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Audubon/Au-du-bon: Man and Artist

BY WALTER SUTTON

John James Audubon achieved lasting fame for his paintings of America's birds and animals, reproduced in *The Birds of America*, and, to a lesser degree, in the later *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. But he was also a gifted and prolific writer. In the five-volume *Ornithological Biography* (the companion to the great folio), his vivid descriptive essays on the birds are interspersed with sketches of his experiences and adventures on several frontiers. In addition, he kept detailed journals of his travels, beginning with his voyage by flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in 1820–21, and extending through his journeys to England and Scotland and his specimen-seeking excursions to the Florida Keys, to Nova Scotia and Labrador, to the Republic of Texas, and finally, in 1843, to the upper Missouri River for specimens of quadrupeds. Most of these journals have been edited and published, often overedited and mutilated. The chief family offender was Maria Audubon, who tried to make her grandfather respectable by Victorian standards. Trivial but indicative is her changing of Audubon's "naked rock" to "bare rock" (1826 *Journal* 42; *Audubon and His Journals* 1: 97).

Fortunately some of the original manuscripts survived, to be published in our time as faithful reproductions of Audubon's often erratic but lively and picturesque style. (It is probably just as well that he never mastered the formal use of the English of his own time.)

Of all Audubon's writings, I am here most concerned with the 1820–21 journal of his voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi (which has been preserved intact), the English and Scottish journal of 1826 (also in its original form), and the descriptive sketches of early pioneer life in the *Ornithological Biography*. These early journal sources dramatically reveal, at first hand, Audubon's long struggle through many failures and obstacles to win the success and recognition he craved and also enduring status as a distinctively American artist.

One might say of Audubon's work what Whitman said two decades later of his own *Leaves of Grass*: "Camerado, who touches this

book touches a man.” I shall try to do justice to the man, while recognizing that it is often hard to distinguish between the actual person and the literary persona created by the writer.

In his original draft of the preface to his *Ornithological Biography* (hereafter cited as *Biography*), Audubon wrote, “I received breath and light in the New World, and my Parents say, under the dark foliage of an Orange Tree, with a load of Golden Fruit and blossoms upon which fed that airy Silph the Hum Bird, whilst I received the tender cares of a Mother ever since kind to me” (Dwight 26). In actuality, Audubon was born in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in 1785, the natural son of a French naval officer, planter, trader (and slave trader) and his Breton French mistress, who died soon after his birth. Taken to France as a young child, he was adopted at the age of nine by his father and his father’s wife, who spoiled him during his father’s long absences. Talented in drawing, fencing, music, and dancing, he resisted all his father’s efforts to insure his formal education (including the learning of English). In his very early years, he went by several names, including Rabine or Rabin (his natural mother’s), before settling finally on the Americanized John James Audubon. Burdened as he was by the secret of his illegitimacy, it is not surprising that his origins became shrouded in myths and legends, largely self-generated (like that of an idyllic Louisiana birth and early childhood). His identification with the lost Dauphin was, however, a posthumous fabrication. While still very young, he developed an absorbing interest in birds and a compulsion to draw and paint them. As an artist he was largely self-taught. He had not been a student of David in Paris, despite the story he invented. At the age of eighteen, he was sent to America, chiefly to avoid conscription into Napoleon’s army.¹

Audubon arrived in America in 1803, during Jefferson’s first administration, early in the period of rapid westward expansion that followed the opening of the Northwest Territory and shortly before the setting out of the Lewis and Clark expedition and the almost coincidental Louisiana Purchase.

1. Among documented biographies useful for information about Audubon’s origins and the events of his life are those of Herrick, who first uncovered the facts of Audubon’s birth and adoption in French records; Ford, who pursued further research into French and American sources; and Adams.

While living on a Pennsylvania farm owned by his father, he fell in love with, and subsequently married, Lucy Bakewell, the daughter of an English neighbor.²

In 1808, at the age of twenty-three, inspired by dreams of success as a frontier businessman, Audubon traveled west across the Alleghenies by stagecoach and down the Ohio River to Louisville, to open a store in a partnership funded by his father, and soon after brought his bride there. Their first son, Victor, was born in 1809 (the year of Lincoln's birth in a backwoods Kentucky cabin). The business was later moved to the frontier river hamlet of Henderson, where, after changes in partnership, it was expanded by the establishment of a steam mill and by other ill-fated enterprises through which Audubon and many of his friends and neighbors lost a great deal of money. The mill in particular became a drain. Though Audubon actively promoted these schemes, much of the actual work was done by others while he was off hunting, fishing, and socializing—and continuing to collect and draw new specimens of the birdlife of the Ohio Valley.

