

Audubon's illustrations of the black tern (*Chlidonias nigra*)

Resolved that Mr. Gowen be authorized to obtain Audubon's Ornithology from his estate & shown for the specified sum of \$200 currency.

THE AUDUBON MYSTERY

Two Bibliographic Sleuths in Search of a Long Lost Secret
Make a Startling Discovery

by

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WHERE DID THEY come from?" "How much did they cost?" "Whose were they?" "How did you get hold of them?" These questions are asked over and over again by hundreds of visitors every year when they visit the Legislative Library in Fredericton. They are asked about the famed Audubon bird books, one of which is on display in a glass-topped case, and the other three of which are shelved in a fire-proof vault near by. The answers are always the same. "We don't know. We really don't know. It is thought that perhaps they were bought at auction in New York about 1851. This set was probably the one owned by Louis Philippe of France."

The mystery of the bird books has deepened year by year. Authors, journalists, and historians, to say nothing of the staff of the Library itself, have all tried to solve the puzzle, and all of them have failed. Stories have grown into legends, and speculations have taken on the appearance of fact. One story had it that they were given to the Library by Sir

Archibald Campbell, the royal governor, who had entertained Audubon when he visited the province in 1832. Another story suggested that perhaps they found their way there through the influence of Sir Edmund Head, a scholarly gentleman and patron of the arts who was governor of the province from 1848 to 1854. There have even been rumours that the books were privately owned, and found their way into the Library by some unexplained chance. Credit has been given to New Brunswick's first premier, Charles Fisher; and a certain Mr. Beckwith has been mentioned as the man with the foresight who prompted the government to buy its most outstanding possession in the field of art.

The story of the search to dispel the mystery is a complicated one. Every rumour had to be considered, and every lead tracked down. Few mystery stories can rival it in complexity, and certainly no story of local research can match it for excitements and disappointments.

