

Enjoy the vivid beauty of parrots as never before in this rare collection of ornithological plates by Edward Lear

Edward Lear, *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*. London: self-published, 1832. 21 1/2 inches x 14 1/2 inches (546 x 368 mm), 90 pages, 42 plates

Edward Lear's album of parrots contains the finest illustrations of the family ever produced: it is also a stylistic monument in the history of the depiction of birds. Lear turned his hand to many things in the course of his long life — landscape painting, nonsense verse, and the illustration of birds and reptiles. The nonsense verse is Lear's most widely known achievement, but the limericks and their companion sketches are above all the inventions of a landscape painter who still preserved a hand attuned to the forms of reptiles and birds.

Lear's work as a natural history draftsman lasted little more than the decade of the 1830s, until his eyesight became too weak for the detail of feathers and scales. The *Psittacidae* is his finest achievement. Lear conveyed with telling sympathy the carriage of a bird, the grasp of the claws, the tilt of the head, its grave, curious, or quizzical expression (noteworthy beaks later reappear as remarkable noses on the limerick people, who are as distinctive as his parrots for their idiosyncratic posture and curious poses). Lear was exceptionally sensitive to the structure and function of features such as the parrot's beak and the turtle's jaws (the latter is evident in his lithographs of turtles and tortoises in Thomas Bell's *A Monograph of the Testudinata*).

Edward Lear's *Psittacidae* was drawn, lithographed, and published on a shoestring by the artist himself in a tiny edition. This copy of Lear's rarity is from the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and is bound in half dark red morocco and marbled boards. The spine with gilt-decorated raised bands and the gilt title: "LEAR'S | PARROTS"; the front pastedown bears bookplate of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, with manuscript inscription "Deposited by Dr. T. B. Wilson [18]47." Thomas Bellerby Wilson (1807–65) was from a prosperous Quaker family with interests in civic improvement. Like many naturalists of the period, Wilson

was educated as a physician, but he never needed to practice. Instead he formed huge collections of minerals, birds, shells, fossils, reptiles, fish, and insects. He joined the Academy in 1832 and remained a member until his death, over that period donating tens of thousands of specimens to its museum and some 12,000 volumes to its library. Some of these books and specimens had been bought from the ornithological entrepreneur John Gould. Since Wilson was not a subscriber to Lear's *Psittacidae*, his copy may well have come from Gould's remainder stock of the book.

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