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Mabel Osgood Wright, A Friend of Nature

Cover Page Footnote

Rebecca L. Abbott is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Sacred Heart University. Work on this essay was supported by a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council.

REBECCA L. ABBOTT

Mabel Osgood Wright, A Friend of Nature

Nineteen hundred and ninety-eight marks the centennial of Mabel Osgood Wright's founding of the Connecticut Audubon society, and a complete celebration of that event should also recognize the many other contributions she made during her lifetime. Her Audubon leadership, for instance, was coupled with the creation of the Birdcraft bird sanctuary in her home town of Fairfield. She was also the author of numerous books, popular in her day, on birds, nature, and domestic life, and she wrote on political and patriotic topics, influenced by the Colonial Revival movement. Wright was an active photographer who made hundreds of black and white negatives which she either printed herself or had made into hand-tinted glass slides; many of these images were used to illustrate her books and those of others. Much of her life, too, revolved around her constant passion, gardening. Despite their range, though, Wright's activities were unified by a love of beauty, particularly the beauty of nature, which for her was as stimulating to the intellect as it was to the senses. Living as she did at the turn of the twentieth century, Wright presents an interesting profile of an educated, professional, and rather privileged woman who actively shaped both the culture and landscape of her community. Striking a middle ground between a desire to preserve wilderness untouched and an urge to tame it for human benefit, Mabel Osgood Wright advocated more than anything else an intimate appreciation of all that she defined as natural.

A Child of New York City

Wright's book *My New York*, published in 1926, chronicles her childhood in New York City and is an excellent introduction to her

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life.¹ Two powerful influences emerge from that biography: the city,

which in the mid-nineteenth century was a place of immense growth and change; and above all, her father.

Samuel Osgood was a Unitarian Minister who spent most of his professional life as pastor of the Church of the Messiah, the first Unitarian church in New York City. He and his wife Ellen raised three daughters at their home at 118 West 11th Street, of whom Mabel Gray was the youngest. Educated at Harvard, Osgood authored an extensive range of work which was highly respected in his day, including essays in *North American Review*, *Putnam's*, and over 70 articles in *Harper's Monthly*. His cultural interests and professional acquaintances (including George Bancroft, Oliver Wendell Holmes, J. Pierpont Morgan, and Edwin Arnold among others) connected Mabel with well-known writers, artists, and intellectuals, experiences which she relished and he encouraged to a degree unusual for young women of the day.

Mabel was her father's constant companion at lectures at the New York Historical Society, at the theater, and at book and art sellers' shops. As much as his intellectual interests involved her, though, Osgood's religious ministry certainly must have been an equal influence that indirectly played a role in Mabel's later work on behalf of nature. This religious heritage places her uniquely within the legacy of Protestantism and its impact on the environment.

The relationship of Western religion to natural wilderness has produced some interesting scholarly discussion. On one hand, environmental historians point to the Bible as the source of Christian impulses to subdue and exploit nature: "Transforming the wild into the rural had Scriptural precedents which the New England pioneers knew well. Genesis 1:28, the first commandment of God to man, stated that mankind should increase, conquer the earth, and have dominion over all living things," writes Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*.² Donald Worster credits Lynn White, Jr., with sparking contemporary debate by throwing "all the blame onto Judeo-Christian 'anthropocentrism' " in which "the environmentally destructive forces of science, capitalism, technology, and democracy had a religious origin (they were all derivations from medieval Christianity)."³

But in his book *The Wealth of Nature*, Worster also notes that "Protestantism has in fact provided an important spawning ground

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for environmental reform movements" which went beyond another biblical directive of providing "good stewardship" of nature. He notes that "personal Protestant roots and environmental reformism appears repeatedly" throughout American history.⁴ Worster describes several naturalists whose parents were ministers or who otherwise had intensely Protestant childhoods, including John Wesley Powell, who helped create the federal conservancy bureau; Stephen Mather, first director of the national Park Service; and especially John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, and arguably the nation's most ardent preservationist. Although Muir turned to nature in apparent rebellion against his father's strict Campellite zeal, Worster is convinced that what Muir learned from his early religious experiences was the concept of missionary passion in the abstract.⁵ That Mabel Osgood Wright's mature voice promoted the evangel of nature makes sense in this context, and puts her in very good company, indeed.

