

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 1983

## Review of *Elliott Coues: Naturalist and Frontier Historian* By Paul Russell Cutright and Michael J. Brodhead

Gary E. Moulton

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, gmoulton1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Moulton, Gary E., "Review of *Elliott Coues: Naturalist and Frontier Historian* By Paul Russell Cutright and Michael J. Brodhead" (1983). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1687.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1687>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Elliott Coues: Naturalist and Frontier Historian.* By Paul Russell Cutright and Michael J. Brodhead. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981. Illustrations, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. 509 pp. \$28.50.

Vain, petty, vengeful, arrogant, and austere would be appropriate words to describe Elliott Coues. Yet, on occasion, he unselfishly aided a promising career and took up unpopular causes such as women's rights. Trained as a physician and employed as an army surgeon during much of his career, Coues nevertheless used much of his time to observe, study, read, and write about birds. Indeed, Coues (pronounced "cows") was one of America's outstanding ornithologists. He was also a prolific writer with more than six hundred titles to his credit, including a seminal work of taxonomic organization, *Key to North American Birds* (1872).

Coues spent a large part of his military career on the Great Plains and completed some of his most important bird studies there, including *Field Ornithology* (1874), *Birds of the Northwest* (1874), and *Birds of the Colorado Valley* (1878). While stationed in Arizona, he gathered many specimens of animals that were virtually unknown to science at the time and shipped them to the Smithsonian Institution.

Coues's associations with the plains extend beyond his military assignments and his descriptions of native fauna. As this book's title indicates, he was also a frontier historian. His historical editing began in 1892, when the publisher Francis P. Harper asked him to work up a reissue of the 1814 narrative edition of Lewis and Clark's journals. Coues's original intention was to publish a verbatim version of the first edition while adding annotation, a bibliography, and an index. But he "rediscovered" the original journals of the captains in the archives of the American Philosophical Society and began to extend his footnotes by quoting liberally from the journals. In fact, in his edition the notes nearly outrun the text. When using the journals he tampered with them unmercifully, adding numerous and long interlinear notations, reordering the pages to fit a chronological sequence, and even making a covert copy. Besides this cavalier handling of the journals themselves he made changes in the wording, grammar, and spelling when quoting from them. Coues was awed neither by these original manuscripts nor by the journals of other western personalities that he edited, including Zebulon Montgomery Pike, Alexander Henry, David Thompson, Charles Larpenteur, Jacob Fowler, and Francisco Garcés. One historian noted that Coues's comments "are to be found on some of the nation's most valuable documents" (p. 410). Nonetheless, his annotation of these journals is still highly regarded, particularly for his identifications of plant and animal species—aspects disregarded before his time.

The sources for this biography come largely from the papers of Coues's correspondents and from Coues's "Book of Dates." The latter item was a serendipitous find by the authors. Coues prepared this chronological catalog of his life in 1896, noting professional events and adding lively tidbits of personal information. From these candid revelations we learn the names of his extramarital partners over a lifetime of philandering and of an incidence of body-snatching while in medical college. The book of dates reveals a fair degree of audacity, for few would be so shameless in print.

One annoying feature of the book is the authors' method of citing Coues's correspondence. A note is simply added to a correspondent's biographical sketch, giving the general location of his papers. References to individual letters are nonexistent. Since the authors do not date much of the correspondence, it would be nearly impossible to locate a particular piece. To compound the error, the authors fail to provide a category for manuscript sources in the bibliography.

Despite these flaws, this is a solid biography of an entertaining personality and an important figure in American science. The authors' research is exhaustive, and the section of the bibliography listing Coues's extensive publications is a significant contribution. The concise biographies of Coues's associates are another useful feature of the book. Although it is not likely to find a place on private bookshelves, the work will be welcomed by ornithologists, frontier historians, and western history enthusiasts.

GARY E. MOULTON

Center for Great Plains Studies

Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

University of Nebraska-Lincoln