

STUART W. GENTLING

26 May 1993

Dear Alice,

Thankyou for your gratuitous advice, but more about that later.

First of all, Alice, please relax about the bird book. When Scott and I gave it to you we GAVE it to you - fee simple absolute as my teacher used to say in my law school property class. That means you can do anything you wish with the book. If you want to give it to a niece or to a museum or to a library or to a charity or even sell it, please do what you feel most comfortable doing. I don't care a fig about a tax deduction. The book is not my property; it is yours. But do please let us know where the book ends up if you can.

Next, I am sorry to hear about the death of Michael Harwood. I really enjoyed the "On the Road" book. It echoed so many of Scott's and my boyhood travels in Audubon's wake. About our plans for a trade edition for "Of Birds and Texas" with the possible title "Of Birds and Texas, Audubon, and Us" I can say that the new, smaller version will contain a new essay by me to replace the missing Graves text and many additional pencil and watercolor bird studies. We are going to include our Audubon research material as well. My essay will detail the story of how we created our Folio; it will tell about our discovery of JJA's Boat-tailed Grackles and how we proved its authenticity and how the painting ultimately came to the rescue of our book project.

Please remember a couple of things, Alice. Scott and I are not wildlife painters. We did our original book in homage to JJA and the beauty of his "Birds of America." We are not great fans of contemporary bird painting with some notable exceptions. There is too much of it, and the vast majority of modern works lack the vibrant elegance of Audubon's best examples. Also, Scott and I have absolutely no intention of pursuing careers as painters of birds. We are essentially painters of portraits, still lifes and landscapes. The portrayal of birds has always been more like a serious hobby with us than a major career commitment although we ended up spending years in the publishing of our bird book. By doing "Of Birds and Texas" which was planned as only one of seven or eight books we intended to produce, we wanted to make our publishing debut with a spectacular book dealing with one of our many interests, a book that would have a wide appeal to both art and nature lovers. We wanted to restore some of the romanticism and elegance and good design to this art form.

I think you know that our book was dedicated to Audubon from the beginning. When we happened to serendipitously discover JJA's grackle painting in a catalogue sent to us by a Philadelphia print dealer we had never heard of before - because my older brother in North Carolina had placed our names on the dealer's mailing list - our project was drawn even closer to the great bird artist. Audubon really played a very major role in saving our publication from bankruptcy. And we likewise corrected an ancient injustice by publishing his grackles for

the first time in our own Folio as he would have wanted the world to see it. You, of all people, know how much that Audubon-Rider plate in the Bonaparte supplement rankled him. The story of our discovery is a very good one, and I think that it will make entertaining reading.

As for including Audubon's name in the new title, that idea was, indeed, suggested by our agent to attract the notice of a wider public who might not be interested in opening a book titled "Of Birds and Texas." You see, there are a lot of people out there who do not like things Texan. And, again, our connection with Audubon is real. I might also add here that our association with bird painting has not been particularly beneficial to our image as "fine artists," so riding on Audubon's coat tails was never considered by us to be a good career move. I am not, however, ashamed to be called a proselyte - especially for the true artistic merit of JJA's work which, I think, has rarely been equaled except by the great Japanese screen painters and the artists of the Song and Ming dynasties.

We are trying to publish a smaller, more affordable edition of our bird book so that a wider audience can have a chance to see what we have done and learn about our story. Sadly, most of the copies of our Elephant Folio are now in special library collections or the houses of the wealthy and are not accessible to the general reader. I doubt that the book will be a runaway best seller or will make us rich, but it will be a record of our unabashed love of Audubon's work and our curious encounter with him.

Again, Alice, we do wish you would honor us by writing a page or two or three for a Preface or Forward perhaps telling about how you came to be interested in JJA or anything of your choice that you might think appropriate. We really don't want Roger Tory Peterson or anyone else for that matter doing it. You are John James Audubon's greatest biographer. Your books nurtured our early interest in the man more than any others with the exception of the Macmillan edition of the Havell prints, and I have quoted you several times in my new essay as I tell about how you came into our lives. You are already a part of the new book. It will definitely be our final statement about birds and our Audubon connection. How fitting it would be if you could participate in some way.

Please think about it. When I finish typing my first draft (the original is in my almost illegible handwriting) I will send it to you warts and all. I always do extensive revisions. Until then . . .

All the very best,

Stuart Gentling

I have just finished re-reading your revised biography. It is truly amazing how my thoughts about Audubon have been changed by our own publishing experience.