George Meléndez Wright: The Fight for Wildlife and Wilderness in the National Parks

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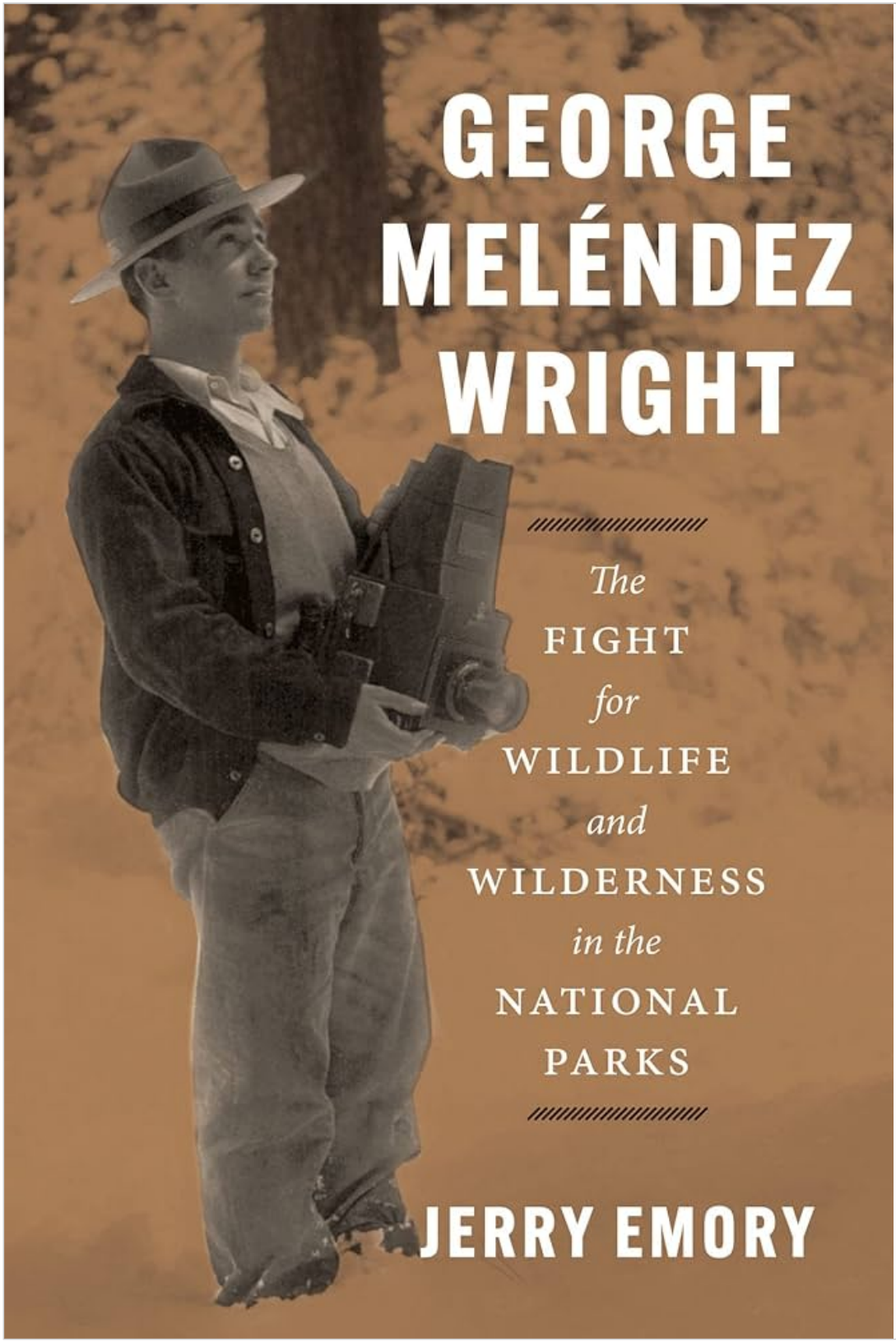

BOOK REVIEW

Jerry Emory. 2023. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, USA. 254 pages (hard cover). $28.00.
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For many years I had heard references to the George Wright Society and the George Wright Forum. When this book was published, I seized upon a chance to learn a bit about just what both were but, more importantly, to learn something about George Wright himself. I am glad I took advantage of the opportunity to read the book and write this review. This volume is a short, albeit detailed, biography of an individual that played a prominent role in the conservation of natural resources, and particularly wildlife conservation, in the United States.

George M. Wright, a student of Joseph Grinnell at the University of California, Berkeley, played an important role in elevating wildlife conservation to a higher level than had existed in the National Park Service (NPS) prior to his rise to prominence. This book provides information about Wright's early life in San Francisco, the death of his father at Wright's young age, the separation of family members, and other details that may be of no special interest to those involved with the historical aspects of wildlife conservation. Nevertheless, the story evolves from there, beginning with his early interest in wildlife and, particularly, in birds.

