

BOOK REVIEW

Joan Winearls

Desmond, Ray. *Great Natural History Books and Their Creators* (London and New Castle, Delaware: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2003) ISBN 0 7123 4774 7, 1 58456 090 8. 176p. 114 Colour and monochrome illustrations, Bibliography, index. \$39.95US.

This enjoyable and well illustrated book has been written by Ray Desmond who was the Chief Librarian for the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew and former president of the Society for the History of Natural History. Desmond has also written several books on early botanical discoveries and publications. The book is essentially mistitled, as the majority of works covered relate to botany but the author has frankly admitted that he has chosen to discuss the works he knows best.

The first chapter is a useful and interesting introduction to the main themes in his approach — the problems encountered in publishing and selling natural history books from the mid-seventeenth century to Victorian times, including the costliness and losses incurred, and the support or lack of from patrons. Most books were issued in parts on subscription which allowed publishers and booksellers to cover costs gradually. Natural history books, however, became very popular after the 1730s when they made huge profits for their publishers, but by the early nineteenth century costs were up for such books. Many works were published over far too many years. Perhaps the worst example of this was *Flora Danica* which took 122 years to complete. Hand-colouring was always a problem for publishers and was eventually replaced by chromolithography in

the late nineteenth century. However the *Curtis Botanical Magazine* managed to produce hand-coloured issues until 1948, when a shortage of colourists forced them to go to mechanical printing.

The main part of the book begins with chapters on publications arising from natural history discoveries in the New World and Asia. As well, new genres were developed such as the *florilegium* which was a record of favourite or rare botanical specimens, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century famous botanical gardens also became the subject for books. Early nurserymen's catalogues are also covered. Desmond also touches briefly on books that essentially recorded natural history forgeries such as *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis* (1726) in which Professor Beringer published illustrations of purported fossils planted as a hoax by his students.

Naturally this book covers some of the better known publications and stories in the realm of natural history such as Sir Joseph Banks *Florilegium* — drawings of plants made on his voyage around the world with Captain James Cook. Banks made attempts to get this published and actually had the plates engraved but the work remained unpublished and the whole set of plates, drawings and papers ended up in the British Museum. Finally in 1980 a facsimile edition was published from the copper plates. He also describes the long history of Robert Thornton's *Temple of Flora* (1799-1807) who unfortunately was trying to publish during the Napoleonic Wars, a poor time for selling subscriptions. It was an overly ambitious work; it failed and he was ruined. The

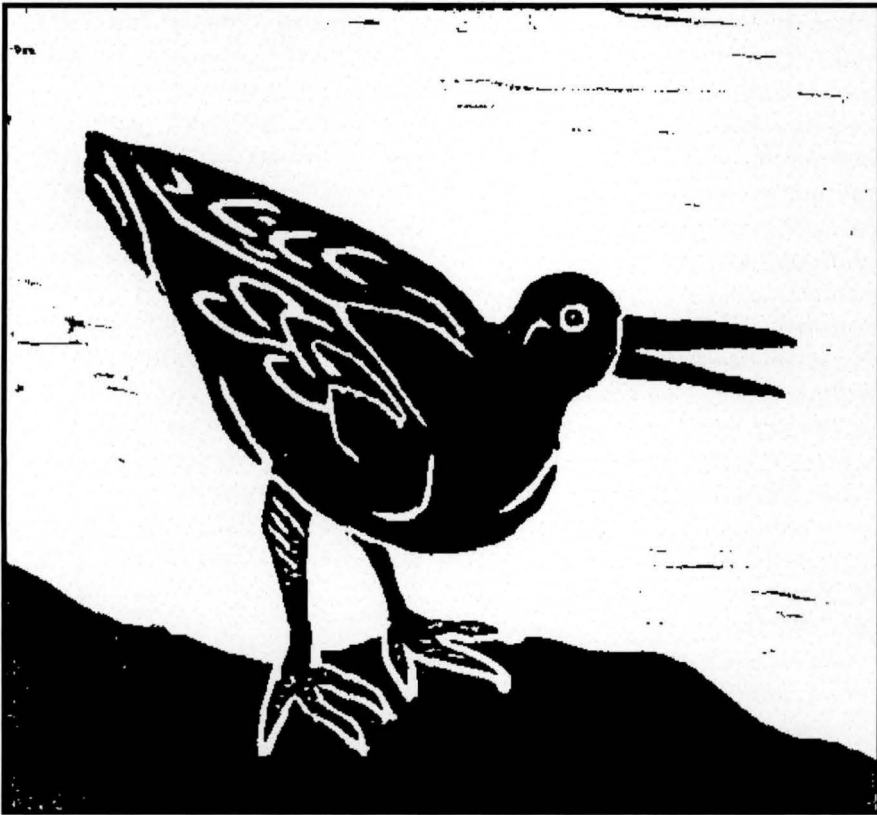
author notes that it is a nightmare for bibliographers today as every copy seems different in choice, number or state of plates.

There is a chapter on John James Audubon and the production of the double elephant edition of *The Birds of America* (1827-38) in which he notes that Henry Bohn, the London bookseller, advised Audubon not to make it too large as he would sell fewer copies. While it was being engraved and printed in London by Robert Havell Jr., the French engraver Dumesnil told Audubon it certainly could not have been published as cheaply or as well in France. In the end the 175 copies of the

huge work while including many illustrious subscribers lost Audubon money, but the later American octavo edition was a great success selling over 1100 copies and helping him to recoup financially.

Two chapters, one on nature printing (printing directly from plants) and one on clerics as authors, are both interesting. A short bibliography and an index successfully conclude a work which brings the stories surrounding some great natural history books to life for book lovers.

Joan Winearls, retired Map Librarian, University of Toronto Library, is a keen collector of bird books.



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