

Keats and Audubon: A Curious Episode in the Early History of Kentucky

by Philip Krummrich

In 1818, a business deal in Henderson, Kentucky went sour, with far-reaching effects on all concerned. Given the unsettled economy of western Kentucky in those days, this misfortune was not at all unusual, and it would no longer be remembered if not for the instantly recognizable names of the partners. John James Audubon suggested the deal. He never was much of a businessman, but a copy of his *Birds of America* recently commanded the highest price ever paid at auction for any book, and his paintings of wildlife have earned him eminent stature in the history of art and of nature studies. He persuaded a recently-arrived Englishman, George Keats, to invest heavily in the venture. George, of course, was the brother of the great Romantic poet John Keats, and he became one of the leading citizens of Louisville in later years. The glamor of these names alone would draw attention to the incident; a close study of the consequences for their lives and careers, however, will more fully reveal the importance of this little-known episode.

Audubon married Lucy Bakewell in Virginia in 1808, and settled in Henderson, Kentucky in 1810, drawn by the combination of economic opportunity and wildlife-rich wilderness in what was still a frontier region. Many attribute his lack of success



John James Audubon

in commerce to his penchant for spending whole days and weeks hunting and sketching birds and animals, although others ascribe his failures at least partly to bad luck, excessive optimism, or a tendency to trust the wrong people. When he met George and Georgiana Keats in 1818, however, he seemed a prosperous, well-connected, and knowledgeable man of affairs, with a substantial house into which he and Lucy welcomed the young couple as guests. The Audubons represented what there was of civilization in the area at the time, and by all accounts their great personal charm would also have attracted the immigrants from London to them.

George Keats had come to America with a clear goal: he wanted to become wealthy, and thus guarantee the financial well-being of his entire family. His parents had died when their four children were still quite young. George believed wholeheartedly in his older brother John's genius as a poet, and hoped to free him from the necessity of worrying about money so that he could concentrate on his work. Both George and John felt strongly the responsibility of caring for their sickly younger brother Tom, who was to die at seventeen, and their little sister Fanny. They had all inherited a respectable estate, but George realized that it would never be enough to support them all unless he accepted the challenge of increasing the family's wealth. After looking into opportunities in Cincinnati and southern Illinois, he and his wife ended up in Kentucky, in what was at first a warm relationship with the Audubons. George allowed himself to be persuaded to invest everything he had brought along to America in a boat, in partnership with Audubon. He trusted in Audubon's local knowledge, and must have found his confidence and optimism compelling.

The details of what went wrong remain murky. The boat ended up on the bottom of the Mississippi, ruining both Audubon and Keats.¹ From his letters to his brother, and from comments in John Keats's replies, we know that George Keats believed that Audubon had simply swindled him. He accused the naturalist of knowing that the boat had been lost before he persuaded the Englishman to invest, and of scheming to use the Keats money to cushion his own fall (Kirk lxxxvii). The two quarreled violently, and never mended their relationship. These passages from John's letters should suffice to convey the general tone of the Keats family's views on the Audubons: "I cannot help thinking Mr. Audubon a dishonest man" (*Letters* 305); "I cannot help thinking Mr. Audubon has deceived you. I shall not like the sight of him. I shall endeavour to avoid seeing him" (*Letters* 324); "Give my compliments to Mrs. Audubon, and tell her I cannot think her either good-looking or honest. Tell Mr. Audubon he's a fool..." (*Letters* 348).

We are never likely to know the full truth of the matter. Was Audubon a knave, or a fool, or just another unlucky victim of the vagaries of the river? Some infer from the complete absence of references to George Keats in Audubon's journals and other writings that he felt shame regarding his conduct in the affair, but such speculations are all we have (Kirk lxxxviii). Whatever Audubon may have intended, he lost his business, his home and his property in Henderson. He and his family embarked on a wandering existence. Eventually Lucy settled as a schoolteacher in Louisiana, while Audubon spent years in England working to publish his *magnum opus*. Only decades later did they attain a measure of financial security, purchasing a home in upstate New York and enjoying a few years together before Audubon's death and more business reverses left Lucy with a relatively impoverished old age.

