

Homer Dill's Undead

That he loved the birds cannot be disputed. His notes, detailed, thorough, are deeply admiring of their habits, which he came to know over the course of six brief weeks when he lived in their company on a tiny coral-sand island. There are the shearwaters “moaning in their burrows, the little wingless rail skulking from one grass tussock to another, the saucy finch.” The white-breasted petrel, “a fearless, dove-like creature, quite amenable to petting and stroking.” And the albatross. When excited, it emits a sound “like the neighing of horses.” He has watched them closely, memorized their movements and mannerisms, recorded their particulars until he knows them by heart, all so that when he does what must come next—when, one by one, he catches them and gently snuffs the life from them with his hands, then holds a blade to their warm feathered bellies and carefully slits the skin, pulling it away from the meat—he may one day bring them back to life.

At one time, everyone seemed to know his name and what he had done. The National Audubon Society invited him to address its members at a New York convention. Ornithological journals solicited his writings on the mating and nesting habits of the albatross and the *Fregata aquila*. The local papers turned his work into headlines: “One of the greatest accomplishments of modern science!” Today, all that remains of him can be found on the fourth floor of Macbride Hall on the University of Iowa campus, where a vast natural history collection, first opened in 1858, is now preserved for public display: rooms of stuffed walruses and rhinoceroses, otter and egret, elk and wolves. But also: jars of snakes and crawfish and leeches kept behind bolted blast doors, should the alcohol that pickles them ever ignite; cupboards that when opened reveal a company of wild turkeys and a single albino raccoon; drawer after drawer stuffed with the skins of songbirds, their eyes stitched shut; and a polar bear, eyes open, shrouded in plastic sheeting, too big to fit in the building’s service elevator.

His achievement is located between displays of cranes of the South Dakota prairie and the yellow-rumped warblers and song sparrows of Iowa, a mahogany-paneled alcove with lettering above the door that says “Laysan Island Cyclorama, 1914.” Walk through the narrow doorway, up the small ramp, and onto a platform, where you’ll find yourself

in the center of a rectangular-shaped enclosure. Glass walls surround all sides of you, save the way you entered, so that the effect is perhaps what it would feel like to stand inside the letter C, its back flattened straight.

Behind the glass, a sandy beach filled with taxidermied birds. Dozens of birds—birds caught mid-wing, mid-preen, mid-skittering step. They stare down their beaks at you, challenge you with unblinking eyes. As you pace the edges of the platform, you are meant to feel as though you are tracing the shores of an island, a mural of waves crashing behind you, stuffed petrels peering out from the crags of cast rock. Before you is the suggestion of a massive rookery, nests balanced on tufts of bunch grass, awkward-looking albatross chicks, hunched, unfledged, the mural continuing its wrap-around illusion of hundreds, thousands more in the painted distance. Speakers above you play an endless loop of courting songs.

This is so unlike all the other displays in the museum. It clearly wants you to enter a scene, not just observe it, but be a part of it, to feel as though you have been transported to this white-sand island. You can feel the ambition of it, even if it comes off a little sad by today's standards: experience eviscerated, preserved and staged behind glass; the birds' feathers coated in a fine dust; the sand worn in patches; the mural peeling at its corners. Still, someone tried desperately here with all the skills they possessed to evoke a moment in time that people hundreds of years and hundreds of miles removed could enter again and again. There is something poignant about that impulse, but also something a little strange: what is it about this rendered scene that demanded such obsessive attention by its maker, made him so certain that this place begged our endless return?

Homer Dill, says a sign.

This is his creation. And this is also his legacy: this curious alcove full of forever birds, as obscure as it is enduring.

What do we say when someone is beyond our grasp, a little peculiar? We call him an odd bird.

And yet, odd birds are also cause for wonder.

There is startlingly little to work with for a man who made immortality his business. One thin folder in the university archives containing only some correspondence regarding his appointments and promotions. A handful of files in the natural history museum's collection, clippings mostly from a scrapbook maintained by his first wife, who died in 1934 (*widower*, it is noted in spidery hand in the university's ancient personnel notes). The pages are as yellowed and brittle as dried leaves, and they

crumble at the touch of a hand, each attempt to know him and what moved him to create that display of birds another assault on his fragile record.

The file contains inexplicable things: poems on love and faith; a list of the seven wonders of the world, ancient and modern; advice on how to kill flies; a black-and-white photograph of an open window snipped from the newspaper. But gradually, among the articles and old photocopied speeches and letters and papers (“Mounting Large Animals Without Opening Cuts in the Legs”), the spine of a story emerges.