A decade after moving west, Audubon was briefly jailed for debt and entered bankruptcy in 1819, having lost all his worldly goods and the respect and good will of his neighbors, among whom he had been very popular.

A pariah in need of support for his family, Audubon for the first time began to draw portraits in pencil and black chalk, which for a while, at five dollars a head (living or dead), provided a meager income. (His avocation was becoming a vocation.) In 1820, he moved upstream to the thriving town of Cincinnati, Ohio, where he became a taxidermist in Dr. Daniel Drake's Western Museum and also taught drawing classes. Encouraged by Drake, who pointed out in a public lecture that Audubon had recorded new species of birds unknown to Alexander Wilson, the prominent Philadelphia ornithologist (Adams 193–95), Audubon, at the lowest point of his life, decided upon his great project: to publish a comprehensive volume of life-size paintings of the birds of America, not only in their natural settings but caught in the midst of their characteristic activities. His first deliberate move toward this goal was to travel downriver along

2. For fuller information about Lucy, a talented musician, swimmer, horsewoman, teacher, editor, and resourceful partner to Audubon in all his efforts, see DeLatte.

the great Ohio-Mississippi flyway—a richer resource than the Atlantic coastal flyway partially explored by Wilson.³

On 12 October 1820, at age thirty-five, Audubon opened the journal account of his voyage: “I left Cincinnati this afternoon at half past 4 o’clock, on Board of Mr. Jacob Aumack’s flat Boat—bound to New Orleans— . . . I kissed My Beloved Wife & Children with an expectation of being absent for Seven Months—” (The separation was to be for fourteen months.)

“I took with me Joseph Mason a Young Man of about 18 years of age of good family and naturally an aimiable Youth, he is intended to be a Companion, & a Friend; . . . Leaving Home with a Determined Mind to fulfill our Object= Without any Money My Talents are to be My Support and My enthusiasm my Guide in My Dificulties, the whole of which I am ready to exert to keep, and to surmount” (*Journal* 1820–21 3).

Joe Mason, actually a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old drawing pupil at the time, was the first of a number of assistants; his payment was to be Audubon’s continued instruction. Mason was to produce, without recognition, some of the finest renderings of the plants and natural settings in Audubon’s earlier plates.

Audubon’s mood at the beginning and through much of his down-river journey oscillated between fear and hope. Still suffering from alienation and rejection, he was stricken by the sight of Henderson a few days after setting out: “We . . . passed Henderson about sun raise, I Looked on the Mill perhaps for the Last Time, and with thoughts that made my Blood almost Cold bid it an eternal farewell—” (12–13).

Two weeks later, at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi, Audubon contrasts his poverty with his affluence on earlier river trading trips. He goes on to describe the meeting of the waters: “The Beautifull & Transparent Watter of the Ohio when first entering the Missisipi is taken in small Drafts and Looks the More aquable to the Eye as it goes down surrounded by the Muddy Current, it keeps off as much as possible by running down on the Kentucky side for several miles but reduced to a narrow strip & is lost” (30). (His close obser-

3. For further information on the publication of Wilson’s life work, *American Ornithology* (9 vols., Philadelphia, 1808–14), see Snyder, 19–25.

vation here curiously anticipates that of Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published sixty years later.)

Though Audubon continued to suffer depressions, he was usually shaken out of them by the beauty of his surroundings, the richness of the wildlife, and the enthusiasm of productive work. The pages of the journals are filled with observations of birds and animals, including great flocks of migrating birds. Near New Madrid on the Mississippi, the center of the great 1811 earthquake, on 23 November he shot a White-Headed or Bald Eagle with a rifle at 150 yards, arranged it on wires, and began his "drawing" (actually mixed-media painting), which he completed in four days. (He prided himself on the fact that he was naturally a fast as well as thorough worker.) As with other specimens, he recorded its weight (8½ pounds) and measurements (37–40).⁴ Not long afterwards a fellow passenger winged another eagle, which was brought aboard alive. After describing the "Noble Fellow" as he "Looked at his Enemies with a Contemptible Eye," Audubon remarked, "I am glad to find that its Eyes were Corresponding with My Drawing—[he felt that he had caught the life] . . . the femelle hovered over us and shrieked for some time, exhibiting the *true sorrow* of the *Constant Mate*" (61).

