

The Remarkable Nature of Edward Lear¹

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INTRODUCTION

Although he is best remembered today as a whimsical nonsense poet, adventurous traveler, and painter of luminous landscapes, Edward Lear (1812–1888) is revered in scientific circles as one of the greatest natural history painters of the 19th century (Figure 1). During his brief immersion in the world of science, he created a spectacular monograph on parrots, and a body of other work that continues to inform, delight, and astonish us with its remarkable blend of scientific rigor and artistic finesse.

In 1988 the British government honored Lear with a set of postage stamps featuring four of his whimsical ink drawings. These included a self-caricature of the bearded artist flying on improbably miniscule wings and the wedding scene from his best-known poem, “The Owl and the Pussycat” (Figure 2). The affable Lear would have been pleased—and probably astonished—by his country’s philatelic attention, but almost certainly disappointed by the Royal Mail’s choice of images marking the centennial of his death. He considered the illustrated verse in his *Book of Nonsense* (1846), which ultimately earned him a place in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, a sideline to his more serious focus: natural history and landscape painting. The artist so feared that these flights of fancy would undermine his reputation in the scientific world that he hid behind the pseudonym “Derry-Down-Derry” until 1861, by which time his nonsense verse and illustrations had already won him a devoted following around the world.

Lear’s contributions to science are half-forgotten today, but early in his life he was a prolific painter of natural history subjects, earning

1 This paper is an expanded version of the talk that was given in honor of Dr. Keith Stewart Thomson, former Executive Officer of the American Philosophical Society, at the APS Meeting on 11 November 2017. It is excerpted from three previous publications: Robert McCracken Peck, “The Natural History of Edward Lear,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 22, nos. 2–3 (Summer–Fall 2011): 1–68; Robert McCracken Peck, “Natural History: The Wilder Side of Edward Lear,” *Nature* 485, no. 7396 (3 May 2012): 36–38; and Robert McCracken Peck, *The Natural History of Edward Lear* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2016).



FIGURE 1. Edward Lear as he appeared in the mid-1840s, daguerreotype, private collection (Stephen A'Court Photography).

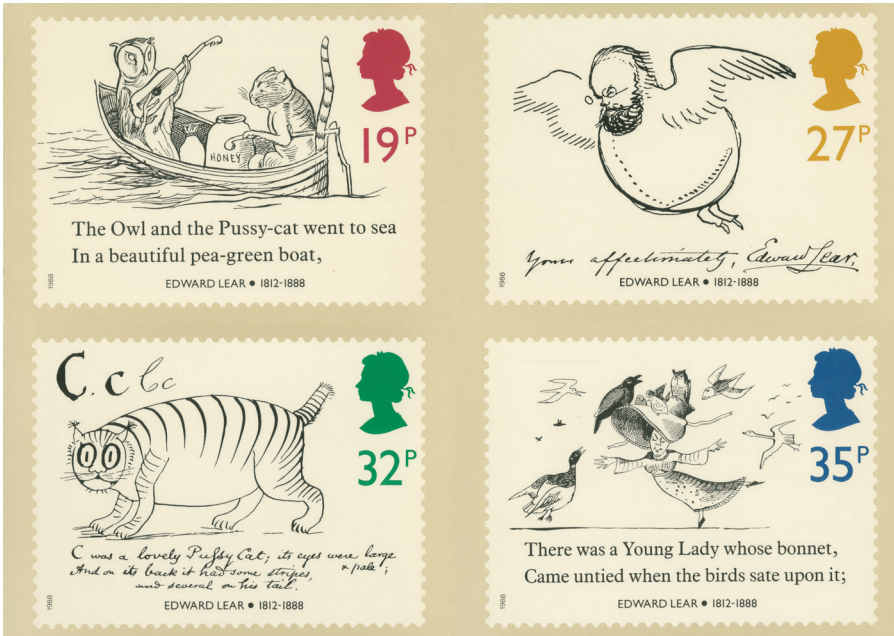


FIGURE 2. Edward Lear stamps, Royal Mail, 1988, private collection.



FIGURE 3. Lear's study of the Red and Yellow Macaw (*Macarcercus aracanga*), now known as the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*), which he eventually used as plate 7 for his book *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (1830–1832), watercolor over graphite, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.9 [68]).

near-universal praise for his accuracy, originality, and animated style. Lear's greatest scientific contribution was his magnificent *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots: The Greater Part of Them Species Hitherto Unfigured* (1830–1832)—the first monograph to focus on a single avian family—which he began to publish when he was just 18 years old. Admired by aviculturists and ornithologists alike, its animated depictions of “species hitherto unfigured” helped to make Lear the artist of choice for many of the leading ornithological publishers in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s. In that golden age of colorplate books, Lear created some of the most spectacular natural history illustrations ever published. The original watercolors for these and his other scientific paintings retain a timeless vitality that confirm Lear's place among the greatest natural history painters of all time (Figure 3).

AN EARLY INTEREST IN NATURAL HISTORY

Edward Lear was among the last of a long line of children born to Jeremiah Lear, a London stockbroker, and his wife Ann (née Skerrett) in the fashionable village suburb of Upper Holloway, just north of London (now Highgate).² When his father suffered a reversal of fortune on the stock exchange in 1816, Lear's family was forced to vacate their elegant Georgian house. Most of the children were dispersed and Lear was raised by his oldest sister Ann (1791–1861) from the age of four. Aside from a short stint at boarding school, the young boy seems to have received most of his formal education from Ann and another sister, Sarah (1794–1873). This suited Lear's nonconformist personality and, if anything, may have helped to stimulate his creative abilities and inherent curiosity. "I am almost thanking God that I was never educated [at a school]," he wrote when he was 47, "for it seems to me that 999 of those who are so, expensively & laboriously, have lost all before they arrive at my age—& remain like Swift's Stulbruggs—cut & dry for life, making no use of their earlier-gained treasures;—whereas, I seem to be on the threshold of knowledge . . ." ³ It was a threshold he continued to move and expand throughout his long and productive life.

Ann Lear, 21 years older than her brother, was not only a loving foster parent, but, as a modestly talented artist in her own right, served as an inspiration and role model to her young ward. Before coming into a small inheritance of her own, she may have augmented the family's income by selling stylized paintings of shells, birds, and flowers. With her encouragement, Lear found that he too could earn money as a commercial artist. "I began to draw, for bread and cheese, about 1827," he recalled late in life, "but only did uncommon queer shop-sketches—selling them for prices varying from ninepence to four shillings: coloring prints, screens, fans; awhile making morbid disease drawings for hospitals and certain doctors of physic."⁴

2 There is some debate about how many children the Lears had. Some accounts say there were as many as 22. Others say 17. Certainly, there was a good deal of infant and child mortality in the family. Of the many biographies of Edward Lear, the most complete and accurate are the ones written by Vivien Noakes and, more recently, Jenny Uglow. See Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1968; rev. ed. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2004); and Jenny Uglow, *Mr. Lear: A Life of Art and Nonsense* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

3 Edward Lear to Chichester Fortescue, September 2, 1859 in Edward Lear, *The Letters of Edward Lear*, ed. Lady Strachey (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), quoted in Noakes, *Life of a Wanderer*, 10.

