

















Otus Galapagoensis.

Andrea Hart & Ann Datta

Birds of the World

The Art of ELIZABETH GOULD

PRESTEL

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Ptyctolophus galonias

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The life of the gifted artist

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Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841)

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INTRODUCTION

The name Elizabeth Gould, and her remarkable artistic talent, may be unfamiliar to many. However, in recent years her story and skill in the field of ornithological illustration has attracted renewed interest, especially with an increasing appreciation of the role of women artists in the progress of science. This book brings together her eventful life and many of her published and previously unseen original artworks which abundantly demonstrate her significance in the development and publication of bird illustration.

Elizabeth Gould was born during a period that saw great scientific, industrial and societal change across the globe. Increasing exploration and a growing interest in describing the birds of the world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of ornithology as a Western scientific discipline. This meant that alongside scientific descriptions and observations of the physical and behavioural aspects of avian species, many of them new, the art of ornithological illustration started to take its place alongside its botanical counterpart, which had previously dominated natural history studies.

A name that might be more familiar to readers is that of Elizabeth's husband, John Gould (1804–1881), businessman, publisher and obsessive bird collector. Known as 'The Bird Man', Gould gained a reputation as an expert taxidermist in the early nineteenth century, working for some of the leading scientific establishments in England including the Zoological Society of London and the British Museum. This early career work provided him with a sound knowledge of animal anatomy, in particular of birds, the subject to which he would devote the rest of his life, and saw him become one of the leading British ornithologists of his day. In due course he would also come to be regarded as the father of Australian ornithology, and Elizabeth as the first lady of Australian bird painting and lithography.

Perhaps overshadowed by her husband's status, and her own premature death, what has remained less known and appreciated is the significant contribution Elizabeth made not just to his life but, ultimately, also to the success of his spectacular publications. Her artistic skill, her ability to demonstrate the immense variety of colour and form found in the natural world, and her devotion to her husband, helped create an enduring scientific and artistic legacy which she built over and above her responsibilities as a wife and mother to many children.

Commencing in 1830, the Goulds would publish a series of lavishly illustrated publications on birds of the world featuring fine lithographic plates that Elizabeth herself transferred to stone, based on her own drawings. Known as the 'Gould folios', the books were of imperial folio size (approx. 22 × 16 inches), which meant that the numerous hand-coloured plates that sat alongside John's descriptions were large enough for many birds to be figured life-size. By the time they set sail for their pioneering voyage to Australia in 1838, six folio books and one other in a smaller format had been published.

After a twenty-month stay, during which John observed and collected birds and other animals, they returned to England in August 1840. But, just as they had started work on their seventh folio book, Elizabeth unexpectedly died in 1841 following the birth of their eighth child. She was just 37. At the time of her death, she had contributed over 600 plates to their publications in just twelve years. The new series *The Birds of Australia*, the first comprehensive work on Australian avifauna, was completed eight years later, in 1848, and John would go on to publish seven further titles, including *The Mammals of Australia*. Upon his own death in 1881, John Gould had produced the longest series of bird books ever published, containing an astonishing 2,999 plates depicting birds from five continents.

We are therefore left to wonder what might have become of this talented and dedicated woman but for her tragic death, or how her continuing support of her husband might have changed both his and their family's future direction. What is known, and is becoming more widely recognised, is the crucial role she played in the creation of a unique series of publications in her short but eventful life. This could never have been achieved had it not been for her artistry and the remarkable partnership with her husband.

Figure 1: Portrait of Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841) holding a female Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*. The oil painting is thought to have been realized in Elizabeth's lifetime but is undated and the artist remains unknown.

ELIZABETH GOULD – EARLY LIFE

The relative obscurity of the life and work of Elizabeth Gould is largely due to its sparse documentation, especially that relating to her early life. Born Elizabeth Coxen on 18 July 1804 in Ramsgate, Kent, she was the sixth of nine children and the only surviving daughter of Nicholas Coxen (1765–1833), a sea captain, and his wife Elizabeth (née Tomkins, d. 1850). Not unusually for the time, four daughters and a son died in infancy. Of the three sons who survived to adulthood, two of them, Stephen (1798–1845) and Charles (1808–1875), emigrated to Australia, in 1827 and 1834 respectively, where they bought land and farmed in New South Wales.