As a child of New York City in the second half of the nineteenth century, Wright was witness also to the spiritual intensity of the city's cultural riches and also its explosive growth and change. *My New York* bubbles with excited descriptions of walking adventures and cultural experiences that were obviously quite formative for Wright. She was especially struck by the contrast between the city's urban/industrial and pastoral landscapes, a contrast that informed her later work. The industrialization which helped fuel eighteenth-century European Romanticism was having a delayed but similar impact on American observers like Wright, whose education and class gave them the luxury to turn their attentions wistfully towards a vanishing wilderness.

Wright was not the only author to record her reaction to American cultural change. In the first decade of the twentieth century the expatriate author Henry James returned to tour his former homeland, chronicling his experiences in *The American Scene*.⁶ The "New York Revisited" chapter of James's book is strikingly echoed by parts of Wright's *My New York*. Having been sensitized to the special ruthlessness of New York City's brand of urban development, Wright and James react with a mixture of both awe and revulsion. For instance, on revisiting 14th Street and then the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue and 11th Street, which Wright as a child had jokingly nicknamed (because it was Episcopalian) "the Wicked Church," she writes:

West Fourteenth Street. Did I ever bring carrots and greens in my little basket to feed the Van Buren's cows in the pasture just past the corner? Yes, a memory not a dream, for I yet have the basket!

Eleventh Street. The long remembered "Wicked Church" is there . . . Should we cry out *too* loudly about the best belonging to the past? Yet I feel about the stoneless churchyard of tombs much as I did of yore. Even more grim, it seems, since I have lived wholly afield, to have one's clay bound down by city weight of the material things instead of making earth under the sweetening air of country skies and wild blown grasses.⁷

This passage makes an interesting comparison – both in terms of content and style – with James's writing on the same subject (including a second church a block away), observed during a visit to the U.S. in 1904-05:

Let me not, however, forget, amid such contemplations, what may serve here as a much more relevant instance of the operation of values, the price of the as yet undiminished dignity of the two most southward of the Fifth Avenue churches. Half the charm of the prospect, at that extremity, is in their still being there, and being as they are; this charm, this serenity of escape and survival positively works as a blind on the side of the question of their architectural importance. . . . all you know, and want to know, is that they are probably menaced – some horrible voice of the air has murmured it – and that with them will go, if fate overtakes them, the last cases worth mentioning (with a single exception), of the modest felicity that sometimes used to be.⁸

Despite the fact that Wright was a popular author, it is clear her writing did not rank with James's. It is notable, nonetheless, that both authors

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are preoccupied with what is lost or threatened through the rapid and uniquely American type of growth: for Wright, the constricting force on natural earth "bound down by city weight of the material things," and for James, the sense of impending danger to the few remaining sites of beauty, the threat of loss of an aesthetic sense, the "modest felicity that sometimes used to be."

In contrast to industrial and commercial growth, and perhaps largely because of it, a new American response to nature and wilderness was taking shape, as these authors illustrate. Roderick Nash explains that

appreciation of wilderness began in the cities . . . With the flowering of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wild country lost much of its repulsiveness. It was not that wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious, and chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted. European Romantics responded to the New World wilderness, and gradually a few Americans, in urban situations and with literary interests, began to adopt favorable attitudes.⁹

The end of the Civil War brought prosperity, at least for the wealthy. William Cronon believes this fueled a new desire among the upper classes to discover the wilderness, in a revival of the American frontier myth, through "enormous estates in the Adirondacks and elsewhere . . . cattle ranches for would-be rough riders on the Great Plains, guided big-game hunting trips in the Rockies, and luxurious resort hotels wherever railroads pushed their way into sublime landscapes."¹⁰ By the end of the 1800s, landscape photography, itself a very young medium, made public the beauty of America's first National Park at Yellowstone, founded in 1872. Even in ante-bellum New York City, wilderness, or at least a domesticated version of it, was permanently enshrined in Frederick Law Olmstead's creation of the city's most enduring and defining monument: Central Park. For a young Mabel Osgood, the Park stood at one extreme of a continuum from the natural to the developed to the corrupt.

