

BOOK REVIEW

This Bright Land: A Personal View. By Brooks Atkinson. Published for The American Museum of Natural History by Doubleday/Natural History Press, Garden City, N.Y. 1972. 201 Pages. Black and white drawings. \$5.95.

Is there some close connection between Maurice Evans delivering Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy and a hermit thrush singing by itself in the dusk? Is there something in both the proscenium stage and earth's global stage that appeals similarly to the theatre-goer in us. The question is inspired by Brooks Atkinson's latest nature book, "This Bright Land: A Personal View."

It is not what Atkinson says that raises the question, but who he is — a man who spent 31 years as drama critic for the New York Times. This would really not be enough except that two others of the most important American dramatic critics also devoted much of their writing to nature. They were Joseph Wood Krutch and Walter Prichard Eaton.

Krutch became drama editor of *The Nation* in 1924. He served until 1950 as professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University. Then removing himself to the desert scene in Arizona he became famous for books like "The Desert Year," "The Twelve Seasons" and one of the most important works in our nature literature, "The Great Chain of Life."

Eaton started in 1902 reviewing musical and theatrical events for the New York Tribune. In 1907 he went on the New York Sun for about two years as drama critic. He spent the next decade as drama editor of the *American Magazine*. In 1933 he succeeded the great George Prince Baker (teacher of Eugene O'Neil, George Abbott, etc.) as professor of playwriting at Yale University. Besides a series of "Boy Scouts in the White Mountains," "Boy Scouts of Katahdin," etc., Eaton's nature books include "The Bird House Man" in 1916 and "Green Trails and Upland Pastures" in 1925.

But my theory received little critical acclaim during a conservation fund-raising cruise up the Hudson River a few years ago. Learning that Atkinson was aboard, I had to accost him with my insight. I expected to be grasped in his arms as he welcomed me into the literary community to further expound about my great idea. I remember that he looked like a milder version of Teddy Roosevelt as I enthusiastically promoted my theory for five minutes. But Roosevelt could not have spoken more softly nor used a bigger stick than Atkinson unknowingly did when he politely said that he did not see the connection between theatre and nature.

However, and with all that 'due respect' business, I have clung to the hunch. One reason is that both theatre and nature can be good shows. There are good scenes to describe, which these three writers do very

well. Take Eaton's nesting goldfinch in "Green Trails and Upland Pastures:"

"The lively goldfinch is brother to the butterflies in our forsaken pasture in thistle-time. There are but few thistles, and they are clustered amid wild sunflowers in a fork of an old logging road by the edge of the second growth — a pretty colour scheme of pink and gold. It seems almost as if the finches realized their own harmony with this bit of wild gardening, for they wing into the bed, seeking thistle-down for their nests. . . .

But you can sense the critic in Eaton showing itself when he attempts — successfully — to get across the effect of the Hermit Thrush's singing in this book.

"George Moore has called the songs of Schubert and Schumann 'the moonlit lakes and nightingales of music.' But what man-made music is twilight and the hermit thrush? A few of Mozart's andantes? Almost, perhaps, yet they lack the forest timbre and the dusk; they are liquid and pensive, but they were composed at sunrise, or while the sun yet lingered on the lowland meadows. Incomparable of birds, uncelebrated in classic story like the nightingale, uttering no homesick note in a warm and sentimental southland like the mocking bird, your habitat in your musical matingtime is the forests of our bleak New Hampshire hills, and on the border of an upland pasture at twilight you sing an unheard song that could ravish the world!"

The intellect's ability to detect universal significance in stage action is another reason for seeing the connection between nature and theatre. A critic who is trained to see this in the theatre can also do this in nature. There are actors in both.

A critic like Krutch can feel and sense the truth of all the ages in Hamlet and his death — if the actor "dies" well. The actor is usually always effective on nature's stage — as for example in that "slice of life" gleaned from peering through a microscope. Krutch devotes two chapters in "The Great Chain of Being" to the performance of the Volvox, which to the naked eye appears no bigger than a green speck. Watching the death of this tiny "Hamlet" under the microscope's intense beam, Krutch is led to make one of the most dramatic statements I have ever come across in nature writing:

"...What...I do find surprising is not the assumption that men have souls, but that it should ever have come to be commonly assumed that no other creature has."

It is not any possible literalness of this statement that is so remarkable to me, but the spirit, feeling, awareness and even love that has gone into that utterance. It is significant that it comes from a person who has watched

characters struggling in life's situations on the stage. He must have emotionally and intellectually identified with them and felt and saw their meaning. He was able to do this watching the characters on nature's stage, and come up with deep critical insights.

If the foregoing represent proof of the connection between nature and theatre—then Atkinson's new book is further evidence. It is in format a history of the decline of wildlife and wild areas in America. In some chapters he focuses on particular problems such as "The California Condor" and "The Florida Everglades." But it is readable and significant, laced as it is with colorful pictures of the show and of insights of emotion and intellect that must have come from his many years watching the stage action on Broadway. Examples of both show and insight are found in a chapter on the phenomenon of birding and birders entitled "The Bird Habit:"

"... The Maryland yellowthroat with his stunning black mask, would seem normal in a tropical jungle where gorgeous birds such as toucans and parrots tumble and scream through the dense foliage. But to see not one but several yellowthroats every day in the dry, dusty brush along a stretch of road and to hear their modest secenade, is to be startled by the extravagant beauty of nature—a beauty that is all the more remarkable because it is as common as the white daisy, the scrub oak, and the gray squirrel."

For insight and feeling, the following is an example:

"... To hunt for birds in the field is to hear the distant, muffled ticking of the great clock of the universe. To human beings, these units of time are staggering. It is believed by some professionals that the annual migration of birds repeats every year the advances and retreats of the several glaciers of the Pleistocene age. But I doubt it. Although the Pleistocene epoch lasted more than a million years, it constituted less than a hundredth part of the age of birds. The glaciers were incidents. Bird life preceded the glaciers by millions of years."

That is the kind of speculative mathematics an amateur bird watcher is dealing with when he hears the geese going over in autumn. Something bigger than anything we know is happening."

This is a true theatre goer speaking!

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