All the Coxen children received schooling, but in the early nineteenth century systematic instruction did not exist for girls as it did for boys. Education for a middle-class girl was not intended to prepare her for a career but for marriage, the raising of children and management of a household. The consensus of those who have written about Elizabeth is that, given the conventions of the period, she was well-educated, probably home-schooled by a governess.

Elizabeth herself would find employment as a governess, one of the few paid positions available to middle-class women in the early nineteenth century. With the blustery sea-port market town of Ramsgate offering limited job opportunities for men, let alone women, taking such employment might have become a necessity if her family was unable to support her as an unmarried daughter. Alternatively, it might imply that Elizabeth held ambitions for a more fulfilling life, which meant leaving her hometown for London.

In 1827 she began working as a governess for William Rothery, who was the Chief of the Office of the King's Proctor in Doctors' Commons and acted for the Admiralty on certain British colonial affairs. He lived on James Street, near Buckingham Palace, and his nine-year-old daughter became Elizabeth's pupil. In a letter to her mother in the autumn of 1827, she describes her pupil as a 'perfect child in mind and manners', but often she felt 'miserably-wretchedly dull'.

Although a governess might expect acceptable accommodation in the house of a wealthy employer, the position was often a lonely one. In the hierarchy of a grand household a governess was uncomfortably sandwiched between the lower-class servants and her employers, belonging to neither. She was clearly homesick, writing in the same letter of 1827: 'The wind is howling a good deal tonight and I think of my darling brother much and of the beloved lost one. I fear I shall get very melancholy here.' (Sauer 1998a: 10–11)

MEETING JOHN GOULD

Elizabeth's melancholy was to pass upon her meeting John Gould. Born in Lyme Regis, Dorset, on 14 September 1804, Gould was the only son of John Gould, senior (1783–1829), and his wife Elizabeth (née Clatworthy, 1775–1861). The family moved to Surrey, where four girls were born, and to Eton in 1817 when Gould, senior, was appointed Foreman Gardener to King George III (1738–1820) at Windsor Castle. John's father encouraged him to explore the extensive grounds



surrounding the castle, pointing out the different birds and looking for birds' nests in hedgerows. John soon learnt how to use a gun and how to stuff the birds shot by the estate gamekeepers to sell to collectors. After leaving school aged 14, he served apprenticeships in the gardens at Windsor and Ripley Castle in Yorkshire, but a gardener's life was not for him. Instead, in about 1825 he moved to London and set himself up in business as a taxidermist in Broad Street, Soho.

The details of where and when Elizabeth met her future husband are not documented, but it is thought that she may have taken her pupil to look at the stuffed animals in the Museum of the Zoological Society of London in Bruton Street, where John had been appointed Curator and Preserver in April 1828.

Figure 2: Lithograph of John Gould (1804–1881), aged 45, by T. H. Maguire in 1849. He married Elizabeth in 1829 and their enduring partnership produced some of the most sumptuous ornithological books ever published.



MARRIAGE AND EARLY MARRIED LIFE

Elizabeth and John were married at St James, Piccadilly, on 5 January 1829, both aged 24. Their personalities complemented each other: Elizabeth was calm and cultured, while John was assertive and energetic (Lambourne 1987: 26–7).

The newly-weds lived at first in rooms behind John's workplace in Bruton Street, lying just west of the wide shopping thoroughfare of Regent Street. Almost immediately Elizabeth fell pregnant with their first child, John, but he died in infancy in October 1829. Their sorrow would grow with the death of John's father two months later, in December.

The following year the couple moved to the other side of Regent Street into Soho, a relatively small but densely populated quarter. They rented number 20 Broad Street (now 56 Broadwick Street – the street was renamed in 1936), one of six houses in a handsome terrace on the north side dating from 1722/23.