In addition to the birds Audubon shot for his work, he was responsible, as the boat's hunter, for the killing of game to feed the crew and passengers. While still on the Ohio, he wrote, ". . . after a Long Walk return to Dinner with only 7 Partridges and 1 Pheasant. . . . I finished my Drawing of the *Common Crow* and after Dinner Went a Shore with the Company—Killed 5 pheasants 14 Partridges 1 Squirrel and 3 Turkeys. . . ." Sometimes the fare was plentiful, as when he caught a sixty-four-pound catfish in the Missis-

4. The *Ornithological Biography* carries a striking description of the eagle he drew here (1: 160–69); actually he revised the painting (for Plate No. 31) eight years later, in London. In his journal entry for 10 February 1828, Audubon wrote: "This morning I took one of my drawings from my portfolio and began to copy it, and intend to finish it in better style. It is the White-Headed Eagle which I drew on the Mississippi some years ago, feeding on a Wild Goose; now I shall make it breakfast on a catfish, the drawing of which is also with me, with the marks of the talons of another Eagle, which I disturbed on the banks of that same river, driving him from his prey. I worked from seven this morning till dusk" (*Audubon and His Journals* 1: 282–83).

sippi. Sometimes it was skimpier: "The Tell Tales [sandpipers] we eat to Day were very fat but very fishy—I eat the purple Grakle it tasted well" (10, 21).

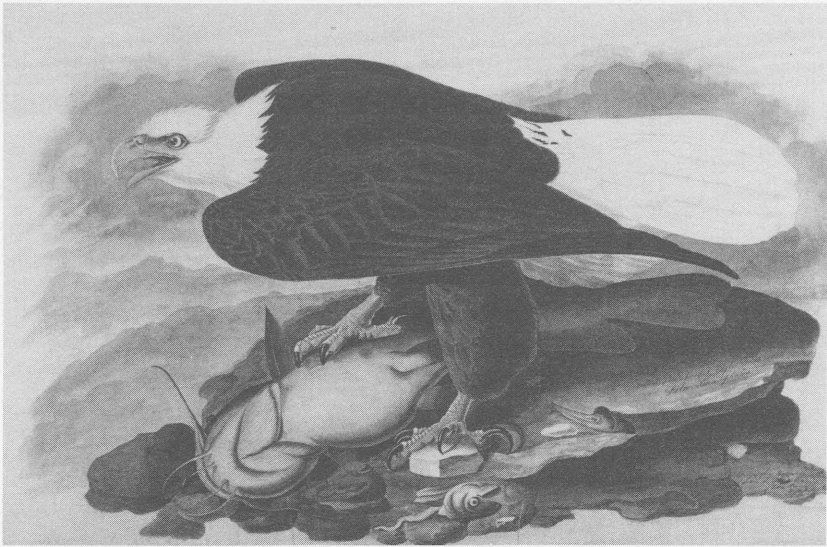
It was not until he reached Natchez on the more settled lower Mississippi that he had a regular meal, at a hotel, and reported "the awkwardness I felt . . . having not used a fork and Scarcely even a Plate since I left Louisville, I involuntarily took Meet and Vegetable with My fingers several times; on Board the flat Boats We seldom eat together and very often the hungry Cooked, this I perform^d when in need by Plucking & Cleaning a Duck, or a Partridge and throwing it on the Hot embers; few Men have eat a Teal with better appetite than I have dressed in this manner—" (94–95).

The sightings of migrating birds continued into the winter. On the day after Christmas, he reported: "We saw to day probably Millions of those *Irish Geese* or Cormorants, flying Southwest—they flew in Single Lines for several Hours extremely high—" (88).

Even after reaching New Orleans on 7 January, Audubon continued to go out along the river to see birds. On one occasion he witnessed "the Passage of Millions of *Golden Plovers*" driven south by a winter storm and killed by the thousands by hunters who had come out from the city (134). But this destruction was nothing in comparison with the slaughter of passenger pigeons Audubon graphically described in the *Biography*, with the conclusion, however, that "nothing but the gradual diminution of our forests can accomplish their decrease, as they not unfrequently quadruple their numbers yearly, and always at least double it" (1: 325). In the midst of the teeming birdlife of an unspoiled land, Audubon could not have imagined the possibility of the recorded death of the last surviving passenger pigeon in the Cincinnati zoo on 1 September 1914.

Meanwhile, in grimy lodgings, Audubon resumed his career as a portrait painter, with enough success to be able to raise his usual fee from \$5 to \$25. On 29 January, he sent \$270 to Lucy, together with a crate of Queensware as a gift (120–21). (All her former household goods had been sold to pay creditors.)

