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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF

ELLIOTT COUES

1842-1899

BY

J. A. ALLEN

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## BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF ELLIOTT COUES.

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ELLIOTT COUES\* was born in the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, September 9, 1842, and died in the Johns Hopkins Hospital, in Baltimore, Maryland, December 25, 1899, at the age of 57 years, the immediate cause of death being a grave surgical operation for an affection of the throat. He was a son of Samuel Elliott and Charlotte (Haven) Coues.

Dr. Coues† came of excellent New England ancestry. The first of the Coues line to settle in America was Peter Coues, great-grandfather of Elliott Coues, who was born in the Parish of Saint Peters, Island of Jersey, Channel Islands, and came to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, about 1735, where he was married November 4 of the same year, and where he died at an advanced age, about 1783. His son, grandfather of the subject of this memoir, was Captain Peter Coues, born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, July 30, 1736, where he died November 29, 1818, at the age of eighty-two years. In early life he was a sea captain, and for a time an officer in the British Navy, but he returned to Portsmouth some time before the beginning of the American Revolution. Here he spent the remainder of his life, becoming a prominent citizen and one of the founders of the Universalist Church of Portsmouth. It is a family tradition that he was at one time sailing master of the famous *Royal George*, which capsize and sank in the roadstead at Spithead, England, in August, 1782. A number of Captain Coues's relatives were also officers in the British Navy.

Dr. Coues's father, Samuel Elliott Coues, was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, June 13, 1797, and died there July 3, 1867. In early life he was a merchant, but later, for many

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\* Pronounced *Kouz*. Cf. the Century Cyclopedia of Names, 1804, p. 285.

† I am greatly indebted to Mr. Joseph Foster, of Portsmouth, N. H., for a very full genealogical history of Coues's ancestry, on which the following brief summary is wholly based.

years, held an appointment in the Patent Office at Washington, where he resided from 1853 to 1866. He was a man of literary tastes, active in humanitarian movements, and for several years was president of the American Peace Society. He was the author of "Mechanical Philosophy" (Boston, 1851) and "Studies of the Earth," etc. (Washington, 1860). It is said of him that he had "a keen perception of the beauties and mysteries of nature and an ever-pervading feeling of philanthropy."

Dr. Coues's ancestry on his mother's side is traced back, on different lines, to John Mason (d. 1635), the original grantee of New Hampshire, to the Appletons and Havens of Massachusetts, and to other distinguished New England families (among them to Governor Thomas Dudley). Charlotte Haven (Ladd) Coues, Dr. Coues's mother, was a direct descendant from Daniel Ladd, who came to New England in 1633-1634, and, after short residences at Ipswich and Salisbury, became one of the original settlers of Haverhill, Massachusetts, where he died in 1693. Coues's mother survived him by a few months, dying at Brookline, Massachusetts, July 4, 1900.

Coues's grandmother, wife of Captain Peter Coues, was Rebecca Elliott, a daughter of Samuel Elliott, who came from Topsham, Devonshire, England, and was married at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, May 6, 1761. This connection is the source of the baptismal name Elliott in the later generations of the Coues family.

It thus appears that Dr. Coues's ancestry was partly French and partly English. His forebears on the English side in America were among the earliest settlers of New England, and belonged to families of distinction, there being among them a former president (Haven, 1749-1806) of Harvard College. It also appears that his immediate predecessors for several generations were all residents of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

As already noted, Dr. Coues's father removed with his family from Portsmouth to Washington in 1853, when Elliott was eleven years old, and this city became the future residence of the younger Coues until his death, except when away on official duties during his nearly twenty years' service in the medical corps of the United States Army. He prepared for college at Gonzaga Seminary, a Jesuit school in Washington, and later



entered Columbian College of that city (afterwards called Columbian University and now known as George Washington University), from which he received the degree of A. B. in 1861 and M. D. from its medical department in 1863. From the same institution he received the honorary degree of A. M. in 1862 and that of Ph. D. in 1869. Here for ten years—1877-1886—he acceptably filled the chair of anatomy.

In 1869 he was chosen to the chair of zoölogy and comparative anatomy at Norwich University, Vermont, which position, however, he was unable to accept.

His military career began in 1862, when he enlisted in the United States Army as a medical cadet; he was promoted to acting assistant surgeon in 1863, and to assistant surgeon in 1864, serving in this capacity till 1881, when he resigned from the army to devote his entire time to scientific and literary pursuits. He was assigned to his first military post at Fort Whipple, Arizona, in March, 1864,\* where he remained for sixteen months, making the journey from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fé, New Mexico, by mail coach, and thence to Fort Whipple on horseback, traveling with the military command to which he was officially attached. During his assignment to Fort Whipple he made a military journey from Fort Whipple to San Pedro, on the coast of southern California, via Fort Mojave and Fort Yuma.† Later his travels in the service of the Government gave him an opportunity to become personally familiar with the physical features of other portions of the West while it was still unchanged by the inroads of civilization. On his return from Fort Whipple he was assigned to Fort Macon, North Carolina,

\* For an interesting sketch, with portrait, of Dr. Coues at this enthusiastic stage of his ornithological career, see a paper by Captain C. A. Curtis, U. S. A. (retired), entitled "Coues at his first Army Post," published in "Bird-Lore" in 1902 (Vol. IV, pp. 5-7), together with an extract from Coues's journal, referring to a day's march in New Mexico (reprinted from the "American Naturalist," Vol. V, June, 1871, pp. 190, 200).

