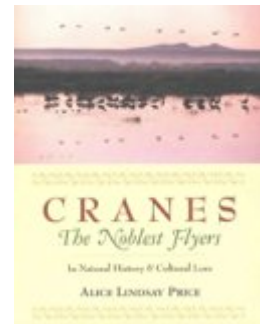


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alice Lindsay Price. *Cranes: The Noblest Flyers in Natural History and Cultural Lore*. Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 2001. 237 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-888809-24-4.

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Cranes in Legends, Stories, Images, and Science

Cranes in Legends, Stories, Images, and Science

At the heart of Alice Lindsay Price's book is the story, well-known to birders, of the several projects by scientists assisted by lay people and amateur naturalists (p. 1) to rescue Whooping Cranes from extinction and (p. 2) to save their breeding grounds, to protect them on the ground, and to reestablish their migratory routes from Wisconsin and Canada down to Texas and Florida. Best known, perhaps, is the tale of Operation Migration (<http://www.operationmigration.org/>) and its touching and half-comical triumph in leading young cranes on the wing south by an ultra-light airplane "parent" upon which the young cranes have imprinted. Intermixed with the tale of the Whoopers are accounts of Sandhills and other American Cranes, and of exotic African, European, and Asian cranes in sanctuaries.

Along with this success story we learn from Price a good deal about captive breeding programs and the debates surrounding them. Can birds raised by people be reintroduced to the wild? How can a program accomplish that? We learn also of the ingenuity of dedicated crane keepers who learn to "dance" with cranes and to "speak" their calls. I can imagine interpretive rangers in national and state and regional parks dancing for tourists. I once witnessed the "dance" of an owl along a branch as rendered by a Miwok interpretive ranger, Dwight Dutschke, at Grinding Rock State Park in California in the 1970s. I found it a richer presentation of owlness than all the stories in words I had ever read by ornithologists.

We learn from Price especially of the giants in crane research: Robert Porter Allen, Vladimir Flint, Fred Bard, Jim Harris, Faith McNulty, Marianne Wellington, George Archibald and others. Her seven-page bibliography includes many scientific papers by earlier Americans impressed by our cranes, especially John White, Mark Catesby, William Bartram, Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon, and Ernest Thompson Seton. And as context for such specific studies, Price introduces us to the work of those with broader experience and interests whose work helps interpret the more tightly drawn accounts of crane research and rescue, authors such as Arthur Cleveland Bent, Joseph Campbell, Paul and Anne Ehrlich, Loren Eiseley, Clyde Kluckholm, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Konrad Lorenz, Ernst Mayr, Donald Culross Peattie, and Edward O. Wilson. Price has done her library work.

It is her work in the field that gives her story a nicely personal touch, her driving her station wagon south in search of cranes, her meeting with researchers, etc. And I find especially engaging the many pencil sketches of cranes standing, jumping, bowing, pipping, and flying. They remind me of the sensitive and eloquent field sketches by Niko Tinbergen and by Ernest Thompson Seton (oddly, Tinbergen does not appear in Price's bibliography or text). Her drawings are not fussy, rather they catch posture and gesture economically and, it seems, easily. They should encourage others to take pencil and sketchbook into the field.

But Price's book is also a cornucopia of intriguing

ing bits and pieces on cranes: excerpts from poems and prose, woodcuts, engravings, petroglyphs, and half-tone photographs of birds, landscapes, sculpture, pottery, tapestries, and even Canadian and U.S. conservation stamps. Generally these words and images appear as marginalia; some of the quotations work as epigraphs at the head of sections. Collectively they testify to the power of cranes to inspire storytellers, artists and artisans through the ages. They are meant to tease us, perhaps, more than to provoke further library or museum research by the reader, as the author often does not sufficiently attribute them to sources the reader might access if interested. Frequently they bear no relation to the text they accompany.

Whether to fault Price for such casual embellishment remains for me problematic. To footnote each sketch and photo and bit of testimony would admittedly encumber the work. I imagine that she and her editor struggled over this matter of style and content. They clearly elected to forego the sort of academic apparatus some of us readers thirst for. As one who has written about colonial American “nature reporters,” I have struggled often with texts that had foregone indexing and have ground my teeth in irritation. Some of the best help an author who has done the work Price has done is to leave a trail others can pick up and follow to further discoveries. And this is especially true with Price who has dipped deeply into exotic poetry and illustration well beyond the scope of readers with less extensive collections at their finger tips. Some appendices which allow us to follow her trail should have been devised.

That she failed to imagine such readers is further demonstrated by her continual practice in the text of citing a work parenthetically but omitting page references. One example may show the difficulty. Price writes on page 42 of her book: “At the beginning of the Christian era, the Roman scholar Hyginus writes that Mercury ‘invented the alphabet while watching a flight of Cranes’ (Graves, *Goddess*)” Graves’ *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, appears in Price’s bibliography, but without a page number we are left to search through the book’s whole until we find the quotation and the context in which it appears. That is asking too much of this reader.

That much having been said, however, Price’s book remains a treasure trove, perhaps especially to non-academics committed to nature in legend and story. Here are a hundred provocative quotations, epigraphs, snippets of poetry and fine prose, as well as ancient images and modern anecdotes about cranes on the ground and on the wing. And her book suggests the sort of cross-disciplinary abundance one might assemble to tell the stories of other species: condors, cockroaches, hummingbirds, rattlesnakes, swans, crows, coyotes, and so forth. If nothing else, Price demonstrates that there is not one story of cranes, but a bundle of tales and images tied loosely together and drawn from history, anthropology, natural science, travel prose, poetry, and art history. Such “totem animals,” as we in NILAS have tagged them, often “organize” the wealth of popular culture, folk culture, and elite learning stimulate by the presence among us of “nature’s people,” as Emily Dickinson called them.

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