Considering what we know about Audubon, he would no doubt eventually have come to grief in a commercial venture; lovers of art and of natural history have reason to be grateful that he did not have better luck as an entrepreneur, and was driven by circumstances to fulfill his destiny and develop his gifts as a painter and student of



John Keats

Photo credit: Mark Harden, archive.com.

wildlife. For George Keats, by contrast, this failure was a crushing blow, and although he persisted in his efforts and became one of the most prosperous citizens of Louisville, in important respects his success came too late, as we shall see.

The story of George Keats in America is far more than a footnote to the biography of Audubon or John Keats, or even an interesting sidebar to the early history of the state of Kentucky. George's emigration, and his financial ups and downs in Henderson and Louisville, had a significant impact on the literary career of one of the greatest of English poets. Unquestionably, George meant well: as he wrote to Charles Dilke years later: ". . . my motive was to acquire an independence to support us all in case of necessity" (Rollins I 285). The separation was never intended to be permanent: either George was to return to England after making a pile of money, or John was to follow him to America. It was not a bad plan, and it might have worked.

Instead, of course, nothing turned out quite as planned. Poor Tom died before George could establish himself; the failed partnership with Audubon delayed George's rise to prosperity for years. Without George to help and watch over him, John's own health deteriorated rapidly, and George was unable to do anything to ease John's financial troubles before it was too late. He was mortified by his inability to send John money the one time he asked for it, and more than once wondered if he had done the right thing in leaving, even musing, several years after John's death: "I almost believe that if I had remained his companion, and had had the means, as I had the wish to have devoted my life to his fame, and happiness, he might have been living at this hour" (Rollins I 284).

Nevertheless, there were some benefits for posterity in George's decision to seek wealth in Kentucky. John's massive journal-letters to George and Georgiana Keats contain many of his most memorable insights, and much valuable biographical detail. Those letters would never have been written if George had remained in London, and we would have been deprived on some of the best of Keats. Moreover, it could be argued that John Keats would not have developed so rapidly if he had not been obliged to devote so much time and energy to writing to his closest friend and biggest supporter. To put it another way, he might not even have had some of these thoughts, much less written them down, if he had not been striving to make his letters rewarding and stimulating for his absent brother and sister-in-law.

The unfortunate episode involving Audubon had a more specific and more plainly negative impact on literary history. Having lost all his money, and getting the sad news of Tom's death, George resolved to return to England to claim his share of Tom's estate. He was unwilling to admit defeat and give up his dream of supporting John's literary career. When he came back to Kentucky, he brought not only his own share, but much of John's. Several of the poet's friends, particularly William Haslam and Charles Brown, accused George of acting selfishly, and never forgave him for leav-

ing his brother destitute; they believed that George shortened John's life by taking so much of their patrimony. Later scholars tend to absolve George of blame: John may have given George more than he could afford, but the consensus seems to be that both brothers were honestly mistaken. George did not realize John's predicament, and John did not understand how badly off he would be. Certainly George takes great pains to justify his behavior in letters written to Charles Dilke in the years following John's death.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the case, we can say with certainty that John's later financial woes must have interfered with his work, and abbreviated his life. The attitude of John's friends towards George kept him from contributing much to biographies and literary scholarship regarding his brother, resulting in large gaps, and probably in the loss of valuable material. George offers again and again to help: in a letter to Dilke in April/May 1828, for example, he writes: "It reminds me that you had some idea of writing a life of John, and of the materials that I am able and willing to furnish for that purpose to you or any one who is competent to do it well" (Rollins I 313). On several occasions, he makes it plain that he does not approve of the biographical sketches composed by Leigh Hunt and Charles Brown, two of his brother's friends with whom he was not on good terms. Thus, the failure of the partnership between George Keats and Audubon had both immediate and far-reaching consequences. The unflattering references to the painter and his wife in John's letters might have been several shades darker if the poet had been able to foresee the full impact of Audubon's incompetence or knavery or bad luck on his life, work and legacy.