† The ornithological results of his journey from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Whipple and from Fort Whipple to the Pacific coast are given in two papers published in "The Ibis," entitled respectively "Ornithology of a Prairie Journey" (Ibis, April, 1865, pp. 157-165) and "From Arizona to the Pacific" (Ibis, July, 1866, pp. 259-265).

and afterwards to Fort McHenry, Baltimore, Maryland. In 1873 he was ordered to Fort Randall, Dakota, and thence assigned (1873-1876) as surgeon and naturalist to the United States Northern Boundary Commission. From 1876 to 1880 he was detailed as secretary and naturalist to the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, under the late Dr. F. V. Hayden. In 1880 he was again ordered to Arizona, but the surroundings of a post surgeon on the frontier were so incompatible with the prosecution of the scientific work he had then in hand that, failing to receive a more favorable assignment, he resigned his commission and returned to Washington.

Dr. Coes early showed a strong liking for natural history pursuits, and especially for ornithology, to which he later became passionately devoted. His residence in Washington, with free access to the collections of the Smithsonian Institution and intimate association with the late Professor Baird and other leading naturalists connected with this great institution, afforded him the incentive and opportunities for research which he early and enthusiastically embraced. His first technical paper was "A Monograph of the Tringæ of North America," published in the Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in July, 1861 (pp. 170-205), when he was only nineteen years old. This paper was notable for the care and completeness with which the subject was treated, and would have been creditable to an author of much greater experience. It fully foreshadowed the high character of his subsequent work in systematic ornithology.

This paper was followed in the same year by his "Notes on the Ornithology of Labrador,"\* based on field observations and collections made by him on a visit to that country in 1860. This was succeeded the same year by "A Monograph of the Genus *Ægiothus*, with Descriptions of new Species,"† and the following year by a faunistic paper (with D. Webster Prentiss) on the birds of the District of Columbia,‡ and the beginning of a series

\* Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Philadelphia, 1861, pp. 215-257.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 373-390.

‡ Sixteenth Ann. Rept. Smithsonian Institution for 1861 (1862), pp. 309-421.

of monographs (1862-1868) on various groups of water birds, as follows: "Synopsis of the North American Forms of the Colymbidæ and Podicipidæ";\* "Revision of the Gulls of North America";† "A Review of the Terns of North America";‡ "Critical Review of the Family Procellariidæ,"§ and "A Monograph of the Alcidae."|| Here may also be mentioned his "Classification of Water Birds";¶ his "Studies of the Tyrannidæ, Part I. Revision of the Species of Myiarchus";\*\* and his "Material for a Monograph of the Sphenicidæ."†† During this same decade he also published several papers on the anatomy of birds.‡‡

Dr. Coues's writings cover the whole field of ornithology, and, including reviews and short notes on special subjects, number probably more than five hundred titles, but, with the exception of a few revisionary, monographic, and bibliographical papers, deal almost exclusively with the birds of North America north of Mexico. His greatest service to ornithology is, beyond question, his "Key to North American Birds," the first edition of which appeared in 1873 and the fifth and last in 1903, four years after the author's death. This edition was in reality, as respects the general text, the third revised edition, the third and fourth editions being reprints of the second, with the addition of important appendices.

The "Key" was designed as a popular handbook of North

\* Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Philadelphia, Vol. XIV, 1862, pp. 226-233.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 291-312—an abstract of a monograph published in full twelve years later in "Birds of the Northwest," 1874, pp. 689-717.

‡ *Ibid.*, pp. 535-559.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. XVI, 1864, pp. 72-91, 116-144; Vol. XVIII, 1866, pp. 25-33, 184-197.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. XX, 1868, pp. 2-81, figs. 1-16.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXI, 1869, pp. 193-218.

\*\* *Ibid.*, Vol. XXIV, 1872, pp. 56-81.

†† *Ibid.*, pp. 170-212, pls. iv, v.

‡‡ "The Osteology of the *Colymbus torquatus*; with Notes on its Myology." Mem. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist., Vol. I, pt. II, 1866, pp. 131-172, pl. v, and 2 text figures.

Bird's-Eye Views [on the structure of the eye in birds]. American Naturalist, Vol. II, 1868-69, pp. 505-513, 571-583, with illustrations.

Mechanism of Flexion and Extension in Birds' Wings. Proc. American Assoc. Adv. Sci., Vol. XX, 1871 (1872), pp. 278-284, with illustrations.