[Review of the book
*A Concise History of Ornithology*]

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Originally published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society and can be found at: [http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=isis](http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=isis)

Michael Walters. *A Concise History of Ornithology*. 255 pp., illus., bibl., index. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003. $30 (cloth).

Michael Walters, curator of birds at Tring, has written a concise history of ornithology aimed at readers who know something about birds but little or nothing about the history of their study. It makes no claim to present original research and relies heavily on Erwin Stresemann’s classic text on the subject published in 1951 (translated, with an epilogue by Ernst Mayr on American ornithology, in 1975). In the half century since Stresemann wrote his scholarly survey, much work has been done on many of the important ornithologists of the past, as well as many of the key aspects of the history of ornithology. Unfortunately, little of this informs Walters’s text, with the result that it reads like an extended popular encyclopedia article. The central focus is on individuals, and little attention is devoted to institutions, technical factors, or cultural setting.

The study begins in the distant past with a reference to geese in the ancient *I-Ching* and then moves on to various figures in Greece and Rome, a couple in the Middle Ages (e.g., Frederick II of Hohenstaufen), some Renaissance writers, and a few early modern naturalists such as John Ray. Most of the book focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is organized as a sequence of short biographies of individuals who advanced ornithology. A short chapter by John Coulson on ornithology in the twentieth century concludes the text; it is followed by sixty pages of appendixes that give the classification systems for birds from Walter Charleton to Hans Friedrich Gadow. It is difficult to see who will use these tables, but the information is there for those who know something about contemporary classification and might want to see how earlier naturalists arranged birds. Many black-and-white illustrations, mostly portraits of the individuals discussed, accompany the text. There are no credits given for the illustrations, which is peculiar even for a book without footnotes. The bibliography contains mostly primary sources and gives no hint of the extensive literature on the history of ornithology or natural history.

Historians of science will find little in *A Concise History of Ornithology* that is not available in more scholarly form elsewhere. Students of ornithology may enjoy learning about some of the many men who studied birds in the past, but they will miss much of the story of the history of ornithology.

Paul Lawrence Farber


The history of science is not known for its sense of humor. The story of the human body has, in recent years, been largely told as the history of pain and suffering. Scholars of embodiment divide their time between theorizing how oppressive ideologies operate to contain and constrain the unruly bodies of history’s others (women, the mad, the poor, people of color) and staging rhetorical escapes from corporeal confinement via the imaginative transcendence afforded by prosthetic technologies. The work is varied and the debates are heated, but scholars do tend to agree on one thing: the body is not funny, and death is no laughing matter.

Mary Roach wasn’t there the day the historians made up the rules. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* is a history of the dead body that takes as its guiding premise the ideas that the corpse can be very funny indeed and that treating it with a proper irreverence is not only not disrespectful but positively beneficial to humankind. Death, Roach clarifies, is deadly serious. But corpses are not. Their fundamental feature is that they lack dignity. “Being dead is absurd,” Roach writes. “It’s the silliest situation you’ll find yourself in. Your limbs are floppy and uncooperative. Your mouth hangs open. Being dead is unsightly and stinky and embarrassing, and there’s not a damn thing to be done about it” (p. 11).

Roach has two interrelated goals in *Stiff*. The first is simply to feed our insatiable appetite for the macabre. Corpses have done some awfully unusual things in their capacities as crash test