An Eye for Nature: The Life and Art of William T. Cooper

Jane Carruthers\textsuperscript{ab}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of History, University of South Africa
\textsuperscript{b} Centre for Invasion Biology, Stellenbosch University

Published online: 20 Jun 2014.

To cite this article: Jane Carruthers (2014) An Eye for Nature: The Life and Art of William T. Cooper, Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa, 69:2, 125-126, DOI: 10.1080/0035919X.2014.930722

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0035919X.2014.930722
Book review


Dr Penny Olsen, the author of An Eye for Nature: The life and art of William T. Cooper, is a rare ornithologist. Currently an Associate Professor in the Research School of Biology at the Australian National University in Canberra (from which she obtained her degrees), she combines the skills of scientific researcher, world authority on raptors, active member of various bird-related organizations, editor of Birdlife Australia’s magazine Wingspan, writer of children’s books on birds, and contributor to many academic journals, popular magazines and radio programmes. Recognition for her contribution to ornithology and bird conservation has come through many awards. She is the recipient of the D.L. Serventy Medal (1997) from the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now Birdlife Australia); in 2011 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia, and in 2013 the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales presented her with their Special Commendation and Whitley Medal, probably the most sought after zoological prize in Australia because it is based on a long period of sustained publishing productivity in high quality work.

Few ornithologists are able to span so many fields with proficiency and expertise, but Olsen is also recognised for her knowledge of the history and evaluation of bird art. Together with other books on this topic, in 2001 she published Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australian Bird Art (Canberra, CSIRO Publishing), a survey of artists’ and illustrators’ fascination with Australia’s bird life from the 1700s into the modern era that she melded into a history of changing human attitudes towards birds and their conservation. In that book she devoted just three pages to the wondrous talent of William T. Cooper (b. 1934) and it is thus a pleasure now to have her full length, fully illustrated biography of this gifted artist who is 80 years of age this year. The Foreword is by Sir David Attenborough who avers that, while remaining within the strict requirements of ornithological science in the tradition of John Gould and his illustrators, Cooper has lifted the art ‘to new and unprecedented heights … to become arguably the greatest of all bird artists’ (p.viii).

An Eye for Nature is a beautifully produced large-format book with a wealth of colour illustrations of various sizes, very many of them full page. Photographs of Cooper at various times of his life are included, many of them taken of him at work in his studio or in the field. Preliminary sketches and pages from notebooks provide an indication of the artist’s working methods. The full-page illustrations of various bird species are stunning, the birds-of-paradise particularly almost flying off the page. Cooper, however, was not only an artist of birds – although these are his main subjects – there are also examples of scenery, animals, buildings, fruit, butterflies, flowers and a few people. Cooper travelled widely within Australia, Malaysia, India and even Africa, and the birds of each of these areas are reflected in the book.

Cooper was not an ornithological artist of field guides. His birds are true works of art. They are depicted in their appropriate habitats – perched on mossy branches, given a background long view of a rain forest, cockatoos appear on different Banksia species, a Southern Cassowary and chucks emerge from the dark undergrowth into a pool of light on the forest floor, Sarus cranes and brolgas flirt on the expanse of the Atherton Tablelands, and tiny Red-backed Fairy-wrens forage among a tangle of grass stems. Cooper’s oeuvre includes A Portfolio of Australian Birds (1968), the Lansdowne Edition of Parrots of the World (1973), The Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds (1977), Turacos: A Portfolio of All Species (1997), as well as many other publications. His most important work is probably Kingfishers and Related Birds: six large and very heavy tomes (16 kg) that were written with Joseph Forshaw, published between 1983 and 1994 in a limited edition by Lansdowne. I have seen these magnificent volumes for myself in a Johannesburg library and it is not surprising that the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, USA, gave Cooper their gold medal in 1992 for ‘artistic endeavors and life’s work which have contributed to mankind’s better understanding and appreciation of living things’. He has also been awarded the Order of Australia. There is no doubt that he is an extremely competent ornithologist as well as artist. Olsen – and Cooper himself – pay tribute to the many ornithologists and property owners in Australia and elsewhere who have shared their knowledge with Cooper, thus augmenting his acute powers of observation and enabling him to fulfil his talent. He is also something of a bird-art teacher; his book Capturing the Essence: Techniques for Bird Artists appeared in 2011.