And it begins on Laysan, a small isolated island in the Hawaiian archipelago, and one of the world’s largest bird colonies.

In 1902, a ship called the *Albatross* drops anchor offshore, in an official government expedition. Among those on board is the curator of Iowa’s natural history museum, a man named Charles Nutting, who is serving temporarily as a member of the ship’s civilian scientific staff. Nutting is a bold man, a dreamer, who has big ambitions for his museum back in Iowa, which, like so many natural history museums around the world, has come of age in the late nineteenth century as the full inheritance of the Industrial Revolution becomes clear. People look for places to rest black lungs and imagine greener spaces, to commune with the furred, the fanged, the fragile and mysterious. They had been told that they would find wonder in the machine, but instead, at least on their days off, they crave a world without spinning jennies or blast furnaces or steam engines. The natural history museums, with their collections of strange, stuffed beasts, give them permission, however briefly, to imagine themselves in another, wilder, reality.

Nutting wants to lure these crowds because, smart man that he is, he knows that the higher the museum’s profile, the more support for its research. He launches expeditions to such far-flung locations as the Arctic, the Dry Tortugas, and the Bay of Fundy in search of new marvels.

Then he arrives on Laysan. And although he has traveled around the world, from the rain forests of Costa Rica to the beaches of the Bahamas, he has never been so struck as he is when he steps off onto Laysan’s shore and finds himself surrounded by eight million birds—birds covering every inch of the island’s three-and-a-half square miles, the air so thick with their wings that the sky above him is nearly blotted out. “Try as we may; this scene can not be described,” Nutting writes in the alumni magazine upon his return to Iowa. “And as day after day the wonder of it grew and deepened, the writer found [himself] constantly recurring and intensifying the great desire to have it reproduced as a

masterpiece of art for the benefit of the...University and the people of Iowa.”

He becomes possessed by this memory, imagines that if only he could find a way to re-create the brush of wings that he experienced on Laysan in an exhibit, he just might secure his university’s place as home to one of the finest natural history museums in the world.

He carries the idea with him for years, until one day he hears of a concept kicking around the museum world: the cyclorama. Or, as Nutting describes it, in an appeal for money from Iowa alumni and students, an exhibit “where the observer gazes upon hundreds of thousands of men and miles of space, a veritable miracle of vast numbers in intense action, the actual figures in the foreground so skillfully joined to the painted background as to deceive the very elect.”

Actually, the cyclorama is a space—a room, an enclosure—designed so that those who enter experience a 360-degree panoramic view. A landscape perhaps, an epic historical moment. It is the invention of an Irishman named Robert Barker who is said to have climbed a hill in Edinburgh in the late 1700s, gazed out over the city all around him, and decided to re-create the sensation through painted murals hung in the round. Barker’s fairly simple idea takes hold, and around the world, people craft cycloramas of battle scenes and waterfalls and trans-Siberian railroads, grand, exotic moments and places that people might imagine being teleported to for a time.

But as far as Iowa’s curator knows, no one has tried to build a cyclorama using taxidermies of animals. This is how he will bring Laysan to Iowa. This is how he will make his museum among the world’s most famous. He sends letters to the U.S. government asking for access to the island, now a federal wildlife refuge. He tells the student paper that the cyclorama will make Iowa “the mecca of scientific men for years to come.” And he seems to genuinely believe it. All he needs is a man capable of carrying out his vision.

Homer Dill. Did you think we had forgotten about him?

Without Homer Dill, there could be no story.

From the yellowed newspaper clippings we learn that he arrived in Iowa in 1906, hired by the museum “after winning a high reputation in the East.” Dill is a naturalist who also happens to be a highly trained taxidermist; a skilled observer who understands each species, its behaviors and movements and physiology, but also, master of a skill that falls somewhere between butcher, tanner, upholsterer, artist, and resurrectionist—a man able to wield a gun and a knife, gut and skin, administer

the proper potions, capture the still life, sew the perfect, binding stitch. Dill does not stuff animals. He transforms them.

Shall we transform him, then, back into a child, roaming the docks of Gardiner, Maine, where ships from ports around the world anchored then, and trading those ships' sailors "snatched cookies, boiled eggs, and apples for lizard skins, feathers, and whales' teeth." When he is about ten, a friend lends him a copy of *Practical Taxidermy and Home Decoration; Together with Practical Information for Sportsmen* by Joseph H. Batty. As he recalls years later, "From then on, I mounted everything I could get my hands on."

