

BOOK REVIEW

THE INLAND ISLAND by Josephine W. Johnson. Simon and Schuster, 1969. 159 pp.

The growing awareness of ecology's realism may be having its influence on the new nature writing if *The Inland Island* by Josephine W. Johnson is an example. There is a lot about birds in this book, about her 'island' (her farm)—and most of it is shocking from what I have heard my fellow birders say.

"Have you seen the beak of a brown creeper?" this Pulitzer Prize-winning author challenges her readers. "There's a scythe—a scimitar! Think how it looks to the small bark beetles. Hammered steel to them. A vicious thing and huge—the fishhook beak of this tiny bird like a speckled egg."

As for the birds that come to her feeder—"Two downies. They look dirty. They always do.... A ladderback redbelly came and gorged on damp bread.... Just saw the blue jays stuff each other with bread-crumbs."

Compare this with "the confiding and cheerful Downy" kind of description that has dominated much of the nature literature about birds. This is another woman writing: Mabel Osgood Wright in *Gray Lady and the Birds* published by The MacMillan Company in 1907. It is one of several period books on birds and nature I have been collecting to ascertain the feeling with which earlier writers approached the environment. The comparison between the two women writers was contrasting with Mrs. Wright sometimes resorting to an anthropomorphic and somewhat sentimental "Dear little Jenny Wren" compared to Mrs. Johnson's "fat wrens" which "sing beautifully."

Such comparisons, however, can lead to fragile simplifications because Mrs. Wright's anthropomorphism can be infused with a realistic style as in the eating habits of her Downy Woodpecker: "Every stroke with which he knocks at the door of an insect's retreat sounds the crack of doom. He pierces the bark with his beak, then with his barbed tongue drags forth an insect, and moves on to tap a last summons on the door of the next in line."

Perhaps Mrs. Johnson's realism has actually been more latent than absent in American nature writing. Take, for example, a feminine predecessor of Mrs. Wright, Emily Dickinson. She was blunt in her description of what I am convinced is the familiar robin which would most likely show up in the yard of the New England home which Miss Dickinson seldom left:

"A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow raw."

You would almost believe that Miss Dickinson had been well aware of such words as *ecology* or *food chain*—that our natural environment, as far as living forms are concerned, is made up of a continuous consumerism; that life is perpetuated and evolved on an endless mill of death.

All this is a hard reality to face—and, indeed, in much of our nature literature it has been overlooked and instead a kind of heroism of many of earth's creatures has been accented like Mrs. Wright's Downy Woodpecker feeding on "injurious insects" as though it was serving man. She cites "the apple-tree borer as one against whom he (the woodpecker) wages war."

It seems that Mrs. Johnson with her provocative vocabulary and phrasing is attempting to deal with nature's reality as with her description of the kingfisher: "What big, beady, sharp, stern eyes he has. What a beautiful speckled ruff—and that vibrating fan, his crest! In the shadows, his blue had a greyish cast, his red, the red-brown of dry blood. He kept up a constant trilling. Is he trying to scare up a fish? He dived with a splash, returned frowzy wet, crest dripping. He swallowed the minnow and shook his wings. Feathers awry—rust, blue, white, every which way. A great squat bird. A marvelous bird. He honors our small polluted stream."

Ironical! In her hard modern realism, Mrs. Johnson also has her heroes.

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