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Audubon at Sea:

The Coastal & Transatlantic Adventures of John James Audubon

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Audubon at Sea: The Coastal & Transatlantic Adventures of John James Audubon edited by Christoph Irmscher and Richard J. King. University of Chicago Press, 2022. 334 pp.

To be “at sea” suggests being out of one’s element, adrift without purpose or control, indecisive and unsure. Although the literal scope of this remarkable edited volume are two very real sea voyages, these

figurative meanings also contribute to the version of John James Audubon that editors Christoph Irmscher and Richard J. King present. The book's epigraph says as much, in Audubon's own words:

A long voyage would always be to me a continued source of suffering, were I restrained from gazing on the vast expanse of the waters, and on the ever-pleasing inhabitants of the air that now and then appear in the ship's wake. ... When the first glimpse of day appears, I make my way on deck, where I stand not unlike a newly hatched bird, tottering on feeble legs. Let the wind blow high or not, I care little which, provided it waft me toward the shores of America.

Those are the opening lines of his 1835 essay, "Wilson's Petrel" (today, known as Wilson's storm-petrel), first published in *Ornithological Biography*. The essay itself, fully included in *Audubon at Sea*, waxes further with ornithological delight, Audubon's own version of the Romantic sublime. "If the sky be clear," he continues, "the first sight of the sun excites emotions of gratitude towards the Being by whose power it was formed, and sent forth to shed its benign influence on surrounding worlds. Silent adoration occupies my soul... (260).

But if Ralph Waldo Emerson's encounters with sublimity, feet firmly on the New England ground, brought him to a transcendental "brink of fear," Audubon's suffering was more fully embodied. He was prone to seasickness all his life—not unlike his contemporary Charles Darwin. His paternal grandparents intended a naval career for him, but he flunked out of the training school at Rochefort-sur-Mer in France, and the editors observe, "Audubon never overcame his fear of travel on the high seas" (11). Those literal seas take on greater cultural and historical significance as we move through Irmscher and King's contextualization.

Divided into three sections, *Audubon at Sea* presents the painter's development as a writer. Both the first and last sections are excerpts from the journal he kept during those two voyages in the Atlantic. Part I relies on the original journal, including excerpts from the journal he kept from late April to late July 1826 while traveling from New Orleans to London to display his drawings, secure an engraver, and generally network in the circles where he would hope to sell *The Birds of America*. The journal itself he sent back to America to his wife Lucy, intending it to acquaint her with his adventures and then remain in her care for later reference.

Part III represents the second of these transatlantic voyages, a collecting trip to Labrador that Audubon undertook in 1833, along with several companions, including his twenty-year-old son, John Woodhouse. Unlike Section I, these passages are not in Audubon's own voice. Instead, they are polished, revised prose that his wife Lucy included in the biography she published after his death.

Section II compiles nearly three dozen distinct essays excerpted from *The Ornithological Biography*, the five-volume set Audubon intended to accompany *The Birds of America* but actually published over several years, from 1831-1839. These pieces show Audubon as one of the early practitioners of what would become known as "nature writing," an important thread in American literary history and, in the hands of somewhat later contemporaries, emerging environmental advocacy.

Thus, taken together, the book offers distinct versions of John James Audubon, a man whom the editors describe as "prone to inventing an alternative origin for himself" (4), whose fabrications reflected a "casual relationship with facts" (6). Indeed, Audubon attempted several self-reinventions through his life, from attempts to hide his illegitimacy and the



section describes the surviving manuscript (438 pages, 12 1/8 inches by 7 3/4 inches) and reproduces several of its fine illustrations; they comment on his idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation, which they maintain throughout, helpfully explaining that “Audubon’s misspellings allow us to imagine his accent, the French language that always hovers in the back of his mind and causes his hand to write ‘anstant’ instead of ‘instant’ or, since the French ‘h’ is silent, to omit it where it should occur and insert it where it shouldn’t, turning, for example, the nautical hailings ‘Brig ho!’ and “Ship hi!’ into ‘Brig Oh! And Ship I!’” (37). As well, the headnote guides us to consider how Audubon’s previous practice of simple field notes gave way to a more personable voice: “Just a few weeks into his journal,” the editors note, “Audubon is no longer addressing Lucy only; his writing has become a much bigger thing—a tool for exploring the relationship between human observer and nonhuman environment that is nowhere stranger than on the high seas” (37).

