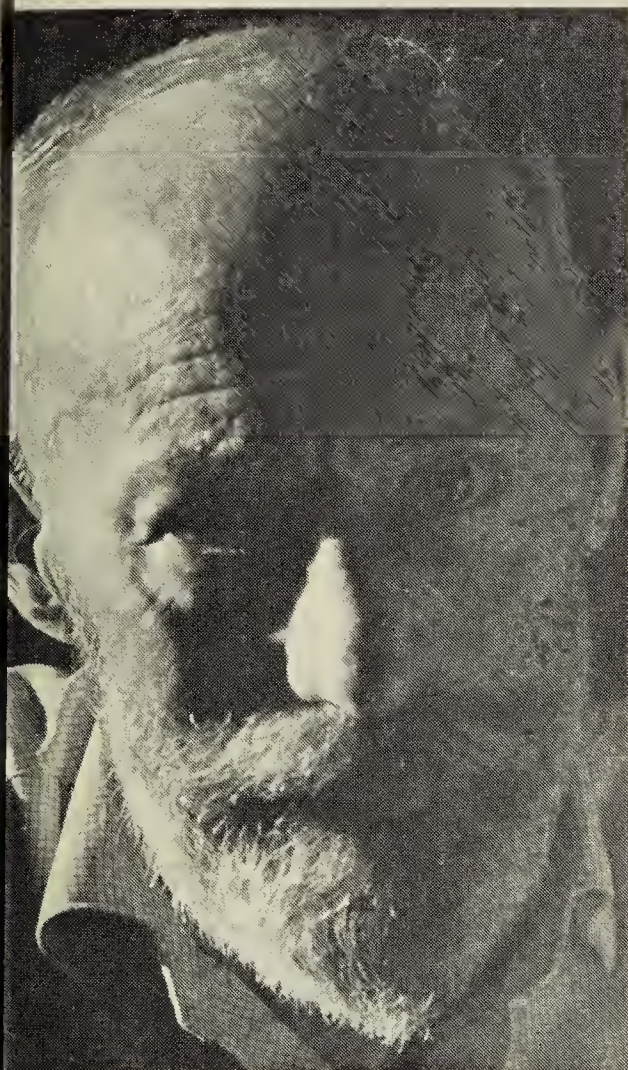


In Memoriam

ROBERT DAVID SYMONS, 1898 - 1973

by GEORGE F. LEDINGHAM*



I first met Bob Symons when he was painting the background for the antelope case in the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History. Though this meeting was in 1952 before our present museum building was built or opened (1955), I remember the occasion very well for I had never before met anyone quite like him. That day he was rather artistically and unconventionally dressed and was surrounded by the paints and rags with which he had been working. While he put away his equipment, Bob talked of what he was doing. The scene he was painting with amazing rapidity was the west block of the Cypress Hills looking south to the Bear Paw Mountains. He described each ranch in this huge area, how many square miles it contained and who owned it. It was obvious to me even in that first meeting that Bob knew the country and loved it, and that he understood well the complex relationships of birds, mammals, plants, and ranchers. I had had my first meeting with a man who was not only an excellent artist but who also could make a person see and understand the complexity of the world, and more particularly the complexity of this province in which we live. I met a new friend that day, and in so doing gained respect for the director of the museum who had recognized his ability.

A friend and supporter of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and an able defender of all living things, Bob Symons died February 1, 1973. We are sad that his physical suffering, which sometimes during the past 7 years was most unbearable, is over. We all join in expressing sympathy to his wife, Hope (a stimulating personality in her own right), and to other members of his family. We are sorrowful that we will not be able to meet with him again, to listen to explanations of his philosophy of life and to discuss and debate many topics with him. An excellent story teller with a vivid memory, he was a man who lived a richly varied life, and he is still with us in the memory of his conversation and in his writings and paintings.

Bob Symons was born in England, son of William Christian Symons, a well-known London Artist. He came to Canada in 1913 at the age of 16 with the resolve to be a cowboy, and ended up in Maple Creek where he waited until a rancher wanting a hand came to town. His books indicate that his memory of this time was vivid. His life in this area was interrupted, however, by the First World War. He joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1915 and served in France with the 217th Battalion. When he returned to Canada, he registered his own brand and started ranching in the Arm River valley. (The coyote case in the museum depicts this area and in-