More than anyone else, though, Mabel's father was her escort into

the realm of the natural, partly through his many acquaintances. The Rev. Osgood was a close friend of the writer and naturalist William Cullen Bryant, whose poems Osgood read at the New York City memorial service for Abraham Lincoln. Bryant responded to growing interest in American wilderness by editing the oversized, illustrated, two-volume *Picturesque America: Or the Land We Live In*.¹¹ This book circulated widely in the 1870s and created ``enduringly influential popular images of some of the nation's most famous scenic spots."¹² Wright was particularly impressed with Bryant's uncanny prescience, as he talked with her and Dr. Osgood, that Central Park's rural character would be impinged upon by the city's rapid growth: ``I shall not see it, nor you, Doctor, but,' turning to me, `you may, when this beautiful Park, this gift, blended of nature and art, to the people of New York, may be surrounded on all sides by buildings eight, nay possibly ten stories in height, until the spirit of the Park's loveliness will go from it.'"¹³

For Mabel the northern reaches of Manhattan, where Central Park lay, also pointed towards regular summer family escapes (like other families of means, turning their backs on the growing disruption of cities) to their own eighteen room summer ``cottage" on eight, rocky acres in Fairfield, Connecticut. Wright's life at ``Mosswood" (as her father had named it) provided contrast with the stimulating but grating experience of New York urban growth. Rev. Osgood began building the home in 1857 just before Mabel was born, in the belief that ``When we are weary of being in the crowd that but reflects our own excitement, there is a great relief in resorting to the beasts and birds, the trees and flowers, and streams and stars, precisely because they care nothing about us, and help us to get out of ourselves by their majestic nonchalance."¹⁴ Osgood created elaborate gardens, walkways, and a natural ``pulpit" on the grounds that encouraged Mabel's sense of nature as a sanctuary.

Osgood's sudden death in 1880 was a serious blow to Mabel, softened only by her new acquaintance with James Osborne Wright, an Englishman and seller of rare books. They were married in 1884, and after several years living in Europe, returned to the U.S. where Mabel assumed her father's gardening mantle at Mosswood. Mabel and James were, by all accounts, very happy there together. ``He was, if possible, even more absorbed in nature than I. We were both

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perfectly wrapped up in the country out here."¹⁵ From her gardens at Mosswood, Wright began to preach her own gospel of natural husbandry, one which prodded her suburban neighbors to consider gardening not simply as home adornment but as part of natural conservation.

Wright's Career as an Author

Mabel recalled in a *Bridgeport Post* interview before the publication of *My New York* (which, in 1926, was her 25th book) that both her husband and her father expected her to become a writer.¹⁶ About her early efforts, though, James was reserved: "See here, Mab, these are green apples. Wait till they ripen a little."¹⁷ Not one to hold back where her own convictions were concerned, Mabel published several essays on nature anonymously in both the *Evening Post* and the *New York Times*. These she then combined with several others in book form, which James submitted to his friend George Brett, a Greenfield Hill resident and president of the MacMillan Publishing Company, without indicating who the author was. This tentative gesture led to a meeting between Mabel and Brett, who requested revisions. After a series of editorial exchanges, Mabel Osgood Wright's first book was published in 1894 under the title *The Friendship of Nature*.¹⁸ Illustrated with Mabel's own photographs, the work was quite successful and drew strong praise from the family friend Oliver Wendall Holmes.

At that time, *The Friendship of Nature* was one of few books on nature written for popular audiences, another being Olive Thorne Miller's *A Bird-Lover in the West* which was published the same year.¹⁹ But their success pointed to growing public interest, and Wright recalls that Brett "sensed the demand and asked me to write a handbook on birds."²⁰ Wright then spent two winters at the American Museum of Natural History's ornithology department guided by Dr. Joel Asaph Allen, chairman of the Joint Department of Birds and Mammals. She explained that "Dr. Allen has given me both aid and encouragement and I am about to write a popular field book of New England birds, upon a plan that will render the subject interesting and lucid."²¹

In 1895 *Birdcraft* appeared, to such critical and popular acclaim that it was reprinted nine times between 1895 and 1936. The book led

a tide of similar works, many by women authors including Olive Thorne Miller, Florence Merriam Bailey, and Neltje Blanchan. Audubon historian Oliver H. Orr, Jr. reported that "[bird observers bought books on ornithology, especially clearly written textbooks. In the six-year period ending in 1898, publishers sold more than seventy thousand copies of such books in New York and Boston."²² Nature writing had special appeal for middle- and upper-class women, whose resources allowed them the leisure to develop their amateur interests and find recognition. According to Marcia M. Bonta, author of *Women in the Field: America's Pioneering Women Naturalists*, Wright's book *Birdcraft*, was considered by Frank Chapman, longtime head of the Ornithology Division of American Museum of Natural History, to be "one of the first and most successful of the modern bird manuals."²³

