

Sandpipers, Sapsuckers, and Godwits

The Adventure of Birds

by Charlton Ogburn
Morrow, 381 pp., \$10.95

Reviewed by Walter Arnold

STORMY PETREL, wandering albatross, curlew, screech owl, skylark, nightingale. The names of birds are often magical when they are not comical or otherwise delightful. Yellow-bellied sapsucker, tufted titmouse, coot, loon, solitary sandpiper, Hudsonian godwit. Consider the humble chimney swift, a bullet with wings chattering high above the houses. Its courtship flight ends even higher above the earth when, in Roger Tory Peterson's words, a pair "lock in a copulatory embrace and fall a thousand feet, their wings flailing the air like a pinwheel." Then there is the story told in this book of a golden eagle that was observed being harrassed by a red-shouldered hawk as it soared South one fall: "Rolling over on its back, it reached up as the Red-shoulder struck, plucked it out of the air, and plunged earthward to consume it." This is a glimpse of what it is about birds—their symbolism of freedom, their intensity of life—that entranced Alexander, Charlemagne, Shakespeare, and both Presidents Roosevelt.

The Adventure of Birds is an account of birds that would "tell all about them, or, if not all, then what went into being a bird; what made birds of sustained interest and even fascination to their now numerous human following; what gave them meaning to man in the needs of his soul." It is the only book I know of that does this so consciously and satisfactorily. Its author, although not an ornithologist, has been an "ornithophile" and pursuer of birds since boyhood and has often written about them in other contexts. But Ogburn's

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interests and talents range well beyond bird lore. He was one of Merrill's Marauders in the Far East during World War II (and wrote the book on which the movie was based), has toiled for the State Department, in Washington, is the author of some notable fiction, and is an authority on Shakespeare. He is also at least as experienced and knowing about flora as he is about avifauna; his descriptions of flowering plants in this and other books are remarkable.

Ogburn is one of the very best writers we have on natural history today. Something seems to have happened to most naturalists' sense of the English language since the time of Darwin and the first Huxley. Misanthropy and the pathetic fallacy between them have too often choked whatever green shoots of talent chanced to sprout up. At any rate, Ogburn's *The Winter Beach*, published a decade ago, is one of three or four contemporary books of natural history—Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are two others—that will surely be read and reread down the years. For the humane substance of its thought, as well as for the visual richness of its poetic prose, Ogburn's writing at its best does bear comparison with Thoreau and deserves the widest possible audience.

The present book is jammed with marvelous bird lore from the author's own experience and his wide reading. The evolution, biology, distribution, behavior, migration, and songs of birds, among other things, are put within a fully human context. But unfortunately, although the writing in *The Adventure of Birds* is often as compelling as that in *The Winter Beach*, his latest book is not without fault. There are too many overly complex and dense sentences, too many jarring shifts of focus between paragraphs. Furthermore, the book as a whole lacks a fitting overall architecture or directing form. The first of the book's two parts, "A World of Birds," does not cohere well with the second, "Birds Through the Year,"

which is naturally divided into the seasons and might have served as the best form for the entire book.

Nevertheless this is an Icarian book and extends the adventure of its subject to the reader. As Louis Halle, another top writer on birds and a friend of the author, said: "The territorial imperative tells me why the Nightingale sings at all. It does not tell me why it sings so beautifully." But Ogburn surely has a good part of the answer: it is "that a bird finds fulfillment in its singing and that (we may reasonably believe) the more demanding the song the higher the degree of fulfillment it finds." The point is not so much that this statement is frankly subjective as that it seems entirely warranted by the observations the author has made. As he says in a remarkable passage on the rousing sight and sound of migratory Canada geese in the fall: "What a summons it is, that high, broken, incessant baying out of the wild and solitary spaces of the North, like the sound of an army returning with battle-honors from a frontier beyond the imagination of stay-at-homes." ©

