

## Audubon in Edinburgh and his Scottish Associates

By John Chalmers. National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh. 2002. 157 pages. \$34.95 U.S. \$70.00 Can. Available from Codasat Canada Ltd., #1, 4335 West 10<sup>th</sup> Ave., Vancouver, British Columbia V6R 2H6 Canada.

John Chalmers, an orthopedic surgeon in Edinburgh, has filled a void with his careful documentation of archival letters and files dating back more than a century and a half. Although most members of the general public know the name of Audubon, few historically-minded ornithologists realize that Edinburgh, Scotland, was Audubon's favourite among all the world's cities. Audubon had received little encouragement in America, or in London or Paris, but Edinburgh grew to love him during the 22 months he spent there during his six visits, two of which lasted for six months each. Audubon's fame and his success date from these six visits. Chalmers includes twelve pages of biographical profiles of men who interacted with Audubon.

Audubon, the rough but charming and talented backwoodsman, was unexpectedly well received by eminent people in what was then the world's leading city for science endeavours. Members of the intelligentsia wine and dined him. The august Wernerian Society welcomed him. Thirteen of Audubon's early scientific papers were published by four different Edinburgh scientific journals. William McGillivray, in particular, went out of his way to help him with the scientific aspects of ornithology. The kindness of such savants never ceased to amaze Audubon.

Audubon's *Birds of America* was extremely expensive to produce. The first 10 plates were engraved by W. H. Lizars in Edinburgh, though publication later switched to London. In total, there were 87 parts, which sold at two guineas each, for a total cost of £187, containing 435 plates and text. Chalmers provides a list of the present whereabouts of the 23 sets that were sold in Scotland, as well as a list of exactly fifty places,

including 43 private residences, frequented by Audubon; all but 11 of these buildings are still standing.

Ironically, not one of the 14 complete sets of *Birds of America* sold in Edinburgh has remained there; the cash-strapped University of Edinburgh sold its set at auction in New York in 1992 for \$4.1 million. There is an extant copy in Paisley, coincidentally the hometown from which Alexander Wilson had left in disgrace for America in 1794.

This book combines an informative text, helpful footnotes, and magnificent illustrations, including reproductions of some of Audubon's finest bird paintings. Readers will marvel, as Audubon did, at the extent to which Edinburgh launched his career. Among innumerable pleasures are the spontaneity and charm of Audubon's letters to his wife, back in America.

I detected few errors. Although Chalmers is correct in saying that Alexander Wilson, a transplanted Scot in America, named the Eskimo Curlew in honour of Audubon in 1813, he fails to appreciate that J. R. Forster in 1772 had pre-empted Wilson by naming the species from a specimen collected by Humphrey Marten at Albany, on Hudson Bay, in 1771. Elliot Coues is misspelled Cowes. The index is sadly incomplete, hardly excusable now that indexes can be compiled unerringly and almost automatically by highlighting each name in the text.

This sumptuous, 228-page, beautifully-illustrated, sturdily-bound paperback is necessarily expensive. It would be an elegant gift for anyone interested in Audubon, the primacy of Edinburgh during Scottish enlightenment, or the history of ornithology. One hopes it can be purchased by every major library in North America and Europe.

C. STUART HOUSTON

863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8  
Canada

## A History of Devonshire Ornithology

By David G. Jenks. Isabelline Books, 2 Highbury House, 8 Woodlane Crescent, Falmouth TR11 4QS, Cornwall; e-mail: mikann@beakbook.demon.co.uk. FAX 0870 051-6387. 2004. Hardcover. 477 pages. £53 plus postage.

Devon is one of the most beautiful and interesting of the many British counties. David Jenks planned to write its ornithological history as a chapter for *Birds of Devon*, but when that project fell through he completed an entire book on the history alone. And what a book! Full of detail, printed on high quality paper, it is a sumptuous book, but almost too heavy to hold for someone who reads a chapter each night at bedtime.

As the Foreword explains (page xi), thoroughly-researched historical accounts such as this help us "understand the origins and raison d'être of the modern nature conservation movement." The first chapter

deals with the prehistoric record – skeletal remains of birds found in seven different caves or deposits. These caves are mapped, but readers are handicapped by the lack of a map of Devon showing the many other place names mentioned.

North Americans can only envy the additional centuries of scattered historical information available in England. The Isle of Lundy, off the north shore of Devon, features prominently throughout. The first Lundy entry concerns the gannet colony and nesting peregrines found there in 1274 AD.

There is a sordid side to most of the accounts before 1900. So-called scientific interests were served by shooting a bird, then almost the only way to identify it. Physicians and country vicars alone seemed to have "the leisure, the academic training and the opportunity



Houston, C Stuart. 2005. "Audubon in Edinburgh and his Scottish Associates, by John Chalmers [Review]." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 119(4), 607–607.  
<https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v119i4.233>.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/109674>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v119i4.233>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/352597>

#### **Holding Institution**

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

#### **Sponsored by**

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

#### **Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Rights: <https://biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.