4 Edward Lear, *Nonsense Songs and Stories*, 6th ed. (London; New York: Frederick Warne and Co., 1888), preface.

A small album in the Houghton Library at Harvard University dating from this period contains an interesting mix of natural history subjects by both Ann and Edward Lear, including flowers, shells, insects, birds, and even a few fish.⁵ So similar in style are the album's many still lifes and bird-filled landscapes that, were it not for an occasional signature, it would be difficult to attribute many of these paintings to one or the other artist with certainty.⁶ Some of the compositions in the book may represent Ann's commercial work or the "queer shop-sketches" Lear was selling "to stagecoach passengers in inn yards" at the age of 15.⁷

With the exception of the botanical studies, a somewhat stylized peacock (dated 1831), and an animated red-and-yellow macaw peering at the viewer from the trunk of a stunted tree, most of the paintings in this album are of imaginary subjects. The paintings feature flamboyant cranes, tufted hummingbirds, and extravagantly plumed pheasants, few of which bear any resemblance to actual birds. The landscapes are equally exotic and stylized (Figure 4).

A conspicuous contrast to the heavy stencil work and imaginary bird and landscape paintings that dominate the album is a beautifully rendered lithograph of the head of a blue macaw accompanied by two feathers (Figure 5). This arresting study reflects not only a change in Lear's approach to bird painting—from his sister's fanciful style to his own distinctive focus on reality—but also serves as an example of his early experiments with lithography, a reproductive technique that the young artist would fully master by the end of his teenage years.

The head vignette and the two feathers that accompany it were drawn on stone, reverse-printed with black ink, hand-colored, cut out, and then applied to the page. Elsewhere in the book we see the reverse of this process: an original watercolor of a pair of small green parrots that served as the starting point for another of Lear's lithographic experiments.⁸ A third page has four actual feathers glued beside a single painted one, further documenting Lear's transition from drawing fictional subjects to recording firsthand observations of living birds.⁹

While the Houghton album is not dated, watermarks in the paper indicate that it was begun in 1827, the year Lear and his sister Ann

5 Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.4.

6 One of the landscapes is clearly signed by Ann. There are a number of very similar paintings in private collections in England that are signed by Edward.

7 From Daniel Fowler's autobiography, as quoted in Noakes, *Life of a Wanderer*, 22.

8 There are two hand-colored prints of this apparently unpublished lithograph in the Houghton Library. See MS Typ 55.9(2) and 55.9(26).

9 The feathers represented appear to be from one or more Amazon parrots, while the painted feather is probably from a (wild) European jay.



FIGURE 4. Imaginary birds in a landscape by a youthful Edward Lear, circa 1827, ink and watercolor over graphite, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.4 [fol. 12]).



FIGURE 5. Study of macaw head and feathers by Edward Lear, hand-colored lithographs, cut and mounted on paper, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.4 [fol. 56]).

took up residence together in a modest flat at 38 Upper North Place, Gray's Inn Road in London. One dated painting (the peacock) and part of a lithographic print that Lear created in the fall of 1831 suggests that the album was in use, possibly as a keepsake for Ann, over a period of at least four years.¹⁰ It is almost certain that the feathers and living bird studies were made at the London Zoo, which Lear began to frequent soon after it opened to visitors in 1828. A watercolor study of a black-capped lory, just one page away from the pasted feathers, is noted as having been painted "at the [zoological] gardens."¹¹

EDWARD LEAR AND THE LONDON ZOO

Although the nascent Zoological Society reserved access to its collections to members and their guests, Lear appears to have gained admission through the help of a family friend. Whether he paid the one-shilling gate fee required of most non-member visitors, he did not say. Perhaps his personal connections freed him from this expense. In any case, the zoo offered a wonderful new world for Lear. He was especially besotted by the parrots he saw there, and decided to paint as many of them as he could. In June 1830 he formally applied for—and received—permission from the Society's Council to make drawings of all the parrots in their collection for the purpose of creating a book on the subject.¹² For the next several years, he was a frequent visitor to the newly built aviary in Regent's Park (Figure 6) and the Society's administrative headquarters at 33 Bruton Street, where the balance of its birds and animals were kept.

With the active assistance of several interested keepers who would sometimes hold the birds and help him to measure their various parts, Lear created a dazzling set of pencil and watercolor studies. Using these as his starting point, and with instruction from Charles Hullmandel (1789–1850)—England's most accomplished lithographer—Lear then redrew each picture onto a lithographic stone and thus created the

10 The uncolored, trimmed-down lithograph is of an undulated parakeet (plate #13 from Lear's *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*). It was issued in October 1831. Lear's watercolor of a peacock, which was also once glued into the album, is signed and dated 1831. The album also holds a sketch of grasses signed and dated September 9, 1834 by Lear, but this is so unlike anything else in the album that it may have been tucked into it at a later date.

11 There was also a commercial London menagerie, aviary, and pleasure grounds known as the Surrey Zoological Gardens, but in this picture Lear is more likely to be referring to the Zoological Society's gardens in Regent's Park, for the Surrey gardens did not open until 1831 and was not as well known for its collection of parrots as the London Zoo.

12 The Council minutes of June 16, 1830 grant Lear permission "to make drawings of the Parrots belonging to the Society."



FIGURE 6. Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park (London Zoo) by George Scharf, hand-colored lithograph, 1835, private collection.

basis for the 42 hand-colored plates that would comprise his book, *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (Figure 7).

Although Lear found the process of lithography difficult (later referring to it as “that dreaded enemy”), he must have been elated by the chance to shift his artistic focus from the lifeless subjects of the hospital ward that had occupied his middle teenage years to the far more appealing and vital occupants of the zoo. No longer peddling hack work to unappreciative travelers or making “morbid disease drawings” for “doctors of physic,” by the summer of 1830 Lear was reveling in the company of beguiling birds. He was also beginning to attract the admiration of some of the country’s most distinguished and influential naturalists with his work.

Within the next few years, Prideaux John Selby (1788–1867), William Jardine (1800–1874), Edward T. Bennett (1797–1836), Thomas Bell (1792–1880), Thomas C. Eyton (1809–1880), John Gould (1804–1881), and Lord Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby (1775–1851)—a who’s who of Great Britain’s scientific establishment, all of whom were involved in one way or another with the zoo—would each enlist Lear’s help in illustrating books. The Society itself would also commission Lear to create illustrations (beginning in 1833) to accompany papers in which newly discovered species of birds and animals were being



FIGURE 7. Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Macrocerus ararauna*, now *Ara ararauna*) dated December 1831, hand-colored lithograph from Edward Lear's *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (1830–1832), Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.4 805L.32 [A], plate 8).

described for the first time. Lear took on these commissions even as he worked to create a book of his own.

Edward Bennett, one of the founders and a longtime officer of the Zoological Society, was among the first to enlist Lear's help in delineating the residents of the zoo. In his two-volume work *The Gardens and Menagerie of the Zoological Society Delineated* (1830–1831) are several wood engravings that seem particularly Larian in their animated poses. At least two of these, a pair of white-fronted lemurs in volume one, and two blue-and-yellow macaws in volume two, were certainly created by the young artist, for each has Lear's distinctive "EL" monogram partially concealed in the bark of the branches that support them.¹³ There is no mention of Lear in the text of either volume

¹³ The lemur illustration is on page 299 of volume 1 (mammals), and the macaw illustration is on page 125 of volume 2 (birds). Other illustrations which may be by Lear (with the vaguest hint of "EL" monograms) are the red lemurs on page 145 of volume 1 and the

of the book. The title page credits only William Harvey (1796–1866)—a distinguished artist and student of Thomas Bewick (1753–1828)—as the book’s illustrator, though it does acknowledge that the engraving firm responsible for executing Harvey’s illustrative vignettes was “assisted by other artists.”¹⁴ Presumably this refers to Lear, who must have been invited to fill some gaps in Harvey’s illustration list. He may have volunteered his services for the book in an effort to become better known, or perhaps he was paid a modest fee by Bennett and so was considered “work for hire” not deserving more public recognition. In either case, having his pictures appear in such an important, popular publication must have been pleasing to Lear. It was also strategically useful, for whether or not he received public recognition for his work, his involvement with the project enabled him to build a publishing resume and effectively immerse himself in the world of natural history study that was beginning to center on the zoo.

