Guided by nature

Farewell, Bill Cooper, portrait painter to the birds.

In the 1970s David Attenborough was leaving the offices of a Sydney publisher when he came across a line of paintings of birds of paradise along a corridor. He was stunned and later recalled: “They were most delicately coloured and marvellously drawn... (the) postures and the colouring and varying textures of their plumage had an immediacy and vivacity that Gould’s artists never approached.” The paintings were by Australian artist William Thomas Cooper. David returned in the early ’90s to make a documentary on ‘Bill’, dubbing him ‘Portrait painter to the birds’. They became firm friends and the BBC broadcaster added many Coopers to his collection of natural history art. When I wrote Bill’s biography, An Eye for Nature: The Life and Art of William Thomas Cooper (National Library of Australia, 2014), David honoured Bill by writing the foreword, something he rarely does. Here he described him as “The best ornithological illustrator alive.”

The paintings David ‘discovered’ in that Sydney office were from Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds, Bill’s second collaboration with ornithologist Joseph Forshaw. Between their first monograph, Parrots of the World, in 1973, and their eleventh, Pigeons and Doves in Australia, released a few months ago (see page 42), Bill and Joe covered thousands of bird species. When Bill died on 10 May this year at the age of 81, in his home on the Atherton Tableland, the world lost one of its greatest bird artists. As David described, he was known for his accuracy in all aspects of his paintings, not least capturing the personality and mood of his subjects, which came from a deep knowledge of the natural world. His method was to see the living bird, wherever possible, observe it for long periods and make many sketches. He eschewed photographs, but referred to museum skins for fine details, particularly plumage colours. He put great effort into researching appropriate habitats and food plants or animals, again referring to specimens collected himself or sourced from around the world. As a kid he learnt taxidermy at the local zoo, which helped him greatly with anatomy, especially the underlying structure of birds. For reference, he had his own collection of insects, shells, and bird skins and skeletons. Although best known for his birds, Bill began as a landscape artist, and could paint anything nature presented, from thylacines to platypuses. After their move to Atherton, he and his wife, Wendy, set out to learn about the poorly known plants of the Australian tropical rainforest. Some 17 years and two books later, Bill had drawn 1270 luscious fruits, and self-taught Wendy had become the international expert on several botanical groups. Their third joint effort in 2013 was the Australian Rainforest Fruits: A Field Guide.

In recognition of his contributions, Bill was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1994, and in 2014 the Coopers became the first couple to receive Honorary Doctorates from the Australian National University.

Bill was guided by nature. He particularly liked the words of 16th-century painter Albrecht Dürer: “Do not depart from [nature], thinking that you can do better yourself. You will be misguided, for truly art is hidden in nature and he who can draw it out possesses it.”

He will be sorely missed.

PENNY OLSEN