

A THIRD SET OF JOHN ABBOT BIRD DRAWINGS

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THREE times in the annals of American ornithology, each about twenty years apart, John Abbot has been brought to our attention in the pages of 'The Auk': first in 1896 (13: 204-215), when Walter Faxon described a set of 181 drawings which he said had "recently" come to light in the Boston Society of Natural History; again in 1918 (35: 271-286), when Samuel N. Rhoads reported on a second set numbering 122, which were purchased in 1906 for the Wymberley Jones de Renne Georgia Library¹ situated in an old colonial mansion on the Isle of Hope, Savannah. Rhoads believed that Abbot returned to England about 1810 and he exhorted us to further study on his life and work. Twenty years after Rhoads, Mrs. Victor Bassett took up the challenge, and we recall her enlightening article in the 'Auk' for April, 1938 (55: 244-254), disclosing not only the fact that Abbot remained in this country until 1839, and probably died in Georgia, but also that he came here in 1776, some fifteen years before the date usually given for his coming. Perhaps in another twenty years the whole story of John Abbot, his paintings and his vast collections of specimens may be revealed to us.

In the meantime I have a few notes to add on a third set of Abbot bird drawings, which I chanced upon in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum in 1936. They form numbers 1137 and 1138 of the Egerton Manuscript Collection, which was the bequest of Frances Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater, in 1829. The set is in two large volumes, bound in green embossed morocco, and contains, according to the description in the catalogue of the British Museum "246 highly finished figures." They are described as "a most beautiful assemblage of the birds of Georgia in America accompanied with Description and the Latin, English and Georgian names in manuscript collected and painted from life by John Abbot of Savannah, splendidly bound by Lewis."

The volumes are dated MDCCCIV, while some sheets are watermarked Edmeads and Pine 1802. Others are watermarked J. Whatman and others are plain cartridge. The drawings had been mounted on heavy paper, with gilt edges, probably preparatory to being bound in the sumptuous covers of gold-embossed green leather. The first volume opens with a paragraph entitled "Remarks on the migration

¹ This library has recently become the property of the University of Georgia, at Athens, and Mr. W. W. De Renne, of the old De Renne family, is in charge of it.

of North American Birds" done in the most meticulous script and the drawings, no less, present a pageant of skill in observation from life as well as in execution by pencil and brush. Each drawing is accompanied by a careful description of the bird in life. As a rule the coloring is accurately and delicately done, though there are a few instances of too vivid coloration, as in the Blue Jay, which is bright sky-blue. All the yellows are particularly good, but Abbot had the same difficulty in drawing the eyes that he had in the De Renne set, for here, too, the high-light is too large and often placed forward, giving the bird an unnatural look. The Carolina Parakeet (Tab. 26), however, is an exception and is well drawn, as is also the Hairy Woodpecker (Tab. 52), showing the buffy, feathery tufts at the nostrils and the plain outer tail-feathers. Occasional inaccuracies are to be found, as in the Skimmer, *Rynchops nigra nigra*, which is represented without webbed toes, and the Water-Turkey or Snake-bird, *Anhinga anhinga*, with the hind toe not included in the web. I had hoped to make a careful comparison of this set of Abbot's drawings with those in the Boston Collection and those now owned by the University of Georgia, but it became necessary to return to the United States, and subsequent plans to continue these pre-Audubon studies in England have been cancelled with little expectation of being able to go-back to them. Therefore, my notes are incomplete and the search for the source of these Abbot drawings and for information on John Abbot himself before he left England have been all but abandoned. However, I have been fortunate in having Mr. A. J. Watson, of the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, follow, during 1939, several possible sources of information and, for many of the notes I am about to give, I am greatly indebted to him.

The few articles on Abbot, including those in entomological journals and indices, emphasize Abbot's contributions to entomology and omit or mitigate his work on birds. It is indicated, however, that even in his early career in this country he was engaged to collect and delineate birds, as we may gather from a letter concerning Abbot shown to Mr. Watson when he enquired for Abbot materials at the Natural History Museum in London. This letter, dated March 23, 1917, was from a Doctor A. A. Mumford, of the Grammar School of Manchester, to Sir L. Fletcher, of the Natural History Museum, London, and mentioned that John Abbot was employed by the Chetham Library of Manchester between 1791 and 1802, to draw birds and spiders of Carolina and Georgia. At this time Abbot had been in America some fifteen years and was probably in his mid-thirties.