In the heart of the city, he was intrigued by a mocking bird, "always in the Same Spot and Same Position, and [I] have been particularly pleased at hearing him Imitate the Watchman's Cry of *All's Well* that Issues from the fort about 3 Squares Distant, and so well,



The Bald Eagle (Falconiformes Accipitridae *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) from John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, in the Syracuse University Library.

has he sometimes performed I Would have been mistaken if he had not repeated too often in the Space of a 10 minutes" (132).

(Audubon's later depiction of mocking birds attacked by a rattlesnake was his most dramatic and controversial painting [Plate No. 21], since it drew the charge that rattlesnakes could not climb trees. He was later proved right.)

He admired mockingbirds for their courage in fighting off their enemies and also for their virtuosity as singers, later comparing them with the European nightingale in the edited text of the *Biography*: "I have frequently heard both species in confinement and in the wild state, and without prejudice, have no hesitation in pronouncing the notes of the European Philomel equal to those of a *soubrette* of taste, which could she study under a Mozart, might perhaps in time become very interesting in her way. But to compare her essays to the finished talent of the Mocking Bird, is, in my opinion, quite absurd" (1: 113).

On 17 February he listed twenty drawings "Sent My Beloved Wife." Among these were the Bald Eagle and the Common Crow. Eight were designated as "Not Described by Willson" (124–25). Just after

the end of his first year away, he reported, on 26 October, that he had “finished 62 Drawings of *Birds & Plants*”; they represented not quite a seventh of the 435 engraved plates of the completed folio (199).

In December of 1821, Audubon was joined by Lucy and their sons, Victor and John (223). The family lived for some time on a hand-to-mouth basis. Audubon continued his painting and occasionally taught, while Lucy worked where she could as a governess until she finally secured a permanent job as a teacher in a plantation school near Bayou Sarah. Her new home remained their permanent base for a number of years, although Audubon continued to move about seeking birds and any extra work that might help to ease their expenses.

In 1824 he undertook an ambitious journey upriver and east to try to consult with naturalists and publishers about possible arrangements for publishing his work. In Philadelphia, he exhibited his pictures at the Academy of Arts and Sciences and won considerable praise, especially from the visiting Charles Bonaparte (a nephew of Napoleon), who was himself working on an ornithological volume. But in the eyes of the public who came to view, his long hair and rough clothes marked him as a backwoodsman. He also found enemies among partisans of Alexander Wilson who had personal interests in the continuing sales of Wilson’s work, a Philadelphia publication.

Proceeding to New York with letters of introduction, Audubon was more successful. He was invited to show his pictures at the New York Lyceum of Natural Science and to give a paper on the migration of cliff swallows, which had been thought to hibernate during the winter months. The society elected him to membership and printed his paper. But he found no support for his idea of publishing the ambitious folio.

Giving up his plan of visiting Boston, he backtracked to Bayou Sarah, where he arrived physically and psychologically exhausted. After rest, recuperation, and long consultation with Lucy, it was decided that he would continue adding to and perfecting his paintings, meanwhile earning what he could in lessons in fencing and dancing. (The latter proved especially popular throughout the countryside, with Audubon demonstrating steps as he led cotillions to the music of his own violin.) For her part, Lucy would continue her teaching. Together, they would pool their savings toward a trip to England, since

it seemed clear that no American publisher would undertake the book.

By the spring of 1826, they had saved \$1700, and in May, Audubon, at the age of forty-one, sailed from New Orleans on the *Delos* on a two-month voyage to England.

Arriving in Liverpool with letters of introduction, he quickly found friends and supporters among naturalists and influential citizens who were greatly impressed by his mixed-media paintings of the exotic birdlife of America. An exhibition at the Royal Institution of Liverpool was a sensational success, and Audubon found himself lionized by society, not only as an artist but as a specimen of the American Woodsman par excellence. He kept his long hair and rough garb, even though some well-wishers urged him to dress more like an English gentleman. His new friends and admirers were also impressed by his openness and simplicity of manner.

After an unsuccessful visit to Manchester, Audubon moved on to Edinburgh. There, after a cool initial reception, he found enthusiastic admiration and support and—again—lionization. He was wined and dined by intellectuals, artists, and influential citizens. He was also elected to membership in several prestigious scientific societies. Most important, he greatly impressed the Scottish engraver W. H. Lizars, who had done plates for ornithological volumes. In describing their meeting, Audubon tells of spreading out his work and of Lizars' surprised exclamation: "My God, I never saw anything like this before!" (1826 *Journal* 244).

