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Introduction to Special Issue on Casey Albert Wood

Victoria Dickenson and Lauren Williams

Shortly after his retirement from medical practice in 1920, Dr. Casey Albert Wood (1856–1942), a Canadian-born medical doctor, founded the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology and the Blacker Library of Zoology at McGill University. These libraries eventually merged to form the Blacker Wood Library of Ornithology and Zoology, which is now the Blacker Wood Natural History Collection. For thirty years until her retirement in 2011, the Collection's long-serving librarian Eleanor MacLean (1947–2018) ensured that researchers had access to the treasures preserved in one of North America's finest special collections for the study of natural history. MacLean was heir to a line of dedicated librarians going back to Gerhard Lomer (1882–1970) and Henry Mousley (1865–1949), both of whom worked with Casey Wood to build these libraries.

A prominent medical practitioner and researcher in ophthalmology, Wood loved books. In his 1907 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Medicine, he urged his fellow practitioners to find in reading not only solace but also antidote to what might be a “learned narrowness” in the medical profession:

If I were to pray for a taste which should stand me in stead under every variety of circumstances, and be a source of happiness and cheerfulness to me through life, and a shield against its ills, however things might go amiss, and the world frown on me, it would be a taste for reading ... Give a man this taste, and the means of gratifying it, and you can hardly fail of making a happy man, unless, indeed, you put into his hands a perverse collection of books. You place him in contact with the best society in every period of history—with the wisest, the wittiest—with the tenderest, the bravest and the purest characters that have adorned humanity. You make him a denizen of all nations—a contemporary of all ages. The world has been created for him.¹

¹ Casey A. Wood, “A Medical Career and the Intellectual Life,” Presidential Address, Annual Meeting 1907, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Medicine*, no. 8 (1907): 183–92 (184).

Wood certainly took his own prescription, and after his retirement from medical practice in 1920 he devoted himself to the pursuit of two things he valued most highly: books and natural history.

This special issue of the *Papers* grew out of a 2018 symposium at McGill University in Montreal, which sought to re-situate Casey Wood in terms of his career in medicine, his extensive writings, and the collections he built. Best known for his near obsession with birds and the literature of ornithology, a cursory investigation revealed that Wood had a much broader field of interests, to which he contributed in surprising ways.

Wood combined his role as a practicing doctor with active participation in various medical societies and contributions to the literature—he published extensively in scientific journals—and was the associate editor of the *Annals of Medical History*. He also undertook the editorship of the eight-volume *The American Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Ophthalmology* (1923), albeit “assisted by a large staff of collaborators.” In 1923, evidently in an effort to avoid a “learned narrowness,” he also translated the text of Benvenuto Grassi on eye disorders from the 1474 Latin edition. Grassi had based his book on the earlier works of Ali Ibn Isa’s *Tadhkirat al-Kahhalin* (*The Oculists’ Memorandum Book*), which Wood also wished to translate but found learning Arabic in his seventies challenging. Wood did, however, devote considerable resources and time to building a collection of the history of ophthalmology with particular attention to Islamic authors—a story that Anaïs Salamon, the Islamic Studies Librarian at McGill, unravels in this issue.

Wood’s interest in eyes led him naturally to the study of birds, whose vision, especially in raptors, is acute. In 1917, he authored a book on the anatomy of the avian eye still consulted today: *The Fundus Oculi of Birds Especially as Viewed by the Ophthalmoscope: A Study in Comparative Anatomy and Physiology*. It is likely that this work was the inspiration for yet another translation project rendering the twelfth-century manuscript of Frederick II on falconry into English, with the assistance of his niece and travelling companion, Florence Marjorie Fyfe. In this issue, Maurizio Ruiz, an art historian with an interest in semiotics at Université du Québec à Montréal, has analyzed Wood and Fyfe’s magnum opus, which was originally published in 1943—the year after Wood’s death—and is still in print today. Beyond book collecting, editing, and translating, Wood was an accomplished bibliographer. With the help of Henry Mousley, his dedicated librarian and bibliographic assistant in Montreal,

he undertook the monumental task of writing the massive *An Introduction to the Literature of Vertebrate Zoology* (1931), which he based on the Blacker Wood and Osler collections, and which continues to be a useful reference for students and librarians.