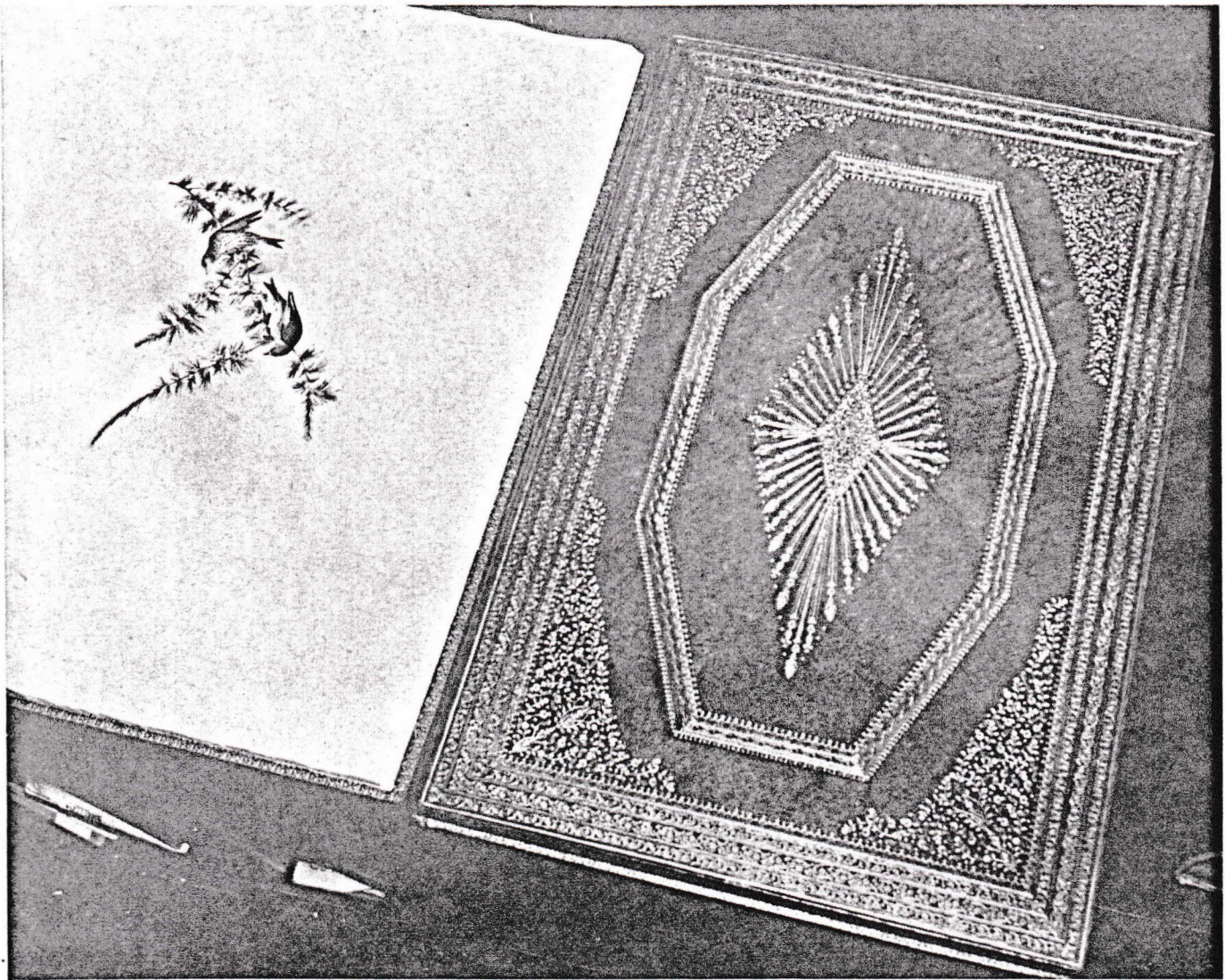
John James Audubon, the famous

American ornithologist, was born on April 26, 1785 in Haiti. He lived most of his life in France and in the United States, and died in New York on January 27, 1851. During his lifetime he travelled extensively in North America, visiting cities and towns, wandering through fields and forests, following rivers, and fighting his way through swamps, always in search of specimens of birds, which he killed and drew on the spot.

In the autumn of 1832 he visited New Brunswick, spending some time at the home of the governor. One of the most beautiful of the smaller plates is the Pine Finch, the specimens for which were obtained on the grounds of the Old Government House in Fredericton. This "Fredericton Plate", number 180 in the books, was bought separately a few years ago in New York, so that now it hangs permanently on the Library's walls in a striking bird's-eye maple frame.

In 1826 Audubon went to England and arranged to have his water-colours, now in the possession of the New York

Agreeably to the order of the committee, the 4 volumes of Audubon's American Ornithology, have been purchased at a cost of \$800. and are now in the Library. They were the property of the Duke of Orleans, eldest son of King Louis Phillippe of France, and they have thus acquired a kind of historical interest.



At left is the so-called "Fredericton plate", while at right is a good view of the excellent binding of the volumes.

Historical Society, engraved and hand coloured, first with W. H. Lizars of Edinburgh and then, after disagreements with him, with Robert Havell Jr. of London. The subscribers, who numbered over 160, bought the 435 plates in series of fives. Each series always consisted of a large plate, one not so large, and three small plates. The binding of the set, usually in four volumes, was arranged by each subscriber to suit his own taste. It is not known today how many of the sets were actually bound.

Although in Audubon's day the plates cost about \$1,000, at present a fine set will bring as much as \$25,000. The Legislative Library has in recent years had one offer to buy, but has made none to sell. Nor is the government likely to part with its treasure.

