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Desk Meets Field

Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay
by **TRAVIS V. MASON**

Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013 \$48.99

Reviewed by **MAUREEN SCOTT HARRIS**

The poet is pulling out her hair, wondering what she can say about Travis V. Mason's *Ornithologies of Desire*. Though she writes reviews and occasional responses to poems she's not a critic. But here she is, confronted with a book that does heavy lifting in the practices of literary criticism, ecocriticism, interdisciplinarity, intertextuality, close reading ... her head is spinning. She asked for this book—what was she thinking?

The poet is not an academic. Secretly she thinks of herself as a common reader, a Woolfian position she wouldn't claim aloud. General reader is more like it. She decides to take a leaf out of Mason's book and, modeling herself on BC, the birder-critic roaming in the chapters called ecotones, name herself poet-critic, PC for short. A risky move she understands, particularly given the perils of naming that Mason explores.

PC has to admit she wanted the book, a study of Don McKay's poetry. McKay's work has broken paths for her. Listening to him read from *Night Field* in 1991, she said to herself: "*You can still write nature poetry!*" and the focus of her writing shifted. Interesting, she thinks, that McKay's poems sent her back to the page with a different sense of its possibilities, while they sent Travis Mason, eventually, away from the page

into the field. With binoculars. Well, that's the thing about poetry—it can throw you on, or off, course.

Ornithologies of Desire. PC wonders what that means. "Ornithology" she knows as the scientific study of birds. "Desire" she also knows, in several guises, but at its core, she thinks, is longing, with its endless distances. Mason posits desire as characteristic of both science and literature: the ongoing longing *to know*, inflected by disciplinary boundaries, and always falling short. He's interested in the human longing to know birds in particular, arguing for the validity of science's kinds of knowing and their usefulness to the literary critic. Step outside your boundaries, he says.

Mason also says be ready to inhabit not-knowing, recognize where what you know fails, falls short. PC finds that comforting as she contemplates her review. She's having trouble finding a path though the book. Then she remembers it's a collection of essays not chapters, *Ecocritical Essays*, as the subtitle states. Essays are essentially tries, so it's not surprising there's no single path here, but many trails, circling, intersecting, linking, occasionally coinciding.

But what, PC keeps asking herself, is this book *about*? Don McKay's bird poems, yes. But it's about birding and actual birds too. An unsystematic bird-watcher since she was a child, PC likes the presence of particular birds in this text. Mason's consideration of them as more than symbol strikes her as accurate and long-overdue, and his argument for the importance of specificity in McKay's poems, their biological accuracy, rings true. The book

also examines and challenges ecocritical practice. Mason urges critics to embrace interdisciplinary thinking and broaden their territory, to go beyond literary text and page into source texts for ecopoetry (field notes, bird books, scientific writing, birds themselves), and the actual field, the material world that supports everything we are and do. Allied with its insistence on the importance of the field another longing seeps into the book, one that PC recognizes in herself: the wish to live responsibly and equably, to break through the boundary between us and the others, acknowledging human relationship to the rest of the world.

Boundaries play a large part in the book, PC realizes, beginning with the pronounced constraints that bound academic writing and make dense thickets of text she must traverse. Following citations, references to arguments, and acknowledgements to colleagues, she frequently loses the main path and has to retrace her steps. Mind you, she often has to read poems several times to hear them clearly. But, she says to herself, I'm interested in poems. A lot of this critical back-and-forth strikes PC as turf wars, though she understands that Mason, as a young academic, has little choice but to engage. And he's certainly thorough. PC pauses for a moment—birdsong arises from territoriality. Should she think of these academic constraints as grounds for song rather than as battlements?

Mason notes "the permeability of disciplinary and epistemological boundaries." In the material and social worlds boundaries are often porous. Along them, things edge up against each other and a "between" develops. PC

thinks of the almond overlap of a Venn diagram. In ecology that edge space is the ecotone, a transitional area where two communities mingle and some things thrive mightily—coyotes in large urban parks, for instance. Mason wants to write "an experiential criticism that flourishes in the space between thematics and theory, words and the world." PC thinks a coyote criticism could be interesting. She wonders if Mason had something like that in mind when he wrote the essays called "Ecotones," one of which occurs at the end of each section of this book. She loves the shadowy bird tracks in the corner of the first pages of these pieces.

In the ecotone essays Mason enacts the move he wants ecocriticism to make as he takes to the field, begins birding, and creates his birder-critic persona. While BC describes his accumulating experience in identifying birds, he reflects on the ideas and preoccupations of his book. Odd but interesting, notes PC, that I think of these essays as first-person accounts when they're written in the third. She enjoys their respite from the density of the literary-critical pieces and likes Mason's willingness to mix a different style and voice into an academic work.

Though reading the book sometimes feels like a slog to PC, she has begun to admire its ambition and reach. Mason allows himself to be taught by McKay's poems, struggling to think about the world through them, teasing out McKay's ideas to test them against his own thoughts and experiences. As a poet PC finds this response moving. She enjoys following Mason's readings of individual poems, even when her own readings differ. But

that's as it should be. She's grateful to Mason for returning her to McKay's books.

Mason situates McKay within an English-language literary tradition of nature-writing. He traces how McKay's work both rises from that tradition and subverts some of its assumptions and practices, particularly as it questions human-centred language and thinking. It occurs to PC that Mason is modeling himself on McKay, attempting a critical text that works within and yet challenges literary criticism as it is currently practiced.

PC is growing a bit panicky—she's used up most of her allotment of words but left so much out! What about the wonderful bibliography that includes field guides and birdwatchers' narratives, ornithological reports and literary studies? It will direct PC's reading for months or perhaps years to come. The "Bird Concordance," an appendix that records the appearances of specific birds in McKay's poetry, astonishes her. How many different birds McKay has written about, precisely, accurately, lovingly! And the index—PC is partial to good indexes—she used this one a lot as she tracked through the book. It never led her astray.

Mason, like McKay, thinks the world has things to teach us, and that poetry can serve our learning. He wants to change our ways of thinking about the world and ourselves. Good aim for a book, PC thinks.

MAUREEN SCOTT HARRIS's most recent poetry collection is *Slow Curve Out* (Pedlar Press, 2012). *Drowning Lessons*, also from Pedlar, won the 2005 Trillium

Book Award for Poetry. Harris's essays have won the *Prairie Fire* Creative Nonfiction Prize, and the WildCare Tasmania Nature Writing Prize. She lives in Toronto.