



Ernest Thompson Seton

Biography

Ernest Evan Thompson (1860-1946) was born on August 14, 1860, in South Shields, England, the eighth of the ten sons of Alice Snowdon Thompson and Joseph Logan Thompson. In 1901, Ernest Evan Thompson changed his name legally to Ernest Thompson Seton.

Joseph Thompson owned a small fleet of merchant sailing ships, but when forced out of business by competition from steam-powered ships in 1866, he emigrated to Canada with his family to become a farmer. On the farm near Lindsay, Ontario, Seton developed the interest in wild animals that became the basis of his career as a naturalist, wildlife artist and nature writer.

The Thompsons were unsuccessful as farmers and, after four years, they moved to Toronto. Here, Seton discovered the wildlife of Toronto Island and the Don River valley. He described his Don River valley adventures in *Two Little Savages* (1903).

In 1876, Seton was apprenticed to the Toronto portrait painter, John Colin Forbes, and began night classes at the Ontario School of Art and Design. Although he won a seven-year scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Arts in January 1881, he abandoned his studies after only seven months and returned to Canada, settling on his brother Arthur's homestead in the province of Manitoba. Seton published his research on prairie wildlife in several scientific articles and texts, including *Mammals of Manitoba* (1886) and *Birds of Manitoba* (1891), which resulted in his appointment as *Provincial Naturalist* by the government of Manitoba.

Seton completed his art training between 1890 and 1896 at the Académie Julian in Paris where he met the writer Grace Gallatin, the daughter of a San Francisco financier. They

were married in New York in June 1896 and settled near Greenwich, Connecticut, USA. Their only child was Anya Seton, the novelist. The marriage ended in divorce in 1935.

In 1898, Seton published his first book of nature writing, *Wild Animals I Have Known*. Lavishly illustrated with Seton's unique drawings and paintings, the book was an instant success, and Seton went on tour, reading from his work and showing slides of his illustrations. For the next 45 years, Seton usually published at least one book per year, including many additional books of nature writing (see the list of Seton's publications below).

Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* was one of the first examples of the modern approach to nature writing. During the early 1900s, Seton and other authors, including the Canadian, Charles GD Roberts, and the American, Jack London, began to write popular, fictionalised stories about animals, giving them names and describing them as individuals with personalities and the ability to reason, adapt, learn and teach. This approach to nature writing conflicted with the traditional 19th century scientific view of animals as creatures incapable of conscious thought and only able to behave in ways governed by their inherited instincts. This conflict inspired the American literary debate known as the *nature fakers controversy*.

The *nature fakers controversy* began in 1903 when the famous American naturalist/philosopher, John Burroughs, published an article titled "Real and Sham Natural History" in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. This article accused Seton, Roberts, London and other nature writers of "fraud" because, in Burroughs' view, they were deliberately misleading the public for financial gain by depicting animals behaving in ways that were "fantastical".

John Muir (the so-called *Father of National Parks*), President Theodore Roosevelt (who coined the term, *nature fakers*) and other important American environmental and political figures of the day, wrote articles supporting Burroughs' position. In response, authors wrote articles defending the accuracy of the animal behaviour depicted in their nature writing. These conflicting articles were a common feature of the public press for six years. The publicity given to the *nature fakers controversy* undermined the popularity of nature writing during this period. Readers began to distrust the truthfulness of nature writing because its authors, regarded as mere amateur naturalists, were being criticised by professional scientists. However, during the same period, scientific understanding of animal behaviour was changing under the influence of evolutionary theory and sympathy for the suffering of domestic animals and concern about the extinction of wild animals was growing.

In the preface to *The Watchers of the Trails: A Book of Animal Life* (1904), Charles GD Roberts responded to Burroughs' accusation of fraud by acknowledging that his stories were "avowedly fiction". However, Roberts continued: "They are, at the same time, true, in that the material of which they are moulded consists of facts". Today, the facts of animal consciousness and intelligence are no longer in dispute.

Instead of an explicit response to Burroughs' criticism, Seton endeavoured to demonstrate his credentials as an expert field naturalist by investing five years in researching and writing the two-volume work, *Life Histories of Northern Animals*, which was published in 1909. This work re-established the credibility of Seton's nature writing. After Seton published an enlarged edition of the *Life Histories of Northern Animals*, as *Lives of Game Animals* (in four volumes) (1925–1928), he was, ironically, awarded the *John Burroughs Memorial Society's* Bronze Medal.