This was only part of Wood's legacy in natural history. In a letter written from Fiji in 1923, Wood revealed that his studies of birds' eyes had precipitated an interest in "general Ornithology," which he took up with his habitual enthusiasm and energy.² As he loved rare books, he loved birds. He became an active member of the American Ornithologists Union and contributed observations to its journal, *The Auk*. He was also a member of the British Ornithologists Club and published in *The Ibis*. His interest in birds translated into an interest in their portrayal, and, in addition to books, he acquired literally thousands of paintings, drawings, and prints by great natural history painters like George Edwards, Elizabeth Gwillim, Edward Lear, and John and Elizabeth Gould, as well as by lesser known artists, like Charles Collins and Peter Paillou, and amateurs like Sarah Amy Miller who painted her own illustrations to the Birds in "Latham's General Synopsis." Anna Winterbottom has explored this merging of Wood's interests as collector, naturalist, and bibliophile in examining his travels and activities in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the 1920s. Not only did he collect a wide array of books, manuscripts, and objects, he also undertook to commission the illustrations to *Manual of the Birds of Ceylon* (1927–35).

The Blacker Wood Natural History Collection

While Wood contributed extensively to building a number of McGill's library collections—as Christopher Lyons, Mary Hague-Yearl, and Salamon describe in this issue—he devoted particular attention to the library that bears his name. The Blacker Wood Natural History Collection at McGill was established by Wood in 1920 as the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology in honour of his wife who he wrote "had always been much interested in birds."³ The library was augmented with funds for vertebrate zoology from Robert Roe and

² Casey A. Wood to numerous recipients (Suva, Fiji Islands), 12 November 1923. Original typescript in Casey Albert Wood Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill Library, CA RBD MSG 1203–2–6.

³ Casey A. Wood, "Wood Family of Shelf, Halifax Parish, Yorkshire, England, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Long Island, N.Y., and Canada," (unpublished

Nellie Canfield Blacker, friends from California, and was subsequently renamed the Blacker Wood Library of Ornithology and Vertebrate Zoology. When Wood began the process of acquisition for these two conjoined libraries, he was building a scientific reference collection for students and researchers, and, in addition to monographs, he ordered complete runs of periodicals from scientific societies and universities as well as published accounts of expeditions and voyages. To these printed works he added—with a bibliophile's enthusiasm—the manuscripts, original drawings, watercolours and paintings, autograph letters, and unique annotated volumes that distinguish the collection today. Lauren Williams, who is now the librarian charged with the care of the Blacker Wood collection, has poured through the countless letters that Wood sent daily from wherever his travels took him—and they took him from South America to Australia—to chart the growth of the library. Wood's extensive correspondence files reveal his untiring efforts to chasten, chivvy, and prod booksellers, colleagues, and his patient (and sometimes impatient) librarians into building what became a singularly important collection about natural history. W. L. McAtee, writing Wood's Obituary in 1942 in *The Auk*, acknowledged his achievement: "Going direct to the best sources, he was personally instrumental in building the excellent Blacker Library of Zoology, called after the friends (Mr. and Mrs. Robert Roe Blacker) who helped furnish the funds, the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology, named for his wife, and other libraries at McGill University. The memorialist is no judge of the collections in other fields, but he ventures to say that those in ornithology are unexcelled at any other single institution in North America."⁴

In 1931, Wood documented the collections in *An Introduction to the Literature of Vertebrate Zoology, based chiefly on the titles in the Blacker Library of Zoology, the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology, the Bibliotheca Osleriana, and other libraries of McGill University, Montreal*. A half century later, in response to the changing focus of biology, the Ornithology and Zoology Library merged in 1988 with the Botany-Genetics Library to create the Blacker Wood Library of Biology. In 2005, the Blacker Wood collection was divided from the Biology Library, and Wood's rare books, older

typescript 1920): 27. Casey Albert Wood Collection, MSG 1203. Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill Library.

⁴ W. L. McAtee, "Casey Albert Wood, Obituary," *The Auk* 59, no. 4 (October 1942): 611–12 (611).

and obscure periodicals, manuscripts, and superlative collection of original drawings of birds and other animals were housed within McGill Library's Rare Books and Special Collections as the Blacker Wood Natural History Collection.