The only one with whom we know Abbot was closely associated in England was John Francillon, to whom he sent his drawings and specimens from America. Francillon was a jeweller and silversmith in the Strand, with a prominent clientele among whom were some of the royalty and nobility; he was also an entomologist delving in such minutiae as labial palps and coxae of insects, a combination of interests which seems sufficiently bizarre and yet which called for the same care and precision in workmanship. In one of the letters abstracted by Mr. Watson, John Francillon tells of meeting a Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn and showing them the jewels which he had prepared for the Prince of Wurtemberg. "He has appointed us his jeweller," said Francillon, and he went on to say that "we set his picture about three months ago very richly ornamented with Diamonds, which was presented (by his desire) to the King for the Princess Royal, which she now wears on particular occasions." As an offset to these royal commissions, Francillon took care of his large entomological collection, buying, selling, and exchanging specimens with scientists of England and the Continent.

It is difficult to learn anything about Francillon. His sales catalogue, published in London in 1818, yields nothing biographical, and the London Directories, including the Trade Sections for the years 1792-1809, which Mr. Watson examined, make no reference to him. However, a group of letters by Francillon to John Leigh Phillips of Manchester (Additional MS 29533) makes frequent references to this third set of Abbot bird drawings. This manuscript volume of letters, of which Francillon's letters are a part, was presented to the British Museum by Dr. John Edward Gray, Keeper of the British Museum, and, in addition to the Francillon letters of present interest, it contains letters by other naturalists—Dr. Daniel Carl Solander¹ (1736-1782), John Ellis (c. 1710-1776),² Bracy Clark (1760-1792), George Johnstone (1829-37), and others.

John Leigh Phillips of Manchester (1761-1814) was a very wealthy merchant who, although he died at the rather early age of fifty-three, helped many struggling naturalists from his private purse. Hence there is some likelihood that Phillips was one of John Abbot's sponsors, and that Abbot may have been an agent of the firm of

¹ Solander was a Swedish botanist who catalogued the natural history collections at the British Museum between 1760 and 1768, when he accompanied Sir Joseph Banks on Captain James Cook's voyage in the *Endeavour*. In 1773 he was made Keeper of the Natural History Department of the British Museum. He died in 1782.

² Ellis was a London merchant and became agent for West Florida in 1764 and for Dominica in 1770. Like Catesby, he sent many American seeds to England, and later imported them. He wrote a number of botanical papers, and some manuscript drawings by him are in the Linnaean Society, London.

J. Phillips of Manchester when he came to America. Be this as it may, we gather from Francillon's letters that Abbot made a set of 100 bird drawings, including eggs of many species, which, through the agency of a Mr. Bell,¹ were sent to Mr. Phillips of Manchester, and these are part of the set in the British Museum.

John Francillon's letter to Phillips is quoted below except for two lines at the end: (BM 29533, folio 75), dated London 3d October 1792.

"Dear Sir, I have sent you a Box per favor of Mr. Bell, who has kindly undertaken to send it with other things to you. The Box contains 100 Drawings of Birds of Georgia Drawn by Mr. Abbot of Georgia from Nature. I have shown them to Mr. Latham, who has examined them, and says they are correct, and are a true resemblance of the Birds, said if he collected Drawings he would certainly have purchased them. Mr. Latham said he was so satisfied with the Drawings, that he had wrote references to his own work on Birds (which you have seen) opposite to each discription which Mr. Abbot has wrote in his Catalogue, which I have inclos'd with the Drawings; the price is 6/- for each drawing, but if you chuse to purchase them I will venture to let you have them for 5/6 each. I think he will be satisfied with it by what he says to me in his Letter. No person has seen them except Mr. Latham. If you doo not chuse to purchase them please to endeavour to sell them to the Library, or any person you think likely to purchase them, and should they not sell at Manchester please to return them to me by the Waggon as soon as possible, as I must write to Mr. Abbot by the first ship that sails next week, and I shall be glad to inform him wether they are sold or not.

"Mr. Abbot is the person who collects insects so well, and (folio 75 verso) you are in possession of many of his collecting. He says he can complete about 100 more Drawings of other Birds, if the person who buys the present 100, chuses to give him the order to go on with them, and at the same price.

.....
I am Dear Sir Your
most obdt. Humb^l. Serv^t.
John Francillon"

We gather from this letter that the eminent English ornithologist, Dr. John Latham, who had recently published his 'Index Ornithologicus' (1790), thought highly of Abbot's work, and I recall he likewise makes occasional mention of his esteem for Abbot's observations in his other ornithological works. This letter indicates also that John Leigh Phillips was collecting bird drawings and other natural-history materials on his own behalf, and since he was a prominent citizen of Manchester, his manuscript letters may well contain matter of keen interest to ornithologists. Mr. Watson informs me that a manuscript volume of this purchaser (1791-1813) with about

¹ Perhaps a passenger on some ship to England. It was then customary to entrust one's packets to private individuals.

