

TEXAS BOOKS IN REVIEW

BY AL LOMAN

Bird books--good ones--seem to endure an unusually long and difficult gestation period. Audubon struggled from 1827 to 1838 to see his Birds of America in print. The finished work consisted of 435 hand-colored aquatints collected in four volumes. Fewer than 200 sets were printed, and these were sold for \$1000 each.

Last December the Arion Press of San Francisco printed the ornithological artwork of Andrew Jackson Grayson 116 years after the artist had put down his brush. Birds of the Pacific Slope contains 156 portraits handsomely assembled in an edition of 400 copies, which can be yours for a mere \$4500.

Closer to home, Harry Oberholser despaired of ever getting his Bird Life of Texas into print. When he died in his nineties Oberholser had invested sixty years of labor in his project and was still revising, correcting and updating. His collaborator, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, was already as dead as any of his specimens. And still another decade elapsed before Bird Life was issued by the University of Texas Press in 1974--to wide acclaim, one might add. This two-volume set remains in print at \$100--a wonderful buy for the dedicated birder.

Now come the Gentling brothers, Scott and Stuart, Fort Worth artists whose magnum opus is a \$2500 portfolio entitled Of Birds and Texas. This baby weights 46 pounds and springs from the most ambitious marriage of art and the printed word ever consummated in this state. And, unlike some of their predecessors, the brothers have stayed around to enjoy the praise that is being heaped on their work. Hale and hearty in their mid-forties, hard at work and with many more dreams in their heads, they might even

outlive Oberholser. If so, their culture legacy will be a formidable one--already is on the evidence at hand.

The brothers spent eight years producing the ten landscapes and forty birdscapes that make up this portfolio. They knew from the outset that they wanted an extraordinary format, reproductions of the highest fidelity, an impressive and handsomely printed text, the whole thing to be strikingly boxed. Like the dude on the Jolt Cola billboard, they dared to want it all, and they got it. The result is a paragon of both offset lithography and letterpress printing, the work of master printer David Holman.

There are no less than three essays in part one of the portfolio. The first is a personal introduction of the brothers by longtime friend Harry Tennison. The second is an extensive discourse by John Graves, mostly on his life as a nature lover and incidental bird-watcher. In the third and final essay Stuart Gentling proves himself almost as adept with pen as with brush as he offers personal insight into how he and Scott got this way. Both brothers worked on the commentary that accompanies the land- and birdscapes in part two of the portfolio. Eschewing scientific palaver, they engage our attention with lively, well-honed tales of adventure as they pursue their quarry. If this book doesn't make a birder of you, it will at least raise your awareness and appreciation of Nature's feathered ornaments.

Pictures and text have been gathered into a heavy linen case that measures 30 inches high by 23 inches wide and 3 inches thick. As Stuart Gentling has said, "This is no coffee table book; this book is a coffee table!" Originally the Gentlings had thought of arranging the leaves in a specially crafted wooden

box, but ultimately the cost was prohibitive. The sturdy linen case is the less pretentious, more honest solution anyway. It is, by the way, another splendid example of the incomparable work being done by Craig Jensen of Austin, one of America's finest limited edition binders. The only adornment on this box is a front cover label that is stunningly elegant in its simplicity.

This mood is carried over to the title leaf found inside the first of two heavy linen folders--the first containing the prefatory essays, the second the prints and commentary. The title leaf is a typographical tour de force--just letters and lines of type, printed in red and black, but so skillfully arranged and spaced that they create a breathtaking impact. This is one of the most beautiful title pages I've ever seen. The letterpress work on the succeeding text leaves is perfection itself--crisp and clean, the product of heart and hand in total union. The only typeface employed is that most aristocratic of faces: Centaur, which has been composed in monotype by Mackenzie & Harris of San Francisco.

The offset lithography used to reproduce the paintings is equally spectacular. Some printers are first-rate at letterpress work, others are skilled at offset, but rarely does a single printer excel at both as David Holman has done. Purely from the technical viewpoint, my favorite picture is the black-crowned night heron, perched in moonlight on a limb high above the Brazos River valley. Here, the background, especially, is so vivid, so luminous, so alive that one can almost hear night sounds. This is magic--magic that the printer had as much to do with as the artists. Incidentally, individual prints from the portfolio are

available at \$200 each.

What about the art? Remember the title: Of Birds and Texas. The subject is not only bird life but landscape as well. And what variety! Of locale, of season, of color, of mood and intensity. There is little that is static or routine about any of these pictures. They are alternately somber and playful, literal and fanciful, forthright and subtle, sentimental and ironic.

Artists may capture our fancy in many ways. They evoke mystery, wonder, pathos, humor, surprise, and other emotions, but the ones that prompt the readiest response are those that tell a story. The Gentlings are storytellers. Their purple gallinule scampers over the bleached skull of its natural enemy, the alligator; their burrowing owls look askance as an armadillo finds pottery shards in his littoral; their house wrens consider a pair of empty boots as a nesting site; their mourning dove sips water from the fossilized track of a dinosaur; their chuck-will's-widow crouches before a tornado that dances in the background.

Some may dismiss these particular treatments as "gimmicky." Others will applaud their "bold and innovative" composition. But the stronger impression is of two artists with the most remarkable gift of all--the ability to share with us that joy of discovery and sense of wonder which, sadly, deserted most of us years ago. They come across as two intensely likeable, reasonably well-rounded human beings who, when they aren't painting, might pick up their shovels and go looking for a pony.

J. Frank Dobie tells a wonderful story about pioneer cowman

Tom O'Connor who, on his deathbed, dreamed of camping once more on the mesquite grass prairie of his youth. "Don't talk to me about a lot of tallow-faced angels singing hymns. Who that's ever rode a good horse and heard an old Texas bull beller down a canyon could want to be a god-damned angel, anyway?" So the dying rancher told his foreman to pen a bunch of cattle outside his bedroom window. He wanted to leave this world with natural music in his ears.

This story (in I'll Tell You a Tale, pp. 45-47) always moves me. Tom O'Connor was satisfied with God's world exactly as he found it. This must have pleased God greatly. Such people are rare. When they express themselves in art, and do it so passionately, they touch us at the core of our existence.

Of Birds and Texas is available from Gentling Publications; 902 Boland St.; Ft. Worth, TX 76107. Price is \$2500 plus sales tax, if applicable.