Their Broad Street home was a five-storey terraced townhouse, large enough for the family and a shop, with space in the basement for preparing skins. The house had eleven rooms including a nursery, several bedrooms, a drawing

room, a dining room next to the kitchen, a school room on the second floor, a small library, an office at the back where John worked on his books, and quarters for domestic staff including a nursemaid, cook, housemaid, groom and day servants (Datta 1997: 209). There was also an office for John's secretary, Edwin Charles Prince (1809/10–1874), and another room for Elizabeth in which to do her drawing. Oil lamps and candles would have provided lighting and coal fires heated the rooms. The Goulds' neighbours were tailors, grocers, cheesemongers, haberdashers and bakers. It was a neighbourhood where great wealth and poverty existed side by side, where grand carriages rolled down Regent Street and ragged children hawked trinkets in the side streets.

Figure 3: The Goulds lived and worked in London throughout their married life. This map of Soho shows the proximity of their home to Hullmandel's printers and the Zoological Gardens.



ELIZABETH GOULD – WIFE AND MOTHER

John Gould undertook his science and business by means of an extensive correspondence. However, despite significant collections of extant letters in the Natural History Museum, London; the Mitchell Library, Sydney; and other repositories in the United Kingdom and the United States, these contain little information about their married life.

What is recorded are the births of the Goulds' eight children. Following the loss of their first son, John, they welcomed a second son, John Henry, on 21 December 1830. Their next child, another son they named Charles, died in infancy in October 1832. Throughout these pregnancies Elizabeth was hard at work producing the plates for their first publication, *A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains* (1830–33).

More sadness followed when in April 1833 Elizabeth's father died. It was also in this year that Elizabeth herself nearly died in childbirth. In a letter dated 19 April 1833, the artist and poet Edward Lear (1812–1888) wrote to George Coombe that:

Mrs Gould went into premature labour [around April 11] with her fourth child, during which she nearly died. At the time of writing, she is still in imminent danger ... [and] is to be for a long while incapable of lithography. I have in the meantime been engaged to go on with this *European Ornithology*. (Sauer 1998a: 42)

At this time Lear's assistance as an ornithological artist was very much needed, as Elizabeth and John had another son, in January 1834, whom they again named Charles. Their first daughter, Eliza, was born in April 1836, with a second, Louisa, born the following year in December 1837.

It is not possible to know the effect of Elizabeth's pregnancies on her long-term health, but without the benefit of modern medical care it is likely to have been significant. She would eventually give birth to eight children of whom six survived to maturity, which would have no doubt added a huge emotional burden to the physical demands of pregnancy and childbirth. Convalescence following births at this time could range between five to fifteen days depending on the circumstances. But with so many children born within such a short period of time, and her continuing strenuous work creating plates for her husband's publications, even with the assistance of a nurse and house maids, the stress must have been considerable. When John decided to investigate the then little-known birds of Australia for which he wished to take Elizabeth with him, the maternal guilt and the psychological trauma of leaving three young children behind when they set sail for Australia in 1838 is evident both prior to their sailing and in the letters Elizabeth sent home thereafter.

Despite those of her children who were old enough to remember seeing their mother and father in the family home busily sketching birds or discussing their work, and despite their three daughters demonstrating artistic ability through painting flowers, small topographical scenes and some birds' eggs, none of their children would pursue a career in art. All three sons attended university. Henry (1830–1855) and Franklin (1839–1873) qualified as doctors, and Charles (1834–1893) trained as a geologist. Henry joined the East India Company in 1854 and sent his father bird skins from India; his paintings of Australian birds' eggs also demonstrate a developing interest in ornithology. Eliza was the only one who married (twice) and she had one daughter.

Figure 4: The Goulds' five-storey townhouse in Broad Street where they moved to in 1830. The street was renamed Broadwick Street in 1936.

ELIZABETH GOULD – THE ARTIST

No members of the Gould or Coxen families are known to have been artists or had any connections with the art world. Elizabeth's family was engaged in the sea and John's father was a gardener. During the period in which Elizabeth was growing up, watercolour painting became a popular hobby, considerably eased by paint manufacturers who had found ways to make cakes of paint that were readily portable by binding pigments with gum arabic. Paper manufacturers rose to the demand and produced greater quantities of drawing paper of different grades and sizes. Brushes were available at various prices depending on the type of animal hair used. One of the more popular subjects for women to paint were flowers. For many this was a hobby, but for others it was a vocation allowing an income either from teaching or, following an explosion of publications on plants, the provision of illustrations. Fewer women however took up painting animals, and it is unlikely that Elizabeth would have become a bird painter had she not married John.