640 letters on all sorts of subjects is extant. A catalogue of his collections also is in the Chetham Library. These collections at the time of Phillips's early death, in 1814, were purchased by one T. Robinson, and when the Natural History Society of Manchester was formed, in 1821, these collections were purchased presumably from Robinson to form the basis of the Manchester Museum now housed at the Victoria University.

But apparently Phillips did not purchase personally the first consignment of 100 bird drawings by Abbot, for we read in Francillon's letter [Ibid. folio 48 v.] dated 21 November, 1792.

"I am extremely obliged to you for your great kindness in selling the Drawings of Birds, and I have wrote to Mr. Abbot to continue to make all possible addition he can with the Eggs to them agreeable to your instructions, and for the same price finish'd as soon as possible and as complete. I hope you will not take it amiss, as I plead for a poor Widow who is much in want at this time, to whom I am order'd by Mr. Abbot to pay the money too, as soon as I could sell them. I suppose Mr. Radcliffe will not take it amiss if you mention the reason for asking him for the payment of the 100 Drawings. But I shall leave it to your management whether to ask him or not."

Here we learn that the drawings were sold to a Mr. Radcliffe and the money for them was paid to some unfortunate connection of Abbot's probably a relative whom he was helping, but it is not stated whether this woman was in America or England. She was apparently in England, since there would not have been time to send the money to America after November 21, 1792, and receive thanks from her by December 22, 1792. On this date Francillon wrote to Phillips [Ibid. folio 79].

"I am infinitely obliged to you for your remittance of £ 27-10 for Mr. Abbot's 100 Drawings of Birds and the woman whom I pay the money too [sic] is much obliged likewise to you and Mr. Radcliffe, and the enclosed is my receipt for the same."

In a letter dated London, 2 September 1794 [Ibid. folio 84], Francillon wrote as follows:

"Mr. Abbot does not mention anything in his Letter concerning the continuing of Drawing the Birds, but I dare say he means to continue the work and I have this day wrote to Him on the [folio 84V.] subject."

At this time in his career (1794-95), according to Mrs. Bassett's article (*Auk*, 55: 248), John Abbot became prosperous. Slave labor became available to persons in more moderate circumstances in upper Georgia, following the invention of the cotton-gin, and Abbot is said to have owned "several slaves and to have had a comfortable and commodious home."

Whether these better circumstances prevented him from sending more bird drawings to Francillon, or whether in truth they were sent and somehow were not mentioned in these letters is not clear. At any rate, Francillon's next letter with regard to the bird drawings is dated London, 1st November 1805. Here Francillon wrote to Mr. Phillips [Ibid. folio 96]:

"With respect to the drawings of Birds which I sent you the other Day, I can settle with Mr. Abbot by the first ship that sails after Christmas, I was obliged to send away my Boxes by a ship that sailed for Charleston last week."

By this time Abbot had introduced some conventional devices in the composition of his drawings, which his clients in England did not approve, and Francillon argued in his behalf as follows:

". . . . I am sorry that they are not approved of. I believe the Birds are as well drawn and colored to nature as those that have been sent to you before; the Plants, Stumps and Moss are not given as fine drawings, but only something for the bird to stand or perch upon. If they had been good drawings of plants & c & c it must have greatly enhanced the price, I suppose at least double. I should have liked them plain colored bare twigs, or stumps without leaves, of a brown color and very simple, which I think would have shown the Bird better and saved Him much trouble, but has [sic] he had began the drawings on this plan of color'd Plants, Stumps & Moss, He must now go on with it so, those who see them should only examine the Birds, and look upon the rest merely to carry or support the Bird. [folio 96 verso]. I think it a great pity now (as the Gentlemen of the Library are so far advanced with them) not to have the whole as far as Mr. Abbot can find subjects to draw, which I think cannot be any more now, and it will render it complete being the drawings of one Man, and of one Country. As the Ship sailed sooner than I expected to Charleston, I ordered Him to proceed with them, not imagining there would be any alteration to the contrary, therefore if the Gent^l. of the library should determine not to have any more, please to inform me as soon as you can after Christmas, and I will write to Mr. Abbot by the first Ship that Sails. As there cannot now be a great number wanting to complete the Birds of that Country, I think it a great pity to discontinue this work, but this I must submit to your and the Gentlemens better Judgement."

It appears from subsequent letters that the "Gentlemen of the Library" for whom Phillips was negotiating, finally agreed to have Abbot complete the whole set of the birds of Georgia, for on January 13, 1806, Francillon wrote to Phillips [Ibid. folio 98]:

"I am very much obliged to you for the pains you have taken in settling with the Gentlemen of the Library to continue to take the remainder of the Birds. I will write to Mr. Abbot by the first ship [sic] and request He will take more pains with the drawings in future."

