

## Book Reviews

### Audubon: Artist and Naturalist

**John James Audubon.** Alice Ford. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1964. xiv + 488 pp. Illus. \$7.95.

**Audubon's Wildlife.** Edwin Way Teale. Viking Press, New York, 1964. viii + 256 pp. Illus. \$15.

The fascination of Audubon's amazing career continues to attract devoted biographers. As much "French courtier and American salesman" (Teale) as artist and naturalist, Audubon appears to us the very embodiment of the Romantic enthusiast, combining great sensitivity to living things, a passionate and impetuous temperament, and astounding physical vigor. His mature years were those of the settlement of the Old Northwest and the Mississippi Valley, and his declining days witnessed the opening stages of the military conquest of the Far West. It was on the changing frontier—west, south (Florida), and north (Labrador)—and above all in the Great American Forest, then still in its primal splendor, that Audubon sought out the unknown species of birds and quadrupeds which he was so memorably to recreate in chalk and oil and to describe, not always with the same exactitude, in the *Ornithological Biography*.

Was he a genuine naturalist or was he no more, and no less, than a skilled and imaginative delineator of birds and mammals? To answer this question would be to advance considerably our appreciation of Audubon's contribution to the study of the natural history of North America and to comprehend more fully his place in the history of biology. Alice Ford's book does not entirely supply the response we need. *John James Audubon* is the product of uncommonly diligent research, and we are given, for better or worse, a large share of the new information uncovered. The use of new sources can become a vice, the vice of excess. It has done so here. We learn

many details about Audubon's singular father and the unusual familial circumstances into which this natural child was born. One is at a loss, however, to enregister in the mind, from Alice Ford's presentation, the endless genealogical intricacies of this family. Indeed, the book in general seems possessed by the proverbial cast of thousands, with persons often identified by name only, whose relevance to the overall story is not announced and who occasionally disconcertingly reappear after a long absence. Even John Bachmann, the South Carolinian, who most encouraged Audubon's later work, is drawn with the lightest of strokes. The conflict that set the virulent George Ord and the eccentric Charles Waterton against a proud and intemperate Audubon was a confused blend of jealousy, pettiness, legitimate criticism, and clashing personalities. Of this almost incredible affair we are offered not an account but a selection of pieces from the amusing, but here incoherent, campaign of derogation directed against Audubon. Finally, the author frequently discusses the always embarrassing financial condition of the Audubons. The greatest drain on their resources, apart from Audubon's patent business inadequacies, was the private publication of the great folio edition of the *Birds of America*. On this matter Ford adds much new information, and yet we never learn the whole story, not even whether the work ultimately proved a financial success.

Certain conspicuous geographical blunders must be noted. It is most unlikely that even Indians could cross the "Illinois River" from a point near present-day Cairo, Illinois, and land on the opposite bank, identified as "Tennessee" (p. 78). It is absolutely impossible that Audubon himself sailed on an Ohio river steamer to "Pittsburgh, where he boarded an Erie Canal boat for Philadelphia" (p. 402).

Happily, the defects of unmeasured scholarship do contribute to the in-

trinsic merits of the book. Ford's compendium is a rich lode for all who henceforth will study Audubon. The information that she presents in her text and the guides to Audubon's works of art and to manuscripts by and pertaining to the artist which are provided in the appendices will direct much future research. This book is not a narrative of Audubon's life and an exacting analysis of his work. Surely no one today knows more about Audubon than Ford, and perhaps in a future edition of her book she will literally revivify her hero and make an estimate of his work. Until that time we must continue to refer to the aging writings of R. H. Herrick. The University of Oklahoma Press should be complimented on the splendid design and production of this volume. The plates are both delicate and beautiful.

*Audubon's Wildlife* contains a brief introduction by the editor, Edwin Way Teale, to the career of the artist-naturalist and offers a large selection from Audubon's unfamiliar writings. The latter are supplemented by reproductions of representative paintings. The publisher rightly cites two virtues of this edition: for the first time bird and quadruped paintings are published between the same covers, and all pictures are reproduced in the original size, even if this has required severe cropping of the plates. The quality of the reproductions is high; plates 86 and 87 (showing the fox squirrel), however, are so blurred that the desired detail is lost.

This collection allows the reader to make his own decision, aided by the editor's introductions to the sections, regarding Audubon's qualities as a naturalist. That he was impressionable and a lover of extravagant tales is notorious, but the chapters reprinted here, ranging from the Phoebe to the Bison, from the Cougar to the Arctic Tern, will convince perhaps the most skeptical reader of Audubon's acquaintance with diverse fauna and his exceptionally keen sense of observation. Audubon's writings persuade us that he should be read at length and that his paintings, however exquisite and vital they may be, reflect only one facet of his scientific life. *Audubon's Wildlife* is therefore a welcome contribution to our literature on the study of American animals and a book well worth its price.

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