

SOME SIXTEENTH CENTURY PAINTINGS OF AMERICAN
BIRDS.

BY ELSA G. ALLEN.

Plate V.

It augurs well for the progress of ornithology in America that a weight of interest has been placed of late years upon the history of the science, not only by way of careful delineation of its modern development, but also in attention to the foundational work of pioneer naturalists. New details in the lives and labors of those earnest workers, Catesby and Wilson, are gradually being added, and recent historical papers point to even earlier beginnings of American ornithology.

Such is the interesting account given by Bayard Christy¹ of an old manuscript by the English clergyman, Edward Topsell, entitled 'Fowles of Heauen,' now housed in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. In the account of the Fiftieth Meeting of the A. O. U.,² we read that "The manuscript [Topsell's] dates from 1613 or 1614, six or seven years after the founding of Jamestown, and so far as known is the earliest list of American birds."

A number of years ago I became very much interested in the history of early American ornithology, and through the writings of the American scholar and bibliophile, Henry Stevens of Vermont, I learned of the existence in the British Museum of certain water colors of American birds, plants, and other natural history subjects which antedated Topsell's work by from twenty-five to thirty years.

Topsell's work, 'Fowles of Heauen' is primarily a treatise on European birds, but it lists seventeen American species which in various ways had become known to the author, although he never visited America.

The subject of the present paper, in contrast to Topsell's account, represents work, done in America, by a painter, one John White, also called John With,³ who, as artist and draughtsman, accompanied Sir Thomas Hariot in 1585 on that ill-starred expedition sent out by Sir Walter Raleigh to found an English colony in America. He was chosen by Queen Elizabeth for the express purpose of studying and painting the aborigines and "natural products" of this far country.

John White thus becomes the first man, so far as is now known, to observe American birds in their native haunts, and to leave a pictorial record in colors of his observations.

¹ The Auk, July, 1933, pp. 275-283.

² T. S. Palmer, The Auk, January, 1933, pp. 66-67.

³ Edward E. Hale, American Antiquarian Society Proceedings, April 25, 1860, referring to the artist John White, says, p. 47, "John Twit, John With, John White and John Whyte, are all the same person."

A synopsis of the story of these paintings made during his first expedition to Virginia¹ may be found in the 'Bibliotheca Historica,' by Henry Stevens, Boston, H. O. Houghton & Co., 1870, pp. 222-226. Here we read (op. cit. 224) "In the year 1865, John White's original water colors, made for Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, fell by purchase into the hands of the writer [Henry Stevens], and in March, 1866, fell into the right place in the Grenville Library in the British Museum, at the moderate cost to the Trustees of £236, 5s. 0d.² They now are a prominent part of the world-renowned Grenville De Bry 'Voyages'. A glance at the drawings will show that they are the work of an artist, and portraits—whether of men, women, animals, fish, fowls, fruits, or plants."

During the winter of 1934-1935, while studying in the British Museum, I took opportunity to enquire for these John White originals, and was delighted to find that they were on exhibit as samples of Elizabethan Art.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Eric O. Millar, Deputy Keeper of Manuscripts, who had informed me of the transfer several years ago of these drawings from the Department of Manuscripts to the Department of Prints and Drawings, I was permitted to study carefully these early samples of bird art, and through the kindness of Mr. A. M. Hind, Keeper of Prints and Drawings, to have several photographic copies made from them, two of which are herewith reproduced.

There are three albums of these John White drawings, the first of which bears the following identifying title and number: "1. John White's Original Drawings in Water Colours, 1585 Case 199, No. a. 1."

On the first page the following inscription appears: "From Lord Charlemont's Library, sold at Sothby's August 11, 1865, 769, 228, for £125." Below is the name "Grenville."

There are also pages cut and pasted in from Stevens' description of Sir Thomas Hariot's 'A Briefe and true Report of the New Found Land of Virginia,'³ which establish the authenticity of the manuscript and recount the story of its sale in 1865.