Lizars offered to help launch the publication of the work and to begin by deferring immediate payment for the engraving, printing, and coloring of the first five plates, which Audubon could then use as the sample first number for the purpose of selling subscriptions. Audubon accepted gladly, though he realized that the arrangement meant a British visit of years rather than months since he was determined to superintend the engraving and the coloring personally: "I pray that my courage will not fail; my industry, I know, will not." Lizars insisted that he wear a wolf-skin coat for a portrait to be engraved and used to attract subscribers abroad as well as in Britain (1826 *Journal* 252, 262).⁵

5. The original oil painting by John Syme (1795–1861), F.S.A., long thought to be lost, has recently been discovered; it is now in the White House Collection, Washington, D.C. (1826 *Journal* 252n).

The cost of each five-plate number was to be two guineas (or \$10 American; amounting to \$1000 for the completed work). Audubon wrote to Lucy, "It is not the naturalist that I wish to please altogether, I assure thee. It is the wealthy part of the community. . . . The University of Edinburgh having subscribed, I look to the rest of them . . . to follow" (1826 *Journal* 346–47). And the rest did, in England and Europe and increasingly in America, once the news of his foreign reputation spread.

The Birds of America was to be a subscription book in the grand tradition. It proved to be quite possibly the greatest of its kind even though it came late, at a time when the subscription method was changing from a way of insuring the publication of expensive works to a way of distributing large numbers of books through the use of traveling agents (a method later exploited by Mark Twain as the exclusive subscription publisher of his own popular books).

Edinburgh completed the crucial change in Audubon's fortunes that had begun in Liverpool. Behind lay long years of struggle and seeming failure; ahead, success and recognition. Just six years earlier, in 1820, Sydney Smith, the co-founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, had issued what was to become a famous (or infamous) jibe: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?" Well, people were looking. And Audubon was a pioneer in an emerging *eastward* movement that was to bring American literature and art to the Old World.

Audubon next proceeded to London, where he was hospitably received and entertained by Albert Gallatin, then serving as American minister.⁶ King George IV became one of numerous new subscribers. But suddenly a crisis developed. The publication of plates was suspended after the first two numbers when Lizars' colorists went out on

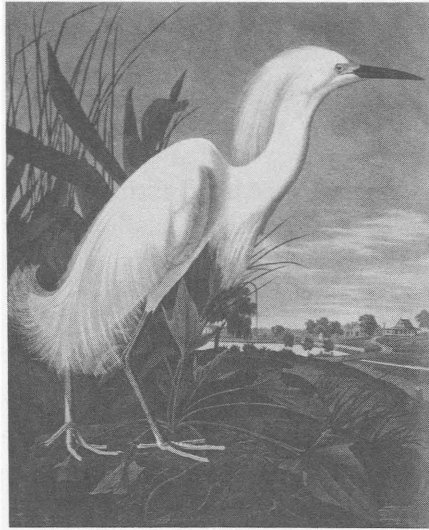
6. Albert Gallatin (1761–1849), Jefferson's great Secretary of the Treasury and architect of the Treaty of Ghent (1814) was, like Audubon, a naturalized American citizen who had failed as a frontier businessman before undertaking the career which brought success and fame. On 30 May 1827, Audubon wrote: "At twelve o'clock I proceeded with some of my drawings to see our *Envoy extraordinaire*. He has the ease and charm of a perfect gentleman, and addressed me in French [the Genevan's native tongue]. . . . The ladies knew every plant, and Mr. Gallatin nearly every bird" (*Audubon and His Journals* 1: 254). The Gallatins were the first viewers abroad to whom Audubon's subjects were not strange and exotic.

strike, and Audubon was cut off from the copies needed for new subscribers. After looking for new colorists, Audubon found the English engraver Robert Havell, and their arrangement became permanent.

For the next eleven years, Audubon worked long days (often sixteen or seventeen hours). Besides painting new specimens, he attended to the multifarious business details and correspondence involving not only production but also selling subscriptions, collecting payments, and bookkeeping. The bookkeeping was complicated by the fact that the work was issued in numbers rather than completed volumes and also that subscribers came and went. Some of the endless chores were delegated in various ways over the years, but Audubon maintained responsibility. He also closely monitored the quality of the engravings and their coloring, which remained a persistent problem. When he visited the Radcliffe Library at Oxford, he was dismayed to find that some of Lizards' early plates were hardly colored, and he saved the subscription by providing replacements. Motivated as he had never been in his youth, he finally succeeded in business, a vital part of his huge project. As he wrote in his journal, "Had I made such regular settlements all my life, I should never have been as poor a man as I have been; but on the other hand I should never have published the 'Birds of America' " (*Audubon and His Journals* 1: 292, 276).