With the success of her first two works, Wright turned her attention to writing for children. Although she had no children of her own, she recognized that public education, particularly the education of children, about bird protection was a requisite for reform. Her horrified discovery of a popular hobby especially motivated her:

One day I came upon two happy, ragged little boys . . . displaying and gloating over some sort of treasures. I went toward them . . . Absolutely unabashed, as if no possible objection could be offered, they showed me respectively a quart fruit jar almost full of Robins' eggs and a tin can a trifle smaller, containing an assortment of robins,' wrens,' and many other small eggs of the sparrow tribe . . . It was a decided shock to me, wild bird life destroyed and of no more real meaning to their owners than so many bits of bright glass or pebbles.²⁴

Wright correctly intuited that scientific information — and the message that birds and nature required protection — needed a story to affect young readers. In correspondence with Brett she explained that nature studies with "a narrative thread . . . however slight, serves to hold the attention, and acts as a check upon the author, when he or she is tempted to overcrowd the pupil with too many ideas."²⁵

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Her first two works for children were *Tommy-Anne and the Three Hearts* (1895) and *Citizen Bird* (1896), both of which weave accurate botanical and ornithological information within pleasant, if sentimental, children's narratives. *Citizen Bird* was a collaboration between Wright and Elliot Coues, with illustrations by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Coues was President of the American Ornithologists Union during the 1890s and was one of the era's best known ornithologists. Fuertes was a renowned wildlife artist who later worked extensively for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The Library of Congress American Conservation Movement web page includes the entire text and illustrations of *Citizen Bird*, and calls it "a classic work of nature writing for young people . . . [which] suggests the conjunction of science, aesthetics, and moralistic pedagogical enthusiasm which inspired both the surge of popular ornithology in this area and much of the grass-roots support for preservationist conservation measures."

The Connecticut Audubon Society

By the late 1800s public concern over the fate of birds had grown significantly from awareness of their wholesale slaughter for use in fashion. Audubon historian Oliver H. Orr, Jr. reported that "Hundreds of thousands of birds were killed annually in America for the millinery industry, which produced women's hats richly ornamented with bird feathers and bodies."²⁶ When the American Ornithologists Union was formed by Joel Allen, Elliott Coues, and William Brewster in 1883, one of their first worries was the destruction of birds. By 1886 Grinnell had formed a bird protection organization which he named after John James Audubon, who he felt had done "more to teach Americans about birds of their own land than any other who ever lived."²⁷ Even though this fledgling national Audubon Society attracted 50,000 members within two years and published persuasive literature which was widely read about the need to protect birds, by 1889 it had folded for lack of money and little local organizational support. Its effects may well have been latent, however, because fewer than ten years later the first of the state Audubon societies were being formed, largely by women who had finally become concerned about the ways that fashion caused the cruel deaths of

“feathered friends.”

The founding of the Connecticut Audubon Society actually happened by chance, although it was clearly an idea whose time had come. Mabel recalled that in the year 1898 the Fairfield chapter of the D.A.R. held a class in Parliamentary Law, for which “the technique of forming a society was rehearsed and it was called, for the sake of a name, The Audubon Society. . . . [T]he idea suggested by the name was too good to lose and [it was] moved that the Society become permanent under the name it bears today.”²⁸ The new organization was one of the first in the nation, following Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania, and Mabel Osgood Wright was elected its president. The by-laws of the Connecticut Audubon Society show that it was formed largely to “discourage the purchase or use of the feathers of any birds for ornamentation” and prevent “destruction of birds and their eggs, and do all in their power to protect them.” Education and legislation were seen as the best methods to achieve those ends, following the lead of the American Ornithologists Union.