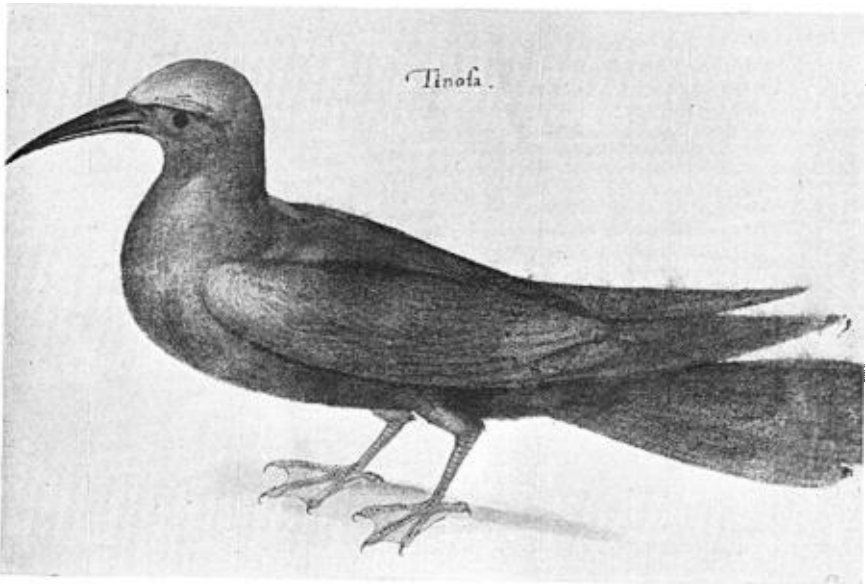
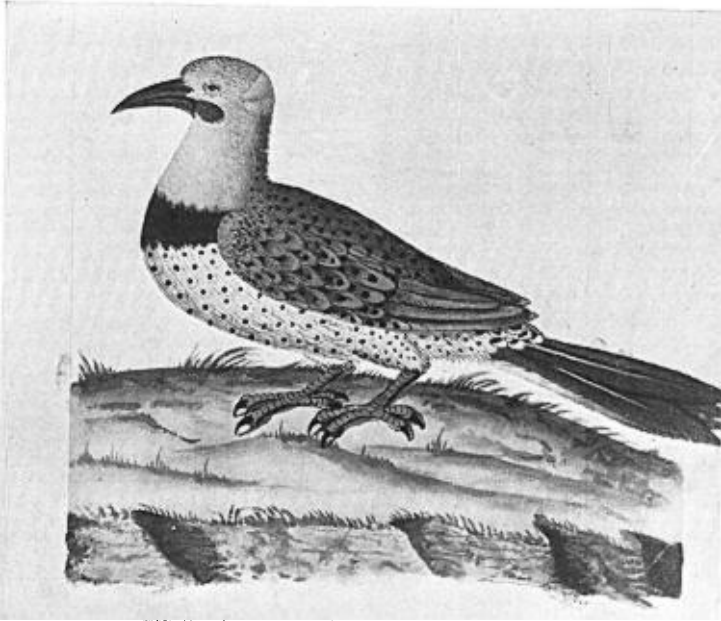
The first volume contains 130 water color drawings entitled, in the artist's own handwriting, "The pictures of sundry things collected and counterfeited according to the truth in the voyage made by Sir Walter Raleigh Knight for the discovery of La Virginia. In the 27th year of the most happy reigne of our Sovereigne lady Queene Elizabeth and in the year of or Lord God 1585."

These drawings, however, are not all of American subjects. It is said

¹ In 1585 the name "Virginia" was used to designate, besides present Virginia, the territory southward to Florida.

² According to Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, Vol. III, p. 123, these White water colors were sold to the British Museum for £210.

³ *Bibliotheca Historica*, 1870.



PAINTINGS BY JOHN WHITE (ABOUT 1585).

EARLIEST PAINTINGS OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS.

UPPER: FLICKER (*COLAPTES AURATUS*).

LOWER: NODDY (*ANOUS STOLIDUS*).

that White had done considerable other exploring, including travels on the continent of Europe, and also to Greenland. This explains the presence of Esquimos, ancient Britons, an oriental woman, and other figures among the drawings which are mostly American. The American material includes many very well executed drawings of Indians, and Indian customs and ceremonies, in addition to the paintings of natural history subjects.

The birds in this album of pictures are numbered as follows, the names in italics being those of White, the descriptive notes those of the writer:

58. *Alcatras*¹—The head of a Brown Pelican.
59. *Timosa*—Noddy Tern.
60. *A Flaminico*—Flamingo.
61. Hoopoe—not American.
62. A large seabird with spread wings.
63. *Bobo*—Booby.
64. The Roller—not American.
65. Tropic Bird.

The present ranges of these American birds would seem to indicate that they were probably drawn en route somewhere in the West Indies rather than in the Roanoke colony.

Of special interest also to ornithologists is White's drawing of an Indian Flyer (No. 16), who, as a badge of his occupation, wears a bird adorning his head. This shows remarkable detail and delicacy of execution in the feathers. The same is true to a lesser extent of the Flamingo, No. 60 (Binyon catalogue, No. 62).

It is necessary to state that there is an apparent discrepancy between the numbers on the drawings and the numbers by which the drawings are designated in the descriptive catalogue.² For example, No. 60, according to the number on the drawing, is referred to as No. 62 in the catalogue, while the drawing bearing No. 58, is No. 60 in the catalogue. The drawing bearing No. 59 (the Noddy Tern, reproduced herewith Plate V, fig. 1), is No. 61 in the catalogue, and the drawing of the Hoopoe bearing No. 61, is No. 63 in the catalogue.

In addition to the birds in this album, there are drawings of other natural history subjects, such as insects, scorpions, turtles and lizards.

The second of the three volumes of John White Drawings bears the following identifying title and number: "John White's Drawings in Water Colours 1585. Offsets in 1865."

¹ *Alcatras*. This drawing bears the descriptive remark: "This fowl is of the greatness of a swanne and of the same forme, saving the head which is in length 16 ynches." Below is the name *Janboril*, while the word *Alcatras* appears above in what is probably the artist's own hand. *Alcatras* was an Indian name and was widely adopted by travellers for the Pelican.

