

Jean Audubon

<http://www.bbhc.org/audubon/1-NewYork-Bio.html>

In his journal, John James Audubon wrote about his father, revealing Jean Audubon's influence on his young son's interest in Nature:

My father was Lieutenant Jean Audubon. He sailed as a sea captain to the West Indies, where in 1785 I found light and life in the New World. During my earliest years there and in France he often brought me birds and flowers. With great eagerness, he would point out the elegant movements of the birds, and the beauty and softness of their plumage. He called my attention to their shows of pleasure or sense of danger, their perfect forms and splendid attire. He would speak of their departure and their return with the seasons, their haunts, and, most wonderful of all, their change of livery. He excited me to make me study them.¹

In personal appearance my father and I were of the same height and stature, say about five feet ten inches and with muscles of steel. His manners were those of a most polished gentleman. In temper we much resembled each other also, being warm, irascible, and at times violent. But it was like the blast of a hurricane, dreadful for a time, then calm almost instantly returned.²

My father... believed not in the power of gold coins as efficient means to render a man happy. He said, "Talents and knowledge, added to sound mental training, assisted by honest industry, can never fail, nor be taken from anyone." Therefore, notwithstanding all my mother's tears, off to school I was sent.³

As I grew up I was fervently desirous of becoming acquainted with Nature. But the moment a bird was dead, no matter how beautiful it had been in life, the pleasure of possession became blunted for me. I wished to possess all the reproductions of Nature, but I wished to see life in them, as fresh as from the hands of their Maker.⁴

This was impossible. ... I turned to my father, made known to him my disappointment, and he gave me a book of illustrations that put new life in my veins. Although the pages were not what I longed for, they gave me a desire to copy Nature. To Nature I went and tried to imitate her. But for many years, I saw that my drawings were worse than the ones I regarded as bad in the book.⁵

Jean Audubon was a wanderer. An adventurous spirit and constant curiosity about the world around him pervaded his life and fixed his eye on lofty goals most men would never have attempted. His romanticism and passion for new experiences was passed on to his son, John James Audubon.⁶

He was a French merchant and sea captain who traveled to distant ports, owned a plantation in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), bought a farm near Philadelphia (Mill Grove), traded in sugar and slaves, and made a small fortune in these and other endeavors.⁷ Captain Audubon's philanderings led to the illegitimate birth of his son by a French chambermaid, Jeanne Rabine, in Les Cayes, Saint-Domingue, on April 26, 1785. She died only a few months after her child's birth. In 1788, Jean Audubon took his 3-year-old son to Nantes, France to be raised by his legitimate wife, Anne Moynet, who lovingly accepted the boy and his younger half-sister - the daughter of an octoroon woman with whom Audubon senior had also consorted in Les Cayes.⁸

1 *Capturing Nature: The Writings and Art of John James Audubon*, eds. Peter and Connie Roop (New York: Walker and Company, 1993), p. 2.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *John James Audubon in the West : The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, ed. Sarah E. Boehme, with essays by Annette Blaugrund, Robert McCracken Peck, and Ron Tyler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, 2000), p. 11.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Mill Grove

The same year President Thomas Jefferson negotiated the Homeric Louisiana Purchase from France (1803), Audubon, now 18, came to America to escape conscription into Napoleon's army and to manage his father's farm in Mill Grove, near Philadelphia.¹

Donald Culross Peattie wrote:

As Lieutenant Audubon had left Haiti just in time to escape the frightful massacres of the race war that had its beginnings in Les Cayes, so now he got his son out of France just in time to escape the wholesale conscriptions of Napoleon. Young Audubon was sent to America, to his father's estate near Norristown, Pennsylvania, in 1803... 'Mill Grove,' the Audubon estate, was a manor house, situated in what we might call Valley Forge country, and connected with lead mines which the lieutenant had bought as a speculation. It was secluded deep in the country, that eastern Pennsylvania countryside which has some of the qualities of English scenery - gentle, tranquil, aristocratic. At the opening of the nineteenth century it must still have possessed what it has never completely lost, an eighteenth century charm, that colonial seaboard atmosphere of a temperate New World tingling with wildness in which are set an Old World elegance and leisure. The inhabitants, with exceptions important to Audubon, were Quakers, a peaceful and industrious lot quite without sympathy for Audubon's hobbies of shooting, music, bird-watching, drawing, and fine dress. Not far away, as distance seems to us today, was Alexander Wilson, teaching school, playing his melancholy flute, unsuccessfully courting, and beginning to draw and study birds. But destiny had not yet drawn their paths to cross...²

Perhaps the most carefree year [sic] of his life was that when Audubon lived at Mill Grove, as self-styled lord of the manor. His father had intended him to look after the lead mine, in company with an older and hostile partner. But the mine, which never had paid and never would pay, was only a source of distress to Audubon; he shook off unpleasant duties lightly in those days and, clad in elegant pumps and ruffled shirt, he roamed his woods with the finest fowling piece he could purchase - shooting grouse like an English lord.³

At 23, in 1808, Audubon married [Lucy Bakewell](#), whose family had recently emigrated from England and who lived on an adjacent farm. The young couple soon left Mill Grove to pursue new horizons in Kentucky, then Louisiana, where, in sequence, Audubon's business ventures failed. Those business failures, and a nationwide economic crash in 1819, led Audubon to pursue art as a profession in 1820, at the age of 35.⁴

¹ *John James Audubon in the West : The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, ed. Sarah E. Boehme, with essays by Annette Blaugrund, Robert McCracken Peck, and Ron Tyler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, 2000), p. 14. (Hereafter referred to as *John James Audubon in the West*.)