Section II comprises the bulk of the book. In these essays Audubon includes descriptions of himself working at his drawings, weathering a

possibility that he was mixed-race, to the claims that his striking paintings were “drawn from life” rather than the specimens he’d shot or borrowed from others, to many other sleights-of-self along the way. This volume contextualizes Audubon’s emergence as a voice in 19th-century American letters and explores his contributions to our own necessary examinations of how species extinctions, human enslavement, and indigenous dispossession are so tightly, and disastrously, intertwined.

Throughout, the editors frame the text with extensive scholarship. An illuminating introduction to Part I sets some historical context. The *Delos* “was laden with 924 bales of cotton, harvested and no doubt loaded by enslaved people” (33), they note. The headnote to this

storm at sea, and sitting as audience for a lengthy tale told by a crewman—the “Death of a Pirate” whom the ship’s officer had come upon wounded in a secluded cove of the Gulf of Mexico. He’s conversational, if not actually confiding. Where the journal en route to Britain addressed Lucy, here he directs his remarks to his Reader. “Look at the birds before you,” he directs us in “The Common Cormorant.” “I wish you could have witnessed the actions of such groups as I did while in Labrador” (245). He is by turns witty, suggesting that the “Fish Hawk, or Osprey” might, following the example of the “very inferior powers of the bird named the Kingfisher,” be better named the “Imperial Fisher”—that is, he grins from the page, “were I not a member of a republic” (172).

However, natural history is the main focus. Ranging from Florida to Labrador, these sketches present close observations of birds' habitat; nesting behavior—number, size, and appearance of eggs; construction of nest; diet (he dissected many); number of broods per season; care of the young (such as the “artifice” of the Wilson's plover broken-wing display to draw predators from the young); as well as details of the species' range and migration. Irmischer and King note that over time, Audubon began to drop the narrative anecdotes and “in an effort to establish his bona fides as a naturalist, doubled down on the science” (76).

In this mode, he anticipates concepts now familiar from ecology; in the osprey he describes what we would now call site fidelity—the Fish Hawk, he says, “shews the same attachment to the tree on which it has built its first nest and returns to it year after year” (174). He notes that what we would name pair bonding can be seen in the osprey, the pair “uttering cries of joy and exultation, alighting on the branches on which their last year's nest is yet seen remaining, and doubtless congratulating each other on finding their home again. Their caresses are mutual” (175). We see cross references to specimens collected and information given by others, including his contemporary/rival, Alexander Wilson, John Kirk Townsend, Charles-Lucien Bonaparte, John Bachman. The editors painstakingly footnote all this with current population status, species names, and other updates. For example, “Audubon seems to have received incorrect information,” they surmise, indicating that “Modern ornithologists have confirmed [only] in part Audubon's distributions and observations” of different species of petrel (265). Indeed, Irmischer and King observe that “the immense synthetic effort that went into Audubon's writing, the determination with which he fused anatomical detail, journal notes, accounts by other observers, and insights gleaned from previous writers into near-seamless narratives, made *Ornithological Biography* an unparalleled resource for other scientists, including Charles Darwin” (81).

It is impossible to separate Audubon's mid-19th

century accumulation of these life histories from the constant current of slaughter. No more than a month into his first voyage, he devotes a poetic description of mahi-mahi (with phrases like “from Burnished Gold to Silver Bright”), concluding with his “Share of Pleasure in seizing them with a Sharp Hook” (53). In “The Florida Keys” he recounts the “rare sport” of shooting “a multitude of pelicans,” and hundreds of nesting cormorants, such that “I thought by some unaccountable means or other we had killed the whole colony” (91). In the midst of a keenly-detailed account of sea turtles, he delineates several methods of their capture—that is, the mechanics of the centuries-long decimation of today's endangered species. One “extraordinary turtler,” Audubon wrote, who had reportedly collected some 800 green turtles in a year, “had an iron instrument ... four-cornered but flattish, and of a shape somewhat resembling the beak of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker.” From the irony of a comparison to a now-vanished species, he further likens the hunt to “being run like a whale, [so that it] soon becomes fatigued” (120).

