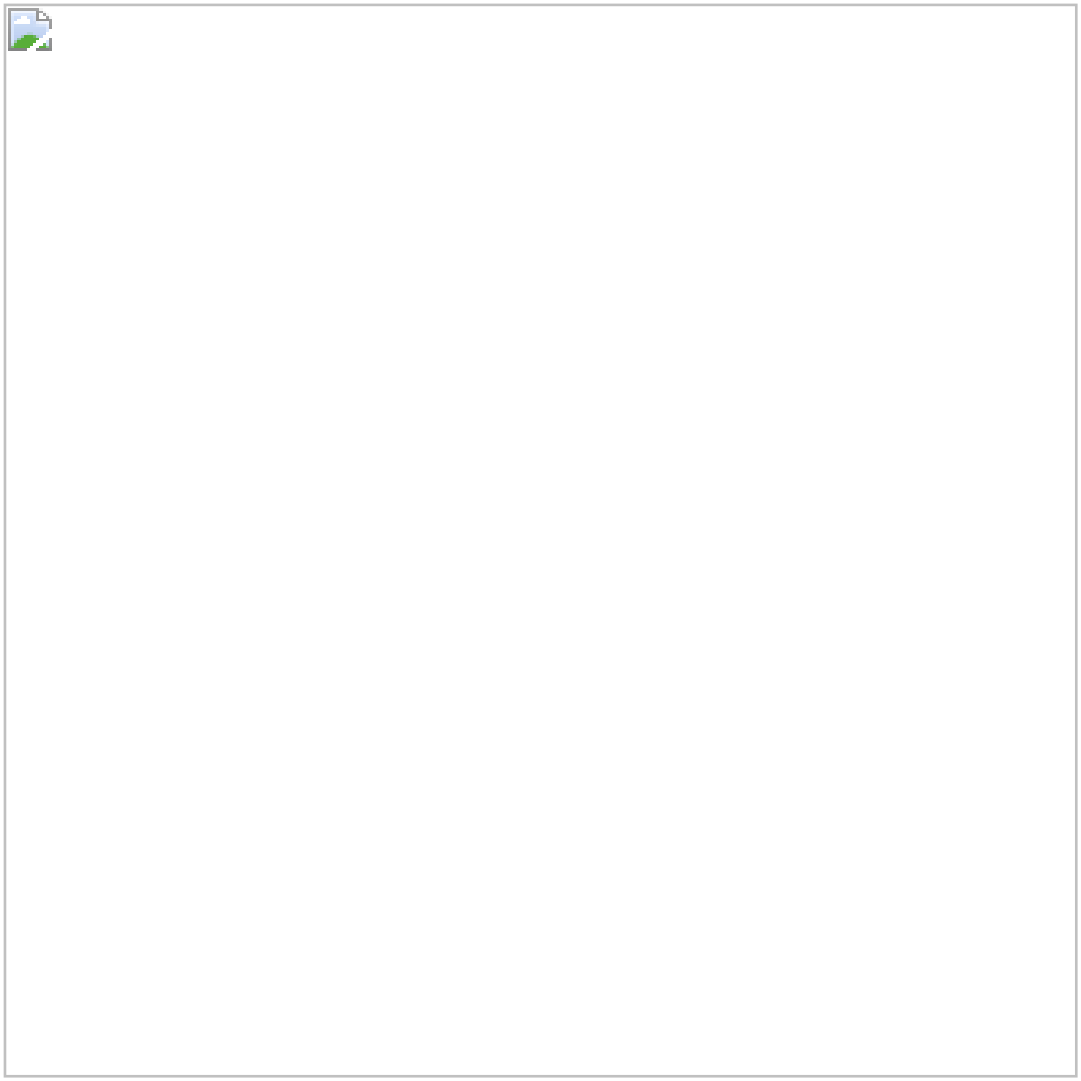

The American Ornithologists' Union: The First Century, 1883–1983

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Source: The Auk, 134(1) : 260-261

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-16-183.1

The Auk
Ornithological Advances
AmericanOrnithology.org

Volume 134, 2017, pp. 260–261
DOI: 10.1642/AUK-16-183.1

BOOK REVIEW

The American Ornithologists' Union: The First Century, 1883–1983

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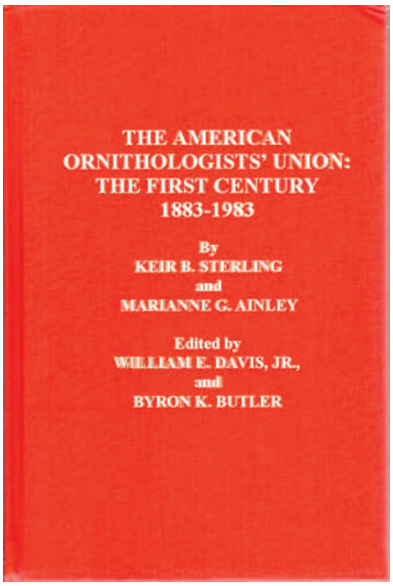
Published January 4, 2017

The American Ornithologists' Union: The First Century, 1883–1983 by Keir B. Sterling and Marianne G. Ainley; edited by William E. Davis, Jr., and Byron K. Butler. 2016. viii + 405 pp., 6 appendices, 6 tables, 49 black-and-white photographs. $35 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-877973-50-5.

This volume was commissioned by the AOU to mark its centennial year of 1983. After a manuscript was produced, it languished for 30 years, for reasons detailed in the preface to the book (a story in itself). I played a role in its revival—full disclosure—and the reasons I was eager to do so form the basis of this review.



