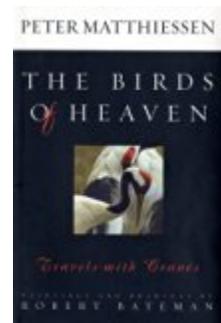


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Matthiessen. *The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes*. Paintings and drawings by Robert Bateman. New York: North Point Press, 2001. xv + 350 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-19944-9.

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Who Cares About Cranes?

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Peter Matthiessen opens his introduction to *The Birds of Heaven* with the story of a woman he met at a dinner party who asked where he had been all summer. When he told her “Eastern Siberia and Outer Mongolia,” she cried “Why?!” When he “offered [his] excuse of field research on endangered cranes and tigers,” he writes, “she drew back, aghast. ‘Cranes?!’ she squawked. ‘Who cares about cranes?’”

Matthiessen does, of course, as do I and those who are likely to read his book. “Like many people on many continents,” he writes, “I care profoundly about cranes and tigers, not only as magnificent and stirring creatures but as heralds and symbols of all that is being lost” (p. iv). Yet, as his interrogator’s response signals, she and many others do not care. That clash between those who do and the many who do not lies at the core of this masterfully full, informative, complex, challenging, and moving narrative. *The Birds of Heaven* thrusts the reader into the very presence of fifteen species of cranes, rendered eloquently in words by Matthiessen and in color and line by Robert Bateman. Sadly, also, it dramatizes the many dangers to their flight paths and habitats from human population pressures, thoughtless engines of “progress,” military establishments and missions, and “bottom-line” economic and engineering policies.

Matthiessen is at once (1) a prophet crying warnings, (2) a chronicler detailing excursions, meetings, and the findings of scientists, and (3) a psalmist celebrating the

presence of cranes in creation. We all know the warnings by now; Matthiessen relentlessly specifies them, region by region and species by species. Rhetorically the book offers a kind of jeremiad, calling attention to our sins of commission and omission and calling on us to reform before it is too late for the cranes and for us. But embedded in the prophetic anger and despair are his accounts of heartening, frustrating, sobering, and amusing encounters with other “craniacs” and with bureaucrats in charge of wetlands and political borders. An added dimension to this book about cranes is that it also amounts to a virtual syllabus of lessons about the geography and geology and cultural history of the lands that cranes fly through and over or nest in here and in Asia, Africa, and Australia. I found myself referring again and again to the detailed endpapers that map out “Cranes in the Western Hemisphere” (front) and “Cranes in the Eastern Hemisphere” (back).

But throughout the narrative of dangers and despair appear lyric accounts of the wonderful birds and their message from the dawn of creation, from the Eocene when they walked among the dinosaurs (p. 235). Listen to Matthiessen on their majesty and meaning:

“The cranes are the greatest of the flying birds and, to my mind, the most stirring, not less so because the horn notes of their voices, like clarion calls out of the farthest skies, summon our attention to our own swift passage on this precious earth. Perhaps more than any other living creatures, they evoke the retreating wilderness, the van-

ishing horizons of clean water, earth, and air upon which their species—and ours, too, though we learn it very late—must ultimately depend for survival” (p. 4).

Just as evocative are his thumbnail descriptions of a scene: “Sun and shadow, whisperings of rain, a silver shimmering like uncoiling eels in the brown water” (p. 22), or:

“The Arkhara plain lies inland from the village, a huge savanna of bog and wet meadow wandered by creeks and scattered with islands of willow, birch, and poplar. A roe deer, then another, flushed from the swale, streak away through the birch islands like shoots of fire in the white trees” (pp. 28-29).

Like the naturalist he is, Matthiessen can capture a scene, populate it with birds, and locate it in a larger landscape all in one sentence: “Facing upriver, the cormorants, terns, and tall grey herons have taken up stations on the banks as down the canyon between bluffs the wind comes in sudden puffs and buffets, raising white ridges on the current and leaving a strong scent of lime from flowering linden trees in the higher forests upriver” (p. 22).

I confess that I come to any book by Matthiessen ready to be shaken and enlightened, and also that, like Matthiessen, I am awed by the sight of and sound of cranes, by the “gargling” din of half a hundred sandhills high above, almost out of sight, circling and staging before V-ing up to head north. As we who read Matthiessen have come to expect, biology, history, political economy, and passion weave wonderfully together to move us and inform us of difficult decisions ahead. For all his chronicling, lyric description, and attention to governmental

and political economic forces, he does not slight the biological. The evolutionary history of the several species of cranes, their morphology, adaptive strategies, and behaviors swell each of the chapters on the several cranes. Lengthy, discursive notes explain DNA, behavioral distinctions, larynx morphology, and the trial-and-error and science realized in the many rescue, refuge, and breeding programs in the United States and abroad.

Matthiessen ends his narrative with the heartening account of recent attempts to restore the whooping crane species in America: “In October 2001, twelve young whoopers from Patuxent [Maryland] would be led south by ultralight aircraft on the six-week journey to Chas-sahowitzka [Florida], with every expectation that some, at least, would survive the journey, overwinter safely, and return to Wisconsin in the spring of 2002 as the nucleus of a new migratory flock of *Grus americana*” (p. 300). Readers may have seen the television documentary on just such an experiment in leading young whoopers south to their wintering grounds. But while that experiment may stick in one’s mind as a metaphor for a happy ending to this drama of endangerment and rescue, what Matthiessen’s three hundred page chronicle raises to awareness are the many, world-wide efforts to save habitat and species and preserve flyways and migrating birds.

This is a book to buy and own. It is not a quick read, at least it was not for me, who feels obliged to grasp each species and locale and sort the information into my own map of the world. I did weary about halfway through, much as I relished each chapter. But the book remains a richly informative, engaging, and even at times amusing chronicle of Matthiessen’s travels and his encounters with human enthusiasts and with these “birds of heaven.”

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