THE LONDON ZOO: A SOURCE OF SUBJECTS DEAD AND ALIVE

Lear was quick to realize that the Zoological Society was more than a source of appealing subjects for his pencil and brush—it could also be his gateway to securing important illustrative commissions. As the zoo grew in stature during the 1830s, many new and interesting natural history discoveries from around the world were sent there for study and publication. Artists were needed to record these creatures, both dead and alive, and Lear was happy to fill that role.

LEAR’S UNFINISHED PORTFOLIO: *SKETCHES OF ANIMALS IN THE ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS*

While Lear ultimately achieved his greatest success by allying himself with the scientific goals of the zoo’s charter, he recognized the educational, artistic, and commercial opportunities that were presented by the public’s growing fascination with the zoo’s exotic occupants. Perhaps inspired by the success of Edward Bennett’s popular book on the zoo (*The Gardens and Menagerie of the Zoological Society Delimited*) to which he had contributed several illustrations without recognition, Lear decided that he could produce a portfolio of his own life drawings of the occupants of the zoo. With these he sought to capture

galleated curassow on page 65 of volume 2. It should be noted that the “EL” monogram is more clearly visible in some copies of the book than others, depending on the inking of the plates.

14 The engravers were Branston and Wright, the same men who had worked with Harvey on the illustrations for Bennett’s *The Tower Menagerie* (1829).



FIGURE 8. Edward Lear's preliminary study for the "peaceable kingdom" vignette used on the wrapper or title page of his portfolio *Sketches of Animals in the Zoological Gardens*, circa 1829, ink wash over graphite, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.27 [fol. 47]).

the public's appetite for exotic wildlife and the recreational pleasures associated with visiting the zoo's beautiful "gardens" in Regent's Park. The only pieces of evidence that survive from this ambitious project are four lithographic prints in the archives of the London Zoo. These include a title page and three uncolored plates all in "folio" format (15 x 10½ inches) for what may have been Lear's first attempt at publishing a book of his own creation.

The title page for *Sketches of Animals in the Zoological Gardens Drawn from Life and on Stone by E. Lear* uses half a dozen different typefaces, all hand-drawn on stone, embellished with a vignette of birds and mammals gathered together in a "peaceable kingdom" tableau based on a small wash drawing at the Houghton Library (Figure 8).

Unfortunately, neither the preliminary sketch nor the title page are dated, but the childlike nature of the drawings in the vignette and the context in which the study is preserved suggest that it may have been created in 1829 or 1830, at about the same time—or possibly before—Lear began to work on his parrot monograph.

The project, which so optimistically began with a promise of multiple "parts" of the portfolio on plain paper (for five shillings) or

“India” paper (for seven shilling, sixpence) per part, appears not to have garnered enough public response to have been a success. Three lithographic prints—a sleeping lion, a harpy eagle, and a polar bear—are all that survive of the projected publication. Perhaps they were all that ever existed. In any case, no other title pages or any other prints from the portfolio are known to exist.

Since Lear’s diaries from this period no longer exist, we may never know the genesis of the *Sketches of Animals* project or why it failed. Perhaps there wasn’t enough public support for the offering to make it profitable, or perhaps Lear found that he didn’t have the time or interest to create the drawings the book required. In any case, partly through his own initiative and partly through the commissions he began to receive from others, Lear’s artistic career was beginning to take a more scientific, less popular direction. Not until he began publishing illustrated travel books (in 1841) or his nonsense rhymes and drawings (in 1846), did Lear again attempt a publication intended for the general public.

LEAR AND LITHOGRAPHY

Lear’s earliest published illustrations (in Frederick William Beechey’s *The Zoology of Captain Beechey’s Voyage*, 1839, and Edward Bennett’s *The Gardens and Menagerie of the Zoological Society Delineated*, 1830–1831) were translated from his original drawings and paintings to prints by others—professional engravers working on copper and wood, respectively.¹⁵ This expensive process, the cost of which was borne by the publishers, was something Lear could not afford for his own, self-published book. It was therefore incumbent upon him to find a printing technique that he could master in order to create the plates for *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*.

When lithography was introduced to Great Britain from Germany and France in the early 19th century, its champions promoted the process as a less expensive and potentially more creative printing technique than had been available until that time. Unlike engraving, which requires great technical skill and the mastery of specialized tools (to cut lines into a metal plate from which the final prints are pulled), lithography allows an artist to create his or her own print without need of

¹⁵ Two of the Beechey plates were engraved by Thomas Landseer (1795–1880), the brother of the famous animal painter Sir Edwin Henry Landseer (1802–1873), and the rest by John C. Zeitter (1796–1862). The engravers for the Bennett book were Branston and Wright. In the Beechey book, the engravings were on metal plates, most likely copper. In the Bennett book they were wood engravings.

specialized training or an intermediary.¹⁶ In lithography, artists can use tools with which they are already familiar: crayons or “chalk” for half-tone effects and ink applied with a pen or brush for line and solid work. With these simple instruments, without having to engage another artist or technician to translate their original drawings onto a metal plate (or the end grain of a hard wood block in the case of a wood engraving), artists can draw directly onto a piece of fine-grained limestone from which their visual creations can be transferred quickly and relatively easily to paper.

Although mastering the art of lithography requires training and a great deal of practice, the concept is relatively simple: oil attracts oil, while oil and water won’t mix. When an artist draws on a limestone printing block with a greasy crayon, wherever the crayon is applied, the microscopic pores of the limestone become filled with pigment. The stone is then saturated with water. Where there are crayon marks, the water is repelled; where there are none, the water soaks into the surface of the stone and becomes repellant to ink. Thus, when the lithographic stone is rolled with an oil-based printer’s ink, the areas with drawing become inky and the empty areas remain ink-free. The block is put into a press and, with uniform pressure, is applied to a sheet of paper that absorbs the ink from the surface of the stone. The resulting print is a mirror image of the original drawing.

With copper plate engraving, the plate must be carefully inked and the smooth parts wiped clean, a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. With lithography, since the ink never adheres to the blank parts of the image, there is less time and labor involved with readying the printing block for the press.

Another of lithography’s advantages over engraving is that it is a more durable process. With copper plate printing, each time the plate is inked and run through the press, the sharp edges of the engraved lines are diminished, thus reducing the crispness of the printed image. Ultimately the plate is so degraded through the printing process that it must be re-engraved. The lithographic stone, by contrast, offers a flat or “planographic” surface that is never degraded by the pressure of the press. If too much pressure is used in the printing process, the stone can crack, rendering it useless, but if this does not happen and the stone is properly handled, it will remain viable almost indefinitely. When the

16 For a description of the lithographic process and its popularity in England, see Michael Twyman, “Lear and Lithography,” in *Edward Lear the Landscape Artist: Tours of Ireland and the English Lakes, 1835 and 1836*, ed. Charles Nugent (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2009), 11–29. See also Michael Twyman, “Charles Joseph Hullmandel: Lithographic Printer Extraordinary,” in *Lasting Impressions: Lithography as Art*, ed. Pat Gilmour (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 42–90.

desired number of prints have been made from a lithographic stone, the surface of the stone can be sanded off and used again. Copper plates, by contrast, must be melted down and recast before they can be reused.

