

## DR. STROBEL'S ACCOUNT OF JOHN J. AUDUBON

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IN the *Charleston* [S. C.] *Mercury* of 28 June 1833, there appeared an unsigned sketch describing the personality and scientific method of John J. Audubon. Obviously written by a friend and first-hand observer, and based on Audubon's brief sojourn in the Florida Keys in the spring of 1832, it has nevertheless, so far as I can determine, escaped the notice of the host of persons who have done serious biographical work on the great naturalist, including his definitive biographer, F. H. Herrick. Conceivably it has been examined but discarded because of its anonymous authorship; more probably it has not been discovered by those especially interested in Audubon. At any rate, for the additional ray of light it throws on Audubon's character, and because the mystery of its authorship has now been solved, it seems eminently worth rescuing from the remote files of the *Mercury* and presenting to those who still revere the name of its subject.

Audubon arrived in Key West, Florida, on 4 May 1832 aboard the United States Revenue Cutter Marion (*Key West Gazette*, 5 May 1832), bearing not only the accouterments of the well-outfitted naturalist but also a letter of introduction to Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel, Charleston-born physician, amateur naturalist, editor of the *Key West Gazette*, and one of the best-informed men on the island. Strobel had learned his medicine at the Medical College of South Carolina and his natural history from the Reverend Dr. John Bachman, Charleston clergyman and naturalist, and co-author with Audubon of *The quadrupeds of North America*, published at New York in three volumes text and three volumes atlas, ca. 1845-54, and other editions. When Audubon made Bachman's acquaintance in Charleston in the summer of 1831 and divulged his intention of visiting the Florida Keys, Bachman eagerly wrote the letter of introduction to Strobel and apparently assured Audubon that Strobel would gladly assist and advise him in his search for specimens. Audubon, in fact, just prior to leaving Charleston for his Florida journey, had seen at Bachman's house the head of a Key West Quail-dove (*Geotrygon chrysia*) sent by Strobel, just one of a variety of birds, shells, and plants collected and dispatched since the latter's arrival in the Keys in the autumn of 1829 (Audubon, *Ornithological biography*, v. 2, 1834, pp. 382-383. Edinburgh, Black.). On reaching Key West, Audubon therefore sought out Strobel, presented the letter, and solicited his aid.

Thus began a friendship based on an actual association of less than three weeks, but nevertheless warm and enduring. During the 17 days of his Key West visit (According to the *Key West Gazette*, he departed on

21 May 1832.) Audubon was much in the company of Dr. Strobel. He was obviously delighted to discover even an amateur ornithologist who might lend assistance. Strobel was overwhelmed with admiration.

Audubon's researches in and out of Key West were closely followed by Strobel and duly noted in his *Gazette*. His departure elicited from Strobel the following editorial eulogy (*Key West Gazette*, 23 May 1832):

Mr. Audubon—This Gentleman left here in the Revenue Cutter Marion, on Monday last for Charleston, calculating to touch on his way at the Florida Keys, and probably the mainland. It affords us great pleasure to state that this expedition has given him much satisfaction and added largely to his collection of specimens, & Mr. Audubon is a most extraordinary man;—possessed of an ardent and enthusiastic mind and entirely devoted to his pursuits, danger cannot daunt, and difficulties vanish before him. During his stay here his hour of rising was three o'clock in the morning; from that time until noon, and sometimes even until night he was engaged in hunting among the Mangrove Keys—despite of heat, sandflies and musquitoes. On his return from these expeditions, his time was principally employed in making sketches of such plants and birds as he may have procured: This was not an extraordinary effort for a day—it was continued for weeks; in short, it appeared to constitute his chief aim, as it is his happiness. Mr. Audubon has adopted a most excellent plan of connecting with his drawing of birds, such plants as may be found in the neighborhood where they are taken. We hesitate not in giving our opinion, that his work on ornithology, when completed, will be the most splendid production of its kind ever published; and we trust that it will be duly estimated and patronized. The private character of Mr. Audubon corresponds with the nature of his mind and pursuits—he is frank, free, and generous, always willing to impart information, and to render himself agreeable. The favorable impressions which he has produced upon our mind will not soon be effaced.

