Florida Atlantic University Libraries

Arthur and Mata Jaffe Collection: Books as Aesthetic Objects

Florida Atlantic University Libraries *Year* 2005

A Field of Owls: The Burrowing Owl Observed

Frank T. Brogan* William Miller† Zita M. Cael‡
John Cutrone** Terri Berns††

*Florida Atlantic University,
†Florida Atlantic University,
‡Florida Atlantic University,
**Florida Atlantic University,
††Florida Atlantic University, tberns@fau.edu

A FIELD OF OWLS

A Field of Owls

THE
BURROWING
OWL
OBSERVED

MINERVA: THE PRESS AT WIMBERLY
BOCA RATON 2005

SILENCE, YE WOLVES!
WHILE RALPH TO CYNTHIA HOWLS,
AND MAKES NIGHT HIDEOUS—
ANSWER HIM, YE OWLS!

from Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*

HOW APPROPRIATE THAT the millionth book to be added to Florida Atlantic University's extensive library collections is a small but important volume devoted to a small but important subject: the burrowing owl.

This resourceful bird provides a metaphor for FAU in many ways. Like the owls, the University grew and prospered in a physical environment that some might consider inhospitable. The owls are often called "feisty," and this can also be said of FAU, which has grown from a small, local institution to a multi-campus university whose accomplishments are becoming known around the world. Owls are renowned for their wisdom, an image that fits the University well.

Over the years, a strong bond has formed between the burrowing owls

and the University. When a new logo was being designed for FAU in 2004, faculty, students, alumni and other friends of the University were polled on their preference for a mascot. In overwhelming numbers, respondents said they wanted to keep the owl, which had been unofficially adopted by FAU's intercollegiate teams in the 1970s. "The owl has represented FAU for many years, and the school shouldn't abandon it," one person wrote.

That relationship has now been formalized and will be maintained for all time to come. FAU is proud to claim the tough little bird described in these pages as its own.

FRANK T. BROGAN 81
PRESIDENT
FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY


ATHENE
CUNICULARIA

Encountering Owls

WILLIAM MILLER

TAKING MY DAUGHTER to the Slattery Day Care Center at Florida Atlantic University in 1988, I saw a pair of burrowing owls nesting by the sidewalk. Or rather, standing outside their burrow, which was in the grass beside the sidewalk.

They stared blankly at me, as burrowing owls are wont to do, oblivious to my existence. Their dreams were of grasshoppers, mice, scorpions, frogs, snakes, perhaps a bird or larger rodent. They were owls, after all, and one's reach should exceed its grasp.

They did not care about me, or the little children, or the university. They did not care about urban blight or Iraq or racial profiling. Rather innocent, they did not even know that they were the mascot of the school. Or that they were a threatened species. They did not know that feral cats, fed and supported by well-meaning

do-gooders, would come prowling and eat them. They did not know that the school would adopt them as mascot, first the *Owls*, then the *Fighting Owls*, and ultimately the *Big, Bad, Burly Owls*. They did not know that new construction sites on campus would some day be labeled as YOUR LATEST OWL BURROW. Had they known, they would have laughed. Buildings would not work as burrows for them.

They were not burly owls; they were delicate little creatures who lived in the ground. *Speotyto cunicularia*, or perhaps more broadly, *Athene cunicularia*, they were just 8 inches long, with tall legs, relatively speaking, the better to spot insects in the short brown grass. They were short and brown themselves, with white spots, like little feathered footballs on stilts; they blended in.

They had no defense against the cats, but they tried. They were "cunicularia," "little miners." They dug holes, or if possible inhabited whatever ready-made tortoise hole or animal burrow or natural depression they could find. They found

organic matter and lined their burrows with it. Perhaps the scent would throw off predators. Sometimes, it worked. In any case, it would attract tasty bugs. They laid half a dozen little white eggs and foraged day and night to feed their brood. When their hatchlings were young, they would stand guard at the mouth of the burrow, and threaten a predator with their claws.

For fun, they stood stock still and stared. And then, one day, the two owls were gone.

Family

ZITA M. CAEL

BEFORE THEY WERE named mascots, the owls came to campus for the runways. The 1200 acres were flat and open, as airfields are, and the owls could spot their prey easily across the tie-down strips and the unused concrete expanses that had gone to war in the early 40s. This had been a grassy expanse early in the century, an agricultural crop dusting strip that donned the uniform when duty called. And as they do, field mice had congregated in the adjoining brush, and stayed on when troops no longer reported for training.

Wars end and bases close, but the ecology of a place sticks to it like damp leaves to bare skin after a hurricane. The field mice prospered along the runways, in the brush, and rattlesnakes and prickly pear cactus spread across the fields. Owls came to hunt the mice and raise their young. Occasional road rallies in the 50s didn't

displace them, nor did the fledgling university's first buildings in the 60s. Dorm students would park near the nests, and watch the parents duck into the mouth of an abandoned snake hole, flinging sand behind them by the claw-full. Several weeks later, a little family stood in the sun, watching for field mice, their favorite meal. The adults stood guard at the burrow entrance, glaring and flinching at the grounds workers and their brush mowers, short lengths of chain wearing the weeds and grasses down to deprive snakes and mice of cover. In time, the owls learned to tolerate the mowing machines, monitoring their work from the street signs, and swooping down on the fleeing mice.

