Lithograph of the scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*) from Lear's parrot monograph, begun when he was 18.

NATURAL HISTORY

The wilder side of Edward Lear

As the poet and artist's bicentenary approaches, **Robert McCracken Peck** celebrates his natural-history legacy.

In 1988, the United Kingdom issued a set of four postage stamps to commemorate the centennial of the death of the beloved artist, poet and travel writer

The Natural History of Edward Lear

Houghton Library,
Harvard University,
Cambridge,
Massachusetts.
Until 18 August 2012.

Edward Lear (1812–88). The stamps featured some of Lear's whimsical ink drawings, including a self-caricature of the bearded artist flying on improbably minuscule wings, and the two boat-bound protagonists of his best-known poem, *The Owl and the Pussycat*.

The affable Lear would have been pleased — and probably astonished — by his country's philatelic attention, but almost certainly disappointed by the choice of images. He considered his illustrated nonsense verse, which ultimately earned him a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner, a sideline to his more serious focus: natural-history and landscape painting. Lear so feared that his poetic flights of fancy would undermine his scientific reputation that he hid them behind the pseudonym Derry Down Derry until 1861, long after his nonsense corpus had won a devoted following around the world.

Today, Lear's contributions to science have been mostly forgotten, but early in his life he was a prolific painter of natural-history subjects, earning near-universal praise for his accuracy, originality and style. Lear's greatest scientific contribution was his magnificent *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (1830–32) — the first monograph to focus on a single avian family — which he began to publish in small batches of individual lithographs when he was just 18 years old. Admired by aviculturists and ornithologists alike, the book's depictions of "species hitherto unfigured" helped to make Lear the artist of choice for many of Britain's leading ornithological publishers in the 1830s and 1840s.

In that golden age of colour-plate books, Lear created some of the most spectacular natural-history illustrations ever published. The original watercolours for these and his other scientific paintings, some of which are on show at the Houghton Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have a timeless vitality. Lear met and worked with most of the leading naturalists of his day. He may even have helped John Gould, the chief taxidermist at London Zoo, and his wife Elizabeth — herself a natural-history artist — to create some of the illustrations for Charles Darwin's report on the birds seen during the voyage of HMS *Beagle*.

Yet Lear's later glory masked tough beginnings and ongoing difficulties. The 20th

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Lear in his late 20s when, despite deteriorating eyesight, his artistic reputation was thriving.

of 21 children, he was born to a prosperous middle-class family in Holloway, now part of north London. But a financial reversal forced the family to disperse when Lear was four years old. He was brought up by his devoted older sister Ann, who gave him lessons that included a rudimentary training in art. As a young boy, Lear earned money “colouring prints, screens, fans” and “making morbid disease drawings for hospitals and certain doctors of physic”, as he noted in the preface to *Nonsense Songs and Stories* (1871).

As a counterweight to this mundane work and to ease his anxiety over the asthma, epilepsy and depression that were to trouble him throughout his life, the youthful Lear created sketchbooks filled with drawings of imaginary birds and animals set in lush, tropical landscapes. A few real-life studies in these hint at the enormous talent he would soon reveal to the scientific world.

Lear's first published illustrations were two vignettes, of lemurs and macaws, in Edward Turner Bennett's *The Gardens and Menagerie of the Zoological Society Delineated* (1830–31). Lear was a natural choice: he had been sketching at London Zoo since it had opened to the public, in 1828.

In June 1830, Lear formally applied for, and received, permission from the Zoological Society's council to draw all the parrots in the society's collection. Over the next two years, he created 42 lithographs for his own folio monograph. Accomplished without institutional, governmental or commercial support, it was an extraordinary achievement, setting new standards for artistic and scientific quality. When renowned ornithologist William Swainson saw the lithograph of a scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*), he wrote to Lear that he considered it equal

Books in brief

Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything

Philip Ball BODLEY HEAD 480 pp. £25 (2012)

The seventeenth-century shift in Western thought may be labelled the Scientific Revolution but, argues science writer Philip Ball, it was more a sea change in how we view curiosity. That singular trait, which was once condemned, became an engine driving our inexhaustible hunt for knowledge. In this magisterial work, Ball examines the people, events and inventions at the turning point, including “professors of secrets”, cabinets of curiosities, the investigations of Francis Bacon, the plays of William Shakespeare, the rise of polymaths — and the echoes of all this in today's science.

Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame

Christopher Boehm BASIC BOOKS 432 pp. \$28.99 (2012)

Ethologist and anthropologist Christopher Boehm exposes the roots of generosity and peer disapproval. Eschewing evolutionary game theory, he opts instead for natural selection within the social environment. Boehm posits that selection began with a “crime and punishment” scenario: thugs would have been kicked out of early hunting bands as threats to group survival, and alpha-male hogging of sexual favours would not have been tolerated. Altruism would, argues Boehm, be increasingly valued in partners and allies. Ultimately, such social control might have caused biological change.