With about eighteen thousand volumes, the Blacker Wood is the largest natural history rare book collection in Canada, and among the largest in North America, similar in size and importance to the American Museum of Natural History's Library in New York and the Ernst Mayer Library at Harvard. The collection is focused primarily on vertebrate zoology—in particular ornithology—with significant materials in mammalogy, ichthyology, and comparative anatomy, and it was recently enriched by the addition of rare books from the Macdonald Library in the areas of entomology, parasitology, and microscopy. The collection also holds important works in history and philosophy of natural history, evolution, zoogeography, and the records of scientific expeditions. It is not only the scale but the breadth and rarity of its holdings that increase the importance of this remarkable collection. It contains published materials in English, Latin, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, German, Scandinavian, and other European languages, as well as in Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese, truly making it a global compendium. Included are many landmark publications in natural history, such as early editions of the works of Albertus Magnus and Conrad Gesner, Belon, Rondelet, and Aldrovandus, plus multiple copies and multiple editions of works by celebrated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists and scientists like Thomas Bewick, le Comte de Buffon, Gilbert White, and Charles Darwin, and numerous first editions, including Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

The collection also holds unique treasures, such as *The Feather Book* of Dionisio Minaggio (1618), Samuel Pepys' personal hand-coloured copy of John Ray's *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* (1678), and Thomas Pennant's own copy of *Arctic Zoology* (1792) with marginal illustrations by the artist Moses Griffiths, as well as examples of many of the great illustrated bird and mammal books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Catesby, Edwards, Audubon, Gould, Levaillant, and Wolf. In addition, the collection houses significant archival material, varying from Sir Joseph Banks's journals of voyages to Iceland and Newfoundland, the minute and letter books and catalogues of the Montreal Natural History Society—the oldest such organization in Canada—as well as miscellaneous correspondence and letter books by nineteenth-century scientists, original manuscripts

and typescripts for works by twentieth-century naturalists like John Burroughs, and Casey Wood's own manuscript notes and letter files (Wood collected actively up until his death in 1942).

What also sets the collection apart is the wealth of artworks on paper, making it comparable to the great natural history archives of New York, London, and Paris. This repository of over ten thousand drawings and paintings of birds and other animals includes watercolours prepared for publication by artists like George Shaw (for *Museum Leverianum*), Elizabeth and John Gould, Edward Lear, J. G. Keulemans, Henrik Grønvald, and Joseph Wolf, as well as unpublished watercolours of birds, animals, fishes, insects, and shells by talented amateurs or commissioned illustrators. Chief among the latter are the 938 works by Charles Collins, Peter Paillou, Eleazar Albin, and George Edwards in the Taylor White Collection (discussed in this volume by Victoria Dickenson); the works by Lady Elizabeth Gwillim on the birds and fishes of India; four volumes of the flora and fauna of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) by René-Gabriel de Rabié; and original illustrations intended for *Oriental Memoirs* (1813) by James Forbes. These unique holdings have resulted in substantial contributions to the literature of natural history, notably by A. M. Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766* (1971); Gordon Sauer, *John Gould: The Bird Man: a Chronology and Bibliography* (1982); Victoria Dickenson, *Drawn from Life: Art and Science in the Depiction of the New World* (1998); Anna Agnarsdóttir, *Sir Joseph Banks, Iceland and the North Atlantic 1772–1820: Journals, Letters and Documents* (2016); and Robert McCracken Peck, *The Natural History of Edward Lear* (2016). In 2006, the collection, in collaboration with the Redpath Museum, hosted the International Symposium of the Society for the History of Natural History, and in 2018 the Casey Wood symposium, which forms the foundation for this volume.

Casey Albert Wood (1856–1942)

Christopher Lyons, head librarian of Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill, of which the Blacker Wood Collection is now a part, has written an appreciation of Wood's career as a physician and bibliophile. Lyons recounts Wood's zeal in acquiring the rare and curious not only for "his" natural history library collection, but also for the Osler Library of Medicine, in honour of his mentor Sir

William Osler, as well as libraries in Chicago and California. Mary Hague-Yearl, the head librarian of the Osler, explores the influence of Osler on Wood's collecting, as well as Wood's long-standing comradery with W. W. Francis, then Osler librarian.

