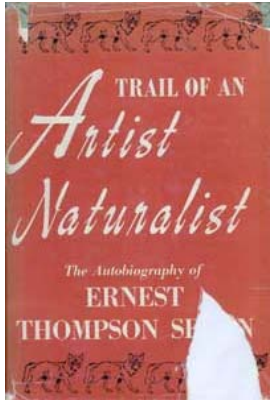


Trail of an Artist Naturalist

by Ernest Thompson Seton



I happened across this volume in a used bookstore while on a recent trip, and snatched it up at once. I recognized the author's name from a book I read many times over as a child at the public library: *Wild Animals I Have Known*. Here, in *Trail of an Artist Naturalist*, is Ernest Thompson Seton's autobiography. Seton was the son of Scots immigrants who settled on a farm in the backwoods of Canada. The first half of the book describes his rough upbringing there, learning the craft of a woodsman and hankering after knowledge of wildlife, an interest none of his family shared. Determined to squelch his desires to become a naturalist, Seton's father pushed him into an artistic career. Seton turned this to his own bent, becoming one of the most renowned wildlife artists of his day. He studied art in London and Paris, worked as a freelance artist and writer in New York City, and when he felt the need to escape to natural haunts, spent time tramping around northern Canada and the American West. He worked on

cattle ranches and remote prairie homesteads, taking any opportunity to roam through the wilderness and study with great scrutiny any wild animals he could find. His greatest interest was birds.

While Seton admired and was enthralled by the beauty of nature, he was also avid about collecting birds' eggs from nests, shooting specimens for their skins and dissecting them for study. While a student in London he would acquire dead dogs from the pound, dissect them to study and draw in his rented rooms, then puzzle over how to safely dispose of the remains when he was done- in one instance he almost got accused of a murder! He was very good at hunting animals, due to having studied their habits in depth, and in one famous incident rid an area of New Mexico of a wolf called Lobo, famed for its depredations on cattle. He had no qualms about pitting his wits against the wolf to exterminate it, but at the same time felt sympathy for the animals and hated to see poison used on them.

Seton knew and met many notable persons. Robert Henri was his fellow art student in Paris, and later in life he met Frederic Remington- two artists I have always admired. He was acquainted with James Barrie and Mark Twain, and his animal stories- sympathetic, novelistic writings based on true accounts and behavioral studies- inspired Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* stories. A man of surpassing energy and enthusiasm for his chosen work, Seton also faced his share of hardships. He suffered from debilitating childhood illnesses until in his twenties finally found a cure via surgery. He survived harsh weather and blizzards in the northern lands, once having to help dig out his own train on a journey from snowed-in tracks, another time nearly dying of malaria on a remote farm. His book - based on extensive journals he kept and full of sketches, drawings and plates of paintings - depicts a way of life in the late 1800's rougher and closer to the earth, and outlines one man's path to become a skillful artist and natural scientist. If I say any more about it, I'll be writing all night! I suppose his books are rather obscure now, but when first published they were very popular. You can read more about Seton [here](#) and [here](#).

Rating: 3/5

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