
BOOK REVIEW

Sarah Stone — *Natural Curiosities from the New Worlds*.

Christine E. Jackson, 1998. Merrell Holberton, London, with the Natural History Museum, London. RRP \$90.

John Abbot — *Birds, Butterflies and Other Wonders*.

Pamela Gilbert, 1998. Merrell Holberton, London, with the Natural History Museum, London. RRP \$90.

These first two volumes in the Art of Nature Series introduce us to the artistry and scientific accuracy of watercolours held by the Natural History Museum, London. Dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the illustrations are brilliantly coloured and supported by a copious and well researched text.

Sarah Stone (*ca* 1760–1844), in over 1 000 watercolours, recorded many important discoveries for the first time. These included artefacts from Cook's 1768–80 world voyages as well as natural history specimens brought back by sailors and naturalists on British survey ships returning from the new colonies from 1770–1790. A great number of these objects have been lost and Sarah's paintings are therefore the only record of many type specimens collected in the late eighteenth century.

Her first studies are dated 1777 when, at the age of seventeen, she began painting at Sir Ashton Lever's Museum in Leicester Square, London. Other artists and illustrators who painted at the Leverian Museum included John Latham and William Lewin, father of John William Lewin who wrote the first account of Australian birds to be published in Australia. J.W. Lewin is also remembered for his sketches of the road to Bathurst, 1815, which are lodged in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, New South Wales.

In 1789 Sarah Stone painted from the natural history collection of the First Fleet surgeon John White the basis of illustrations used in White's *Journal of a Voyage to new [sic] South Wales*. In his introduction to White's *Journal* (A. & R. Sydney, 1962) Rex Rienits attributes forty nine of the illustrations to Sarah Stone.

Christine Jackson includes an account of Sir Ashton Lever's Museum and a catalogue of watercolours by Sarah Stone held by private and public institutions, among which are the Australian Museum, Sydney; the Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales, and the National Library, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory. Thirty one watercolours associated with White's *Journal* are held in Australia by a private collector.

In contrast to Sarah Stone, whose favourite subjects were birds, John Abbot (1751–1840) studied insects from an early age. At a time of great interest in natural history, the young boy was fortunate to meet naturalists and dealers in natural history objects. Pamela Gilbert speculates that he was influenced by the collections of Sir Joseph Banks and his illustrator Sydney Parkinson. Be that as it may, by 1773 Abbot had decided to take the relatively short voyage to America and with

some commissions for collecting specimens, and after paying twenty five guineas for his passage, he almost missed the ship. The Royal Exchange, with his luggage, which included his collecting gear, sailed without John Abbot, who then hired a post-chaise to pursue the vessel down the Thames and on through Kent to Deal where he found the ship lying off shore.

Abbot began collecting in Virginia. His first two cabinets of insects shipped to London were lost at sea. He then moved to Georgia, with commissions from Europe and America for specimens and watercolours. He remained a supplier of illustrations for various authors while keeping in touch with the London scientific circles. Gilbert speculates again that specimens were supplied to John Latham who certainly acknowledged receiving information from John Abbot in the supplement to *General Synopsis*. Abbot's detailed accounts of birds made an important contribution to Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1808–13).

Abbot worked as an illustrator and collector well into old age. Some birds and herbaria are still identifiable, but probably the majority have been absorbed into collections where they cannot be traced. His bird skins in Berlin's Zoological Museum were mostly destroyed by bombing in WW II.

Abbot's description of himself as a man with a 'peculiar liking for insects' does not exclude collections of hundreds of specimens and illustrations of birds. His total output is unknown.

Sarah Stone drew and illustrated from mounted specimens and some of her work may reflect fading of soft parts and unnatural poses. However, it is also a record of the techniques of eighteenth century taxidermy and thus of historical interest. As well as being a record of lost type specimens, her work has acknowledged artistic quality.

The minute detail and naturalness of John Abbot's illustrations evoke a tangible response, most particularly from the transparency of insect wings, the furriness of the scales on moths' wings, and the colours and toughness of the armour-plated cover wings of his dung beetles.

Printed and bound in Italy, stitched binding allows the pages of both books to lie flat when opened. The reader then has good access to examine the watercolours which are printed one to a page with facing text. Heavyweight art paper permits high quality reproduction. This contributes to the cost, but a lower standard would not do justice to these works of art.

Later volumes will include accounts of the work of Ferdinand Bauer, William MacGillivray, Sydney Parkinson, The Port Jackson Painter and Thomas Watling. In addition to beautiful illustrations, the books provide absorbing reading, and will appeal to bibliophiles and those interested in art, natural history, and the history of taxonomy and taxidermy.

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