Audubon's residence abroad was broken by several lengthy visits to the United States, where he made sales trips and undertook excursions for new specimens to Georgia, Florida, Texas, and the Canadian maritime provinces. He was showered with attention in both the private and public sectors. Revenue cutters were put at his disposal, and he enjoyed the hospitality and assistance of naturalists and government officials. In both Britain and America he also now had the support of assistants including Lucy, their sons, Victor and John, and George Lehman, a skilled German Swiss landscape artist, an example of whose work can be seen in the South Carolina plantation setting of the Snowy Egret (Plate No. 242).

Audubon's most important scientific assistant was William Macgillivray, a young Edinburgh professor who helped with the preparation and editing of the *Ornithological Biography*, in five volumes (1831–39). These contain eloquent and often dramatic descriptions of the birds and their habits and, at intervals, sketches of Audubon's earlier



The Snowy Egret (*Ciconiiformes Ardeidae Egretta thula*) from John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, in the Syracuse University Library.

life and adventures along the Ohio River and in the wilderness. The varied subjects include Fourth of July celebrations, shooting contests, hoedowns, horseracing, practical jokes, and tornadoes. One describes the great New Madrid earthquake of 1811, which he had experienced at a distance. Two sketches are devoted to the exploits of Daniel Boone, described by Audubon as a friend and hunting companion, although Boone was actually fifty years his senior. (The Boone stories are highly dubious. The legendary hero had also been a frontier business failure; after losing his land rights, he had moved on to Missouri before Audubon reached Kentucky.)⁷

While in Edinburgh, writing the text of the *Biography*, Audubon rose and began work at 4 a.m., passing his copy on to Macgillivray, who began at ten and worked on into the night; the edited manuscript was given to Lucy, who wrote out fair copy for the printer and probably contributed substantially to the editing, without acknowledgement. Although everything Audubon wrote for the *Biography*

7. These sketches, or episodes, as Audubon called them, have been collected and edited by F. H. Herrick under the title *Delineations of American Scenery and Character* (hereafter cited as *Delineations*).

was edited, Macgillivray respected his basic style and meaning, and the published text was in the form Audubon wanted (Adams 378–79).

Audubon's mood in the autobiographical sketches is mellower than in the earlier journals. Although he recognizes the hardships of his earlier life, his retrospective views tend to be nostalgic and appreciative. Most important, he is writing with an audience other than Lucy in mind, and with an awareness that his identification with Boone and the primitive wilderness will enhance his image as the American Woodsman, as he often called himself in his journal conversations with Lucy.⁸

His first sketch, "The Ohio," presents an idyllic picture of an early descent of the beautiful river in a skiff, with Lucy, in the month of October: "The days were yet warm. The sun had assumed the rich and glowing hue, which at that season produces the singular phenomenon called there the 'Indian Summer.' . . . We glided down the river, meeting no other ripple of the water than that formed by the propulsion of our boat. Leisurely we moved along, gazing at the grandeur and beauty of the wild scenery around us." He comments on the river traffic of rafts and flatboats in this pre-steamboat period and on the richness of the wildlife along the largely uninhabited shores. He also describes a fearsome break in the idyllic voyage when, one evening, they are alarmed to hear in the distance a "loud and strange noise" like the "yells of Indian warfare." (It was the period of the War of 1812, a time of many frontier raids.) As the noise grows louder and more threatening, they round a bend to discover that "the uproar was being produced by an enthusiastic set of Methodists" holding a camp meeting in a beech clearing. The sketch concludes with the common western theme of the wondrous rapidity

8. In a typical journal entry, Audubon begins by addressing Lucy, continues with a conversational report of the events of the day and of his feelings and reactions, and closes with a tender good-night or farewell. When he bought a new blank journal in London on 1 February 1828, he wrote in it: "Another Journal! It has now twenty-six brothers. . . . I bought you yesterday from a man across the street for fourteen shillings; and what I write in you is for my wife, Lucy Audubon, a matchless woman, and for my two Kentucky lads, whom I do fervently long to press to my heart again" (*Audubon and His Journals* 1: 280). Only three of the twenty-seven journals are known to have survived in their original form.

with which in the space of a single generation a wilderness has given way to advancing civilization (*Delineations* 1–5).

