

# H-Net Reviews

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**Carolyn Merchant.** *Spare the Birds! George Bird Grinnell and the First Audubon Society.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 344 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-21545-8.



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*Spare the Birds!* examines the rise and fall of the first Audubon Society, which the American sportsman, naturalist, author, ethnologist, and conservationist George Bird Grinnell launched in 1886. While Grinnell's decision to name his ephemeral conservation organization after John James Audubon came at a time when the artist-naturalist was renowned for his exquisite bird portraits that could inspire viewers toward a deeper appreciation for native wildlife, personal experience as a young boy also influenced his choice.

Three decades earlier, Grinnell's wealthy family had relocated to Audubon Park in upper Manhattan, a thirty-acre tract on the Hudson River that Audubon had purchased in 1841. Although Audubon had been dead for several years by the time the Grinnells moved to the neighborhood in 1857, his elderly widow, Lucy Bakewell Audubon, maintained a small school for her fifteen grandchildren who continued to reside on the estate and several students from nearby households, including the seven-year-old Grinnell. For the next seven years, Grinnell not only fell under the spell of a dynamic teacher who instilled a respect for birdlife in her charges but also freely roamed the wooded lands of Audubon Park and explored Audubon's extensive collection of specimens and paintings. These formative experiences provided a solid

foundation for a life and career that would earn Grinnell the title "the father of American conservation."

Following time at a military prep school, Grinnell attended Yale University, where he earned an AB in 1870 and a PhD in paleontology in 1880. During this period, he participated in several lengthy exploring expeditions in the American West, experiences that galvanized his concern about the decline of wildlife while nurturing an abiding curiosity about native Americans that would remain central for the rest of his life. In 1876, Grinnell became a natural history editor for *Forest and Stream*, a leading sportsman's journal that had begun calling attention to the many threats facing birds, especially through commercial exploitation for the millinery trade. Four years later, after Grinnell became the editor, publisher, and part-owner of the monthly journal, bird conservation began looming even larger in its pages. Grinnell joined the Bird Protection Committee that the American Ornithologists' Union established a year after its founding in 1883, and in early 1886, he published an editorial in *Forest and Stream* calling for the creation of an "Audubon Society" dedicated to "the protection of wild birds and their eggs" (p. 27). A year later, he launched *Audubon Magazine*.

In response to Grinnell's efforts, hundreds of Audubon societies quickly sprouted up across the nation, boasting nearly fifty thousand members within two years. But the apparent enthusiasm for bird protection evidenced by this skyrocketing membership failed to translate into paid subscriptions to *Audubon Magazine*, which Grinnell hoped would generate the revenue needed to sustain the movement. Already pulled in multiple directions, in 1887 he joined with Theodore Roosevelt to launch another time-consuming conservation-oriented organization, the Boone and Crockett Club, aimed primarily at well-to-do sportsmen. When Grinnell decided to abandon Audubon work in early 1888, the movement languished, only to be revived with a vengeance nearly a decade later. Most of the newly established state societies joined together into the National Association of Audubon Societies in 1905, a federation that was renamed the National Audubon Society in 1940. The Audubon movement, whose legislative and educational campaigns have enjoyed much success over the years, remains a potent conservation force to this day.

Scholars have long been familiar with the broad outlines of this story.[1] In addition to filling in numerous

details about Grinnell and his work, primarily from published primary sources, Carolyn Merchant's contribution is threefold. First, she interprets the early years of the Audubon movement through the lens of gender, just as she has done so ably in her previous research.[2] Her narrative offers what she calls a "gendered dialectic" that "moves back and forth between male and female blame and responsibility" (p. 22), with Grinnell and his two journals at the core. Second, Merchant reprints many of Grinnell's writings for *Audubon Magazine*, including the serialized biographies of Audubon and another pioneer of early American ornithology, Alexander Wilson, along with bird descriptions featuring reproductions of Audubon's illustrations that were a regular feature of the monthly magazine. Grinnell's vivid literary sketches of birds and men, which form the majority of the text in this volume, reveal not only his passion for nature and the outdoors but also his attention to detail and ability as a writer. Finally, Merchant's clear, engaging writing style and copious use of illustrations render Grinnell's pioneering efforts in bird conservation accessible to a broad audience.

Notes

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