

WILLIAM SWAINSON TO JOHN JAMES AUDUBON.

(*A hitherto unpublished letter.*)

BY DR. ELLIOTT COUES.

WILLIAM MACGILLIVRAY's collaboration with Audubon in the production of the 'Ornithological Biography' and of the 'Synopsis' is already well known. The case is properly set forth in Audubon's preface, and still more fully in Audubon's Journals, now in process of publication by Miss M. R. Audubon. I have also had more than one occasion to characterize the happy combination of these two great ornithologists.¹

But few can be aware that in 1830 there was some chance of William Swainson's becoming Audubon's collaborator, and no little danger that a classification of North American Birds might be made in the mystical jargon of that quinarian fad which Macleay, Vigors, and Swainson had taken up. The following letter, which Miss Audubon has kindly allowed me to copy and use, shows that Audubon had made certain propositions to Swainson, touching the latter's collaboration; and that Swainson, who evidently thought no small beer of himself, would enter into no arrangements unless his name should appear as that of co-author with Audubon's. We see him holding off for some such understanding as that which resulted in Swainson and Richardson's 'Fauna Boreali-Americana.'

Having sufficiently shuddered at the thought of what we escaped, we can read at our leisure and pleasure Swainson's stiff declination of Audubon's terms, as follows—the letter being printed literally and punctually true to the original in Swainson's handwriting:

“TETTENHANGER GREEN

2d October 1830

“*My dr Sir*

“I have refrained from replying to your letter until I thought you had returned to London.

“Either you do not appear to have understood the nature of my

¹ Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club, V, 1880, p. 201; Key N. A. Birds, 2d ed., 1884, p. xxii.

proposition on supplying scientific information for your work, or you are very erroneously informed on the manner in which such assistance is usually given. Dr Richardson, and a hundred others, similarly situated, might with equal justice say that no name should appear but their own; as it would rob them of their fame, because notes are furnished by one or two other persons, your friends would tell you, if you enquired of them, that even *my* name would *add* something to the value of 'The Birds of America'. You pay me compliments on my scientific knowledge, and wished you possessed a portion; & you liken the acquisition of such a portion to purchasing a sketch of an eminent painter — the simile is good. but allow me to ask you, whether, after procuring the sketch, you would mix it up with your own, and pass it off to your friends as your production? I cannot possibly suppose that such would be your duplicity and I therefore must not suppose that you intended I should give all the scientific information I have laboured to acquire during twenty years on ornithology — conceal my name, — and transfer my fame to your pages & to your reputation.

"Few have enjoyed the opportunity of benefiting by the advice and assistance of a scientific friend so much as yourself; and no one, I must be allowed to say, has evinced so little inclination to profit by it. When I call to mind the repeated offers I have made you to correct the nomenclature of your birds, from the first time of our acquaintance, and recollect the dislike you appeared to have to receiving any such information or correction, I cannot but feel perfect surprize at your now wishing to profit by that aid, you have hitherto been so indifferent about.

"Let me however urge upon you one advise which, for your own sake, I should be sorry you despised. It is to characterize yourself, or get some friend to do so for you, all your new species. The specimens, you tell me, are now in England, & the task will be comparatively easy. I urge this, because you may not be aware that a new species, deposited in a museum, is of no authority whatsoever, *until its name and its character are published*. I have repeatedly set my face against such authorities, so has Mr Vigors, so has Ch. Bonaparte, and on this head we are all perfectly unanimous. Unless, therefore, this is done, you will, I

am fearful, loose the credit of discovering nearly all the new species you possess, and this I again repeat, for your own sake I should be sorry for. To me, individually, your not doing so, would rather be advantageous.

“The more a book is quoted, the more is its merits admitted, and its authority established. it was on this account I so repeatedly requested the *use* only, of a copy of your book, that it might have been cited in “Northern Zoology” not having it — I could not therefore mention it

“I shall always be as thankful to you as formerly for any information on the habits, economy, and manners of birds; but, as to *species*, I want not, nor do I ever ask, the opinions of any one. that is quite a different matter, and entertaining peculiar ideas on that subject, you must not feel surprised at my differing from you in almost every instance. My reasons will always be laid before the public. In the present case, we totally differ about *species* of Woodpeckers. I shall not, however propitiate a favourable opinion from you, or any one, by a compliment and therefore I will wait for some species which you yourself will admit, which I shall then give your name to, I am rather glad you did not accept my offer, for I am *now* assisting in bringing out an Octavo edition of Wilson, by Sir W Jardine which will be arranged according to *my* nomenclature.

Yours my dr Sir

Very faithy

W SWAINSON”

Though the proposed literary partnership thus fell through, the two men continued on the most friendly personal terms. Audubon repeatedly speaks handsomely of his friend Swainson in his Journals; they were often together, both in England and in France; each dedicated a new species to the other; and one of the most complimentary reviews Audubon’s work ever received was from Swainson’s pen.