From Bird Key in Florida to Guillemot Isle in Labrador, he recounts egg robbers. In the south, the Sooty Tern and the Brown Noddy as well as four species of sea turtle are targeted; in the north, Gulls, Guillemots, and any number of unspecified Ducks all fall to those he whom calls “the pest of the feathered tribes, and their brutal propensity to destroy the poor creatures after they have robbed them” (213). Also in Labrador, he recorded the carcasses of 1500 skinned seals; Irmischer and King observe that “the fishermen who killed thousands of guillemots in a day, plucking their feathers and throwing the bodies into the sea, must have seemed monstrous caricatures of himself and his pursuits” (269).

Perhaps. But if so, it's a realization he can't bring himself to name outright in *Ornithological Biography*. In his chapter “The Puffin,” he describes his collecting party ascending to a small islet where “[t]he poor things seemed not at all aware of the effect of guns, for they would fly straight towards us as often as any

other direction.” Despite his avowed pity for their naivet  , he assures the reader, “In the course of half an hour we obtained a good number” (254). Later still, “I shot for one hour by my watch, always firing at a single bird on wing. How many puffins I killed in that time I take the liberty of leaving you to guess” (255).

Irmscher and King conclude in the volume’s Coda that

... the shine didn’t just come off Audubon recently. He was a disappointment even to his contemporaries—to his father, who wanted him to be a sailor; to his wife Lucy, who had to raise their sons on her own during their father’s frequent absences; to fellow naturalists, who lamented his errors and excoriated his plagiarism; to his granddaughter, who assiduously scrubbed his prose and burned his journals; to modern environmentalists, chagrined over his mass killings of birds that undermined those passages in his writings in which he spoke out in favor of conservation. (213)

These are not the failings for which Audubon is most sharply criticized today; our current censure calls out his unquestioning participation in the slave economy, as both seller and buyer of enslaved people. He contributed skulls to the cranial collection of Samuel G. Morton, in a pseudoscientific effort to justify white supremacy. These may be considered more than simple “disappointments.”

The ultimate critique Irmscher and King offer in their Coda is of binary thinking itself—then/now, us/them, nature/culture, etc., and of, as they write, “the notion that boundaries must exist and must be kept intact,” since “the only way we know how to keep them intact is violence” (314). “Audubon leads us across the water to the edge of things,” they reflect, “to the place where life and death meet.... [He] doesn’t show us a way out of our modern predicament. But at least shows us what it (still) is” (314).



I think no reader today would expect from Audubon “a way out” from either our ecological crisis or the larger economic, cultural, and ethical failures from which it emerges. Audubon’s words reveal much about how violence suffused not only commercial but also scientific exploitation of the natural world—the difference lay in degree, not kind. The editors’ scholarship acknowledges the links between those acts of plunder and the trans-Atlantic system of slavery. (They note that the ship he took to Liverpool carried “924 bales of cotton, harvested and no doubt loaded by enslaved people”[33].)

However, they could have gone farther than acknowledgment. Today’s environmental justice movement highlights the way people who are poor and powerless—often so as a result of the histories of slavery, colonialism, and racism—are disproportionately the victims of environmental devastation, what literary scholar Rob Nixon has called a “slow violence.” The enslavement of Black people and dispossession of Native peoples fueled the economic world in which Audubon lived—and, with *The Birds of America*, came into his own success. If our age where climate change brings greater ecological disaster to those who are least economically equipped to withstand it is one of “slow violence” even as it accelerates species extinctions, it’s directly descended from the violences (call them fast, or acute, or simply brutal) that marked his.