As will be evident to readers of these papers, Casey Wood was a forceful character, as revealed not only in his letters, but also in the opinions of his contemporaries. On his death, his niece Florence Marjorie Fyfe wrote "It was amazing how, ill as he was, he still impressed people with the force of his personality ..." Luckily, however, his determined character was tempered by his sense of humor, which his niece reported "stayed with him until the last."⁵ He apparently revelled in mischievous teasing of colleagues like his friend W. W. Francis, but he could also take a joke at his own expense, appreciating, for example, his whimsical depiction as a bibliophilic Don Quixote riding a hobby horse, which was presented to him by fellow physicians at his retirement dinner. *The American Journal of Ophthalmology* described the occasion: "The Chicago Ophthalmological Society took the occasion of its annual meeting on January 19th, 1920, to hold a banquet in honor of its most illustrious and best beloved member, Dr. Casey A. Wood, who is retiring from active practice. Over one hundred members of the Society and old-time friends of Dr. Wood, both from Chicago and elsewhere sat at the tables."⁶ It is evident that he evoked strong feelings of friendship in many.

While he often seemed good-natured and congenial, his letters also reveal his impatience and short temper. He was not to be thwarted, particularly by booksellers, and he was abrupt to the point of condescension with the long-suffering Henry Mousley, who was his collaborator on the *Introduction to Vertebrate Zoology* and who kept the library well documented and in order, despite the boxes of books arriving unexpectedly from all quarters. He also exhibited all the prejudices of his day, often making disparaging comments on ethnic and racial groups, as both Lyons and Hague-Yearl document. In addition to a knowledge of Latin, he spoke and read German and Italian, and in later years spent his winters in Rome, which likely contributed to his sympathies for the regimes of both countries during the 1930s. Always something of an American isolationist, he became strongly anti-British, and, while not out of step with some of his fellow

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶ "Notes," *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 3, no. 3 (1920): 155.

citizens, he was particularly critical in the period leading up to the Second World War. As he aged, his political views hardened, and, as Lyons notes, his enthusiastic support for the fascist government in Italy alienated many of his colleagues.

On evidence from his letters and articles, Wood was formidably well read. In *An Introduction to Vertebrate Zoology*, he includes three pages of proverbs, sayings, and extracts about birds and animals with original quotations in Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Sinhalese, Swedish, Danish, Hungarian, Latin, and English. He was also a lover of poetry. In keeping with his recommendation to fellow medical practitioners on the importance of literature in a well-rounded life, in 1920 he published in collaboration with Fielding H. Garrison *A Physician's Anthology of English and American Poetry*, dedicated to Sir William Osler.⁷ His humour was also apparently expressed in writing, as he contributed to and supported what W. L. McAtee described as the “well known informal journal” of the American Ornithologists Union, *The Auklet*.⁸ This “occasional journal of ornithological minutiae” was “a spoof on the Auk and ornithology in general,” and it included such groaning puns as “Septemurre” and “Auktober.” The first article in its first issue in 1920 was “Moot Points in American Ornithology,” by A. Wise Bird, and the issue also included a suggested change in nomenclature appropriate to the times in the United States: “Change in nomenclature: It is obvious that the name of Brewer’s Sparrow must now be changed to Temperance Sparrow (*Spizzella albotaeinata*).”⁹

There were two additional passions that informed Wood’s life and activities. The first was his love of wildlife, which he expressed in his letters and articles and strongly in his introductory essay to the *Introduction to Vertebrate Zoology* when he condemned sport hunting as “the unnecessary destruction of animal life,” which “when joined, as is frequently the case, to the deliberate killing of birds or other animals for the mere gratification of one of man’s meanest instincts, the act assumes the guise of a cowardly murder—and nothing else.” Like many bird watching enthusiasts of his day, he was unsparing in

⁷ Fielding H. Garrison and Casey A. Wood, *A Physician's Anthology of English and American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920).

⁸ McAtee, “Casey Albert Wood, Obituary,” 612.