Fear of Food: A History of Why We Worry About What We Eat

Harvey Levenstein UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS 232 pp. \$25 (2012)

The United States is a nation gripped by gustatory paranoia, says historian Harvey Levenstein. In this punchy, entertaining account, he reveals how US consumers have suffered for decades from anxiety over the provenance of a pork chop or the fat in fromage fraais. An army of scientists, he says, stoked fear about everything from germs and a lack of vitamins to additives and industrial processing, inadvertently fostering the eating disorder that affects modern US society. Levenstein calls for moderation in all things — including moderation — to regain the joy of eating.

America's Other Audubon

Joy M. Kiser PRINCETON ARCHITECTURAL PRESS 144 pp. £30 (2012)

Genevieve Jones should have been a towering figure in natural-history illustration. In the 1870s, she resolved to plug the gaps in Jean James Audubon's *The Birds of America* (1838). She learnt lithography, and with Eliza Schulz began the exquisite colour plates for *Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of Birds of Ohio*. The pictures — sold by subscription — were bought by the likes of US President Theodore Roosevelt and hugely admired. Then Jones died of typhoid. Researcher Joy Kiser tells how Jones's family battled to finish the 68 plates; reproductions, with updated keys, are included.

The Value of Species

Edward L. McCord YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS 184 pp. £18.99 (2012)

In this meditation on the inherent worth of nature, philosopher and naturalist Edward McCord offers a new twist on the argument for ‘deep conservation’. Each species, he posits, is the astonishing repository of millions of years of natural selection — a volume in Earth's library of life forms. So protecting all creatures is a case of neither need, compassion nor economic value. Instead, their worth is down to their intellectual value, he argues: to the inquisitive mind, each species is incalculably valuable, from bacteria to blue whales.

► in “grace of design, perspective, or anatomical accuracy” to anything by the iconic illustrator John James Audubon; and British naturalist Prideaux John Selby thought the plates “infinitely superior to Audubon’s in softness and the drawings as good”.

The monograph earned Lear election to the Linnean Society of London, but not the financial security that he hoped for. John Gould, who then was just launching his own career as a publisher of ornithological books, saw an opportunity in Lear’s financial distress. He bought unsold copies of the monograph and hired Lear to produce illustrations for several of his own large-format publications. Over the next few years, Lear created 68 powerful plates for Gould’s five-volume masterwork, *The Birds of Europe* (1832–37), and ten illustrations for Gould’s equally beautiful two-volume monograph on toucans (1833–35).

An early admirer was Edward Smith Stanley, later the 13th Earl of Derby and Lear’s most important patron. The earl invited Lear to paint some of the captive birds and mammals living at Knowsley Hall, his sprawling estate near Liverpool. The enormous menagerie contained several thousand animals, including 619 species of birds, along with a natural-history library and some 20,000 mounted and preserved birds and mammals. Lear accepted, and over the next seven years produced more than 100 paintings of the most prized specimens. Seventeen were reproduced in a privately printed book, *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall* (1846), which documented a number of species for the first time.

The exquisite accuracy of Lear’s natural-history paintings was achieved partly by working from living subjects whenever possible. “I am never pleased with a drawing unless I make it from life,” he wrote in 1831. His preparatory studies — stunning watercolours, often heavily annotated regarding colour and form — marvellously mix detail with spontaneity.

That scrupulous accuracy could not hide Lear’s irrepressible bent for the nonsensical. When not painting or socializing with the earl’s guests, he would entertain the children at the hall with a steady flow of whimsy — a way of giving pleasure while

Lear’s ‘hyacinth macaw’ (top) turned out to be an unknown species, now called Lear’s macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*); bottom, a vitoe (*Nyctipithecus felinus*) from the collection of the 13th Earl of Derby.

cutting across barriers of age and social class. Many of Lear’s famous limericks emerged from these sessions. Many of his nonsense drawings, alphabets and verses drew on his knowledge of natural history: for example, his whimsical sketches of pseudo-plants, such as *Manypeepia upsdownia*, captured the look and sound of real species, both spoofing and celebrating the seriousness of his scientific subjects.

Despite his rapid success, Lear soon tired of scientific illustration. He blamed his loss of interest on failing eyesight, although the detail in some of his later work belies that claim. “My eyes are so sadly worse, that no bird under an ostrich shall I soon be able to see to do,” he wrote at just 24, in the hope of forestalling further illustrative assignments from the demanding Gould.

Lear had long held an interest in landscape painting, and in 1837 Lord Derby agreed to underwrite a two-year study trip to Italy. Lear spent the rest of his life abroad, returning to England only periodically. In 1846, he spent a brief stint as drawing instructor to the young Queen Victoria.

Lear remained a keen observer of nature wherever he was — Italy, Greece, Albania, Egypt, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and India, among other destinations — but he never returned to the study of birds and animals, except through his nonsense.

Happily, through one of his early drawings, Lear made an inadvertent scientific discovery of his own. The illustration of the hyacinth macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) in his parrot monograph was later found to be of a different, previously undescribed species. The ornithologist Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon’s nephew, named it *Anodorhynchus leari*, or Lear’s macaw, in 1856. This endangered species, which persists in northeastern Brazil, is a living legacy that Lear would undoubtedly have appreciated far more than the nonsense — or the postage stamps. ■

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