Lear was fortunate in having as his teacher of lithography the man who had literally written the book on the process in England. Charles Hullmandel (1789–1850) was the author of *The Art of Drawing on Stone* (1824 and subsequent editions), a well-illustrated and highly influential how-to manual that was accepted in England as the definitive treatment of the topic through most of the period of Lear's involvement with lithography. Although there is no surviving correspondence between them, it is clear from other references in Lear's letters that the two men became good friends. Lear writes of entertaining Hullmandel and taking care of him when he was ill in 1837.¹⁷

Lear does not record where he worked on most of the lithographs for his parrot book, but it seems most likely to have been at Hullmandel's workshop at 49 Marlboro Street, where he would have had ready access to Hullmandel's advice and where the prints were ultimately produced. It was probably also there that the printed sheets were hand-colored by a professional colorist named Gabriel Bayfield (1781–1870) following original watercolors and pattern plates created by Lear.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Lear destroyed all his diaries from the period in which he was working on his parrot monograph, so we don't know as much about his activities at this time as we would like, but we get some sense of the scale of the enterprise—and his struggle to keep it going—from a few of the letters that survive from that time. In October 1831, after Lear had distributed parts of his book to subscribers in groups of four plates per month for about a year, he wrote to a book dealer named Charles Empson whom he addressed as “my sole distributor of *Psittacidae* in the Northern regions.” In his letter he explained some of the details—and challenges—of his publication:

I have lately had many sets [of the book's plates] to colour—& have with difficulty supplied my subscribers as wanted—but my colourer is hard at work . . . Only 175 prints have been taken of

¹⁷ Edward Lear to Fanny Coombe, June 19, 1835 and January 3, 1837. The original letters, in the collection of Frederick Warne & Co., are published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, Appendix A, 206, 218.

¹⁸ We know that Bayfield was Lear's colorist for the parrot monograph from the prospectus of Thomas Bell's book *A Monograph of the Testudinata* (1836–1842) which refers to it; see Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 22–23, note 52. For more on Bayfield, see Christine E. Jackson and Maureen Lambourne, “Bayfield—John Gould's Unknown Colourer,” *Archives of Natural History* 17, no. 2 (1990): 189–200.

each drawing—& when those 175 copies are subscribed for, my work stops—for already the Lithographic plates have been erased!¹⁹

By this Lear meant that as he completed each lithographic image on stone, he would make 175 prints of it. Prints that didn't meet his high standards were discarded or recycled with their unprinted side repurposed by Lear for use as high-quality drawing paper. When a sufficient number of acceptable (i.e., perfect) black-and-white impressions were made, Lear, or someone else, ground off the "drawing" from the stone (a rented item) and returned it to Charles Hullmandel, or he drew another parrot on it to serve as another illustration for his book. "My reasons for so soon destroying my drawings were these," he explained, "though I dare say they don't appear so rational to anyone but myself." He continued:

I was obliged to limit the work—in order to get more subscribers—& to erase the drawings [on the lithographic stones]—because the expense is considerable for keeping them on, & I have pretty great difficulty in paying my monthly charges,—for to pay colourer & printer monthly I am obstinately prepossessed—since I had rather be at the bottom of the River Thames—than be one week in debt—be it never [stet] so small.²⁰

DATING LEAR'S PARROTS

Right up until the time he stopped work on his parrot book, Lear was promising to provide his subscribers with "14 Numbers" or parts, each containing three or four prints. Lear explained his decision to terminate the project ahead of that goal (with only 42 plates) in a letter to Sir William Jardine in January 1834:

Respecting my Parrots—there is much to say:—no more numbers will be published by me—the 12th [part]—which you have, being the last. Their publication was a speculation which—so far as it made me known & procured me employment in Zoological drawing—answered my expectations—but in matters of money occasioned me considerable loss. I originally intended to have figured all the Psittacide—but stopped in time; neither will there be—(from me) any letterpress [i.e., accompanying text].²¹

19 Edward Lear to Charles Empson, October 1, 1831 in Vivien Noakes, ed., *Edward Lear Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12–17.

20 Ibid.

21 Edward Lear to Sir William Jardine, January 23, 1834, published in Noakes, *Selected Letters*, 19.

The early cessation was not a surprise to those who knew Lear. He had expressed his inclination to abandon the project as early as October 1831. "I have just nine and twenty times resolved to give up Parrots & all," he wrote Charles Empson on the publication of his 29th plate, "—& should certainly have done so—had not my good genius with vast reluctance just 9 and 20 times set me a going again.—*Opportet vivere* [It is necessary to live]." ²²

Lear was pleased to be able to find 125 subscribers for the *Psittacidae*, but soon discovered that not all of them were reliable patrons. He had trouble getting some of them to pay for the prints he was sending them. This certainly contributed to his decision to give up the publication before exhausting the subject. Even when his subscriptions were filled, this left him with an inventory of 50 unsold sets of prints and a debt he could not repay. He explained his situation to his friend George Coombe in April 1833:

You have often—I dare say—heard me express a wish to get rid of the copies of Parrots which I had still unsold,—the little chance I stood of gaining many fresh subscribers after my regular (& for my age—large) connexion [stet] was well [canvassed?], (unless I could have afforded to employ some one for the purpose) was much against my now disposing of them, and I was considerably in debt still for their printing, they were always before me like a great nimbus or nightmare or anything else very disagreeable & unavoidable, which prevented my feeling very pleased in whatever I undertook. ²³

JOHN GOULD

What Lear saw as a financial and psychological drain, Lear's future employer, John Gould, saw as a business opportunity. Recognizing the quality of Lear's publication and seeing the financial strain the book was creating for him, the entrepreneurial Gould, in March 1833, bought all of Lear's remaining prints (about 50 full sets or 2,100 hand-colored lithographs). Lear had originally asked 70 pounds for the inventory, but Gould countered with a 50-pound offer, sweetening the pot with an invitation to pay Lear's expenses on a working trip to Europe where Gould planned to find subscribers for his own books

²² Edward Lear to Charles Empson, October 1, 1831, published in Noakes, *Selected Letters*, 14.

²³ Edward Lear to George Coombe, April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.



FIGURE 9. John Gould (1804–1881) by T. H. Maguire, lithograph, 1849, Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Drexel University (coll. 286).

and study rare birds in zoos and menageries.²⁴ Intrigued by the prospect of “seeing so much of the world for nothing,” and with relief that he would no longer have to find individual buyers for his work, Lear accepted Gould’s offer.²⁵

Lear had known Gould for as long as he had been visiting the zoo, for Gould had been serving as principal curator and chief taxidermist since the time of the zoo’s founding (Figure 9). The two men, though very different in personality, shared interests in both wildlife and publishing. Gould was, as Lear described it, a person “with whom I have always been by circumstances very much allied.”²⁶

At about the same time Lear was launching *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, Gould, with the help of his wife Elizabeth, was publishing a color plate book of his own: *A Century of Birds Hitherto Unfigured from the Himalaya Mountains* (1830–1833). Unlike Lear’s book, Gould’s offered accompanying text with descriptions of each bird figure. Gould’s book contained beautiful, interesting,

²⁴ Lear describes this transaction in a letter to George Coombe from April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.

²⁵ When Elizabeth Gould went into premature labor four months into her fourth pregnancy in three years, Gould had to postpone the planned trip to Europe, the details of which Lear explains in his letter to George Coombe, April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.

²⁶ Edward Lear to George Coombe, April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.

and previously unpublished birds, but what it lacked was the power of Lear's dramatic illustrations.

Recognizing the superior nature of Lear's plates, Gould was happy to assume control of them. "I have some idea of finishing them myself," he wrote to William Jardine.²⁷ Although he never did complete Lear's work, Gould did successfully sell the rest of the copies Lear provided him. He also captured much of Lear's talent by engaging him to instruct his wife in painting and lithography and to provide plates for several of his own lavish ornithological publications. These included *The Birds of Europe* (1832–1837), to which Lear ultimately contributed 68 of the 449 plates, and *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae or Family of Toucans* (1834) for which Lear made 10 of the 34 illustrations.