Wright quickly rose through the ranks of a governmental bureaucracy, having begun work with the NPS as a Naturalist Ranger at Yosemite National Park in 1927 when only 23 years-of-age. During that appointment, he advocated strongly for a survey of wildlife in the nation's national parks, primarily in the western half of the nation. Jerry Emory has described Wright's obsession with wildlife and the importance of wildlife conservation per se very aptly throughout the book, which consists of a foreword by a former director of the NPS, an author's preface, 12 chapters, and an epilogue. A total of 595 detailed references substantiates the material presented, and are grouped together by section or chapter, at the end of the book. It is clear that Emory's research was thorough and the sources for information included were extremely well documented.

In reading the book, I learned just who George Wright was, and gained an appreciation for the forward-thinking ideas he sought to bring to wildlife conservation. The 12 chapters, each addressing specific parts of Wright's career, and each delving into his persona, his thought processes, and the influence that he had on various aspects—and the development—of wildlife conservation as NPS policy. Additionally, Wright was a realist. For example, he would ask how you would restore fauna within a national park, and then at what level, when the question of what represented a pristine situation had yet to be determined, and then raise the question of how to manage contemporary influences (i.e., human visitation) within the parks, which inevitably created problems (Emory 2023:44).

In this short, informative, and well-documented book, author Jerry Emory has captured much of the early history of wildlife conservation in the NPS. The prominent role that George Wright played in developing the program, and its evolution from that of ensuring wildlife was available for the enjoyment of the public to the visionary objective with the conservation of wildlife and habitat as a primary function is detailed throughout the text. During his professional career, which lasted a scant six years, Wright rose from the rank of Ranger Naturalist to become the first Chief of the Wildlife Division, a remarkable achievement for someone only 30 years of age. During his career, he and his colleagues published two seminal works (Wright et al. 1933; Wright and Thompson 1934), both of which had a tremendous influence on wildlife science and management within (and outside of) the national parks; the importance of these publications is emphasized repeatedly throughout the book.

George Wright was acutely aware that boundaries of America's national parks and monuments in the

early twentieth century were not created by wildlife biologists but, by a consortium of “congressmen, land managers, and an assortment of private sector allies” (Anderson 2000:25), a problem that Wright took issue with and sought to change (Emory 2023:62). Wright advocated for what some would describe as an ‘ecosystem approach’ to wildlife conservation, the importance of which was realized by other early advocates. Indeed, Clarke (1913) argued that an ideal system would be to create such reservations close enough to each other that wildlife could pass from one to another and thereby prevent the natural outcome of inbreeding. Similarly, Leopold (1921) emphasized that protected areas must be of adequate size and further that, “…many animal species … do not seem to thrive as detached islands of population” and that many protected areas (even national parks up to a million acres in size) were not large enough to retain their natural predators, or to preclude diseases contracted from domestic livestock (Leopold 1949). Unfortunately, the aforementioned concerns and admonitions of Clarke, Wright, and Leopold—seem to have fallen on deaf ears, and the consortium of congressmen, land managers, and private-sector allies described by Anderson (2000) largely continues to override wildlife conservation concerns. This is exemplified in the way that desert systems have been carved up into tiny samplings of ‘wilderness’ within and outside units of the NPS and especially on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, as evidenced by the politically expedient lack of action to allow effective management of feral horses and asses, and the politically correct push for ‘clean energy’ (Bleich 2018, 2022; Bleich et al. 2023).

Had George Wright not died tragically and unexpectedly at the young age of 31, Jerry Emory provides substantial evidence that Wright would have had a powerful and positive influence on many of the environmental laws that since have been proliferated by politicians, and that influence likely would have resulted in vastly improved legislation. For example, Wright’s emphasis on the appropriate scale for habitat conservation is evidenced in his efforts to bring together state fish and game commissions, sporting groups, and various federal agencies, and his admonition that the “… welfare of animals within the park is vitally influenced by the external factors” (Emory 2023:120). To that I add, however, that the management and conservation of large mammals, which frequently require thousands of hectares of habitat outside of such protected areas to fulfill their life history requirements, is influenced profoundly by activities that are precluded (or allowed) within those protected areas (Bleich 2005, 2018), and I suspect George Wright would have agreed.

I learned a great deal from this book, especially about the early history of several federal agencies and, especially, the NPS. If Wright had lived, I believe he would have had every bit the influence on the field of wildlife conservation and management that did Aldo Leopold and several other luminaries. I was acquainted with several of Wright’s contemporaries—E. Raymond Hall, Lowell Sumner, and Gale Monson—mentioned in the book and am well aware of the contributions of many more—Joseph Dixon, Joseph Grinnell, Ira Gabrielson, Tracy Storer, Paul Errington, Walter Taylor, Clarence Cottam, Wendell McAtee, and others—that were active during the early 20th century and doing work similar to that of Aldo Leopold. If not for the fact that these early advocates of conservation, and George Wright in particular, lacked the benefit of a personal biographer, their contributions likely would have been recognized much sooner and more widely (McCullough 1998).

The book is very well written, extensively documented, and very easy to read. The editing was superb, and I found only one small error: on page 76, mammalogist was misspelled as mammologist. I suggest the book become mandatory reading for all students entering the field of wildlife conservation. Wright either went to school with, studied under, collaborated with, or worked for many of the best-known names in our field; far too many people are unaware of the historical contributions made by George

Wright and his contemporaries. Jerry Emory has taken an important step toward filling that void.

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