

Hunting the wren. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. 234 pp, US\$30.00.

Subtitled "Transformation of Bird to Symbol", the book is a study of the relationships between man and animals and revolves around the ancient ritual hunt carried out in some parts of Europe of the diminutive yet noisy wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*. In the first chapter Lawrence explores animal symbolism and sets the scene for subsequent descriptions of the intricate ceremony associated with, and the reasons behind, the killing of wrens. She outlines the biology of the species and provides an almost excessive collection of legends, myths and folklore related to the bird. Its significance to the Druids, the hatred displayed by the early Christians, stories of its betrayal of Christ and of St. Stephen (who was stoned on the 26 December, the day of the wren hunt), Aesop's fables, liaisons between robins and wrens and much more are all included. The author's investigation into every detail of the relationship between man through the ages and this little bird is impressive (there are 19 pages of references). We discover how the wren was admired for its cleverness but loathed as being deceitful, how it was revered for its pluckiness and for its reproductive prowess, for the contrast between its tiny frame and its enormous spirit, for its association with good and with evil, with sun and moon.

The close links between man and wren in pre-industrial times created a compelling and powerful symbol which was based on knowledge of the bird's biology by country people, an understanding long forgotten today, and a belief that relationships between man and nature shaped lives and guided human actions. The wren was protected except for the day of the hunt and the author suggests that the ceremony, with all its associated complexity of ritual and lore, represents something lost to the modern westernized world. This loss is reflected in our general lack of care for or empathy with the environment and an emptiness of spirituality in ourselves. If we are to conserve species and habitats we must return to a feeling of being an integral part of our environment and not see ourselves as outside of nature, as remote manipulators of other species.