² Donald Culross Peattie, *Audubon's America: The Narrative and Experiences of John James Audubon*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), pp. 7, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.; Audubon spent nearly five years at Mill Grove, from the age of 18-23 (1803-1808), when he and Lucy left for Kentucky.

⁴ *John James Audubon in the West*, p. 14.

Lucy Bakewell

In 1808, while Audubon was living at Mill Grove, near Philadelphia, he married Lucy Bakewell, whose family had recently emigrated from England and lived on a nearby farm. He was 23. The young couple soon left the farm Audubon's father had sent him to manage for other, seemingly better, opportunities in Kentucky. They then moved to Louisiana, where, in sequence, various businesses failed. Lucy endured bankruptcy, the loss of all her family possessions, and, in 1817 and 1819, the death of two infant daughters.¹

Depressed and desperate, her husband, now 35, decided to capitalize on his artistic talents by improving on and up-dating Alexander Wilson's book, *American Ornithology*, published between 1808 and 1814. This decision was made with Lucy's unwavering encouragement. Without the help of this stalwart, enterprising woman, who virtually brought up and supported their young sons alone, Audubon's masterwork, *The Birds of America*, might never have been achieved. "My wife determined that my genius should prevail, and that my final success as an ornithologist should be triumphant," he said.²

While Lucy supported and took care of the family, even assisting in what had now become the family business - by handling correspondence and other administrative matters - Audubon searched for new species of birds, promoted the project, sought new subscribers, and supervised the engraving and publication of *The Birds of America*, throughout the twelve years it took to complete. During this critical period, Lucy taught school and served as a governess to earn money for the family.³

The Audubon family's dream house, "Minnie's Land," built in 1842 along the Hudson River, in New York City, in what is now 155th Street in Upper Manhattan, was named in honor of Lucy. Her affectionate nickname, "Minnie," meant "Mother." The Audubons were a close-knit family, with each of their sons - Victor Gifford and John Woodhouse - building their own homes at "Minnie's Land" and becoming Audubon senior's closest assistants throughout his life.⁴

¹ *John James Audubon in the West : The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, ed. Sarah E. Boehme, with essays by Annette Blaugrund, Robert McCracken Peck, and Ron Tyler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, 2000), p. 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 26, 43.

The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America

Inspired by the success of his ornithological publications and driven by a need to create "something new rather than tread in old shoes upon people's heels," Audubon had launched his ambitious plan to publish a definitive book on what he called "*the Viviparous Quadrupeds* (literally, four-legged animals bearing living offspring) *of North America*." Initially, he envisioned it as a single-volume work "rather less than half the size of the *Birds of America* in about one hundred plates giving all that can be given in such fauna of the size of life accompanied by one vol(ume) of letter press, the whole to be finished (God granting me life and health) in two years!" It would eventually grow to a three-volume work, with an additional three volumes of text, and take fifteen years to complete.¹

Audubon began drawing mammals for *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* in 1840, before his journey west. "I have drawn 61 Species comprising 115 figures,"² he wrote Harris in December 1841. This was the time in which he produced some of his finest mammal paintings. He drew upon his contacts for specimens, and the *Common American Wildcat* (1842) would be the first plate in the new book (*Quadrupeds*, plate 1). Audubon began his publication with a large animal, and with a ferocious image: a cat with its teeth bared, the body gracefully crouched to indicate the possibility of sinuous movement.³

In seeking to portray mammals, Audubon was approaching a field of artistic endeavor in which numerous precedents existed, in contrast to his depictions of birds. The manner in which he portrayed this cat continued a pattern he had established in many of his most dramatic bird paintings - of having a bird look directly out of the composition, engaging the viewer directly. Audubon was already growing impatient to complete the work, trying to achieve in two years with mammals what had taken him the better part of a lifetime to accomplish with birds.⁴

1 *John James Audubon in the West: The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, ed. Sarah E. Boehme, with essays by Annette Blaugrund, Robert McCracken Peck, and Ron Tyler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, 2000), p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Up the Missouri River

Finally, in 1843, five years after the last giant plates of his double elephant folio had been engraved, printed, colored, and distributed to subscribers, and three