In addition to his accomplishments as a naturalist, wildlife artist and nature writer, Seton created the *Woodcraft Indians* organisation in 1902 to encourage boys to participate in outdoor activities. In 1904, he presented a copy of his *Birchbark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians* to Sir Robert Baden-Powell, asking him to help popularize *Woodcraft* summer camps in England. Instead, Baden-Powell created his own organisation, the *Boy Scouts*, in 1908, incorporating most of the games and activities Seton had included in the *Birchbark Roll*. When it appeared that Baden-Powell intended to establish his *Boy Scouts* organisation in the United States, Seton joined forces with other youth leaders to form the *Boy Scouts of America* in 1910, and he became the first *Chief Scout*. However, five years later, during WWI, Seton was forced out of the *Boy Scouts of America* because he was a pacifist.

In 1930, Seton settled on a 930 ha tract of land near Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA. Here he married his second wife, Julia Moss Buttree and, with her, founded the *Seton College of Indian Wisdom* (later the *Seton Institute of Indian Lore*). For the next ten years, the Setons conducted summer courses in arts and crafts, outdoor activities and leadership skills.

Seton published his autobiography in 1940 and his last animal story, *Santana, the Hero Dog of France*, in 1945. He continued to write and lecture until two months before his death on October 23, 1946.

Further Reading

Keller, Betty 1984. *Black Wolf: The Life of Ernest Thompson Seton*. Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver BC.

Seton, Ernest Thompson, 1978. *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist: The Autobiography of Ernest Thompson Seton* (first published in 1940). Arno Press, New York NY.

Published Works

Copies of some of Seton's works, including *Wild Animals I Have Known*, can be read online or freely downloaded from Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org>).

Mammals of Manitoba (1886)

Birds of Manitoba (1891)

How to Catch Wolves (1894)

Studies in the Art Anatomy of Animals (1896)

Wild Animals I Have Known (1898)

The Trail of the Sandhill Stag (1899)

The Wild Animal Play for Children (musical) (1900)

The Biography of a Grizzly (1900)

Tito: The Story of the Coyote That Learned How (1900)

Bird Portraits (1901)

Lives of the Hunted (1901)

Twelve Pictures of Wild Animals (1901)

Krag and Johnny Bear (1902)

How to Play Indian (1903)

Two Little Savages (1903)

How to Make a Real Indian Teepee (1903)

How Boys Can Form a Band of Indians (1903)

The Red Book (1904)

Monarch, the Big Bear of Tallac (1904)

Woodmyth & Fable (1905)

Animal Heroes (1905)

The Birchbark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians (1906)

The Natural History of the Ten Commandments (1907)

Fauna of Manitoba (1909)

Biography of a Silver Fox (1909)
Life-Histories of Northern Animals (two volumes) (1909)

Boy Scouts of America: Official Handbook,
with Sir Baden-Powell (1910)

The Forester's Manual (1910)
The Arctic Prairies (1911)
Rolf in the Woods (1911)
The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore (1912)
The Red Lodge (1912)
Wild Animals at Home (1913)
The Slum Cat (1915)
Legend of the White Reindeer (1915)
The Manual of the Woodcraft Indians (1915)
Wild Animal Ways (1916)
Woodcraft Manual for Girls (1916)
The Preacher of Cedar Mountain (1917)
Woodcraft Manual for Boys; the Sixteenth Birch Bark Roll (1917)
The Woodcraft Manual for Boys; the Seventeenth Birch Bark Roll (1918)
The Woodcraft Manual for Girls; the Eighteenth Birch Bark Roll (1918)
Sign Talk of the Indians (1918)
The Laws and Honours of the Little Lodge of Woodcraft (1919)
The Brownie Wigwam: The Rules of the Brownies (1921)
The Buffalo Wind (1921)
Woodland Tales (1921)
The Book of Woodcraft (1921)
The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore (1922)
Bannertail: The Story of a Grey Squirrel (1922)
Manual of the Brownies, 6th edition (1922)
The Ten Commandments in the Animal World (1923)
Animals (1926)
Animals Worth Knowing (1928)
Lives of Game Animals (four volumes) (1925–1928)
Blazes on the Trail (1928)
Krag, the Kootenay Ram and Other Stories (1929)
Billy the Dog That Made Good (1930)
Cute Coyote and Other Stories (1930)

Lobo, Bingo, the Pacing Mustang (1930)
Famous Animal Stories (1932)
Animals Worth Knowing (1934)
Johnny Bear, Lobo and Other Stories (1935)
The Gospel of the Redman, with Julia Seton (1936)
Biography of an Arctic Fox (1937)
Great Historic Animals (1937)
Mainly about Wolves (1937)
Pictographs of the Old Southwest (1937)
Buffalo Wind (1938)
Trail and Camp-Fire Stories (1940)
Trail of an Artist-Naturalist:
The Autobiography of Ernest Thompson Seton (1940)
Santanna, the Hero Dog of France (1945)
The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton (1949)
Ernest Thompson Seton's America (1954)
Animal Tracks and Hunter Signs (1958)
The Worlds of Ernest Thompson Seton (1976)