

PHILIP A. CLARKE. *ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND BIRDS IN AUSTRALIA: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS.* CLAYTON: CSIRO PUBLISHING 2023. 344 P. ISBN: 9781486315970

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Ethnobiology often sits awkwardly between biology and anthropology, conforming to neither field's paradigms, and failing to reach the front row in intellectual debates within either discipline. Despite over a century of research, ethnobiology is still, in many ways, finding itself, and trying to figure out how best to be both a natural and a social science. Because it straddles this boundary, many ethnobiologists end up focusing on either the cultural or the biological elements of the discipline, publishing in a variety of journals and using different methods, only meeting in the few journals that they share, such as *People & Nature* or the *Journal of Ethnobiology*. Studying the biological interaction between humans and nature with the objectivity demanded of a natural science, and the cultural meaning of the natural world with the cultural sensitivities and reflexivity of an anthropologist, is no easy task. Thankfully, it is one that Phillip A. Clarke managed in his book *Aboriginal peoples and birds in Australia: historical and cultural relationships*. At the beginning of his book, Clarke says that the ideal ethnobiologist 'is a zoologist or ecologist with anthropological or linguistic training' (19).² Clarke's background is typical of many ethnobiologists. He was a biologist who, during fieldwork, found that the cultures which interact with the nature which he was studying to be just as interesting as the nature itself. He has been working primarily in South Australia, as well as across the continent, since the 1980s, and often references previous observations in this text. However, this book should not be considered as a final capstone to a career in ethnobiology. Indeed, references to his own work are brief and sparing, and generally are used to illustrate a point made by others. Instead, this is a work of synthesis, drawing together myriad indigenous and western sources to provide a salutary reference work for ethno-ornithology on the Australian continent.

The book is divided into eight body chapters, each of which is divided into subchapters. The first four substantive chapters relate to purely cultural elements of birds – Birds as Ancestors, Birds as Creators, Birds and the Spirit World, and Bird Nomenclature, and will be of greatest interest to social anthropologists and those ethnobiologists that enter the field as anthropologists. However, it also includes information which is of interest to natural sciences, such as the historic knowledge of fossils amongst Aboriginal Australians, and the parallels between this proto-palaeontology and the proto-palaeontology of Ancient China and Greece. There is also a discussion of why different birds were seen as creators, and how certain birds,

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² Page numbers refer to the ePub version.

especially ratites, are not seen as belonging to the same category of 'birds' by some aboriginal communities.

The latter four chapters relate to the more biological element of interactions between Aboriginals and birds – Early Hunting and Gathering, Birds Working with People, Food and Medicine from Birds, and Material Culture. The chapter on hunting and gathering is particularly strong, though it deals relatively little with the archaeological evidence of bird hunting. Instead, the focus is on historic accounts of hunting by aboriginal people, with Clarke describing many different techniques, such as swimming towards waterfowl, emu drives, and the use of snares, some of which are still used by Aboriginal communities. This chapter would be of interest to ethnobiologists as well as game managers wanting to understand how hunting can be made sustainable.

A strength of this work is that it historicizes aboriginal ethno-ornithology in a manner which remains rare in the ethnobiological literature. Clarke does not think that modern ethno-ornithological practice and custom necessarily reflects the past – indeed, he takes a dim view of the 'racial memory' literature, which, while claiming to respect indigenous knowledge, traps it in amber, outside of time and experience (352). Instead, Clarke documents how European disturbances lead to some legends and knowledge being lost, and that European influences have become integrated into Aboriginal ethno-ornithology. Clarke finishes his book with a plea to consider Aboriginal ethno-ornithology to be of value, whether it is the traditional knowledge of hunter-gatherers, or the modern environmental knowledge of aboriginal peoples who interact with the land in ways their ancestors did not. Clarke also recognises that more knowledge is being lost than is being created, and that, just as there is a crisis of biodiversity loss worldwide, there is also a critical loss of ethnobiological knowledge, from which Australia is not exempt.

This book is a valuable synthesis of the ethno-ornithology of Aboriginal Australia. While not a wholly original work, it is a valuable reference text, and provides a one-stop-shop for anyone interested in learning about the ethnobiology of the region. Australia has been blessed with some excellent field ethnobiologists, like Donald Thomson, Norman Tindale, and Joseph Birdsell (Birdsell 1993; Thomson 1983; Tindale 1974). Clarke has proven a worthy successor of these individuals, contributing self-reflection that they perhaps lacked. This book's structure combines both anthropological and biological elements of ethnobiology, and provides a template for other ethnobiologists who wish to attempt such an ambitious project.

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