² Lawrence Binyon, *Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum.*

On the inside surface of the binding we read: "Dept. of Prints and Drawings Books of Prints Case 199 No. A. 2."

These are evidently the offsets which Stevens describes in his 'Bibliotheca Historica,' pp. 225-226, as having resulted from a fire at Sothby's in London in June 1865. The originals remained in a saturated condition under great pressure for three weeks. In spite of this catastrophe, the drawings were unharmed, and during that time produced duplicates on the contiguous sheets of paper. Mr. Stevens salvaged the treasures and had the 'offsets,' as he said, "carefully preserved, reversed in the binding, and sized at no little cost of time and money." These unique by-products of a disastrous fire are surprisingly exact copies of the originals but are somewhat fainter in color, and were sold to the British Museum for 25 guineas.¹

The third and last volume of the John White Drawings bears the following identifying numbers: "Case 199, No. a. 3 Sloane 5270."

Unfortunately for our fragmentary knowledge of John White and his contribution to American ornithology, the authenticity of some of these water colors has been questioned, and, according to Dr. Lawrence Binyon, formerly Keeper of Prints and Drawings, and author of the Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, some of the drawings in this album may be copies of certain of John White's Originals that have not been found. These paintings are considerably brighter in coloring and show greater detail. No theory as to the identity of the artist who may have copied them is offered, but the assumption is that he was a contemporary, or near contemporary of White. No. 91 of this album, obviously a Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) is reproduced herewith (Plate V, fig. 2). According to the 'Check-List of North American Birds,' the Flicker was described by Linnaeus based on *Picus major alis aureis* of Catesby. This drawing of the Flicker, therefore, indicates that the species was known and pictured nearly 150 years previous to Catesby's description of it.

It is very unfortunate that so little is known of Captain John White. From the researches of Stevens,² we know that he was a prominent man in London, the friend of Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Richard Hakluyt, the latter of whom introduced him to Theodore De Bry, the famous engraver of Frankfort. De Bry was then contemplating the publication of his collection of 'Illustrated Voyages,' and twenty-three of White's drawings were used to illustrate Part I of these "Peregrinations." Through this association he was also a friend of Jaques Le Moyne,³ some of whose engravings of

¹ According to Justin Winsor, Narrative and Critical History of America, Vol. III, p. 123, the offsets were sold to the British Museum for £60, 5s.

² Henry Stevens, Thomas Harriot and his Associates, London, Privately printed MDCCCC.

³ To Le Moyne we are indebted for one of the earliest, if not the first engraving of the Wild Turkey of the South, published with his Brevis Narratorio. In the lower left hand corner one Turkey is figured with spread tail and drooping wattle. Voyages of De Bry, Part II, 1591.

Florida Indians, scenes, and natural history subjects were used in Part II of De Bry, published in 1591.

To both of these artists, White, who worked in America, though interruptedly, from 1585 to 1590, and to Le Moyne, who spent a year (1564-1565) with René Laudonnière in and around Fort Caroline, American naturalists might well give a modicum of their interest, in the hope that these very early observers of our birds, plants and animals may eventually become better known and more fully appreciated by the modern student.

Concerning John White, aside from his association with Raleigh, De Bry, Hariot, Hakluyt and Le Moyne in the cooperative enterprise of publishing De Bry's Voyages, almost nothing has been discovered. Although an artist known to the Queen, he does not appear in any dictionary of painters, and his name occupies but a few lines in the 'Dictionary of National Biography.'

From the writings of Hakluyt, however, we glean the fact that he made at least four voyages to America, and on the second one, which left England in April 1587, he went as Governor of Raleigh's "Second Colonie," consisting of one hundred fifty persons. Among this number were his daughter and her husband who were to become the parents of Virginia Dare, the first English child born in English North America. On arriving at Roanoke and finding conditions disappointing, however, many of the colonists were dissatisfied and persuaded their Governor to return to England. He, therefore, reluctantly returned home with some of the colonists, but left many behind, including his daughter and grandchild, planning to return to them with all possible haste. While he was at home, however, the fear of Spanish invasion gripped all England, and all suitable vessels were commandeered to the defense of the motherland. White, therefore, was unable to go to his countrymen in America until 1590, when a Fifth Expedition was fitted out to carry aid to the deserted colonists. Upon arrival, no trace of them could be found, but Captain White, in going over the ground, found some of his own chests, which had been buried, dug up and broken open, their contents of books, maps and drawings torn and stained with the rains and his armour rusted through.¹

His subsequent career is entirely unknown, except that he retired to Raleigh's estates in Kilmore, Ireland, whence he penned a letter to his friend, Richard Hakluyt, dated the 4th of February, 1593. This is the last fragment of his biography, so far as we know, that has been preserved.

*Laboratory of Ornithology,
Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y.*

It is likewise interesting to know that a collection of 59 beautiful paintings of plants and flowers by Le Moyne has recently been found. It is at present housed in Room 71 of the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London. Diligent search failed to reveal any American birds in this collection.

¹ Stephen B. Weeks, *The Lost Colony of Roanoke*. American Historical Association, Papers 5, 1891, pp. 107-146.