Besides describing raccoon hunts and other adventures in the woods, Audubon treats the grimmer subject of the regulators, or vigilantes, who wrought rough justice on frontier desperadoes. He also tells, in “The Prairie,” of how he narrowly escaped death when a termagant backwoods mother and her two sons, in a cabin in which he was staying for the night, plotted to kill him for his gold watch. The plan was foiled by the arrival of other travelers, who helped to bind and hang the plotters next morning, with no regrets. Audubon adds that this was the only time in twenty-five years of wandering in America that his life was “in danger from [his] fellow creatures” (14–18). Although this tense, dramatic story may have had some basis in Audubon’s common experience of taking shelter for a night (with some uncommonly suspicious characters), the story of the actual plot and hanging were most likely the work of Audubon the artist, and fabulist. Yet there were many actual incidents of this kind on the frontier.

In “A Tough Walk for a Youth,” Audubon relates an experience twelve years earlier, when he and his son Victor, age thirteen, traveled by steamboat up the Mississippi, bound for Louisville. At the mouth of the Ohio, the boat was unable to go farther because of low water, and the boy suggested that they walk overland, along the Ohio River, to their destination. They did so, and Audubon describes the rigors and pleasures of the journey (304–09). (A century later, William Carlos Williams was to draw on Audubon’s account for his own poetic purposes.)

After the completion of the publication of *The Birds of America* in 1838 (and its companion *Biography* a year later), Audubon immediately began work on a smaller lithographed edition that sold by subscription very well and profitably at \$100 a set, and on the ambitious *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, for which he and his sons provided the plates and John Bachman the separately published text. (When Audubon first thought of publishing the smaller *Birds*, in the early thirties, he mentioned that the work might be done with “excellent Wood cuts on the plan of Bewicks birds” [*Letters* 1: 259].⁹)

9. Thomas Bewick (1753–1828), British wood engraver and naturalist, whose work Audubon greatly admired, engraved both a *History of British Quadrupeds* (1790) and a *History of British Birds*, 2 vols. (1797, 1804). After meeting Bewick for the first

But by the end of the decade the newer and faster technique of lithography was becoming popular.)

Audubon's hopes for upwards of 300 and perhaps even 500 subscribers to the great folio were never realized. The list fluctuated, reaching an overall total of about 175 for the completed edition. In a letter to a relative in September 1838, Lucy wrote: "It is Strange rather how few complete copies of the 'Birds of America' there will be, everyone believing that afterwards it would be cheaper; and already the mistake is beginning to be felt since the coppers are all put by—in the application of some for a few extra plates which cannot be had even now" (DeLatte 220).

Audubon and Lucy returned to America in the fall of 1839, when he was fifty-one. They built a large house overlooking the Hudson, in Washington Heights, between what are now 158th and 159th streets, and named it Minnie's Land, for Lucy, using the Scottish word for mother. Their first home of their own since leaving their log house in Henderson more than twenty years earlier, it remained their extended family base. In 1843, Audubon undertook his last ambitious expedition, a steamboat voyage up the Missouri River (forty years after Lewis and Clark's epic journey) in search of specimens of quadrupeds. In 1846 his vision failed, and subsequently his mind, so that he was disabled during the years before his death in 1851.

Because of and beyond his work as an ornithologist and painter, Audubon has become a symbolic figure in our culture, most familiarly as a patron saint of the Audubon Society and other conservation movements, but also as an artist identified in differing ways with a more primitive and individualistic America. Over the past forty years, at least four modern writers have developed and projected the image of Audubon as a peculiarly American artist: they include Jessamyn West, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and William Carlos Williams.

The most ambitious and yet most simple of their works is Jessamyn West's opera, *A Mirror for the Sky* (1948), in which Audubon is linked with Boone as contrasting questing figures in the westward movement, symbolized by the turning wheels of the prairie-schooner wagon train. Boone is characterized as a pioneer of exploration and settlement, while Audubon's mission is to seek out and preserve

time, Audubon wrote, on 19 April 1827, "Thomas Bewick is an inventor and the First woodcutter in the world!" (*Audubon and His Journals* 1: 238).

through his paintings the beauty of the bird life of the young republic. Encouraged by Lucy, he rejects an offer of royal reinstatement (the Dauphin legend) in favor of the higher cause of his artist's vision and vocation.

Warren's group of meditative poems published as *Audubon: A Vision* (1969) begins, "Was Not the Lost Dauphin, though handsome was only / Baseborn . . . , / Was only / Himself, Jean Jacques, and his passion—what / Is man but his passion?" (3). His passion is symbolized by the Great Blue Heron silhouetted in flight against the morning sky. In Warren's view, Audubon's vision of beauty as an artist exists in contrast to the evil and corruption of the human state, into which Audubon had been initiated by his ordeal in the frontier cabin described in "The Prairie."