When Wright worked with Joel Allen at the American Museum of Natural History she met Frank Chapman, who eventually took over the Museum's ornithology department. In 1899 Chapman created *Bird-Lore* as the official journal of the state Audubon societies, and as Carolyn Merchant explains, Wright “took on the task of editing the magazine's Audubon section and of reporting the latest developments in the politics of bird preservation. She requested that the secretaries of the initial nineteen state societies, all but one of whom were women, send news and notes to broaden and strengthen the movement.”²⁹

Carolyn Merchant's work, particularly her book *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, makes it clear that the role of women in late-nineteenth-century nature conservation cannot be overstated. Still, the photograph that appears with the 1923 *Fairfield News* article commemorating the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Connecticut Audubon Society is a fascinating study in gender politics. Even though women were mainly responsible for creating and organizing state Audubon Societies during the 1880s and 1890s, by the early 1900s men had taken over most of the leadership roles. The 25th Anniversary photograph shows six men standing in the foreground of the picture, full figure, with a dozen women peering out from behind them where they are crowded on a porch half-enclosed in shrubbery.

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Just the women's faces are visible, and only parts of them at that. Nonetheless it was Mabel Osgood Wright who wrote the lengthy article chronicling the organization's history, and unlike most of the other women in the movement she managed to hold her own among the men who came to dominate it after the turn of the century.

Marcia Bonta observed that Wright was not among the very few "serious" women ornithologists – including Althea Sherman, Florence Merriam Bailey, Margaret Morse Nice, Cordelia Stanwood and Amelia Laskey – who devoted all their time studying bird behavior. But Oliver Orr insists that she was "the most influential woman in the Audubon movement" because among other things she was a member of the National Committee of Audubon Societies and was editor of the Audubon Department of *Bird-Lore*, which Frank Chapman edited for thirty years and which eventually became *Audubon* magazine.³⁰ Bonta acknowledges that Wright was Chapman's "indispensable associate editor for eleven of those years, contributing a steady stream of chatty, informative columns about bird behavior and conservation."³¹

Wright's Photography

Wright was a talented amateur photographer whose images were used as illustrations in several of her books, including *The Friendship of Nature* and *Flowers and Ferns and their Haunts*, and reveal another dimension of her relationship with nature. Her photographic work also places her in the context of a sizable group of women photographers of her day, sometimes called "ladies of leisure," who saw amateur and semi-professional photography as a creative outlet that was considered "acceptable" for their gender and social caste.

Wright made several hundred black and white negatives which were converted to glass slide photographs, many of which were hand tinted, and the quality of her work is closely comparable to that of the well-known popular photographer Wallace Nutting (1861-1941), her contemporary. Although there is no evidence that they had any acquaintance, the similarity in their work is striking. Wright's photography is also notable in that, through fairly systematic documentation of particular sites in Fairfield and the surrounding towns of Easton, Weston, and Redding, she succeeded in capturing

the appeal of the towns from both an historic and a natural perspective. A number of Wright's colonial-style photographs illustrated the book *Old New England Towns* by Frank Child, who was the preacher at the First Church Congregational in Fairfield.

Wright's photography of historic places grew from her interest in Colonial Revival themes; for her, preserving the past may well have been a way to oppose the corrupting aspects of progress. Wright was also among the many Americans for whom the Centennial Celebration of 1876 was catalytic in resurrecting colonial interest. But her essay "The Value of Colonial Influence," presented to the Colonial Dames in 1905, is most interesting because of the link she makes between colonial principles, conservation, and natural quality. She urges her audience to read early American writing about nature, suggesting that "if we wish to close our eyes and drift completely backward and realize the spirit and the untamed wilderness of the times, it may best be done by going away from houses, roadways, into the woods, holding one of these precious volumes." Articulating her reaction to changes in the American landscape, and also betraying her privileged, leisure class perspective, she concludes "for the Colonial spirit is the saving grace of this country, the return to first principles, from which we cannot break away with any degree of safety, for it represents quality and intellect as against mere quantity and materialism."³² These views epitomize her philosophy, which tied a love of nature with thoughtful, intellectual pursuits.

Birdcraft Sanctuary

In her maturity, Wright's energies struck a balance between the contemplative work of writing and active engagement with nature through conservancy and gardening. Her most influential legacy was the creation of Birdcraft Sanctuary, which is still in operation today, despite having lost half its property to the construction of Interstate 95 in 1957. The sanctuary itself represents an interesting compromise between conservationist and preservationist responses to wildlife.