The *Omega* carried supplies and trappers upriver to fur company outposts. The launch must have been a raucous experience. Audubon wrote that there were "a hundred and one trappers of all descriptions and nearly a dozen nationalities, though the greater number were French Canadians, or Creoles of this State. Some were drunk, and many in that stupid mood that follows a state of nervousness produced by drinking and over-excitement." Edward Harris was less forgiving, stating that nearly all were drunk and calling them "the very offscouring of the earth." Some Indians also were on board, of whom Audubon merely mentioned that they "had already seated or squatted themselves on the highest parts of the steamer and were tranquil lookers-on." In a letter home on this first day, Audubon complained that the fur traders were not observant or knowledgeable about animals, other than what was necessary for business. He also reported showing his plates of the finished *Quadrupeds* to the Indians, and they, in contrast, knew all the animals except one and told him stories about new animals.⁸

The trip up to Fort Union would take 48 days and seven hours - the fastest steamboat journey up the Missouri River to that time. Even with frequent stops for gathering firewood, it was a long journey for the aging Audubon, who was just then turning 58 years old.⁹

During the early days of the trip, Audubon reported seeing mainly small mammals such as squirrels, groundhogs, and rabbits. Although the expedition's purpose was to gather information for the *Quadrupeds*, Audubon's personal love for birds was evidenced in his many references to bird sightings as they traveled. The journey also left time for some philosophical reflection. As he gazed at the riverbanks being washed away by the flooding, Audubon read it as a lesson of Nature's intention that all should live and die. Audubon's room on the boat contained his collection of skins and specimens, which he proudly showed to visitors when stops permitted.¹⁰

His earlier hopes of drawing while on board had been dashed: "... whilst we are running no one can either write or draw with any comfort."¹¹ The speed of the *Omega's* river journey precluded the sort of open-ended observations of wildlife that Audubon had grown accustomed to when traveling on his own. Only in St. Louis before his departure and when he reached Fort Union was he free to indulge in the detailed studies of mammal behavior that Bachman had requested.¹²

On their way up the river, Audubon and his companions observed and collected examples of wildlife. The time and route of travel may well have biased their observations in favor of birds, because they were following a major migratory route (known today as North America's "central flyway") during the peak of the spring migration.¹³

Donald Culross Peattie's, in *Audubon's America: The Narratives and Experiences of John James Audubon*, describes Audubon's river trip north:

Yet the country into which he is so slowly moving, upstream against the Missouri and its numberless sand bars, is a perfect menagerie of beasts, where elk and deer are as abundant on the prairies as ever in the woods. Where blackbear calmly swim the river in front of the steamer, and bison are so plenty [sic] that their carcasses choke the thin and braided stream. Where antelopes spring and prairie dogs chitter, and wolves and foxes show themselves at any time of day. Into this great untouched prairie province, with its whooping cranes and wild swans, its inland gulls and curlews and rails and terns, its troops of cowbirds, wild parrots, wild turkeys, and prairie chickens, sails the veteran naturalist, a man now of balanced judgment in things personal and things zoological. How different an Audubon from the touchy, elated or alternately despondent, impoverished, ambitious, thwarted young man of 1820, sailing down the Mississippi in Captain Cummings's flatboat, all his lifework before him!¹⁴

Audubon traveled in comfort on the *Omega*, in the "Lady's Cabin." Along the way, they ate and drank well, with receipts for wine found among their expenses. They stopped occasionally to gather wood and to hunt, and to visit trading posts and Indian camps.¹⁵ The ship's pilot, Joseph La Barge, described Audubon as haughty: "The impression which the celebrated scientist made upon the crew and those who were entertaining him was quite favorable. He was very reserved and when he did hold intercourse with members of the crew it was generally in an overbearing manner which alienated their good will." Audubon considered Indians not only "poor" but "stupid and superstitious." It was not uncharacteristic of Audubon to criticize the work of any artist with whom he felt in competition. His barbed comments about Catlin also stem from Audubon's identification with the fur traders and others engaged in commerce who approached the region with a pragmatic agenda, not a romanticized concept of nature or of the Indian as "noble savage."¹⁶

A number of artists had documented the American West, and Audubon was aware of some of them. The Swiss-born Karl Bodmer (1809-1893) accompanied the German Maximilian, prince of Wied, on a scientific expedition up the Missouri River from 1833 to 1834 and portrayed the Indians and landscape of the Great Plains in precisely drawn watercolors and oils such as Buffalo and Elk on the Upper Missouri, about 1834, some of which resulted in aquatint engravings. Audubon and his party were housed in the same quarters that Prince Maximilian's group had occupied at Fort Union.¹⁷

¹ *John James Audubon in the West: The Last Expedition: Mammals of North America*, ed. Sarah E. Boehme, with essays by Annette Blaugrund, Robert McCracken Peck, and Ron Tyler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, 2000), p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Quote From John James Audubon

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- *I am at work, and have done much, but I wish I had eight pairs of hands and another body to shoot the specimens.* -- from a letter dated October 11, 1829