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# George Miksch Sutton

*Of all the good things that have happened to the University of Oklahoma during the past 30 years, the presence on the campus of George Miksch Sutton was one of the best. Scientist, painter, teacher, patron of the arts, extraordinary human being, Sutton was, in*

*the finest sense, a renaissance man – one of a kind. His death on December 7, 1982, was a personal loss to friends and admirers throughout the world, but no one phrased his feelings quite so well as Norman Transcript editorial writer Jim Bross.*

George Miksch Sutton so enriched this community's sense of its own uniqueness that his death on December 7 seems to have robbed us of a very precious, personal substance. For a time, he was our guide in a world that few of us knew how to approach. We had heard and read of it in countless magazines and books since childhood. We had seen it beautifully depicted in paintings and on film. But it was always beyond our reach, an abstraction, until this lanky figure with the Lincolnesque chin came along to awaken a sense of wonder for mysteries in our own backyards.

It doesn't seem enough to say that George Sutton gave us an appreciation of nature, though he did that. But it was an uncommon appreciation that spread beyond his friends and acquaintances and involved a private discovery of self. This internationally acclaimed ornithologist and wildlife artist was available to all who showed the slightest enthusiasm for that discovery. Laymen and scholars alike swelled with the emotion of sudden insight when he talked of his own wonder for the smallest and most common forms of life around us.

George Sutton could do that without really try-

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ing. The excitement, the awe, was contagious. It was his, and it was so terribly honest that it swept over his audience like a stunning flash of light. We had seen many of the small birds he studied and painted, but we hadn't thought of them in the context of courage, tenacity, purpose, and unique beauty. Biology classes didn't give us that; most scientists were uncomfortable with such unscientific insights.

This enthusiasm for the marvelous drove George Sutton to question and explore as much as his loyalty to the science of ornithology. It led him, as a boy on the Nebraska plains, to devote his free hours to solitary outings and fashioning crayon drawings of prairie wildlife he encountered. Screech owls, roadrunners, rabbits and opossums were the focus of his childhood enthusiasm. That enthusiasm never faded. It brought him nationwide, then worldwide fame that he both wanted and felt threatened by. Ambition was a disease, he felt, that sapped productivity. George Sutton knew his own pretensions well, and he struggled to check them even after the world said he had a right to them.

In *High Arctic*, one of his most beautifully illustrated and written books, the naturalist wrote: "Since the fall of 1920, when I had begun to consider myself an authority on things northern . . . I had been thinking and reading about musk-oxen, discussing them in lectures as if all that I said were based on personal experience. I had never said in so many words that I had hunted them or watched them form a circle with heads out, horns ready . . .

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*Above left: Langviá, the adult common murre of the ringed phase, painted, July 18, 1958. Above: Skúmur, the great sku chick, painted direct from life, July 22, 1958.*

*From Iceland Summer: Adventures of a  
Bird Painter by George Miksch Sutton  
© 1961, 1974 University of Oklahoma Press*

But my voice had had the ring of an eye-witness', and I had made no effort to modulate that ring. What I was seeing now, in that lovely white valley was far more than four musk-oxen. I was seeing part of myself, too — an ambitious, self-centered sometimes ruthless part that had failed to make clear that it had never seen a wild musk-oxen anywhere. How can anything short of complete honesty be acceptable in the presence of creatures as noble as these?"

George Sutton touched us almost casually in an unidentifiable place that released images of a world in which we could experience a deep, seemingly long-forgotten, harmony. It was, at the same time, humbling and exalting. It was open to all ages, all the people. The only demand was complete honesty. Without that, there could be no wonder, no awe, no sense of self-discovery.

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*Left: Hrafnsönd, the hen common scoter, painted direct from life, July 4, 1958. Below: Urtönd, the teal chick, painted direct from life, July 2, 1958, in Iceland.*

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In recent years, when health became a frustrating obstacle for his work, and he began to look at the certainty of his death, he wrote of how he always had been perplexed by the phrase *eternal life*.

"I had found it impossible to believe that what we called life could continue after death (throughout childhood). The idea of a soul's retaining any sort of entity 'for ever and ever' had been too much for me. I had sensed without losing faith that what I continued to hear in church about heaven . . . was all figurative language. My wondering why all that fancy talk was necessary had bordered on cynicism, but it had not made me feel wretched. I had, even when very young, found comfort in realizing that some of the most obvious facts were beyond all explanation, all logic, all reason. The fact that I *was*, that I existed at all, had confounded me utterly whenever I really thought about it. Yet never had the bewilderment prevented me from enjoying meals, the sound of music, or hours afield with my beloved birds. Perhaps, I had reasoned, life after death was no more impossible, no farther beyond explanation, than one day, one hour, one moment of life."

George Sutton never pretended to be an "informed" guide. Yet for a time, he was the most remarkable guide we ever encountered. Now that the time has passed, we can't help but feel a bit confused and lost. Perhaps, after a while, we'll come to realize that all along he never led us to anything but our own sense of innocent wonder.

– JIM BROSS

*The faculty and students of the University of Oklahoma School of Music will pay tribute to the life of George M. Sutton at a memorial concert at 3 p.m., Sunday, March 20, in Holmberg Hall auditorium. A selection of Sutton's bird paintings will be exhibited at a reception following the concert.*

*Sutton's last book, Birds Worth Watching, completed shortly before his death, will be published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1984.*