His first is a bird: a saw-whet owl, a tiny, downy thing with piercing, saucer-shaped eyes.

Local hunters approach him to preserve their kills, and before long, he has built a flourishing taxidermy business while still a teenager. He goes through the motions in high school, but can "think of nothing else but taxidermy." We can only imagine what his classmates must have thought of him, this brooding boy, his own saucer eyes hidden behind spectacles, always hurrying away as soon as the bell rang to spend his free time forearm-deep in the belly of an elk, dropping guts in buckets. His parents, for their part, are "concerned," beg him to consider engineering.

Instead he writes to William Temple Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Park and one of the most famous naturalist-taxidermists of his generation. Hornaday is clearly impressed, because he invites the teenager to come apprentice with him in New York. For the next two years, Dill spends his days making plaster casts of dead jaguars, monkeys, and manatees. At night, he studies drawing at the Pratt Institute of Art. When Hornaday needs someone to mount his own personal collection of animals, or the big-game trophies of his famous friends, such as Teddy Roosevelt, he turns to Dill, Dill who will later give his first son the middle name of Hornaday, in honor of his mentor.

Dill returns to Maine, where he becomes the state taxidermist, and where his greatest achievement seems to have been the transformation of Wapiti, "a great male elk," who "died in the zoo at the Soldiers' Home." His ambition strains. "It is not technique and method that makes a taxidermist superior," he will write, many years later, "but rather, a God-given gift of keen insight and a feeling for outline and form as nature has given it to our wild creatures."

He begins to send out his CV.

One reaches Nutting, a thousand miles away in Iowa, who just happens to be looking for a new head taxidermist. Out of twenty-four appli-

cants, he chooses Dill, who accepts with a letter signed, “Your obedient servant.”

It is not clear when Nutting first broaches the idea of the cyclorama, but he must have been watching Dill closely, weighing whether he was worthy of the vision. He watches as Dill sets about transforming tired exhibits—the warthog heads staring blankly from mahogany plaques, the kangaroos with sad skins mangled by time, the owls that listlessly grip boring brass T-bars; watches as he banishes bottles of pickled things, groups displays according to habitat, trains students in his newly launched laboratory of “Taxidermy and Plastic Art.”

Art. That’s the key word for Dill.

He insists that taxidermy, conceived of and displayed as art, “can reach where books seldom go to the improving of men’s minds and helping them to higher conceptions and new appreciations of nature and her manifold and marvelous worlds.”

At last, convinced, Nutting approaches him about transforming the birds of Laysan into art.

Dill—*Your obedient servant*—Dill, with his dreams of helping man to higher conceptions—Dill, who can still recall the saw-whet owl in his hands—of course, he accepts.

Letters fly back and forth between Nutting and the U.S. government, negotiating access to Laysan. Supply lists are drawn up (sugar, rice, tapioca, dried cod, beef tongue, aspirin...). Finally, on April 5, 1911, Dill, along with a landscape artist from the Field Museum in Chicago, who will paint the twelve-foot-high, 138-foot-long backdrop of the cyclorama, and two of Dill’s zoology students who will assist in the collecting and skinning of samples, set off from San Francisco aboard the U.S. cutter ship *Thetis*. *Thetis*, the mother who, in Greek myth, tries in vain to make her son immortal.

From Dill’s account of the mission: “About 11 o’clock on the seventh day, the island was sighted. We expected to see clouds of birds about it, but in this we were disappointed.”

Sometimes there is no bridging the distance between what we imagine we are prepared for and what we must we discover on our own. The pristine, untouched island of Nutting’s memories—the cyclorama’s inspiration—no longer exists. Feather hunters in search of plumes to adorn ladies’ hats have discovered Laysan, too. Over the past few years, they have slaughtered hundreds of thousands of birds—sometimes

hacking off wings while the birds are still alive, because the hemorrhaging makes the feathers easier to pluck. By one estimate, perhaps ninety percent of the island's original bird population is gone.

Dill and his group land on a beach that is littered with rotting carcasses, "bones bleaching in the sun." They find clubs and nets, swarms of flies, more flies than Dill has ever seen. In an old shed, thousands of rotting wings, stacked until they touched the rafters and then burst through wooden walls with their cascading weight.