⁹ Polly Lasker, “Satirical Science Journals,” *Unbound*, 14 June 2013. Accessed 20 March 2020, <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2013/06/14/satirical-science-journals/#.XnzFhtNKiu7>

his condemnation of “our very best people” who needlessly did to death “defenceless and often harmless creatures” whether

in the lovely stretches of the British Isles, in the forests or mountains of America, on the blood-stained terraces of Monte Carlo, in the bull-rings of Spain or France, in the jungles of India, or in the uplands of the African continent. Let the apologist disguise it as he will, deplorable inhumanity lurks in live-pigeon shooting matches, in pheasant and partridge bags, in the pleasures of wild-fowling, in the otter hunt, in the horrible stag hunt, in the fox hunt (that “pursuit of the ‘uneatable’ by the ‘unspeakable’”), in deer hunting, and in every one of those allied cruelties one meets the wide world over.¹⁰

While he himself was an avid collector of bird skins, skeletons, and eggs, he forgave this activity in the name of science as “legitimate and rationale,” but at the same time he mourned “the extinction of some of the most charming and lovable birds and mammals on earth through man’s insensate greed and stupid barbarism.”¹¹

This attitude was mirrored in his and his wife’s devotion to the family parrot, John the Third, a Amazon (*Amazona oratrix*). Wood wrote in a tribute to their avian companion, whose image appears on the Emma Shearer Library of Ornithology bookplate, that the altruistic friendship of the larger parrots could not be “regarded as an earthly quality” but as a “symbol of that love in Heaven.” He, his wife, and his niece were charmed by the knowledge that “every day there was awaiting us at home, a sentient being who expected us and by word and deed eagerly welcomed our return and brightened at our coming.”¹² Despite his affection for the bird, or perhaps because of it—parrots were known to pine away when separated from their human families—he decided to have John the Third put to sleep, when, due to the outbreak of psittacosis in 1929, restrictions on transporting live parrots prevented the Woods from returning to America from Italy with John the Third.

¹⁰ Casey A. Wood, *An Introduction to the Literature of Vertebrate Zoology: Based Chiefly on the Titles in the Blacker Library of Zoology, the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology, the Bibliotheca Osleriana and Other Libraries of McGill University, Montreal*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1931) 51

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² Casey A. Wood, “The passing of John the Third: An appreciation” (unpublished typescript, 1929). Casey Albert Wood Collection, MSG 1203. Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill Library.

His other passion was his life partner, Emma Shearer, who shared his travels and enthusiasms and after whom he named his library. He worried about her comfort on their travels, which they began when both were in their sixties, and he delighted in her companionship. The picture of Emma indulging in “gull baseball,” throwing grapes to the gulls on Coronado Island beach, as described in his “Letter from Fiji,” is memorable. While he undoubtedly espoused many of the conventions of his age concerning the place of women, he was surprisingly open to their contributions, both historical and contemporary. He early recognized Elizabeth Gould as a contributor to her husband’s work,¹³ and he was thrilled with the discovery of the birds painted by Lady Gwillim, whom he compared with better known bird artists like Audubon, Grønvold, or Keulemans.¹⁴ That he also appreciated his niece Florence Marjorie Fyfe (1892–1965) and her work is apparent in his sharing with her the honours of authorship for his last book, *The Art of Falconry* (1943). It is likely that they collaborated closely on the translation itself, since the opening essay is entitled “Translators’ Introduction.” In it, Fyfe refers to herself as the “junior translator,” but from the evidence of letters and her own thanks to Stanford University, it would appear that she handled the logistics surrounding the publication for her uncle, then in his eighties. Fyfe was an orphan, both her mother, Wood’s sister Helen (1866–92), and her father, the architect George Fyfe (1863–95), having died in her early childhood. Virtually adopted by her uncle and aunt, she travelled extensively with them to Sri Lanka and Europe and acted as Wood’s de facto research assistant.

Wood was a polymath, a linguist, an animal lover, devoted husband and kindly uncle, but he was also irascible, short-tempered, intolerant, and authoritarian. He distinguished himself in both medicine and natural history and had the respect and sometimes the affection of his colleagues. The contributions to this issue attempt to chart his legacy as an ornithologist and bibliophile and to explore the world of a complex enthusiast who characterized himself as a kind of Don Quixote astride his nag Rocinante “galloping over the fields of science in quest of the unknown.”¹⁵

¹³ See Wood, *An Introduction to the Literature of Vertebrate Zoology*, 502.

¹⁴ Casey A. Wood, “Lady [Elizabeth] Gwillim — Artist and Ornithologist,” *The Ibis* (1925): 594–99.

¹⁵ Casey A. Wood to Beebe, 10 February 1908. Casey Albert Wood Collection, MSG 1203. Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill Library.

Biography

Lauren Williams is a librarian in the Rare Books & Special Collections department of the McGill University Library, and the curator of the Blacker Wood Natural History Collection.

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