The Conservation movement got official recognition when members of Theodore Roosevelt's administration — Gifford Pinchot and W.J. McGee, in particular — defined a principle of "the use of the natural resources for the greatest good of the greatest number for

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the longest time,"³³ which was reflected in the policies of Roosevelt's presidency (1901-1909). "The greatest good of the greatest number," however, referred more to people than wildlife, seen in the fact that Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell (founder of the first, failed Audubon movement) were avid bird and game hunters. The irony that early conservation efforts stressed benefits to sportsmen confirms the fundamental problem posed by a definition of nature based on human interests. The cause of preservation, on the other hand, was spearheaded by John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892. Its goal was to preserve wilderness and wildlife in their natural states, with minimal interference from humans. Wright's work with nature, both through gardening and preservation of birds and bird habitats, stands midway between the two points of view.

Birdcraft Sanctuary was Wright's creation. In 1914 Fairfield resident Annie B. Jennings, a close friend of Wright's, made a sizable donation to the Connecticut Audubon Society to create a songbird sanctuary. Wright administered and designed the resulting project, while Jennings remained anonymous.

Complete with cat-proof fence, Birdcraft Sanctuary, Wright recounted, was meant to be "a place where [birds] can nest in peace, or rest in their travels. *People must be considered only as they fit in with this scheme*" (emphasis in original).³⁴ The presence of people became an issue indeed, since there were initially so many visitors — 6,200 in one of its first years — that birds were often frightened away. Eventually general admission was restricted to the small museum cottage, while the grounds were reserved for members of the Connecticut Audubon Society and "accredited adult bird-students admitted by card."

As a preservationist, though, Wright was selective in her application of the concept, and she betrayed an inclination to define nature as it fit her class and gender sensibilities. Even with the "cat-proof" fence, 107 cats were "taken" from within the sanctuary itself, and in the May-June, 1918 issue of *Bird-Lore* Wright explains that "we have a state permit to destroy any bird that is detrimental to the sanctuary." As a result, 269 English sparrows and 542 European starlings were killed, which "destroy the nests of more useful birds" and eat their food, too; 28 Purple Grackles and 12 Crows, which "break up nests" and steal eggs . . . We also trapped: Sparrow

Hawks, 4; Red-shouldered Hawks, 3; Long-eared Owls, 2; Barred Owls, 1; Screech Owls, 1; Sharp-shinned Hawks, 4; Cooper's Hawks, 3; Northern Shrikes, 14. (All birds of prey are caught in a trap with padded jaws, so that harmless and protected species like the Owls may be liberated unhurt.)³⁵ Apparently, hawks and shrikes were destroyed.

This policy helps illustrate a weakness that arises in conservation efforts when nature is defined by human values. The justifiable reverence with which the name Audubon is invoked, for example, usually ignores the conditions under which John James Audubon collected the subjects of his artistry. Accompanying hunters' expeditions, Audubon joined their "sport" before gathering specimens to pose and sketch:

As we advanced, the more slowly did we move, and the most profound silence was maintained, until suddenly coming almost in contact with a thick shrubbery of mangroves, we beheld, right before us, a multitude of pelicans. A discharge of artillery seldom produced more effect; — the dead, the dying, and the wounded, fell from the trees upon the water, while those unscathed flew screaming through the air in terror and dismay . . . "Pull away," cried the pilot, "never mind them on the wing, for those black rascals don't mind a little firing — now, boys, lay her close under the nests." And there we were, with four hundred cormorants' nests over our heads. The birds were sitting, and when we fired, the number that drooped as if dead, and plunged into the water was such, that I thought by some unaccountable means or other we had killed the whole colony.³⁶

Even though Birdcraft Sanctuary had an unmistakable species bias, it was still designed to benefit birds first and people second. Wright insists that birds mounted for educational exhibits were made only from specimens which died of natural causes, which was a distinct change from Audubon's day. Frank Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History acknowledged in a 1915 issue of *Bird-Lore* that Birdcraft's ten acres and diminutive museum were small

in themselves, ``but the idea which they embody can reach to the ends of the earth. So we repeat our belief that Birdcraft Sanctuary will eventually give refuge to birds on many thousand acres and the beauty and value of bird-life to many generations of bird students."³⁷

Wright and the Garden

Wright valued her involvement with the Fairfield Garden Club and frequently lectured on topics of naturalism. Formal gardens fall into a gray area of environmental protection because while they obviously propagate plants, they manipulate and can even destroy natural environments. Formal gardens are a triumph of human control at the expense of the natural flux of organic systems, and inject an interesting tension between ``conservation" and ``preservation." Mabel was aware of this contradiction, and in her later fiction she satirized wealthy suburbanites who contort their gardens into artificial and ostentatious show-places.