There are also rabbits, thousands of rabbits, racing across the soft white sand on their padded feet, burrowing among the albatross and tern nests, devouring the juncus and other grasses and bushes that provide valuable bird habitat, "their bodies concealed among the thick growth, (so that) only their ears show. At times there are so many ears protruding, they resemble a vegetable garden."

The rabbits are all that is left of a German immigrant who had come to Laysan to make his fortune mining the island's thick deposits of guano. Concerned about how to feed his operation, he decided he could bring rabbits, let them breed, and then can their meat—Belgian hares and English hares "that have crossed and produced some strange-looking animals, both in form and color," according to Dill. Unchecked, with no natural predators, they are steadily taking over.

Poor Dill. One of the things he has prided himself on is how faithfully he has always tried to re-create what he finds in nature. He thinks of it almost as a calling—"to see things as they are and render them faithfully."

And so he does his best to collect what he can of the Laysan that he finds: the bristle-thighed curlews, who "come up around our camp uttering their peculiar complaining note," the wandering tattlers who hide among the reefs, the turnstones who spend "most of their time feeding on the small flies with which the shore and the water are black." He urges the group to collect dead birds if they can find them, but still, the scope of this project demands so many specimens they must kill hundreds. Later, he will tell the student paper, "We skinned birds from morning to night."

He brings home thirty-six large crates filled with the bodies of nearly three hundred birds, eggs, nests, Laysan sand, casts of the island's leaves and branches, photographs, pages of notes and sketches. And then he begins the meticulous, painstaking work of rebuilding Laysan in a corner of Macbride Hall, a process that will ultimately take three years.

When the cyclorama finally opens to the public in 1914, it is exactly as Nutting had intended, the rush of silent wings all around, an invitation to step into a kind of stilled documentary, to “visit” Laysan and its birds without ever leaving the state of Iowa. But it is not a Laysan that exists anymore. In some ways it is a Laysan that never existed, a memory of a memory of a memory, which was already vanishing before Dill even started his work. In fact, three of the species of birds Dill collected will be named extinct before his cyclorama even opens.

Today, the concept of the cyclorama itself is endangered, abandoned long ago to more truly interactive experiences, moving pictures and computerized displays. Iowa’s Laysan exhibit is one of the few remaining natural history cycloramas in the United States. Most people arrive here by accident, suddenly cast ashore on Dill’s forever island. But the longer we stare at it, the more unsettling its unwavering beauty becomes, perhaps because on some level we sense that it is a record, not of what is, or ever was, but what we wish, against all evidence, could be.

And yet what if he had spent those three years in his laboratory giving form to the nightmare landscape he discovered, stretching its ugly skin around the facts that none of us are eager to consider—that this is what our presence really looks like in the natural world, the buzz and hum of our competing desires, converging, swarming, until all that is left is a pile of feathers, dried blood on the sand.

Would that have changed him, stopped him from snipping from the newspaper tips on how to kill flies (could he still hear them, buzzing still, back on Laysan)? After years of faithfully noting he was a Unitarian in his university personnel files, would he have kept filling in that line, rather than abruptly leaving it blank? Was it just an unfortunate coincidence that a pamphlet printed to celebrate an anniversary of the cyclorama declares that it was “Composed and Executed by Professor Homer R. Dill”?

How to admit that maybe what we imagined to be a feel for outline and form as nature has given it to our wild creatures really means that we are good at skinning dead things.

Then again, perhaps the vision of Laysan he left for us—unspoiled, untouched—was the only way he could see it, and the only way he wished all of us to see it, too. Maybe, in the end, there is really more truth in his lie. Because when we all are nothing more than a few crumbling papers in a forgotten file, the birds will go on moaning and skittering in the more perfect world he made for them. And how many times do you have to visit, held back by the glass, before you realize it

is a world entirely without us. A world wiped clean of our presence. As if we were never here.

Some notes on sources:

The files from the Natural History Museum's own archives provided a great deal of biographical information and color on Homer Dill and Charles Nutting. The file on Dill was composed mostly of scrapbook clippings assembled by Dill's first wife; many of the newspaper clippings were snipped without dates or sources. So where that's missing, it's not an attempt to be coy, but to work with a record that is human.

The quotation "We skinned birds..." is from *The Daily Iowan*, September 26, 1911. Unless otherwise noted, other quotations from Dill come from his own writings:

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