests are unlikely to be as oriented as firmly in their pursuit by a few scant undergraduate years as they are by the outlooks and practices they develop across a lifetime as national or gendered or more generally literate beings. Don’t most academics, for instance, share as much with other people who make the world as teachers or readers, as they do with their disciplinary bedfellows? This doesn’t invalidate Kramnick’s beautifully made and well-timed point about the value of literary-critical thinking in its specificity. It leaves entirely intact the careful plea he makes for literary representation as a site of action in the world. But it does mean that his bigger argument risks being inside baseball for academics of a particular caste.