Books in Brief

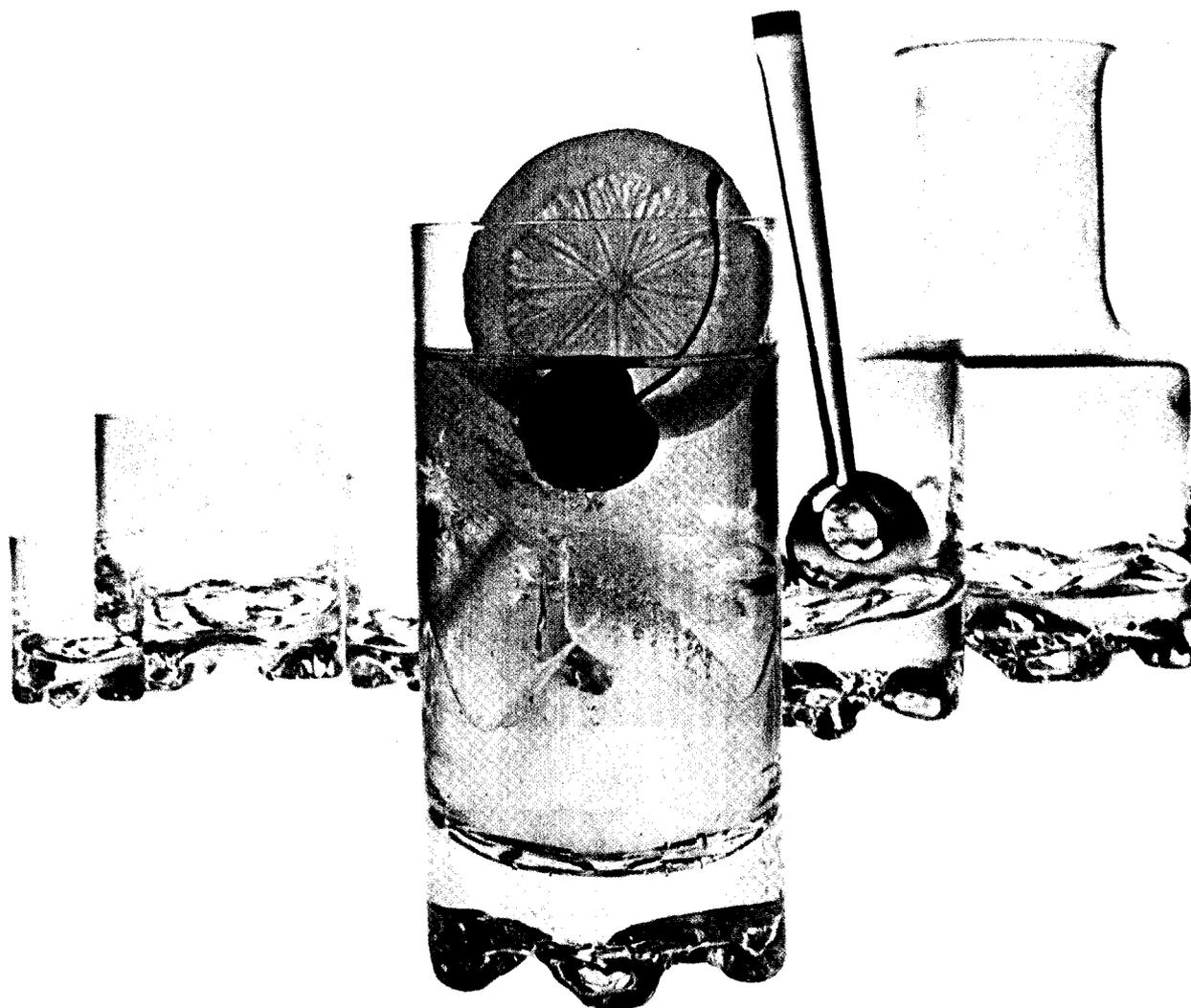
Sleep It Off, Lady

by Jean Rhys
Harper & Row, 192 pp., \$7.95

FEW writers whose work falls out of fashion have Jean Rhys's luck. Encouraged by Ford Madox Ford during the Twenties, she had published five books when World War II swept away, apparently forever, her particular world of shabbily elegant heroines, lurching on Pernod and cigarettes in Montparnasse cafés. So many aspects of the life Rhys depicted were destroyed, so many assumptions altered, that it's not surprising that the bustling, bourgeois Fifties found her novels uncongenial. Fortunately, thanks to an odd combination of feminism and nostalgia, her books are back in print and more popular than ever. This collection of new short stories will gladden the hearts of the many who recently discovered Jean Rhys and devoured everything she wrote, only to wish there were more.

Some of the most successful stories in *Sleep It Off, Lady* are only three or four pages long. Such, for instance, is the witty "Kikimora," in which a pompous misogynist condescends to his hostess and is given a richly deserved scratch by her sleek,

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