It was a different campus then, the furthest thing west of town, with sandstorms, and flooding rains, and few, narrow roads that wound quite differently around the south end of campus to the woods and fields beyond. Most students lived off campus, or had an easy commute to parents or family in West Palm, or Miami, or Hollywood. The campus, weekends, housed more owls than students. There were larks here then, and bird song carried in the wind around the buildings. Watching owls was a favorite entertainment. Not till the 70s did they become our mascot. At first, they were rendered with a few deft strokes as a decoration on T-shirts and mugs. As we grew, and took ourselves more seriously, the cartoon owls of Steve Kika were replaced by a serene rendering chosen from a student competition. Then came the stylish suite of owls' wingspans, and perfectly circular owl faces, followed by scowling sporty owls with talons unfurled. Through it all, the campus owls posed patiently for student photographers, and environmentalists, and artists. Their cousins live at many southern airports, and pose patiently for news photographers and Sunday afternoon families, and duck the backwash from commuter jets, and snatch up imprudent field mice and grass snakes to feed their own families.

Home

JOHN CUTRONE

THE OWLS AND I met on a daily basis in 1994. As a somewhat reluctant ceramics major here at FAU, I was struggling to find my way in clay. The owls were just there, keeping an eye on all of us who worked in the old T-buildings, those early 20th Century relics of our university's past. They watched and reminded us with their steady stare that we were the ones who were just passing through, we were the intruders in their territory.

Their landscape? Flat, sandy fields, an occasional low, sprawling cactus, and a grid of worn, decades-old roads that cut the fields into proper squares but had no real purpose anymore. Stop signs had faded into irrelevancy; there was no one out there but a few of us students in an old broken down building and an occasional tractor from the university's Grounds department.

The grass in the fields was often cut low, but then there were spells when the grass would be left to grow—different theories, we conjectured, about what was best for the owls. The mowing, we decided, probably disturbed them, but the tall grass would endanger them by keeping predators hidden. We figured there was a board somewhere on campus made up of environmental scientists and biologists who were making these recommendations and decisions. "Cut the grass in the owl habitat twice weekly," the Board would sanction, and the Grounds crew would. In reality, it was probably a case of everyone just doing the best they could.

When the fields were cropped low, we would see the owls standing sentinel at their burrows: small, stocky creatures, brooding, watching everything that needed watching. When the fields were left alone, and the windswept grass became like green liquid, the owls would broaden their horizons. They would leave home, venture forth. One took to flying over to our rickety building to set up his watch

atop a wall-mounted air conditioner. He kept a close eye on all of us who came in and out of that building. He watched us glaze pots, and he watched us eat mulberries off the tree by the canal. He watched over our kilns, even as flames rose out of the chimneys. He watched us smash the pots we didn't like, and he watched us climb through a broken window to get into the building on weekends so we could make more.

The building was condemned not long after, and I graduated not much longer after that. The building was gone, and I was gone; even the mulberry tree was gone.

The owls, though: they seem to be holding their own. Ten years later, we are again meeting on a daily basis, though the contact now is less personal, less intimate. They are in their protected zone, I am in mine. As I drive past their burrows, I slow down, and when the fields are cropped low, we regard each other. More often than not, it's me who looks away first. I'm the one just passing through.

WILLIAM MILLER,
Director of Libraries, came to FAU in 1987. He believes firmly that burrowing owls, like all birds, are descendants of dinosaurs, and frequently tries to make his point by ordering dinosaur at restaurants, much to the befuddlement of waiters.

TERRI BERNS,
Director of Cultural Affairs and Communications for FAU Libraries, came to FAU in 2000. She is an alumna of the Graphic Studio of the University of South Florida, and is delighted to have taken up the pen again for something other than press releases and newsletters.

ZITA M. CAEL,
Head of Special Collections & Archives, came to FAU as an upper division English major in 1968, and has since failed to escape the realm of *Athene cunicularia floridana*.

JOHN CUTRONE,
Book Arts Coordinator, returned to FAU in 2001, after learning the crafts of letterpress printing and bookbinding in other strange green lands.

A FIELD OF OWLS
was printed letterpress at the studios of Convivio Bookworks in LakeWorth, Florida, by John Cutrone & Seth Thompson. The types are Perpetua, and the illustrations were printed from copper plates made from the original pen & ink renderings by Terri Berns. 100 copies were printed on Twinrocker handmade paper in the Summer of 2005 and bound by hand by Paula Marie Gourley at Lilyhouse Studio Editions, Eugene, Oregon. Copy number one was specially bound and boxed by PMG: it is the one-millionth volume to be added to the collection of Florida Atlantic University Libraries, and will be placed at the Arthur & Mata Jaffe Collection: Books as Aesthetic Objects at the Wimberly Library, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. The version you are now reading was created for digital viewing.