Written by two historians, the book brings together material from correspondence, interviews, and extensive archival records. It makes for unexpectedly interesting and even lively reading, despite chapter headings such as "By-Laws" and "Classification and Checklists." The history of the AOU is displayed with all its ups, downs, and inevitable controversies, enlivened with quotations that reveal (and sometimes revile) the personalities that so often prove crucial in shaping real-life events. Background on parallel developments in North American science and society place the AOU's evolution in a broader context.

Each chapter is focused on an area of particular importance to governance or activities of the AOU, such as publication, annual meetings, and bird protection. This approach highlights key developments in each area that would have been obscured in a strict chronology, yet allows overarching themes to emerge. The AOU's first 100 years divide roughly into three broad eras: a founding era (1883 to mid-1930s), a period of transition to a modern era (1930s to 1960s), and a final 15–20 years of rapid modernization. The particulars for the AOU are doubtless unique, but the overall picture of change within the AOU must surely be similar to the challenges every scientific society has faced in changing times: What is the main purpose of a scientific organization and how are its goals best accomplished? What should the scope and standards be for the journal? Who should control society governance?

In its early years, the AOU was literally an old-boys network, as was the norm of the age. Because the original focus was classification and nomenclature, the governance structure restricted decision making to a small group of recognized experts. Among its earliest activities, the AOU set rules for itself on taxonomic decision making and nomenclature that influenced rules adopted later by ichthyologists and mammalogists in North America, as well as international rules developed in Europe. Over the years, AOU Checklist iterations shifted in emphasis on splitting vs. lumping as the causes of variation in form became better understood. (Americans in the early days of the AOU were more Lamarckian than Darwinian.) In addition to this core activity, enthusiastic and active committees worked on the study of distribution, migration, and protection of birds. Criteria were soon broadened to expand (nonvoting) membership, which grew quite rapidly, though it took decades of incremental change to democratize the Union's governance.

The transition period of AOU history is captured in quotations concerning remarks made by President Herbert Friedmann in 1938 that summarized past accomplishments and looked to the future (pp. 43–44). He noted that

> The early work done by the Union "in the fields of bird protection and popularization of bird study gave rise to two organizations which have

> long since outstripped their parent in size, wealth, and influence—the Audubon societies and the Biological Survey." The AOU had thus been left "with the pursuance of ornithological science as its sole remaining field…." If the Union "cannot play a progressive and vigorous role in formulating or directing general tendencies in modern ornithology, then it is high time we called in the doctor."

Friedmann and other younger people, including Ernst Mayr and J. J. Hickey, organized a ballot strategy that "to the utter surprise of the Washington crowd" began to elect candidates other than those favored by personnel of the Biological Survey and Smithsonian who mostly had run things before. Increases in the number of university programs in ornithology and their production of trained graduates expanded the scope and quality of contributions to *The Auk*. A Research Committee spawned a variety of efforts to help ornithologists gain access to scientific results, including production of several books reviewing key areas of ornithology. Subcommittees addressed scientific specimen collections and the use of wild birds for scientific and educational purposes. Establishment of the Van Tyne Memorial Fund in the late 1950s began to provide grants for research. In the early 1960s, a committee that included IBM and other computer experts undertook a feasibility study for using electronic or mechanical aids to store and retrieve ornithological information. In the end, the group concluded this would be "premature," as it would cost $60,000 annually (nearly $0.5 million today) and likely would have few users. This is only one example of numerous forward-looking and ambitious AOU initiatives (including the never-completed precursor to *Birds of North America*) that were hampered by lack of manpower or resources, including technological.

My own AOU involvement began in the 1970s, and until I read this book I hadn't recognized the importance of that decade in shaping the society that most current members would recognize. The era coincided with expansion of university programs in ecology, evolution, behavior, and population studies; increased student membership and meeting participation; and growth in the numbers and influence of women in ornithology. The AOU introduced regular symposia and workshops to annual meetings and established new research and student presentation awards. Its "Workshop on a National Plan for Ornithology," funded by the National Science Foundation, examined intellectual, material, and manpower resources of the profession as a whole. The report made numerous recommendations, many beyond the scope of direct AOU action but pursued by others (e.g., expansion of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Library of Natural Sounds). The AOU acted on recommendations that led to the formation of Ornithological Societies of North America (OSNA) in 1979 and the publication of "Career Opportunities in Ornithology." The first "white papers" on conservation issues appeared, and in the mid-1970s the AOU reviewed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approach to conserving endangered species.

Such a brief overview only hints at the breadth of coverage in this landmark history. It is well produced and edited; the only error I detected was duplication in two chapters of an admittedly juicy quote from 1942 saying Margaret Morse Nice, though qualified to become editor of *The Auk*, was an unsuitable choice because of her gender.

Since the centennial year, the AOU has continued to change, both precipitated and facilitated by the dawn of the digital age; but that is a subject for another volume. American Ornithology, represented by the newly merged AOU and Cooper Ornithological Society, will reach its 150th anniversary in 17 years. What an opportunity this offers for the new Society to prepare a companion volume to this one, continuing the story and covering the momentous changes of the 50 years following the AOU's centennial.

It is said that history helps us recognize our mistakes when we make them again, but that is only one of the messages I took from reading this thorough and readable volume. Nearly every issue faced by AOU/AOS today has echoes from the past. Understanding what has been tried before and why the solutions either worked or failed can guide our approaches today. This book will interest anyone with a historical bent, but also people involved in governance and operations of the AOU and quite likely of other scientific societies as well.

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