Lear had a complex relationship with Gould, a man of a more modest social background and eight years his senior. He admired his ornithological expertise and commercial acumen, but disliked his hard-driving personality. In letters of the 1830s, when Lear was in his employ, he described Gould to others as always behaving "in the most handsome & grateful manner to me."²⁸ In later life, however, Lear came to believe that he had been unfairly exploited by Gould, whom he characterized as "kindly and course,"²⁹ "singularly vulgar and odious,"³⁰ and "a harsh and violent man . . . unfeeling for those about him."³¹

He felt differently about Gould's wife, Elizabeth (1804–1841), with whom he collaborated (unacknowledged) on many illustrations for Gould's books, and whom he was employed to teach the fine points of ornithological illustration. "[Gould] owed everything to his excellent wife, & to myself," noted Lear in later years, "without whose help in drawing he had done nothing."³²

Lear's observation about Gould's artistry may have been justified. He did help Elizabeth Gould improve her skills as a bird painter, and he did provide some of the strongest plates for Gould's *The Birds of Europe* (1832–1837) and *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae, or Family of Toucans* (1833–1835). But what his critical comment fails to acknowledge is that Gould's books were successful not only because they were beautifully illustrated and sumptuously produced, but

27 John Gould to William Jardine, January 16, 1834, quoted in Brian Reade, *An Essay on Edward Lear's Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (London: Prion Ltd., 1978), 9.

28 Edward Lear to George Coombe, April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.

29 Lear Diary, March 1, 1861, quoted in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 8.

30 Lear Diary, April 26, 1861, quoted in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 8.

31 Lear Diary, February 7, 1881, quoted in Noakes, *Life of a Wanderer*, 30.

32 Ibid.

because they provided something that Lear was unable to offer in his: scientific content.

With the exception of Gould's first book, *A Century of Birds Hitherto Unfigured from the Himalayan Mountains* (1830–1833), for which N. A. Vigors provided the text, all of Gould's subsequent 40 volumes on birds and mammals contained substantive content written by Gould himself. Though self-taught in the field of ornithology, the one-time taxidermist was able to glean enough information from the existing scientific literature and from knowledgeable informants to turn his books into primary sources of information that were as valued for their content as they were admired for their illustrations.³³ Lear's parrot monograph, while arrestingly beautiful in its presentation, was frustratingly devoid of scientific information. Unlike Gould, Lear had no credentials or even aspirations in the field of science. With the help of others, he did his best to identify the birds he painted with common and scientific names.

CREDIT FOR HIS WORK

Because of Lear's shy nature and inherently likable personality, his admirers have long pointed to his unacknowledged work for Gould as evidence of Lear's innocence being exploited by his blindly ambitious and ruthless employer, but the story is more complex than it first appears. It is true that four of the 68 plates made by Lear for Gould's *The Birds of Europe* are marginally credited to "J. and E. Gould" and not to Lear, who actually drew them and whose name appears in the body of print itself, but this could be explained by the scale, pace, and complexity of Gould's production schedule and the number of people who were involved with making the plates for his book.³⁴ Lear was, at that time, a salaried employee of Gould's and so, by the common practice of the day, not necessarily entitled to individual recognition (Figure 10).

What is remarkable is not that Lear was denied credit for four of his plates in *The Birds of Europe*, but that he is fully credited for the other 64 illustrations he created for Gould's book, and that he is acknowledged in the preface.³⁵ With Lear's growing reputation for

33 For more on Gould, see Gordon C. Sauer, *John Gould the Bird Man: A Chronology and Bibliography* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982); and Isabella Tree, *The Ruling Passion of John Gould: A Biography of the Bird Man* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1991).

34 For an accounting of which of Lear's plates were credited to the Goulds, see Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear 1812–1888* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1985), 208–9.

35 John Gould, *The Birds of Europe* (London, [1832]–1837), viii.



FIGURE 10. Great Auk (*Alca impennis*, now *Pinguinus impennis*), hand-colored lithograph (plate 400) from John Gould's *The Birds of Europe* (1832–1837), vol. 5. This is one of several original illustrations by Lear in Gould's book that bear the credit line "Drawn from Nature and on Stone by J. & E. Gould," Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Drexel University (QL690 A1 G6).

excellence, Gould must have recognized the advantages of having Lear's name associated with the work.

A more frequently cited example of Gould's alleged exploitation of Lear's genius without acknowledgement is in the second (revised) edition of *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae, or Family of Toucans* (1854) where illustrations originally drawn by Lear, some even bearing Lear's signature in the drawings themselves, are uniformly credited to Gould and H. C. Richter (1821–1902). But this too is a more nuanced story than has been reported. A careful examination of the text in these three volumes reveals that in the 20 years between publication of the first edition of the book (1834), in which all 10 of the plates Lear contributed are fully credited to him, and the second edition (1854), where none are, a great deal of new information about the birds had come to light. The significant changes that these discoveries demanded in the plates are further revealed by Gould's notes on the original color pattern plates still owned by Henry Sotherans, Ltd., the London book and print dealers who bought all of Gould's remaining inventory at the time of his death.

In Gould's eyes, the 1854 edition of the monograph was sufficiently different from the 1834 edition as to constitute an entirely new publication. Since many of the old Lear stones no longer existed, having been sanded down and repurposed to other publications, Richter drew new ones, based loosely on Lear's originals, but incorporating Gould's new wishes. On the stones that did still exist (including those bearing Lear's signature), Richter made substantial changes. Gould must have felt that acknowledging Lear's part in creating what he now considered outdated first drafts of 10 of the book's plates was not only unnecessary, but perhaps even inappropriate.

Was it a slight felt from this seeming lack of appreciation and recognition that prompted Lear's harsh assessment of his former employer? Certainly in the 1830s and even the 1840s and 1850s, the correspondence between Lear and Gould seems cordial, even friendly, with Lear frequently asking Gould for more lengthy replies to his letters. Had he resented him from the start, it seems hard to believe he would have made such an effort to keep in touch. Still, it is probably correct that Gould was never very warm or personal in his dealings with Lear, or any other employee (most of whom he continued to address by their surnames even after years of employment). To Gould, an artist like Lear, no matter how talented and likable, was simply a cog in a large commercial wheel, someone to help him with his publications, not a person to be singled out for praise or public recognition.

THOMAS BELL

Another person active in the affairs of the Zoological Society to befriend Lear was Thomas Bell (1792–1880), a dental surgeon at Guy's Hospital and a professor of zoology at King's College London (1836–1861). In addition to his expertise in dentistry and diseases of the teeth, Bell was a leading authority on a wide range of natural history topics. He not only wrote the herpetological volume for the *Zoology of the Voyage of HMS Beagle*, edited by Charles Darwin, but also widely cited monographs on mammals, crustaceans, and reptiles. As President of the Linnean Society of London, he presided over the famous meeting of July 1, 1858, at which Charles Darwin's and Alfred Russell Wallace's papers on natural selection were read.

Bell was among the earliest of the scientific establishment to encourage Lear's talents as an illustrator, but, despite their friendship, which lasted until the end of Bell's life, Bell, like Edward Bennett, was guilty of using some of Lear's work without giving him the recognition he deserved. When he published *A History of British Quadrupeds* in



FIGURE 11. Leopard Tortoise (*Testudo Pardalis*, now *Stigmochelys pardalis*), hand-colored lithograph by Edward Lear after a painting by James Sowerby, (plate 1) from Thomas Bell's *A Monograph of the Testudinata* (1832–1842), Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Drexel University (QL666 C5 B4).