Alice H. Leach, Garden Club secretary, described a talk on ``Garden Pests – Human and Otherwise" which Wright gave to the Garden Club in January of 1928:

Perfection and monotony she also called pests in the garden; she feels a garden should be a pleasure not a responsibility; that it should have individuality, and to be individual one must make mistakes and have failures . . . Hybridization can also be called a garden pest in that it seems to take from the natural strength and vigor of the plants as shown in sweet peas and columbines.³⁸

Wright described a local salt marsh which had been developed to its detriment years after she had written about it in its natural state. These and other gardening notes suggest that for her, the less intervention with natural processes, the better.

As the roots of Wright's life in Fairfield grew deeper, her fiction began to include characters based on the real people around her, offering social commentary through garden metaphors. She and her publisher George Brett were inspired by an enormously popular

English book which appeared in 1901, titled *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*. It had been written anonymously by the English wife of a German count, and "its enticing mix of gardening, gossip and women's rights proved irresistible to the reading public, selling in the hundreds of thousands. It became, in fact, a significant factor in initiating the garden fever," explains Virginia Lopez Begg.³⁹ Wright's own book *The Garden of the Commuter's Wife* came quickly upon the heels of the imported work, and was followed by several sequels, including *People of the Whirlpool* (1903) and *The Woman Errant* (1904). Wright and Brett claimed they were trying to keep these works separate from her writing on birds and nature by using the pseudonym of "Barbara," but they may also have been trying to capture some of the mystique of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden's* anonymous authorship.

Whatever the reasons for secrecy, Wright clearly enjoyed the ruse as she corresponded with Brett about the fictitious author. At one point Wright describes her as "tall, very slim and muscular and possessed of red hair, which combination is hard to argue with." In another letter Wright instructs Brett to "send all communications to her, not alone to my care but in a *cover directed to me*, as if her name appears on the *outside* of envelopes in any way it will attract attention" (emphasis in original).⁴⁰ There was much conjecture in literary circles of the day about who "Barbara" actually was, but Wright recalled that it wasn't until many years later when two reviewers "got me cornered and the secret came out. I continued to write all sorts of things, but without that joyous unselfconsciousness and freedom an anonymous author enjoys."⁴¹

While Wright was a beloved member of her community, exercising the freedom to speak her mind was definitely one of her distinguishing traits. Expressing her displeasure with a set of galleys for one of her books, she wrote Brett that "SOMEBODY has the comprehension of a mud-turtle, and that SOMEBODY is the person who (mis)placed the illustrations in *Tommy-Anne* the distressing proof of which I received this morning."⁴² Her outspokenness worked against her, too, on occasion. In 1907, Wright and her sister Agnes became concerned that Oak Lawn Cemetery, where their father was buried, had become overgrown. They made an urgent request to the Cemetery directors for a specific plan of improvement, which the

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directors considered because "Mabel Osgood Wright was not a woman to be easily put off." The directors spent fifteen years trying to work tactfully with an insistent Mabel Wright, but by 1922 she remained convinced that neither any single member of the Board nor the Board collectively understood cemetery landscaping so well as she did. She might have been correct in her assessment, but she was so high-handed in dealing with the directors that she alienated them and probably delayed many of the reforms she advocated."⁴³

Mabel and James Wright intended to move from Mosswood to a smaller, less costly home in 1916 in retirement. James died suddenly in 1920, however, and Mabel spent the last years of her life alone and in increasingly failing health. Minutes of a meeting of Birdcraft's Board of Governors show that in 1933, Mabel made a special request, apparently because of financial need, to be allowed to build a small bungalow on Birdcraft property where she could live out her days, in return for a \$5,000 donation. The Board of Governors ultimately turned her down for legal and financial reasons of their own, but voted to give her \$500 "in recognition of her valued services which we feel we could not do without."⁴⁴

A year later in May, the Board held their annual meeting "at the home of Mrs. Wright as she was not able to come" to Birdcraft. Among other items of business was a motion by Mabel to give thanks to the Audubon Society's treasurer, which passed. The minutes conclude, "The meeting was then adjourned. As our beloved leader smilingly bade us good bye we all felt that it was a final farewell." Mabel Osgood Wright died shortly thereafter.