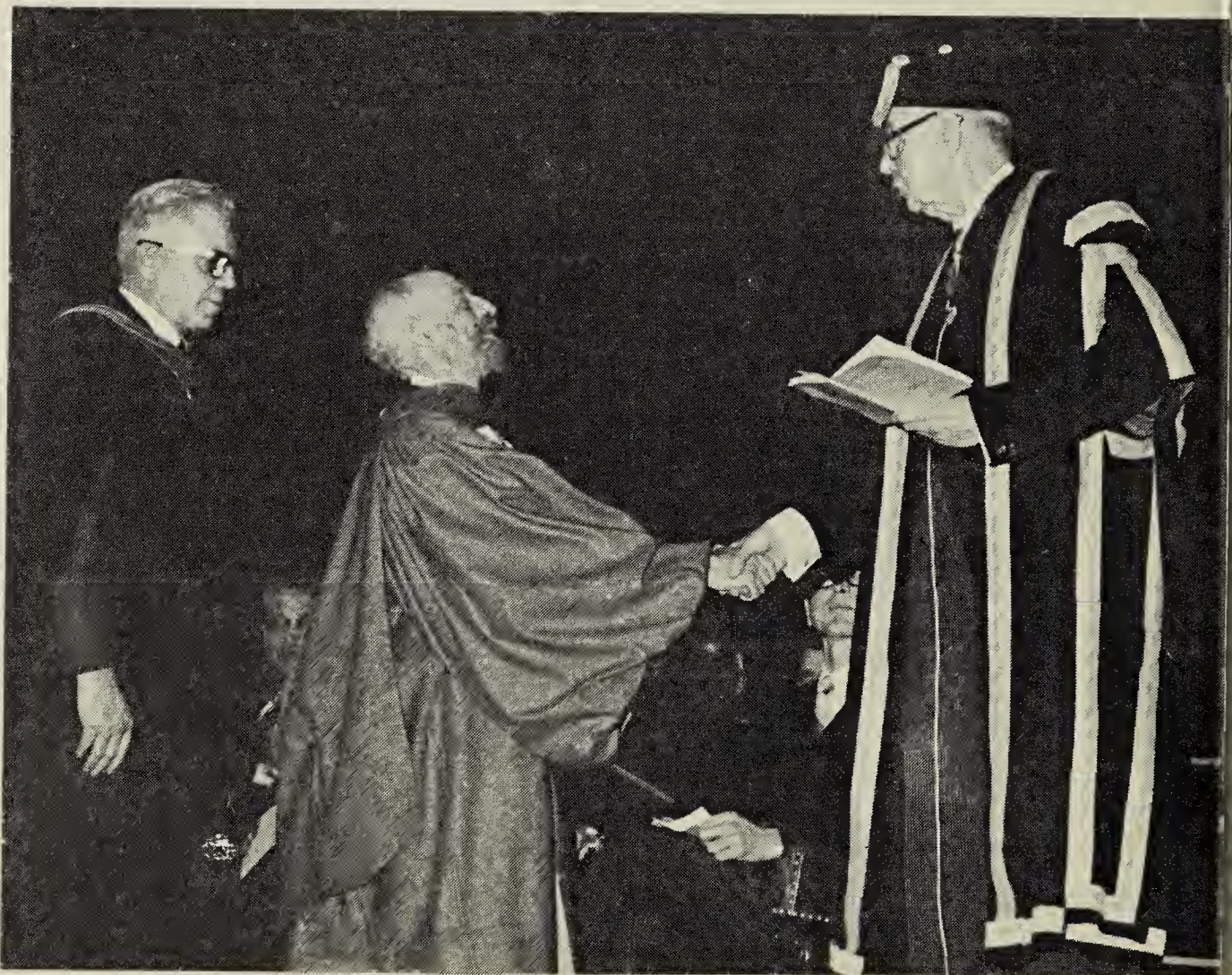
*335 Athol St.,
Regina, Saskatchewan
Received March, 15, 1973.

dicates that his eye saw more than cattle.)

In 1927 Bob Symons became a full-time game warden with the Department of Natural Resources, and his knowledge of Saskatchewan at this time greatly expanded for he was stationed in various parts of the province and finally, in 1939, back in his beloved Cypress Hills. He became a game warden in British Columbia in 1942, but in 1945 he settled on a remote ranch in the valley of the Upper Cache Creek, northwest of Fort St. John, British Columbia. It was during this phase of his career that I had first met him painting in the museum during the winter. In the late fifties when Bob saw his way of life threatened by increasing industrial interests and realized that his health would not allow him to stay on the ranch for long, he sold his land and returned to Saskatchewan. After a winter in the south, spent mostly in Mexico, he opened a studio at Pelican Point near Sifton, but a more serious illness which nearly ended his life early in 1966 forced him to leave the lake and settle in

the village of Sifton. Here, except many periods in hospital, he lived, wrote and visited until a few days before his death.

Following my first meeting with Bob in 1952, I had many visits with him. After that first meeting I had mentioned that first meeting I had mentioned located him in the Cypress Hills, one particular later visit proved to be that he had an incredibly good understanding of all southern Saskatchewan. On this occasion a few of us met to visit with Bob before he left Regina to welcome spring on his ranch in British Columbia. In the course of the evening both Fred Robinson and I projected a few kodachrome transparencies. From the beginning, because of characteristic remarks on the first picture, the activity became a recognition contest. I was amazed at Bob's ability to locate each picture and describe other details of the area outside the limits of the photograph. For example, I had taken a picture from a hill north of Jack Lake not far from where we held our summer meeting last year. The picture did not include any water and I did





these specimens (Gray Jay, Great Horned Owl, Marbled Godwit, Pileated Woodpecker, and Yellow-headed Blackbird). It may even have been this youthful experience which brought him to Saskatchewan in the first place and which inspired what became a life-long concern for conservation. For several years Bob Symons was chairman of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society conservation committee, and the society recognized his contributions in the field of natural history by making him the recipient of its 1965 Conservation Award and by appointing him Honorary President in 1970.