How many complete sets still exist? Mr. Waldemar H. Fries, of Providence, Rhode Island, is now taking a census of extant copies, and by December of last year he had seen and examined 93 complete sets, all of them on this continent. There are of course many more abroad. Canadian libraries own five of the sets: the Toronto

Reference Library; Library of Parliament, Ottawa; Laval University Library; Wood Library of Ornithology of McGill University; and the Legislative Library, Fredericton. Of these, the New Brunswick set is perhaps the best known, and justifiably so, for it is one of the most handsomely bound sets in existence, and it is a rather famous association piece.

Three members of the French Royal Family were original subscribers, King Charles X, King Louis Philippe (then the Duke of Orleans), and Her Royal Highness, Mademoiselle d'Orleans, the Princess Adelaide, sister of the Duke. It seems that the Legislative Library owns one of these three sets.

These are the facts of the case. There is nothing here with which to solve a mystery, and it is no wonder that generations of custodians and librarians have failed.

This is the story of the efforts of the last ten years. In spite of the recorded failures in the past, the present staff renewed the search, and it has become something of an obsession with them to

end the story. To get a working hypothesis a few speculations had to be added and the first to be considered was the year 1851, the year persistently mentioned as the one in which the books were bought. Next it was accepted tentatively that the books were bought at auction in New York, presumably by government officials sent down for the occasion.

The very first check made was in the public accounts of the province. Money grants to the Library, from 1845 to 1855, were reviewed, but no year stood out as more significant than any other. Then customs returns were analysed. It was hoped that an abnormal return would show against books or art objects, but nothing suspicious appeared. Of course there was no way of telling the port of entry, and the check was made more in the name of thoroughness than with hope of success.

The search was then continued in the Toronto Reference Library. They have there a good number of catalogues of book sales for the period, and these were carefully read, but without success. The next approach was to contact the New



The picture shows the four volumes. Note the huge proportions of the Audubon books. They are twenty-five and one-half inches wide and thirty-eight and three-quarter inches long.

York Public Library. Regrettably they informed the Legislative Library that compiled book auction records did not extend back as far as 1851, but they had a large number of book auction catalogues and could put a research worker on them. The cost of that was too high for the Legislative Library to consider.

In the meantime, dozens of boxes of manuscript correspondence, tucked away in an attic of the Legislative Building, were opened for sorting. By far the largest part of the correspondence belonged to the period of Sir Edmund Head, a governor who evidently threw nothing away. Searching solely for a mention of the Audubon books was not the job in hand, but an eye was always kept hopefully cocked. Nothing came to light and that for the time being was the end of the search.

About two years later there was discovered in the Library in an 1847 catalogue of a London second-hand bookseller, Henry G. Bohn, the following item: "Audubon's Birds of America, 4 vols. elephant folio, beautifully coloured plates, most splendidly whole-bound in dark crimson turkey morocco, back and sides most elaborately gilt, broad gold borders and gilt edges." Here was an exact description of the New Brunswick set, and

for a day it looked as though the problem were solved. A London directory of 1854 stated that Henry G. Bohn conducted business at 4 York Street, Covent Garden, London. A letter was dispatched and in due course it was returned. All the resources of the British post office could not deliver to an address which no longer existed.

A few months passed, and then it was learned that G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., publishers in business to this day, had taken over, years ago, the assets of Henry G. Bohn. The letter was sent off again. G. Bell & Sons were sympathetic, but regretted that they did not know where Bohn's bookselling records had gone.

Now the Library decided to change its tactics. It was known, from microscopically small print on the covers of the books themselves, that the binding had been done by J. Wright. It was felt that such an elaborate, ornate piece of binding would be recorded somewhere. John Wright was a prominent London craftsman, and a binder of the highest order, who had been awarded a medal "for excellence in blind tooling and forwarding". Catalogues of the great London Exhibition of 1851 showed that he had displays of his work there, and another text mentioned that he had invented a

contraption for embossing book covers in gold. But once again the scent grew weak and no more information could be traced through this source.