This theme, rooted in Warren's Kentucky Calvinism and developed through similar symbolic contrasts, also appears in his other poems and prose fiction. It is truer to the sensibility of Warren than to that of Audubon, who, despite many disillusionments, was not much occupied with the subject of human depravity, and especially not in his *Delineations*, which Warren draws upon very selectively.

In "A Still Moment," an intriguing story first collected in *The Wide Net* (1943), Eudora Welty takes liberties with history to bring together, on the Old Natchez Trace, the frontier revivalist Lorenzo Dow, the homicidal frontier outlaw John Murrell, and the frontier naturalist and artist Audubon. Preoccupied with his unrealizable dream of rescuing souls from damnation to an eternal life, Dow is riding toward a revival meeting, when Murrell falls in with him, plotting his death. The man of God and life everlasting and the man of evil and death are interrupted, however, by the appearance of Audubon, on foot, single-mindedly stalking a "snowy heron" (Great White Heron, Plate No. 281), which suddenly appears in the rays of the evening sun, feeding by the water, as a shared vision of beauty. The effect on the two horsemen is to overcome them temporarily and paralyze their intentions. But Audubon, as the artist and man of beauty, must shoot the bird: "In memory the heron was all its solitude, its total beauty. . . . But it was not from that memory that he could paint." Yet his creation of beauty in his painting must remain a dead, and not a live thing, "never an essence, only a sum of parts" (90–92). Welty does not consider the extent to which it may be perceived as more than "a sum of parts."



The Great White Heron (*Ciconiiformes Ardeidae Ardea herodias*) from John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, in the Syracuse University Library.

Of the four treatments, Williams' is the most interesting and most relevant to *The Birds of America*, though it is not the simplest—or the most fully developed. In this brief passage from Book v of *Pater-son Five* (1958) quoted here, the horned beast with which Audubon is identified is the mythical unicorn:

Audubon (Au-du-bon), (the lost Dauphin)
left the boat
downstream
below the falls of the Ohio at Louisville
to follow
a trail through the woods
across three states
northward of Kentucky . .
He saw buffalo
and more
a horned beast among the trees
in the moonlight
following small birds

the chickadee
 in a field crowded with small flowers
 its neck
 circled by a crown!
 from a regal tapestry of stars!
 lying wounded on his belly
 legs folded under him
 the bearded head held
 regally aloft
 What but indirection
 will get to the end of the sphere?
 Here
 is not there,
 and never will be.
 The Unicorn
 has no match
 or mate . . . the artist
 has no peer
 Death
 has no peer:
 wandering in the woods,
 a field crowded with small flowers
 in which the wounded beast lies down to rest

(210–11)

In this passage, the trek along the Ohio River, described in “A Tough Walk for a Youth,” is altered and merged with the imagery of the Unicorn Tapestries at The Cloisters, which Williams develops as a symbol of ever-renewed art over the centuries. The wounded white unicorn with the golden collar (shown in the tapestry as encircled by a low fence) is identified in Christian iconography with the risen Christ. It is also, for Williams, a symbol of the artist, who attests the continuing life of the imagination in the midst of suffering and death. Although the unicorn is a quadruped, it is not viviparous. It is a creature of the imagination, in which it has its only existence.

In Williams’ version of Audubon’s vision in the American wilderness, the horned beast’s neck is encircled not by a golden collar, but by a crown. Twice associated with the word *regal* in this passage, the image reinforces the poet’s metaphoric identification of Audubon with

the lost French prince. *Au-du-bon* is not only “to and of the good.” He is identified with the “best.” Just as the unicorn “has no match or mate,” “the artist / has no peer.” Williams recognizes Audubon as an earlier artist of a primitive lost America whose work will endure as a token of imaginative perception, like that of the weavers of the tapestries. (And like that of Williams the poet.)

All four of the contemporary works place Audubon in a new and distinctively modern heroic role as an artist—a role quite different from that of the earlier nineteenth-century idealized “American Woodsman,” or child of nature. All four also are individualistic in their conception of the role and status of the artist, although Williams speaks elsewhere in his poem of the collective and communal role of the weavers, whose hands work together, following the cartoon of the designer, in the creation of the great work of the tapestries.

It seems to me that this latter view is most appropriate to the actual creation of *The Birds of America*, which could not have come into existence without the cooperative efforts of paper makers, engravers, painters, scientists, colorists, patrons, and promoters, all of whose activities were coordinated by Audubon, the master artist who conceived and composed the work as a whole. There could have been no individual triumph without collective effort—and no collective achievement without the essential individual genius.

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