An eye for nature: the life and art of William T Cooper

by Penny Olsen
foreword by David Attenborough


An eye for nature: the life and art of William T Cooper is a high quality production, comprising Penny Olsen's entertaining, informative, carefully researched account of William T Cooper's life and career, as well as about 200 reproductions of Cooper's superb paintings and drawings, and numerous photographs. The foreword, written by David Attenborough (who judges Cooper to be 'the best ornithological illustrator alive') is, appropriately, accompanied by a reproduction of Cooper's stunningly beautiful painting of Lesser Birds-of-paradise. (When Cooper and Attenborough were boys, both were inspired by seeing an illustration of these fascinating birds.) At the back of the book are two portfolios of previously unpublished paintings, one of birds, the other of landscapes. These are followed by a bibliography, a list of Cooper's publications, and a very useful index. The Rainbows on the Moor and text on the dust jacket are also printed on the hard cover, so if anything happens to the dust jacket almost all its content will remain with the book.

Cooper has always had an interest in nature—an interest encouraged by both his parents. He grew up in the Newcastle area, where there were plenty of opportunities to explore the bush, learn bushcraft from his father, go fishing, and observe animals and plants. His mother taught him to sketch, and he began to win prizes at an early age. He left school at 15, and did many odd jobs before becoming a window dresser, an occupation that allowed him to use his artistic talent painting backdrops for displays of merchandise. From the 1950s he entered and won prizes in art competitions, thus coming into contact with other artists, including William Dobell who gave him sound advice and introduced him to art dealers.

Today, Cooper is perhaps best known for his paintings of birds, especially those featured in books produced in collaboration with Joseph Forshaw, such as Parrots of the World, The Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds, Australian Parrots, Kingfishers and Related Birds, and Tucans. However, he has also painted many birdwatching pictures of a host of other animals, has travelled widely to observe his subjects in their natural surroundings, and is equally skilled in botanical illustration. His eye for detail, commitment to accuracy, and instinct for perfect composition are extraordinary.

After reading this book I am amazed that Cooper is still alive, for this remarkable artist has had many arduous and often hair-raising adventures in various parts of the world—or, as Penny Olsen writes, 'many close shaves in pursuit of subject matter' (p. 217). During a trip to Bukit Fraser in Malaysia, for example, Cooper's driver dozed off and the car rolled down a steep hillside and hit a tree. Even here in Australia he has experienced the wrath of a male Southern Cassowary protecting his chicks from the perceived threat of a human.

There are very few faults in this book, though I was somewhat startled to see an elephant referred to as a mammoth (p. 137), and Cooper's mother's maiden name given as Cooper (p. 155) instead of Bird.

This is a most impressive book, well written, splendidly illustrated and beautifully presented. It is also an important contribution to the record of Australia's cultural heritage. At $49.99 it is a bargain. Your interest will be aroused right from the beginning, and on the title page there is a reproduction of a painting of a domestic cat, which the caption overleaf describes as 'The infamous cat that nearly wrecked Cooper's career. Now read on!'

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