It is impossible to glean a consecutive history of these drawings at such a distance and at such a difficult time for research, but it may

be well to record such of the shifts of ownership as are so far known. The first consignment of 100 drawings we know went to Mr. Radcliffe and subsequently, after circuitous wanderings, came to the British Museum. The original cost was £ 27-10-0, after which there is an item listed in the archives of the museum of £ 8-8-0 for inlaying and binding. In 1795, apparently, an index was made at a cost of 3s-6d but this has been lost.

The last consignment of these Abbot drawings mentioned by Francillon is in a letter dated London, December 26, 1809 [Ibid. folio 104]:

"I have the pleasure of enclosing to you forty-four more drawings of Birds for the Manchester Library which I have just received from Mr. Abbot of Savannah, Georgia which I hope will be approved of and I have inclosed a Bill with them, and if not inconvenient to the proprietors of the Library I shall be obliged to them to favor me with the amount as soon as it may suit them, as I shall very soon have an opportunity [sic] of remitting it with some other money and articles in a Box to Mr. Abbot."

These two consignments total 144 drawings of birds by Abbot in the British Museum, but the set numbers 246 drawings so that 102 others were received at some other time.

The drawings passed out of the possession of the Manchester Library and became the property of one John Dent; they were again sold at auction in 1827. After this Philip Hurd bought them for 57 guineas. They were sold again at auction by Evans of New Bond Street July 30, 1845, and finally were purchased for £ 43 by the British Museum for the Egerton Collection.

While these drawings and their wanderings do but very little toward piecing out John Abbot's little-known biography, they are interesting as another ornithological incunabulum, and they are significant in that they offer suggestions for further lines of research, for, in tracing the vicissitudes through which an old manuscript passes, we may at any turn of the tortuous path come upon facts or leads in the author's life and work.

We know from Sir James E. Smith, founder of the Linnaean Society of London and purchaser of the Linnaean collection, that John Abbot started his career by the study of the transformation of British insects. He was one of the few who understood the preservation of caterpillars, by "stuffing"¹ them, and it is said that when he was about thirty² years of age he had gained sufficient reputation as a student of

¹ Jan Swammerdam (1637-1780), German entomologist, also practiced the inflation of insects by means of fine glass tubes filled with wax or other fluid.

² According to W. Horn and S. Schenkling, 'Index Litteraturae Entomologicae,' Berlin Dahlem, 1928, Abbot was born about 1760. This would make him only sixteen years of age at the time of his arrival in America, in 1776, which seems unlikely.

insects to be engaged by some leading entomologists to go to America. Who these men were, we do not know, but it is probable that John Leigh Phillips aided him in this enterprise. Likewise the ornithologist and entomologist, William Swainson, who travelled extensively in South America and ended his days in New Zealand, was his friend and correspondent. Possibly he left letters from Abbot in that far-away country, which would throw new light upon Abbot's associates.

The presence of three sets of Abbot bird drawings all purporting to be originals in three widely separated libraries calls for some explanation. Certainly their superficial appearances are different but the same little details of execution are present in all and it seems reasonably certain that Abbot's hand and brush did the bulk of the work.

According to his friend, William Swainson, this indefatigable collector may have employed one or two assistants to draw and paint for friend and correspondent. Possibly he left letters from Abbot in that they did. Thus their plates often passed as Abbot's own work, but, according to Swainson, the "originals of the master are readily distinguished by the experienced eye."

It seems more than likely, though, that he must have had help with the care of his insects. He is said to have raised them in captivity; this meant studying their food and environment so that these could be approximated in cage life. It should be remembered that not only the adults but also the eggs, larvae and pupae of each species were sent together with accurate drawings of the various stages. Furthermore, the specimens were not dried and poisoned but inflated in life-like appearance by means of tiny instruments and the preserving fluid.

Of one shipment alone, according to a letter from Francillon dated London, 10 August 1793, we read [*Ibid.* folio 81v.]:

"I have received from my friend at Savannah Georgia (the person who drew the hundred Birds) a wonderful fine collection of Drawings of the Insects of that Country the contents are 1021 sheets of Drawings, containing 1664 different species or 1833 figures with a manuscript description of the natural history of each insect."

This represents a prodigious amount of work. The price mentioned for the drawings was 8/6 while his price for specimens was sixpence, certainly not a high figure considering their meticulous perfection. Francillon, the silversmith, was, so far as we know, the only intermediary through whom Abbot's orders passed to the large museums of England and the Continent.

Parts of these vast collections of insects went to London, Dublin, Paris, Zurich, and Berlin. His bird paintings lie in London, Boston, and Athens, Georgia—possibly other places too; and we know at least one of his professional connections—the Chetham Library of Manchester. All these varied archives may prove to be productive sources of new information on this unsung, yet talented, artist of bird life, when peaceful mousings may again be resumed.

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