

BOOK REVIEW

The Indigo Bunting: A Memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay. By Vincent Sheean. (Schocken Books, 131 pp., \$2.95). This is a remarkably comprehensive little book because it not only discusses birds in the life and work of a significant American poet, but presents an overview of birds in Romantic and Elizabethan poetry and even speculates on the archetypal reasons why people become birders.

Millay was a birder. Her worn 1925 edition of Chester A. Reed's *Bird Guide: Land Birds East of the Rockies* was crammed with her notes about birds arriving and pouring out songs. She could identify about 45 species by song which is respectable for someone concentrating on birds around the house as Millay did at the home she called "Steepletop" in Austerlitz, New York. The on-going feeder outside the living room window kept birds of every season close to her life.

All this is described by her friend, a journalist who is known for his books about India, Gandhi and Nehru. In fact, Sheean recalls in the memoir his telling the poet that she could have been an indigo bunting in a previous existence if the Hindu belief in reincarnation were valid. This occurred during a visit to "Steepletop" where she revealed so much joy showing him a cautious acting bunting banqueting at the feeder. This species figures in what is thought to be one of the last fragments — perhaps the very last — that she wrote before being found dead on the stairs at "Steepletop" in 1950.

"Never before, perhaps, was such a sight —
Only one sky (my breath!) and all that blue —
Lepis, and Sèvres, and borage — every hue.
If blue-jay — indigo bunting — bluebird's flight."

Her first poem, made up when she was five or six, is about birds. "Through the intervening years the appeal to these creatures as a sort of kindred is almost incessant," Sheean says as he explores how often they appear and move throughout her poetry. For example, in a sonnet from the volume entitled *Fatal Interview*, Millay uses the image of a wounded bird to express the broken, hurt feelings she had endured over sensual love that could not be sustained.

"O ailing Love, compose your struggling wing!
Confess you mortal; be content to die.
How better dead, than be this awkward thing
Dragging in dust its feathers of the sky. . . ."

This is an example of the feeling of kinship with birds that Millay often expresses with emotional effect and which places her in the company of Elizabethans like William Shakespeare and Romantic Age poets like John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Sheean makes this

observation during an informative comparison of Millay with other writers who have used birds as natural resources for artistic expression. "All lyric poets, it may be supposed," Sheean says, "have some degree of suspicion that what they do relates them to that one creature we know which has as the law of its being to sing and to fly."

Birds are heard in her poem, "Journey."

"Cat-birds call
Through the long afternoon, and creeks at dusk
Are guttural. Whip-poor-wills wake and cry,
Drawing the twilight close about their throats.
Only my heart makes answer."

A woman is saddened at the going of the birds in
"When the Year Grows Old."

"She used to watch the swallows
Go down across the sky,
And turn from the window
With a little sharp sigh."

Sheean probes the deep recesses of history and psychology for more insight into Millay's reliance on bird imagery and allusions. He finds that in ancient Greece birds were divine messengers. A legendary king in India owed much of his prowess to his understanding the language of birds who warned him of dangers. Certain North American Indian tribes believed that "The Old Woman Who Never Dies," an earth-mother goddess who controlled crops, sent migrating waterfowl north as messengers.

After citing other examples, Sheean reports 'that a weight of evidence has accumulated in modern psychology and goes on accumulating to the effect that beliefs held so widely and deeply, over what must have been an immense stretch of human time, have left a residue in the consciousness of civilized mankind, in its treasures of symbol even in the unconscious, and in its instinctive behavior.' This describes the archetypal theory of psychologist Dr. Carl Jung and helps explain for Sheean the generally great interest in birds and why 'bird watching and bird listening are pursuits which with a good many men and women become a primary interest in life.' The theory also helps explain for him why Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry metaphorically takes on characteristics of the bird. He hears in her poetry "a singing line, a contained and articulated melody. . . . it sings, like the indigo bunting."

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