George Keats did succeed as a businessman, eventually. He was called (probably with some exaggeration) "Louisville's first millionaire," and built a magnificent home often called "the Englishman's Palace," in what would now be downtown Louisville (Kirk xcii). He took an active part in all aspects of financial, political, and cultural life in the region. Naomi Kirk goes so far as to speculate: "It seems not unlikely that his reputation as a financier, coupled with his interest in civic and national affairs, would have won him a . . . cabinet post or at least have sent him to Congress" (xciii). Ironically, after many years as a wealthy man and leading citizen of Louisville, George Keats suffered a second and final economic ruin because of another partnership—this one with William Bakewell, Audubon's brother-in-law. This time he could not recover, and died with his affairs in disarray. This second episode of bad luck or bad judgment prevented George from carrying out a cherished project: "Believing as he did in John's poetic genius, he made it the chief aim of his life that his collected work be published and an adequate biography be written" (Kirk xci). Referring to this ambition, George writes in 1836: "My mind has become uneasy lest my 'time should come' before I have done my duty in publishing a biography of John worthy of him, and either a complete edition of his works, or at least such as have not already been published" (Rollins II 23). The collected works were published, of course, and biographies were written, but it may well be that they would have been more accurate and complete if George had been able to contribute, or at least to leave his papers in better order. This sad reflection may be taken as typical: "I suppose that all I know of John will die with me, for I have not capacity of authorship enough to write his life" (Rollins I 314). He complains more than once of not having copies of his brother's posthumous works, although in the best of circumstances he might not have been the ideal custodian: he once sent an original manuscript of one of John's poems as a gift to a woman who had sent him some pressed flowers gathered from John's grave (Rollins II 36-37).

With his estate fragmented and his family left in poverty, George's wife remarried. Her new husband, Mr. Jeffrey, may have meant well, but biographers and literary histo-

rians agree that he was not a good caretaker for the precious letters from John and other documents George left behind. As Kirk puts it: “His editorial judgment . . . did not keep pace with his admiration, and in consequence the world had to wait too many years for the complete letters. Jeffrey’s work as a civil engineer took him to widely separated cities, and in moving about, it is conceivable that some items were destroyed or lost” (xciv). This only compounded what was already a problem: “George Keats had been overgenerous in his gifts of his brother’s poems and letters, and his family continued in the same questionable largesse. This practice and the later lamentable sales effected a dispersion of material that has offered perennial hope to the collector and despair to biographers” (Kirk xciv). Among Jeffrey’s remarkable acts was the gift of a signature of Keats, cut from a letter, to an autograph collector (Rollins II 113). When George died young, broken by his shocking financial reverses, the world certainly lost his memories of his brother, and the documentary evidence was diminished.

George Keats deserves to be remembered with esteem for his civic contributions to Louisville in its formative years. As he himself recognized, however, and accepted cheerfully, he will be remembered for a quite different reason: “What fools we mortals are, how we are forever straining for ever so small a niche in the temple of Fame; I claim being the affectionate Friend and Brother of John Keats” (Rollins I 327). George’s chance encounter with a man who would later become a famous artist, after many years of business failures, led to some regrettable consequences for John Keats. Misunderstandings regarding George’s financial dealings with his brother, after his partnership with Audubon had bankrupted him, prevented him from doing nearly as much as he wished to preserve and honor John’s legacy; any chance he might have had to make up for that loss was taken away, with a painful symmetry, by a second financial disaster, this one attributable to Audubon’s brother-in-law. Knowing about these episodes does not enable us to read Keats’s poetry or scrutinize Audubon’s paintings more perceptively, but an awareness of this bit of Kentucky history helps us to understand their careers a little better. If George had remained in Cincinnati, or had settled down on a farm in Illinois, or had taken his young wife back to England after his investment with Audubon ended up at the bottom of the Mississippi, who can say how the career of John Keats would have been affected? If George had lived to a ripe old age in the “Englishman’s Palace” in Louisville, who knows what letters, or even poems, might have been saved for us? If the partnership had not gone sour, would John Keats have joined his brother in Kentucky, admired paintings by Audubon, and written “Ode to a Hermit Thrush” instead of “Ode to a Nightingale”?

Endnotes

1. Even this detail is uncertain; regardless of whether the boat sank or was confiscated, however, it was lost, and with it all of George Keats’s money.

Works Cited

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