

OTHER

A Love Affair With the Birds: The Life of Thomas Sadler Roberts

By Sue Leaf. 2013. University of Minnesota Press, Suite 290, 111 Third Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401 USA. 274 + xviii +16 pages, 29.95 USD, Cloth.

Thomas Sadler Roberts was the right man in the right place at the right time. His first passion was birds; in high school in the frontier town of Minneapolis in 1875 he formed, with six other teens, the “Young Naturalists Society.” Roberts was the first president; many of their meetings were held in his bedroom, which also served as their library and museum. Only two years after foundation of the Minnesota Academy of Natural Sciences at St. Paul, the lads published original articles on the Black Tern, and compiled a list of 122 species of Minnesota birds and a state list of plants. At their meetings they discussed the works of Elliott Coues and the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Dar-

win and Alfred Russell Wallace. Roberts was the valedictorian of the class of 11 that graduated from Minneapolis High School in June 1877. He then entered classes at the relatively new University of Minnesota. In his first summer he studied birds at Herman and Lake Minnetonka, publishing the results in the *Journal of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*, the predecessor of *The Auk*. The second summer he took part in a survey of the Lake Superior south shore from Duluth to Grand Marais and began correspondence with key ornithologists George Bird Grinnell, J. A. Allen, William Brewster, and Henry Henshaw. In 1880 he worked as a land surveyor, but watched birds as he surveyed.

From 1882 to 1885, Roberts studied medicine at the University of Philadelphia medical school. His roommate was a young lawyer, Carroll Williams, for whom Roberts's second child was later named. William Osler was one of his clinical teachers, so impressed by Roberts that he visited the Roberts home for breakfast one morning when he was in Minneapolis years later. Roberts then did a residency at the Children's Hospital, Philadelphia, the first pediatric hospital in the United States. There was little time for bird study until he returned to Minneapolis to establish his medical practice in the fall of 1886. He married his friend Jennie Cleveland in October 1887; by March 1892 they had three children.

When he had a patient warranting special expertise in diagnosis or treatment, Roberts would sometimes accompany that patient by train to Rochester, about two hours distant, to consult with his friends, doctors Will and Charlie Mayo. The Mayo brothers later rated Roberts as "one of the five best diagnosticians in the United States." Will Mayo, as a regent of the University, later wrote a letter to University of Minnesota President George Vincent to support the appointment of Roberts to the Minnesota Natural History Survey.

For 25 years, Roberts was a "hard-driving hard-working physician," transported by John Nordquist, living nearby on 24-hour call to drive Roberts' horse and buggy — and later automobile — to home visits. Roberts' nurse would often join in his visits to the summer homes of wealthy industrialists on nearby Lake Minnetonka, often to deliver their babies there. Roberts was the chief of staff at the first Minneapolis hospital, St. Barnabas, from 1893 to 1900. In 1901 he became the unpaid Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota medical school and then, from 1906, the unpaid Clinical Professor of Children.

Roberts delivered his last baby in 1915, the year the University elected him as the unpaid (for four years!) Professor of Ornithology. He solicited funds from his wealthy friends merely to pay his expenses for specimen collecting trips; a few special families kept him on retainer for medical care. James Ford Bell and John Crosby (heads of the Washburn-Crosby Company that later became multi-national General Mills) were two of his wealthy industrialist friends. Bell himself said: "Roberts has so many friends who have money."

Roberts was an innovator. His first bird photos were exposed onto glass plates at Heron Lake in 1898 with a heavy mahogany camera powered by a small generator. These photographs were acclaimed at the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) meeting in Washington that year. In the fall of 1916, his second year at the fledgling University museum, Roberts showed Sunday afternoon movies on a projector donated by Bell. That year his first annual ornithology class began with 17 lectures and lab demonstrations followed thereafter by field outings. He helped a bird club organized by the Woman's Club evolve into the Minneapolis Audubon

Society. He encouraged Frank and Marie Commons in their unusually intensive bird banding operations on their farm at Lake Minnetonka. The main thrust of the museum in the 1920s was the construction of large dioramas. In February 1926 Roberts began weekly radio broadcasts about Minnesota birds on Washburn-Crosby's new radio station WCCO.

His major obligation was to write the landmark two-volume, heavily subsidized *Birds of Minnesota*, illustrated with colour paintings by Allan Brooks, George M. Sutton, Francis Lee Jacques and Walter A. Weber. It was finally published to great acclaim in June 1932. His beloved wife Jennie died that October. Roberts then resumed making medical house calls to sick patients to earn some money when income-producing bonds defaulted during the worldwide financial crisis.

In 1937, over fifty years after his first visit there with his roommate, Roberts revisited the Williams farm at New Hope Pennsylvania, where Roberts proposed to Carroll's sister Agnes, twice widowed, and she accepted.

In 1938, at his final AOU meeting, held in Washington, Roberts' two-volume *magnum opus* received the prestigious Brewster Medal from the AOU. That year work had finally begun on a new museum building deferred in 1931 when Minnesota, hit hard by the depression, delayed for 9 years its equal match of the large donation offered by James Ford Bell. The elegant Bell Museum of Natural History was not opened until December 1939.

Roberts' stamina persisted well past eighty. In spite of a slight stroke in October 1944, he did not miss giving a single class in ornithology in the spring of 1945. That summer he had another slight stroke. In October Agnes had surgery for hemorrhage and thereafter received long-term care in Franklin Hospital until her death on New Year's Eve. Roberts himself died of a heart attack 19 April 1946 at age 88.

For centuries a disproportionate number of physicians have shown a serious interest in birds. Thomas S. Roberts was one of these. My personal interest in birds was added to my desire to be a physician, when my two aunts in Manitoba joined together to buy me Taverner's *Birds of Canada in 1940*, an expensive book, selling for three dollars, which had seemed too much money for the first aunt to give to a boy only 12 years old. Later my parents bought me the heavily subsidized two-volume *Birds of Minnesota* which also sold for only three dollars per volume; in those two volumes I read about Roberts himself and his medically-trained colleagues P. L. Hatch, Elliott Coues, E. A. Mearns, and J. C. Hvoslef. These two books and his bird identification key so valuable to bird banders, have held prominent places in my library ever since.

Leaf is too polite to mention the Roberts family finances. Where did Roberts' father, John, gain the financial resources that allowed him to move from a farm in Pennsylvania to reside 25 years in Minneapolis? How

could Thomas and Jennie employ a nurse, a maid, and a chauffeur throughout thirty years of medical practice, and then receive no salary whatever for his first four years at the small initial University Museum?

Sue Leaf has located and reproduced magnificent early and later photographs, from throughout Roberts' life, from 1859 at age 18 months through to 1942. Yet, until he closed his medical office in 1915 after thirty years of medical practice, she makes it clear that, un-

less he was away from Minneapolis, his patients took precedence over birds. She deserves warm plaudits for her careful scrutiny of a mass of data, both ornithological and medical, that she did not know existed in adjacent cabinets when she did her zoology graduate studies in the same room 35 years earlier.

C. STUART HOUSTON

863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8
Canada