Olsen has based her book on many interviews with William Cooper and his wife Wendy, discussions with Cooper’s co-authors, with his friends and with owners of Cooper’s works. She has also had access to Cooper’s field notes and travel journals. The work is arranged chronologically, following Cooper’s life from his boyhood in Newcastle, NSW, as the town emerged from the Great Depression, his childhood in a home – really a shack – constructed by his odd-job father, into the prime of his life as a respected and famous artist. Cooper’s father was a keen bushman, often securing food for his family from the countryside surrounding their dwelling. Unsuspected, William and his brother explored their rural surroundings and came to know and love the Australian flora and fauna. Cooper’s fascination with animals began with the arresting sight of a Regent Bowerbird, a stuffed specimen in a glass case located at the back of a small grocery store that the youngster regularly visited on his way home from school. His sketching began with this bird but he soon began to draw others, his mother encouraging him by always ensuring that he had drawing materials despite the family’s poverty. As a teenager, Cooper became a proficient taxidermist, working in the local zoo and visiting the museum every day when he stayed on holiday with relatives in Melbourne.

Cooper was not a model schoolboy: he was not popular with his teachers, he was a trouble-maker, and he was almost expelled. He never completed his school education. The family environment too was unstable and unhappy. He became a store window dresser, was called up for service during the Korean War – but he deserted with a number of his friends and was subsequently court-martialed. He had two wives before meeting his soulmate, Wendy, whom he later married and with whom he has collaborated on a number of books. As well as becoming Cooper’s greatest
supporter and help, Wendy Cooper is a competent botanist in her own right.

In the mid-1960s, Cooper became a freelance artist and his future was assured as galleries and private clients quickly recognized his worth. Soon he turned from landscapes to birds. He had finally found his métier. He was in demand as a painter of birds and discovered his own niche in illustrating dramatic large-scale books. This he began in partnership with ornithologist Joseph Forshaw who, in the late 1960s, was looking for illustrators for the book Parrots of the World, intended for ornithologists, aviculturists and nature lovers. Thus began Cooper’s travels to discover birds in their native environments and his painting of them in the most dramatic and realistic manner. As everyone knows, birds are elusive and this biography is thus filled with as many disappointments as successes of sightings in the field. With Forshaw and others as his partners, Cooper was provided with assistance in many parts of the world to find his specimens.

Their first trip to Africa in 1989 came about because Wendy and William Cooper wanted to find hornbills. First in Harare, then Nairobi, the couple met legendary figures like Ian Parker, Jenny and Alan Root and Joan Root, and visited many of the East African national parks. An Eye for Nature includes delightful sketches of lions, monkeys, nesting carmine bee-eaters as well as completed paintings of hornbills, zebra and other subjects, many done on subsequent visits to East Africa and Zimbabwe. Now that he is an elderly man, Cooper is content with his reflections on a life well lived, a talent well used, and new philosophical, aesthetic and practical challenges around ‘how paint works’ (p. 233). His passion for nature, ‘his playground, his solace and his inspiration’ (p. 201) has not dimmed.

This could not have been an easy book to write, for although Cooper is a magnificent artist who has kept a good record of his life, he is not a writer. His journals are workmanlike and perhaps even plodding, day by day. Olsen has been obliged to rely on them for her text and it must be admitted that at times she has difficulty in breathing life into them. Nonetheless, this does not detract from an engaging, interesting and informative book with its lavish illustrations of a fascinating natural world by one of the world’s masters.

Jane Carruthers
Department of History, University of South Africa
Centre for Invasion Biology, Stellenbosch University
j.carruthers@mweb.co.za