1837, Bell credited two other artists with the illustrations.³⁶ However, Edward Lear's own copy of the book, presented to Lear "with the author's affectionate regards," belies such a claim. In it Lear has noted seven illustrations for which he was responsible. "Drawn from life by me, Edward Lear" or a similar statement has been written in pencil beside each of the illustrations for which he was responsible.³⁷

Given the close relationship that clearly existed between Bell and Lear (who sought his advice on whether or not he should sell his remaining parrot monograph plates to Gould), it is curious that the older naturalist did not give Lear credit for the illustrations he created for *A History of British Quadrupeds*. Bell was much more generous in granting Lear credit as the lithographer for a large monograph on turtles, *A Monograph of the Testudinata*, which he created between 1836 and 1842 (Figure 11). In this highly acclaimed work, described by historian Kraig Adler as "the single most outstanding collection of

³⁶ In the introduction to his book, Bennett writes, "He [the author] also feels bound to acknowledge how much the work is indebted to the artists Mr Dickes and Mr. Vasey, by whom the whole of the illustrations have been drawn and engraved," xii.

³⁷ Lear's copy of this book is at Houghton Library, Harvard University (Typ 805L.37C).

turtle illustrations ever produced,” Lear’s name appears prominently on the plates, alongside that of the illustrator, James de Carle Sowerby (1787–1871).³⁸

WORK FOR LORD DERBY

John Gould, Sir William Jardine, Thomas Bell, and others kept Lear extremely busy with their illustrative commissions (“I am up to my neck in hurry and work from 5 a.m. till 7 p.m. without cessation,” he wrote to a friend in 1833),³⁹ but Lear’s single most significant patron was the 13th Earl of Derby (Lord Stanley, prior to 1834). It was on his behalf, during six or seven years of intermittent but intense activity (c. 1831–1837) at Knowsley Hall, the Earl’s estate near Liverpool, that Lear created many of the finest natural history paintings of his career. It was also during his frequent visits to Knowsley that Lear created many of the endearing limericks and other illustrated nonsense verse for which he is so well known today. Lord Derby’s patronage was extremely important for Lear, not only because it helped to stabilize the artist’s previously fragile economic condition and gave him the opportunity to secure and expand his reputation as a natural history painter, but also because it did much to boost his self-confidence as a painter and as a person. The Earl’s generosity as a patron and a friend eventually enabled Lear to move on to a life of travel and landscape painting outside of England.

Although there are a few dated drawings that suggest Lear could have visited Knowsley Hall in 1830, the earliest surviving record of personal contact between Edward Lear and the 13th Earl of Derby (then Lord Stanley) is February 1831.⁴⁰ At the time, Lord Stanley was

38 Eight parts of this important monograph were completed in the 1830s, but the book was not brought to completion until 1872 when it was published under the title *Tortoises, Terrapins, and Turtles* with a short text by John Edward Gray. For more on this important publication, for which Lear was creating lithographic plates as early as 1832, see Kraig Adler (commentary), *Thomas Bell: A Monograph of the Testudinata* (New York: Octavo Editions, 1999).

39 Letter to George Coombe, April 19, 1833, Frederick Warne Archives, published in Nugent, *Edward Lear*, 202–4.

40 In Lord Stanley’s diary (Tin Box, Knowsley Hall), he records Lear’s personal delivery of part 4 of his *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*. He notes that he has now paid him for parts 3 and 4. Although the entry is undated, we can assume that Lear would have delivered the parts as they were issued. According to the records of the Linnean Society, part 3 (consisting of plates 26, 9, and 30) was issued sometime between December 30, 1830 and January 20, 1831. Part 4 (consisting of plates 20, 10, 2, and 25) was issued February 1, 1831. While this would establish the date of their meeting as February 1831, it does not establish when the two men may have first met. Did Lear deliver parts 1 and 2 of his monograph to Lord Stanley in December, 1830? Did Lord Stanley agree to subscribe to Lear’s book even earlier, and, if so, was his decision based on a personal solicitation by the artist? Did

president of the Zoological Society of London where Lear was working on his parrot monograph. Despite their significantly different stations in life, a mutual interest in parrots is almost certainly what brought the wealthy patron and the talented artist into first contact with one another.

To Lear's great delight and good fortune, Lord Stanley became one of the earliest and most important patrons of *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, lending his prestige and influence to Lear's efforts by allowing his name to be included in the roster of the book's subscribers.⁴¹ Additional subscribers included an eclectic group of academics, amateur naturalists, and collectors. Some provided in-kind services in lieu of cash. Others provided financial backing. A few made their own live or mounted parrots available to Lear for inclusion in his book.⁴²

It is in this context that Lear may have made his first trip to Knowsley Hall, for Lord Stanley was beginning to assemble there one of the largest private collections of exotic birds in England. Lear included at least two of Lord Stanley's birds, the Stanley parakeet (now known as the western rosella, *Platycercus icterotis*) and the red-capped parakeet (now known as the red-capped parrot, *Purpureicephalus spurius*), among the "species hitherto unfigured" in his book. Seeing these birds in print may have inspired Lord Stanley to commission Lear to do more painting at Knowsley Hall.

After seeing the quality of the paintings Lear had made for his own parrot book, and possibly other illustrations he was then creating for John Gould and William Jardine, Lord Stanley invited Lear to paint the birds and mammals living in the aviaries and menagerie at Knowsley Hall, about which he wanted to publish a book. The live collections there, which were considered unrivaled for the number, rarity, and beauty of the species they contained,⁴³ would eventually include several

Lear and Lord Stanley first cross paths at the Zoological Society? Unfortunately Lear's diaries from this period have been destroyed, and some of Lord Stanley's diaries have been lost. Also none of the existing letters from either man make mention of their first contact, so we may never know for sure. (For a discussion of the dating of Lear's *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, see Reade, *An Essay*. This was first published by Gerald Duckworth, London, under the title *Edward Lear's Parrots*.)

41 Lord Stanley's name appears 18th on Lear's list of 110 subscribers.

42 Several of the people listed as subscribers may have provided services rather than cash for their copies of the book. Charles Hullmandel, for example, was Lear's lithographer, and John Gould, as keeper of collections at the Zoological Society, provided many of the birds depicted in *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*. As sources for the birds he painted, Lear acknowledged Lord Stanley, the Zoological Society, Mr. Gould, Mr. Vigors, Mr. Leadbeater, Sir Henry Halford, and the Countess of Mountcharles.

43 According to the ornithologist Louis Fraser. See Barbara and Richard Mearns, *The Bird Collectors* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 290.

thousand specimens representing 619 different species of birds alone.⁴⁴ These outdoor facilities, in time, would cover an area of 170 acres and require a staff of 30 to maintain. They were complemented by an extraordinarily comprehensive natural history library and a museum collection of mounted and preserved birds and mammals which numbered almost 20,000 specimens by the time it was dispersed in 1851.⁴⁵

Tracing the evolution of Lear's art at Knowsley Hall, from the earliest natural history painting, a chestnut-belted gnateater dated 1830, to the latest in the collection, a series of dove studies dated May and June 1837, one can see a dramatic progression from artistically adequate to extraordinary, and then a gradual decline in the quality of his work as he grew weary of the repetitive nature of his subjects.⁴⁶ During the peak years of his natural history painting—1832 through 1837—Lear's watercolors show a total mastery of both his subjects and his medium.