While all this was going on, students and scholars doing research into the early history of New Brunswick were asked to note any mention of Audubon or of his books. Nothing has been reported to date, and it looks as though newspapers then were not so interested in the books as they are today.

The latest and final approach was based on an entry which appeared in the Journals of the House of Assembly of New Brunswick for 1864. The Secretary of the Legislative Library in his report stated: "The copy of Audubon's magnificent work upon the Birds of America, belonging to the Library, is believed to possess an historical interest as the subscription copy of King Louis Philippe, or of his unfortunate son the Duke of Orleans, who accidentally perished in the full vigour of health and manhood." Mr. Gowan, the Secretary, erred in his assumption that the King's son was an original subscriber. Actually King Louis Philippe was himself the Duke of Orleans at the time the subscription was taken out.

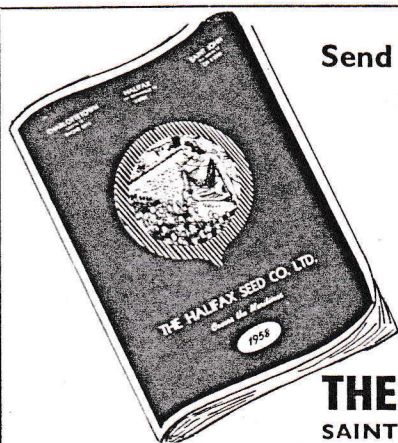
It was mere chance that revealed the following item concerning the King's

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Audubon; it is from Montalivet's *Le Roi Louis-Philippe*, published in 1851: "Les Oiseaux d'Amérique, d'Audubon, papier grand aigle, ouvrage que Cuvier signalait comme le plus beau monument élevé par l'art à la nature. Il avait coûté plus de 10,000 fr.; il ne reste qu'un seul volume, brûlé dans les angles."* Now a letter went off to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The reply was discouraging. "Mais le texte de Montalivet est formel et, des quatre volumes d'Audubon appartenant au roi des Français, un seul volume (et encore il est brûlé dans les angles) semble avoir survécu à l'incendie du Château de Neuilly en 1848."† Certainly the Library could not own Louis Philippe's set.

Ten years of searching had gone by. The results were all negative. Another generation of librarians was about to admit defeat. They had come to suspect that a set of Audubon bird prints, now so valued throughout the world, had perhaps not been so treasured a hundred years ago. Perhaps they were bought for the Library in a routine way, just as books had been bought for years before, and every year since. And this indeed is almost the story of what had happened.

The mystery now is solved, and with the answer before us there has actually been no mystery at all. Very recently there came to light in an attic of the Legislative Building a manuscript book which had been missing from the Legislative Library for a great number of years. It is the book of minutes of the Library Committee, 1849-78. In it, under the date of April 2, 1852, it is stated: "Resolved that Mr. Gowan be authorised to obtain Audobon's Ornithology from Little & Brown for the specified sum of £200 currency." Then, on April 29, 1853, it is further stated: "Agreeably to the order of the Committee, the 4 volumes of Audubon's American Ornithology have been purchased at a cost of \$800 and are now in the Library. They were the property of the Duke of Orleans, eldest son of King Louis Phillippe of France, and they have thus acquired a kind of historical interest."

It must be conceded that there is still a mystery concerning the question of the original subscriber. Since it cannot have been Louis Philippe's set, perhaps it is that of King Charles X, or that of Louis' sister, Her Royal Highness, Mademoiselle d'Orleans, whose set, after all, could quite reasonably have passed into the hands of her nephew, the Duke of Orleans.

* *The Birds of America*, by Audubon, "great eagle" format, a work called by Cuvier the finest monument raised by art to nature. It had cost more than 10,000 francs; only a single volume is left, burnt at the corners.

† But Montalivet's statement is explicit. Of the four volumes of Audubon belonging to the King of the French, a single volume—and that one, moreover, burnt at the corners—was, it appears, salvaged from the Neuilly Chateau fire in 1848.