

## ★ **For Want of Wings: A Bird with Teeth and a Dinosaur in the Family**

### **Jill Hunting**

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Jill Hunting's *For Want of Wings* is the enrapturing, wide-ranging, and thoughtful account of her great-grandfather's discovery of a rare dinosaur fossil in 1872.

Tom Russell was on a Yale student expedition to Kansas when he unearthed a nearly complete skeleton of the *Hesperornis regalis*, a toothed, aquatic bird dinosaur. The discovery was groundbreaking, drawing a definitive link between birds and reptiles. It was one of a group of fossils heralded by Charles Darwin as "the best support to the theory of evolution ... within the last twenty years." Yet Russell is barely remembered today, and the striking specimen that he uncovered has faded into obscurity.

Like digging through the "sepulcher of chalk in a Kansas fossil bed," the book begins with a few scant documents: rare historical photographs, clippings from an alumni magazine, and family hearsay. It uses these to illuminate Russell's "inconspicuous life." The exploration then stretches from the dusty archives of the Peabody Museum and journals of similar expeditions, to accounts of the Russell family's ties to early abolitionists, to colorful descriptions of life on the Kansas frontier and the region's natural history. Scientific considerations of the fossil itself are also included.

As a culmination, Hunting visits the expedition site with her college-age, activist daughter. They reflect on their shared family legacy of adventure, idealism, and curiosity. Intertwined are considerations of the meaning of history itself:

*What is history if not a process that is random, accidental, and uncontrollable, a succession of chance encounters and unforeseen meetings? Interruptions. Tangents ... Things cast off, recycled, and reused.*

*For Want of Wings* is a riveting and entertaining work of scientific history that also considers the value of connecting with one's family story. It reflects on the powerful forces that link generations across time and place.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2022)

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