No reader of Audubon's *Ornithological biography* of five volumes (1831–39), especially the second volume (1834), will have overlooked the frequent references to Strobel, nor can one justly assert that the author was unmindful of the physician's aid. He repeatedly referred to Strobel with gratitude and affection, as, for example, in the following passage (Audubon, *tom. cit.*: xvi):

At Key West, I enjoyed the hospitality of Major Glassel,—as well as my friend, Dr. Benjamin Strobel, and other inhabitants of that singular island, to all of whom I now sincerely offer my best thanks for the pleasure their society afforded me, and the acquisitions which their ever ready assistance enabled me to make.

Or again, the following (Audubon, *tom. cit.*: 396), as Audubon described the vegetation in which he figured the Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*):

Many of these [acacia-like] trees were planted near the house of my friend, Dr. Benjamin Strobel, under whose hospitable roof, the twig was drawn.

Dr. Strobel shared with Audubon his considerable knowledge of the wrecking business based on three years of observation. An important

occupation along the Florida Straits, wrecking had become notorious throughout America and Europe. Audubon was naturally interested. He was fortunate enough to encounter a few wrecker crews while on a brief expedition to the Dry Tortugas during his Key West visit (*Key West Gazette*, 9 May 1832), but he relied on Strobel for first-hand information. Strobel placed in his hands his own transcription of the "Wrecker's Song," prefaced by a general description of wreckers as he had known them. This Audubon printed with full acknowledgment of its source in 1835 (Audubon, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 158-163, 1835), although the *Charleston Mercury* had already printed it on 22 June 1833, some two full years before the appearance of Audubon's third volume.

Thus it is apparent that even on brief acquaintance the two men had developed great esteem for each other. Strobel had early cultivated an aptitude and an appreciation for scientific observation. Audubon's method moved him to deep respect; Audubon's tireless devotion to purpose and his inexhaustible energy inspired his awe. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that Strobel, as he prepared a book on his Florida experiences, included a chapter recalling his impressions of Audubon. Although Strobel's manuscript was accepted for publication by a Charleston printer, for some unknown reason it was never published in its entirety. Portions of it were made available to Charleston newspapers, however, and from time to time excerpts appeared in their columns.

The key to the authorship of these "Sketches of Florida," 11 installments of which were anonymously published in the *Charleston Mercury* between 18 June and 26 July 1833, is to be found in the *Charleston Courier* of 3 February 1836 at the beginning of an item signed by Dr. Strobel. It reads: "Some three years since, I published a few sketches of Florida in the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Evening Post*. Since that time, I prepared a book on the subject, which has been in the hands of a publisher, but from circumstances beyond my control, has not been published." The chapter on Audubon, which constituted the fourth installment of the Strobel "Sketches of Florida" to appear in the *Mercury*, follows herewith. (It is reproduced here essentially as it appeared in the *Charleston Mercury*. Only a few changes in punctuation have been made, when the commas of the original printing seemed completely superfluous.)

JOHN J. AUDUBON

Every thing relating to this gentleman, is calculated to excite a lively interest. I therefore deem no apology necessary for introducing his name into my Sketches. In the months of March and April, 1832, he visited the Florida Reef, and touched and remained three or four weeks, off and on, at Key West, where I had a good opportunity of becoming acquainted with him. By a friend (from whom he bore a letter of introduction) I had been apprised of his expected arrival in the Revenue Cutter Marion, Capt. Day. It being intimated that he was coming ashore in one of the