Bob Symons was also a successful writer. His numerous articles in the *Blue Jay*; in daily, weekly and monthly newspapers; and in farm and ranch journals cannot be listed here, but have influenced the opinions of people in western Canada. He created in many individuals a greater respect for all life and a better understanding of the fact that man lives in a complex, interdependent natural world. Bob Symons' first book was *Many Trails*, published in 1963. The second, *Hours and the Birds*, was published in 1967, but, in-

nk there was anything especially distinctive in it, but I did not need to identify it; Bob located the exact spot. In this connection you may remember Bob's article "A typical nesting of Bonaparte's Gull in Saskatchewan" in the June, 1968, *Blue Jay* which was written because birders in Toronto, who claimed that the birds nested only in reeds, would not accept Bob's 1932 discovery of Bonaparte's Gulls' nesting reeds in Lamotte's Swamp.)

After his retirement from ranching, Bob contributed frequently to the *Blue Jay*. Two of the *Blue Jay* cover illustrations are sketches by R. D. Symons: the September 1962 issue shows the coyote in dry southwestern North America, and the December 1970 issue features two wolves feeding at a carcass. The article written by Bob Symons which I refer to most often is in the March 1966 issue. It is entitled "Personal recollections of some early Saskatchewan Naturalists." One person mentioned in that article was Rex Holmes, who had taken mounted specimens of Saskatchewan birds back to England. As a lad of 12 - 16 Bob Symons saw, loved, and began painting



terestingly enough, an earlier draft of this book had actually been written and accepted for publication in England before 1939. Because of a variety of circumstances the contract was finally broken and all the material returned. The SNHS decided to sponsor the publication by giving editorial assistance to Miss F. Halpenny of the University of Toronto Press and by making (jointly with the Saskatchewan Jubilee Corporation) a grant of money to help with the cost of printing the colour plates. *Hours and the Birds* represents 50 years of bird-watching in Saskatchewan. After 1967 Bob Symons wrote three books: *The Broken Snare* (1970); *Still the Wind Blows* (1971); and *Where the Wagon Led* (1973). Two of these, the first and last, are publisher's book of the month selections, a recognition which speaks for itself.

Bob Symons was also an artist of great talent. The "inward eye" that Wordsworth talks about enabled him to reproduce on canvas many scenes which belonged to his early experience. Many of his paintings are in private collections, while his murals and dioramic backgrounds may be seen in four of Saskatchewan's Provincial campgrounds at Maple Creek, Cypress Hills, Moosomin, and Lac la Ronge; and in the Natural History Museum in Regina. Bob used his talent generously and his friends frequently received hand-painted greetings at Christmas-time. I especially prize a picture of a magpie received this last holiday season because at that time Bob was almost completely confined to bed. His pictures show expert knowledge and understanding of his subject and a true sense of composition. One of my favorites is the jacket illustration for *The Broken Snare* (see review of this book, *Blue Jay* pp. 93 - 96, June 1970); another is the painting of the marsh wrens reproduced in colour in *Hours and the Birds*.

Bob Symons received many awards during his lifetime, but I should like to mention one which I know he especially cherished. In October, 1970, the University of Saskatchewan, Regina, conferred on him an honorary doctor of laws degree for his contribution to the

people of Saskatchewan and to the (*Blue Jay*, December, 1970). In her dress presenting Bob Symons for honorary degree, Margaret Belcher emphasized this point to the assembly.

Many people of varying beliefs visited Bob during the last 10 years of his life. His own religion showed in his love of all living things, a love which compelled him to speak against polluters, modern technologists and those who refused to accept the ideal law. He had no close association with any particular religious faith but could talk to adherents, and appreciate the good points, of all faiths. (The fact that his funeral and memorial services were conducted by ministers of the various denominations substantiates this point.)

Robert David Symons will be remembered, then, in many different ways. He was a cattleman who understood the wolf; he was a cowboy who could stop for a smoke and take time to listen to and sketch a meadowlark. He was a man who abhorred technologically produced luxuries because these in his view contribute little or nothing to the spiritual nourishment of man.

I can think of no more appropriate way to conclude this brief tribute than by quoting Bob Symons himself. Towards the end of *Many Trails* he says: "In the race for money to buy happiness, time . . . robs us not only of our youth, our days, our years, but robs us also of the opportunities to attain the greater happiness we cannot buy — a contented mind in tune with nature". And again, "the message of the silent places is the key to a proper understanding of all the others."

At length the summer's eternity
is ushered in by the cackle
of the flicker among the oaks
on the hill-side, and a new
dynasty begins with calm security.

— Henry David Thoreau
