

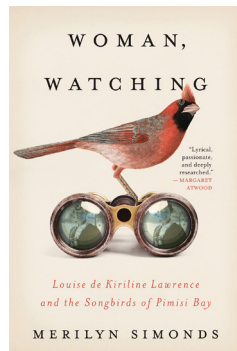
## ORNITHOLOGY

**Woman, Watching: Louise de Kiriline Lawrence and the Songbirds of Pimisi Bay**

By Merilyn Simonds. 2022. ECW Press. 416 pages and 49 black and white figures, 28.95 CAD, Paper, 19.99 CAD, E-book.

The insatiable curiosity of Louise de Kiriline Lawrence allowed her to make significant contributions to the study of songbirds breeding in the boreal forest of northern Ontario. The title of this biography—*Woman, Watching*—is an apt description of Lawrence's approach to five decades of fieldwork in the woods outside her home at Pimisi Bay. But this is also the story of a woman trying to make her way in the world, on her own terms. In 18 chapters, Merilyn Simonds leads us from Lawrence's earliest years in Sweden to her time in Canada, where she became a prominent self-taught amateur ornithologist and the first Canadian woman elected as a member of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU).

Lawrence was born in Sweden in 1894, the daughter of Danish nobility on her mother's side and landed



Swedish gentry on her father's side. It was her father who taught her to love nature, which she explored on their estate overlooking a fjord on the Baltic Sea, 300 km south of Stockholm. Her family often hosted scientific visitors who had a profound influence on Lawrence. When she was 17 years old her father died; the family estate faltered and was sold.

Finding herself in reduced circumstances at the start of World War I, Lawrence trained as a nurse, which was unusual for a debutante but a very patriotic act. The following decade of her life could be the script for a movie (think *Doctor Zhivago*): nursing an injured White Army Russian soldier whom she falls in love with and marries; fleeing from the Bolsheviks with her new husband by sleigh and on foot; getting captured by the Red Army; supporting her imprisoned husband, Gleb, until his disappearance; working with starving Russians as a nurse with a humanitarian relief organization while searching for three years for Gleb, to no avail. In 1927, when she had finally accepted Gleb's death, Lawrence decided to emigrate to Canada—she had been captivated by descriptions

of it from a wounded Canadian airman.

With little money, Lawrence took a job with the Canadian Red Cross, working as a nurse at remote outposts and hospitals in northern Ontario. She took to the remote and harsh conditions with enthusiasm, often travelling with her own dogsled team to reach patients at home. This quiet existence changed in the spring of 1934 when Lawrence took on the task of keeping the famous Dionne quintuplets alive. But after a year, with the Quints flourishing, Lawrence wanted to get back to the land she had bought on Pimisi Bay, a widening of the Mattawa River before it flows into the Ottawa River. In 1939 she married Leonard Lawrence, a local handyman whom she had hired a few years earlier to work on projects she couldn't take on alone: furnishing the cabin; raising and selling poultry and eggs; and running a mink farm. Although each came from different backgrounds, they had a deep and abiding love. Four months after they were married, at the start of World War II, Len enlisted in the army. He was away for five years.

Lawrence had a steady income from Len's army paycheque, which meant she could now devote her time to writing and observing the birds around her. A friend had loaned her a copy of Percy A. Taverner's *Birds of Canada* (National Museum of Canada, 1934); a few weeks later she wrote Taverner about some of her observations, not expecting a reply. But Taverner, chief ornithologist for the National Museum of Canada (now the Canadian Museum of Nature), responded and encouraged her to capture and band birds so that she could record detailed observations of individuals. Thus began her voluminous correspondence with a who's who of ornithology: Doris and Murray Speirs, Jim Baillie, W. Earl Godfrey, Margaret Morse Nice, Eugene Odum, and Alexander Skutch. Godfrey was particularly interested in the distribution of bird species, especially in the understudied boreal forest where Lawrence lived, and told her, "[y]ou have the opportunity, ability, patience, and

enthusiasm, a combination that is hard to beat" (p. 172).

Over the subsequent decades, Lawrence was a prolific writer of long-form nonfiction, creative nonfiction, personal essays and poems, environmental essays, narrative natural history articles, comparative life history studies of birds, and short, narrowly-focussed scientific studies, as well as a memoir. Simonds located 90 articles, which are listed in the Bibliography, along with seven books and eight anthologies in which Lawrence's work was reprinted. Lawrence also wrote over 500 reviews and abstracts of Swedish and French ornithological books and articles for North American journals. She published many articles in this journal as well. (In 1981, Lawrence was elected an Honorary Member of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, the organization that publishes *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*.)

Simonds first met Lawrence in 1980 when she moved to North Bay. In 1989 she wrote an article about Lawrence for *Harrowsmith* magazine, but it was three decades before she began serious research for this book. Lawrence died in 1992, so Simonds recreated her life by reading through all of her books and articles, unpublished manuscripts, and numerous letters (Lawrence kept up a weekly correspondence with her mother for 40 years), from which she pulled copious quotes to help the reader "hear" Lawrence's voice. I found Chapter 11 (The Eyes of the Heart) very interesting because it introduced other, earlier trailblazing women ornithologists, some of whom I had not heard of previously. And in a world of increasingly high-tech, narrowly-focussed studies it was refreshing to read about the general life histories of different species.

I will leave the last word to Lawrence: "[b]ecause you see a bird, you do not know it" (p. 350).

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