boats, I walked down about sun set with a number of persons to see him land. On his landing, I was introduced to him by Capt. Day. He immediately took me aside, informed me that he had letters for me from my friend Mr. B. and that he was anxious to have some conversation with me. I invited him to my house, where we sat down; Mr. Audubon at once proceeded to business, making a number of enquiries respecting birds and other objects of his pursuit. After a long conversation, we parted for the night. I saw him again on the following day, and almost every day when he came ashore during his stay. Mr. Audubon is a very extraordinary man. An acquaintance of half an hour enabled me to enter at once into his character and feelings. Divested of every thing like pedantry, he is frank, free and amiable in his dispositions, and affable and polite in manners. His engaging manner and mild deportment, united to a perfect possession of what the french term "Savior [sic] faire," enables him to accomplish many things, which to another person would be unattainable; every one appears to enlist at once in his service, and to be disposed to promote his views. In addition to the possession of these qualities, Mr. Audubon is the most enthusiastic and indefatigable man I ever knew. It is impossible to associate with him without catching some portion of his spirit; he is surrounded with an atmosphere which infects all who come within it, with a mania for bird-killing, and bird-stuffing. For my own part, I must confess that I have become an incurable victim to the disease.

When we examine Mr. Audubon's celebrated drawings and plates, we can not but yield him our warmest approbation and applause; but how few of us can estimate the danger and toil which they have cost him, or through what "untried scenes and changes" he has passed in procuring his specimens. In our admiration of the Artist we are too apt to forget the labor and privations of the man. In order to give some faint idea of Mr. Audubon's exertions, I will briefly relate the occurrences of one day's excursion, on which I accompanied him. At half past two o'clock, A. M. our party assembled at a given place, we were provided with two good boats, a number of hands and all the necessary apparatus. At three o'clock we started, and steered for 2 or 3 small Mangrove Keys lying to the Northward of Key West; we made a circuit around them, but saw nothing worthy of note.—Previous to our getting clear of these Keys, we got ashore upon a long bank making out from one of them, which rendered it necessary for all hands to get overboard, Mr. Audubon being among the foremost. We hauled the boat over the bank, and bore away for a narrow opening between Key West and Stock Island, through which we proposed passing. There we again got into shoal water, and were again compelled to get overboard. Our boats were hauled over a flat nearly a mile in length before we could get them afloat.—Having passed through the cut, we landed on a long sandbank on the Eastern extremity of Key West. An hour or more was spent here in collecting shells; after which, we footed it around to Key West while the boats were rowed along the beach by the hands. Not a pond, lake or bog, did we leave unexplored, often did we wade through mud up to our knees, and as often were we obliged to scramble over the roots of the Mangrove trees which happened in our course. About 8 o'clock, the sun came out intensely hot; we occasionally penetrated the woods to escape his scorching beams, and as often were driven from the woods by myriads of Musquitoes and Sandflies. One of our party gave out about this time and took to a boat. Most gladly would I have followed his lead, but was deterred by pride. Onward we went, baking and broiling, and what was more discouraging still, we could discover not a single bird worthy of note. Mr. Audubon went on neither dispirited by heat, fatigue, nor bad luck, whilst we began to lag, and occasionally would dodge under some tree, to catch a breath, or sit down to blow. We toiled along in this way for several miles, and finally reached the Light

House, tolerably well broken down. I gladly accepted of the use of a horse, whilst the rest of the party returned to town in a boat. I arrived at home about 11 o'clock, A. M. having made the circuit of Key West. I went to bed immediately and slept soundly for several hours, when I got up and took some refreshment, pretty well satisfied with the jaunt, and no ways ambitious of repeating it. To Mr. Audubon this was an every day affair; he rose every morning at 3 o'clock and went out in a boat, and cruized in search of birds, etc. until 12 or 1 o'clock, at which time he usually returned to dinner. During these expeditions he took no refreshments but biscuit and molasses and water, proving by his example that ardent spirits are never necessary to health even under the greatest exposure and fatigue. Before and after dinner, as soon as he returned from the morning jaunt, Mr. Audubon employed himself in drawing such birds as he might have procured during the morning, and in the evening he was on the hunt again. Thus has Mr. Audubon been employed day after day, for weeks and months on the Florida Reef, exploring Mangrove Keys, swamps and other places, into which I question much, if any animal two legged or four legged, had ever before penetrated, unless it was the Pelican or Cormorant.

Not soon will the recollection of this surprising man pass from my memory, and often as I call him to mind will I admire his unquenchable ardor in the pursuit of science, and his amiable deportment as a gentleman; nay more, the recollection will always be associated with a warm sensation of gratitude, for his kindness and friendship to one, from whom he had reason to expect but little in return.

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