Notes

¹Mabel Osgood Wright, *My New York* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1926).

²Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), p. 31.

³Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), p. 185.

⁴Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, pp. 189-90.

⁵Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, pp. 189-90.

⁶Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907).

⁷Wright, *My New York*, p. 268.

⁸James, *The American Scene* (reprinted New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 72.

⁹Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, p. 44.

¹⁰William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 78.

¹¹William Cullen Bryant, *Picturesque America: Or the Land We Live In*.

¹²Library of Congress web site, "American Memory, The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920."

¹³Wright, *My New York*, p. 210.

¹⁴Mabel Osgood Wright, "A Poor Man's Paradise," in *The Country Calendar*, August 1905, p. 342.

¹⁵"Mabel Osgood Wright Recalls Pleasures and Adventures of a Busy Literary Life," *Bridgeport Sunday Post*, March 8, 1925: n.p. Mabel Osgood Wright Clippings File, Fairfield Historical Society, Fairfield, Connecticut, hereafter abbreviated as MOW and FHS.

¹⁶"Wright Recalls Pleasures."

¹⁷"Wright Recalls Pleasures."

¹⁸Daniel J. Phillippon, introduction to Mabel Osgood Wright, *The Friendship of Nature: A New England Chronicle of Birds and Flowers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, forthcoming).

¹⁹Phillippon's introduction to the forthcoming critical edition of *The Friendship of Nature* cited above provides an authoritative biographical description of Wright and much useful information about the context of this book.

²⁰"Wright Recalls Pleasures."

²¹Letter to Morris K. Jessup, Director, American Museum of Natural History, April 18, 1894.

²²Oliver H. Orr, *Saving American Birds: T. Gilbert Pearson and the Founding of the Audubon Movement* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1992), p. 73.

²³Marcia Myers Bonta, *Women in the Field: America's Pioneering Women Naturalists* (College Station: Texas A & M Univ. Press, 1991), p. 181.

²⁴"Lively State-wide Interest in Bird Protection," *The Fairfield News*, June 9, 1923, p. 5. MOW Clippings File, FHS.

²⁵Letter to George Brett, October 2, 1896, in The MacMillan Collection, New York Public Library.

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²⁶Orr, *Saving American Birds*, p. 7.

²⁷Orr, *Saving American Birds*, p. 30.

²⁸ "Lively State-wide Interest."

²⁹Carolyn Merchant, "Women and Conservation," in *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, Carolyn Merchant, ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1993).

³⁰Orr, *Saving American Birds*, p. 128.

³¹Bonta, *Women in the Field*, p. 181.

³²Mabel Osgood Wright, "The Value of Colonial Influence, A Paper Prepared For and Read at a Meeting of the Colonial Dames." The essay was read on October 12, 1905 and privately published in New York. A copy of the pamphlet is in Sterling Library at Yale University.

³³Merchant, *Major Problems in Environmental History*, p. 357.

³⁴Mabel Osgood Wright, *The Making of Birdcraft Sanctuary*, p. 3.

³⁵Mabel Osgood Wright, "Three Years After," in *Bird-Lore*, May-June 1918, ed. Frank M. Chapman (New York: D. Appleton & Company), pp. 204-05.

³⁶John James Audubon, "On Shooting Birds, 1808-1834," in *Major Problems in Environmental History*, p. 173.

³⁷Frank M. Chapman, "Birdcraft Sanctuary," in *Bird-Lore*, August 1915, n.p. MOW Clippings File, FHS.

³⁸Minutes of Garden Club of Fairfield, January, 1928, Alice H. Leach, Secretary. MOW Clippings File, FHS.

³⁹Virginia Lopez Begg, "Mabel Osgood Wright: The Friendship of Nature and the Commuter's Wife," in *Journal of the New England Garden History Society*, 5 (Fall 1997), p. 37.

⁴⁰Letters to George Brett, 1900, in the MacMillan Collection, New York Public Library.

⁴¹ "Wright Recalls Pleasures."

⁴²Letter to George Brett, July 29, 1896, in the MacMillan collection, New York Public Library.

⁴³Thomas J. Farnham, *The Oak Lawn Cemetery*, p. 13. MOW Clippings File, FHS.

⁴⁴Minutes of the Birdcraft Board of Governors' meeting, 1933, n.p. MOW Clippings File, FHS.