That Lear's artistic improvement as a natural history artist coincides with his first prolonged visits to Knowsley Hall may not be entirely coincidental, for the visibility and prestige of Lord Stanley's patronage, combined with the critical success of his *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, must have given the young artist an enormous boost of self-confidence.⁴⁷ Lord Stanley's commissions—and those received from Gould, Bell, Selby, Jardine, and others—also gave him the first taste of financial security and independence he had ever known. Lear, who, by his own account, had been “turned out into the world, literally without a farthing—& with nought to look to for a living but his own exertions,” was now being paid as much as three pounds per painting by Lord Stanley, for whom he was drawing “very frequently.”⁴⁸ This was a time when Lord Stanley was willing to pay

44 At one time the collection contained 114 species of parrot, 52 species of game birds, 51 species of raptor, and 60 species of wildfowl. *Ibid.*, 291.

45 For a comprehensive discussion of the Knowsley estate and Lord Derby's natural history interests, see Clemency Fisher, ed., *A Passion for Natural History: The Life and Legacy of the 13th Earl of Derby* (Liverpool: National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside), 2002.

46 Although an 1830 date on one or more of the Lear paintings now at Knowsley Hall might suggest a visit to the estate by the artist in that year, it is also possible that Lear painted the birds at the London Zoo or elsewhere and sold the studies to Lord Stanley at a later date.

47 Lord Stanley's invitation to Lear to visit Knowsley at this time was auspicious in another way. There was a serious outbreak of cholera in London in 1832 in a part of the city Lear regularly frequented. His prolonged visits to Lancashire, therefore, may have done more than change his life—they may have saved it as well.

48 Letter to Charles Empson, October 1, 1831, published in *Selected Letters*, 14. According to invoices in the Knowsley Hall archives, Lear was being paid between two guineas and three pounds for each painting delivered to Lord Derby. In addition, all of his living expenses were covered while he was at Knowsley Hall. For comparison, the Scottish



FIGURE 12. Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, the principal seat of the Earls of Derby, where Lear spent extended periods of time during the 1830s, private collection.

five pounds for a breeding pair of Golden Pheasants, 10 guineas for a snowy owl sent live from Nova Scotia, and 15 pounds for two guans “including the living specimen” from a London dealer.⁴⁹ During the same period, an annual income of 125 pounds (less than three pounds per week) was considered respectable for a working family with children.⁵⁰

Lear appreciated the opportunity to create paintings for Lord Stanley. Nevertheless, it took him some time to adjust to living and working at one of the grandest estates in England (Figure 12). Despite the large number of people employed by the Earl (“between 20 & 30 servants wait at dinner,” Lear noted⁵¹) and the perpetual presence of his many house guests, relatives, and friends, Lear felt isolated and out of

artist James H. Stewart (1789–1856) was being paid one guinea for each of the watercolors he prepared for Jardine and Selby’s *The Naturalist’s Library*. See Christine Jackson, *Dictionary of Bird Artists of the World* (London: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1999).

49 From the Knowsley Hall account books, various locations.

50 During Lear’s Knowsley years, five shillings would buy five pounds of butter or 10 pounds of meat, seven shillings would provide a family of five with good table beer for a month, and three pounds was the price of a fine frock coat. See Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 276. For typical budgets for early Victorian families belonging to various income groups, as well as prices of various commodities, see G. M. Young, ed., *Early Victorian England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

51 Letter to Mrs. George Coombe, July 20, 1835, Frederick Warne Collection.

place in the long-established, but to Lear unfamiliar, social hierarchy that controlled life at Knowsley. "I think my stay here will make me burst to have some fun," he wrote to a friend during one of his working visits to the estate. "Consider, I have no creature of my own grade of Society to speak to."⁵² Sometimes he made cartoons on the edges of his bird paintings and invented silly stories to entertain the children of the household or to relieve the tension he felt working in such a formal place.

As much as he appreciated the financial security of Lord Derby's patronage, by 1836 he felt a growing desire to move beyond the increasingly repetitious routine of delineating caged birds and mammals. Troubled by poor eyesight from an early age, Lear found the close work required for scientific illustration particularly taxing. He also found the cold, damp weather in London and Liverpool depressing and detrimental to his fragile health. He began to long for a warmer, sunnier climate and other subjects for his brush.

While honing his skills as a lithographer with Charles Hullmandel in London, Lear had met several artists whose extended painting trips to Europe and the Middle East had whetted his own appetite for travel and ignited a long-held ambition to become a landscape artist.⁵³ Although it was in Lord Derby's best interest to keep Lear in England working on natural history projects (both at the Zoological Society and at Knowsley Hall), he recognized Lear's need for personal and artistic growth. Ultimately, he and a number of his friends and relatives, including his nephew Robert Hornby (1805–1857), would underwrite a two-year study trip to Italy for Lear (1837–1839).

GLEANNING FROM THE MENAGERIE AND AVIARY AT KNOWSLEY

The fruits of Lear's labor at Knowsley Hall were published in a book entitled *Gleanings of the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*, which Lord Derby had privately printed in 1846. Unlike the plates for Lear's parrot monograph, which the artist created himself by drawing directly on lithographic stone, the plates for *Gleanings* were transcribed from Lear's original watercolors by another artist, J. W. Moore. By 1846, Lear was living outside of the country and was no longer interested in working on scientific publications. A selection of his

⁵² Letter to George Coombe, June 24, 1835, Frederick Warne Archives.

⁵³ Lear was particularly close to the landscape artist Daniel Fowler (1810–1894), to whom he refers as "my old friend" and whose paintings from the Middle East he described as "without exception the finest sketches I ever saw from any artist's portfolio; some are beyond wonderful" (Letter fragment, c. 1835, Frederick Warne Archives, emphasis in original). Through Hullmandel, he also knew the travel artist David Roberts (1796–1864).

illustrations were printed in sets of 100 each by the lithographic firm of Hullmandel & Walton, with whose principal, Charles Hullmandel, Lear had worked so closely since the start of his life as an illustrator. Each plate was hand-colored by Gabriel Bayfield, the same colorist who had helped Lear with the plates for his parrot monograph. Thus, though it lacked Lear's personal supervision, *Gleanings* was very much a continuation—and in some ways a culmination—of his career as a natural history artist.

The “Whiskered Yarke,” “Piping Guan,” “Eyebrowed Rollulus,” “Eyed Tyrse,” and several of the other species depicted in this folio, boasted common names one might expect to find in the nonsense writings of Lewis Carroll or Lear himself, but the meticulous accuracy of the plates and the detailed descriptions of each bird and mammal, written by John Edward Gray (1800–1875), leave no doubt that *Gleanings* was a serious scientific publication.

Edward Gray, who served as keeper of the zoological collections at the Natural History section of the British Museum in London from 1824 to 1874, was among the most influential professional naturalists of his day.⁵⁴ Lear had known and worked with him since the beginning of his own career as a natural history painter. In helping Lord Derby choose which of the many paintings in his collection would be best to include in the book, Gray had favored Lear above all other artists, not only because he liked him personally, but because he admired his painting and considered his work superior to that of any of the other artists who had been given comparable commissions by the Earl. Originally, Lord Derby wanted to combine Lear's illustrations with those of Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins (1807–1894), who had been hired to paint most of the larger animals in the menagerie and park.⁵⁵ Gray argued against this idea for fear that Lear's drawings were so good, they “might make Hawkins' look worse than they really are if mixed together.”⁵⁶ He advised instead that the artists' work be published “in two separate works of equal rank and appearance, one coming out a year after the other.”⁵⁷ Lord Derby agreed.

