In the long nineteenth century, scientists discovered striking similarities between how birds learn to sing and how children learn to speak. Tracing the ‘science of birdsong’ as it developed from the ‘ingenious’ experiments of Daines Barrington to the evolutionary arguments of Charles Darwin, Francesca Mackenney reveals a legacy of thought which informs, and consequently affords fresh insights into, a canonical group of poems about birdsong in the Romantic and Victorian periods. With a particular focus on the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Wordsworth siblings, John Clare and Thomas Hardy, her book explores how poets responded to an analogy which challenged definitions of language and therefore of what it means to be human. Drawing together responses to birdsong in science, music and poetry, her distinctive interdisciplinary approach challenges many of the long-standing cultural assumptions which have shaped (and continue to shape) how we respond to other creatures in the Anthropocene.

FRANCESCA MACKENNEY is Research and Teaching Fellow in Romanticism at the University of Leeds. Her research and related work in environmental education has been funded by an AHRC Doctoral Award, a BARS/Wordsworth Trust Early Career Fellowship, an award from Creative Scotland and an AHRC International Placement at the Library of Congress.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE

FOUNDING EDITORS
Gillian Beer, University of Cambridge
Catherine Gallagher, University of California, Berkeley

GENERAL EDITORS
Kate Flint, University of Southern California
Clare Pettitt, King’s College London

EDITORIAL BOARD
Isobel Armstrong, Birkbeck, University of London
Ali Behdad University of California, Los Angeles
Alison Chapman, University of Victoria
Hilary Fraser, Birkbeck, University of London
Josephine McDonagh, University of Chicago
Elizabeth Miller, University of California, Davis
Hillis Miller, University of California, Irvine
Cannon Schmitt, University of Toronto
Sujit Sivasundaram, University of Cambridge
Herbert Tucker, University of Virginia
Mark Turner, King’s College London

Nineteenth-century literature and culture have proved a rich field for interdisciplinary studies. Since 1994, books in this series have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, gender and sexuality, race, social organisation, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. Many of our books are now classics in a field which since the series’ inception has seen powerful engagements with Marxism, feminism, visual studies, post-colonialism, critical race studies, new historicism, new formalism, transnationalism, queer studies, human rights and liberalism, disability studies and global studies. Theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts continue to unsettle scholarship on the nineteenth century in productive ways. New work on the body and the senses, the environment and climate, race and the decolonisation of literary studies, biopolitics and materiality, the animal and the human, the local and the global, politics and form, queerness and gender identities, and intersectional theory is re-animating the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of nineteenth-century literary studies, connecting the field with the urgent critical questions that are being asked today. We seek to publish work from a diverse range of authors, and stand for antiracism, anti-colonialism and against discrimination in all forms.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.
BIRDSONG, SPEECH
AND POETRY

The Art of Composition in the Long Nineteenth Century

FRANCESCA MACKENNEY
University of Leeds
For my mother, Linda
Contents

List of Figures  page viii
Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1
1 The Science of Birdsong: 1773–1871 20
2 The Science of Language: 1755–1873 38
3 ‘Prelusive Notes’: Coleridge and the Wordsworths 60
4 ‘Undersong’: John Clare 101
5 ‘We Teach ’Em Airs That Way’: Thomas Hardy 137

Conclusion 180

Notes 185
Bibliography 217
Index 233
Figures

1. Athanasius Kircher, from *Musurgia Universalis* (1650).  
Acknowledgements

This book developed out of many years of thinking and writing about birdsong in poems. The work began as a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in 2016. I am grateful to my supervisors Ralph Pite and Daniel Karlin; in their different ways, these two men set me thinking, and I would not have written the same book without them. For their insight and sound practical advice on turning the thesis into a book, I would also like to thank my examiners Hugh Haughton and Stephen James. Bethany Thomas at Cambridge University Press guided me through the review process and secured two readers who offered both encouragement and critical scrutiny; their comments led me to revise and dramatically improve the manuscript in places, in a process that has, I hope, made me a better writer. Various others have been kind enough to read parts of the book at different stages of its development: I would especially like to thank Heather Glen, Jeremy Mynott and David Rothenberg for their kind words of encouragement, which buoyed my spirits at times of doubt, blockage and frustration.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding my doctorate. I would also like to thank the Wordsworth Trust and the British Association for Romantic Studies, which awarded me an Early Career Fellowship that enabled me to further my research on birdsong in the writings of the Wordsworth siblings. Many of the ideas explored in this book have been developed through my related work in environmental education and various endeavours to engage young people in ongoing debates about how and why birds sing. I would especially like to thank Sophie Thomas and Mandy Leivers for participating in these activities, as well as Creative Scotland, which provided me with funding to develop an educational podcast about birdsong (waysoflistening.net). To all the young people who took part, thank you.

Some of the ideas for this book were developed through a series of conference papers and articles about birdsong in the poetry of John
Acknowledgements

Clare (Romanticism, 2019) and William Wordsworth (The Eighteenth-Century Bird, 2020). I would also like to thank the Northamptonshire Public Library, which allowed me to pore over many beautiful books of natural history from Clare’s library, and to Nicholas Freville and others at the Kettering and District Naturalist’s Society, who kindly forwarded me James Fisher’s essay on ‘John Clare’s Birds’ from their society’s record of proceedings. My thanks also to the Wein Museum for providing the cover image. Springer Nature provided permission to use William Thorpe’s sonogram recording of the male chaffinch’s song ©1954.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and books are a little like children. I could not have written this book without the love, support and endless patience of my friend and partner Alastair, my brother George, my uncle Mark and my grandmother Joyce. Lastly, the book is dedicated to my mother Linda. My love of literature began with many punishingly long car journeys across the Scottish border, in which she talked in her dreamy way about Shakespeare, theatre and socialism. These conversations were ‘my nurse’s song’, and I am forever grateful.