The edition of *Gleanings* featuring Lear's work (seven mammals, nine birds, and one reptile) now ranks, along with Lear's *Parrots*, as

⁵⁴ For more information on Gray, see A. E. Gunther, *The Founders of Science at the British Museum, 1753–1900* (Suffolk: The Halesworth Press, 1980).

⁵⁵ For more on Hawkins and his work for Lord Derby, see Valerie Bramwell and Robert McCracken Peck, *All in the Bones: A Biography of Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins* (Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, 2008).

⁵⁶ Letter from J. Edward Gray to Lord Derby, February 14, 1844, Liverpool Archives Department ref MM/8/K/3 173-5 [i.e., Letterbook 3, 173–75].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

one of the rarest and most desirable color plate books of the 19th century. It was published in the same year as Lear's two-volume travel book, *Illustrated Excursions in Italy* and *A Book of Nonsense*. The concurrent publication of these three very different books tangibly illustrates the disparate nature of Edward Lear's life.

SAVORING AND SPOOFING SCIENCE

Although he would never return to the life of a scientific illustrator, Edward Lear's early focus on natural history and the rigorous observation of scientific subjects that his professional commissions required left a lasting influence on the way he viewed the world. Animals often featured in his later landscapes and specific (botanically recognizable) plants were sometimes used to embellish and give specificity to works that were primarily topographical in nature.

At the same time, in his nonsense verse and alphabets he took delight in spoofing the seriousness with which his scientific colleagues categorized organisms. This often involved providing pun-filled, pseudo-scientific names for the creatures that he invented to populate his imaginary world. The subset of Lear's nonsense that applies to botany provides the best example of his fondness of blurring the line between the real world of scientific taxonomy, and his own invented world of visual and verbal fun. Twenty ink drawings from a work that Lear called *Flora Nonsensica* show a group of everyday objects—books, brushes, tea kettles, guitars, watches, etc.—creatively transformed into flowers and given mock-serious names that were intended to amuse.⁵⁸ Among these the *Cockatooka superba*, which shows a crested cockatoo emerging as a flower between two narcissus-like leaves, seems to grow right from a plate in his parrot monograph, while his often-reproduced *Manypeeplia Upsidownia* illustration (Figure 13) looks as though he has hung on a clothesline some of the people who had either amused him or tried his patience through the years. All of the whimsical botanical specimens in this set of drawings bear the same sorts of genus and species names that real plants have been given since the system of binomial nomenclature was established by Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) in the 1730s. As an associate member of the Linnean Society of London (from 1831 to 1862), Lear knew full well the importance that was attached to the scientific names of plants and seemed to enjoy poking fun at it.

⁵⁸ Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng 797.1. These were published by Lear, along with some other nonsense songs, stories, and alphabets in 1871 and republished by the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts of the Harvard College Library, with an introduction by Philip Hofer, in 1963. See AC9.H2618H.963e.



FIGURE 13. *Manypeeplia Upsidownia*, ink drawing by Edward Lear, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.14 [13]).

And yet, for all of his humor, Lear was also capable of taking his botanical studies as seriously as he had his ornithological ones. His earliest flower paintings, which date from the late 1820s, focus on detail and color and are as good as any botanical illustration of the era (Figure 14).⁵⁹ Frustrated by his restricted access to authentic botanical details with which to embellish his bird and mammal paintings, he sometimes requested the help of others. In acknowledging the receipt of some flowers from Charles Empson in 1831 (whether pressed specimens or drawings we do not know), he went on to solicit additional botanical material from his correspondent: “If you have any more sketches of S[outh] American trees—(correct,) they would be invaluable for me—for I often want them to put birds on when I draw for Lord Stanley—which is very frequently.”⁶⁰ The lack of detailed backgrounds in most of his natural history paintings may be attributed to Lear’s lack of adequate reference material and reliable information

⁵⁹ See his undated bluebells or raspberries at the Houghton Library (55.4), or his geranium dated 1828, private collection, illustrated in *Edward Lear 1812–1888* (Royal Academy catalog), 78, and Peck, *Natural History*, 26.

⁶⁰ Edward Lear to Charles Empson, October 1, 1831, published in Noakes, *Selected Letters*, 12–17.



FIGURE 14. Oak-leaved Geranium (*Pelargonium quercifolium*) by Edward Lear, watercolor over graphite, signed and dated Twickenham, June 18, 1828, private collection, courtesy of Mass Gallery, London.

about the native habitats of his subjects, rather than a lack of interest in botany.

If anything, his fondness for botanical subjects seems to have grown over time. “When I go to heaven ‘if indeed I go’—and am surrounded by thousands of polite angels,” he wrote in 1862, “I shall say courteously—‘please leave me alone! . . . let me have a park and a beautiful view of sea and hill, mountain and river, valley and plain, —with no end of tropical foliage.’”⁶¹

While a few botanical studies survive from the middle years, the greatest number of drawings that focus exclusively on plants are those he created for his own pleasure and as reference material for future paintings during his 14-month trip to Ceylon and India (November 1873 to January 1875). Here, at last, was the “tropical foliage” he longed for and about which he had dreamed from childhood. Tellingly, in his first enthusiastic description of India, it was the trees—and specifically the palms—that sparked his most visceral response:

⁶¹ Edward Lear, April 20, 1862, quoted in Vidya Dehejia, *Impossible Picturesqueness: Edward Lear’s Indian Watercolours, 1873–1875* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), v.



FIGURE 15. Study of Arcea Palms by Edward Lear, ink and watercolor, Calcutta, India, January 7, 1874, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Typ 55.26 [1603]).

The way . . . drove me nearly mad from sheer beauty and wonder of foliage. O new palms!!! O flowers!! O creatures!! O beasts!! Violent and amazing delight at the wonderful variety of life and dress here. Anything more overpoweringly amazing cannot be conceived!!! Colours, and costumes, and myriadism of impossible picturesqueness!!! These hours are worth what you will.”⁶²

A series of palm studies made at the Calcutta Botanical Gardens a few months later show how Lear could blend his near-photographic vision with the loose handling of color and form (Figure 15). His palm paintings are at once precise and evocative, analytical and expressive. Even in unfinished form, one senses that these watercolors are as much

⁶² Edward Lear India Journal, November 22, 1873, quoted in Dehejia, 6.

about light and air and movement as they are about the structural forms of the palm species recorded. While very different in style from his parrot paintings of the 1830s, they capture much of the same feeling of individuality and personality as those early watercolors. This is the work of an artist with 40 years of experience behind him, working for himself and not for a scientifically exacting patron, but they still convey the love of life and attention to the essential elements of form.

Whether the rigorously detailed paintings he made of parrots while in his late teens, or the looser impressionistic renderings of landscapes he made later in life, much of the appeal of Lear's watercolors lies in the sure and seemingly effortless way in which he applied pigment to paper. Surprisingly, if we are to believe his later comments, this was always a struggle for him. It was also an all-consuming passion. At the time of his death in San Remo, Italy in 1888, Lear left behind more than 7,000 watercolors of his travels in Europe, the Greek isles, the Middle East, and India, about 2,000 studio watercolors, more than 300 oil paintings, almost 400 natural history paintings, five illustrated travel books, two books of natural history illustration, and more than 100 other published lithographs documenting birds, mammals, and reptiles from various parts of the world.⁶³ "Strange," he mused, "that what to me is always painful and disagreeable work, painting, should in a couple of months, create a work which not only gives pleasure to its possessor at present, but may continue to do so to hundreds of others for a century or more."⁶⁴ May Edward Lear's "disagreeable work" continue to give pleasure and inspiration to all who see it for generations to come.

⁶³ Noakes, *Edward Lear 1812–1888*, 10.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Susan Chitty, *That Singular Person Called Lear* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 165.