To develop her skills, Elizabeth was probably already going into the Zoological Society's Museum on Bruton Street. From their lodgings it was only a short walk when John called her in to paint new specimens arriving from Europe and further afield, but also overnight casualties from the Zoological Gardens or donations from supporters of the Society. Newly dead animals retained the appearance and colour of the creature in life. Elizabeth's drawings capturing the fugitive colours would also act as guides for the correct posture and coloration of the soft parts when mounting specimens.

The Museum also served as the Society's administrative headquarters where senior staff including the Secretary Nicholas Aylward Vigors (1785–1840) were regularly in attendance and Fellows would visit to see progress in the then newly formed Society. The presence of Mrs Gould, a young lady working in a professional capacity, would have been most unusual for the period.

Examples of Elizabeth's early bird paintings dated 1829 show that at 25 she was already an excellent draughtswoman, working with precision, handling paints and patterns, applying watercolour over pencil outlines and meticulously colouring the plumage and drawing the bird life-size or to scale as the stuffed skin was propped up in front of her. The primary purpose of zoological illustration is to show the appearance of an animal so that it can be recognised and identified. At this time, without the benefit of photography or digital technology, this meant that Elizabeth had to draw animals in private collections, in a museum or in her home, in the form of flattened bird skins or mounted specimens. Working with direction from her husband, she would try to depict the characteristics of a species, drawing attention to important external features and its posture, perched on a branch or standing on the ground. Most species could not be observed in life, and even fewer in their natural habitats, so on some occasions the resulting drawing could appear rather unnatural.

In her early works, Elizabeth's paintings followed in the tradition of fine late eighteenth-century bird books: attractive but formal plates of birds, mostly in profile positions, on



stylised vegetation or simple landforms. What has become evident from the collection of the Goulds' watercolours acquired by the Natural History Museum, London, in 2017, is the development of her paintings, which range in date from 1829 to 1840 – the entire span of her artistic career. The tight control and relative 'stiffness' of the earliest works ends with a flourish, as seen in a loosening-up of her technique and a natural feel in her Australian work, which suggests a leap forward in terms of her self-confidence. Her composition also developed in Australia: it was her first opportunity to observe and paint the surrounding vegetation associated with birds, and the addition of plants greatly enhances the plates.

Figure 5: This painting of a Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus* is one of the earliest watercolours by Elizabeth in the NHM collections. Painted in 1829, she signed it 'Eliza Gould', the name John used for her.

LITHOGRAPHY AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLATES

No sooner had the Goulds moved into Broad Street than they started on their first book, *A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains* (1830–33). It resulted after John received a collection of bird skins from the Himalayas, some of which were species new to Western science, whilst others had never been illustrated before. On the spur of the moment he hatched the audacious idea of publishing a book about them illustrated with hand-coloured plates despite many of the specimens not having been previously scientifically identified.

Aged 26, John was by no means a wealthy man and could only produce this first book on a shoestring budget. In Elizabeth he had an equal partner as artist to complement his written descriptions, but no funds were available to pay a lithographer. When John confided to Elizabeth his idea of publication of a work on Himalayan birds illustrated with lithographs, she is reputed to have asked: 'But who will do the plates on stone?' 'Who?' replied her husband, 'Why you of course.' (Sharpe 1893: xii)

The printing method John intended to use was that of lithography. It is widely presumed that it was Edward Lear who taught Elizabeth lithography, as she would not have possessed any previous knowledge about the technique, a process that required time and skill to learn. Lear, at the age of 18, had just started to publish his own work on parrots, *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (1830–32), and would later be employed by John to share the job of drawing the 448 plates for the *Birds of Europe* series.

Lear was an impecunious young man with a genius for drawing. At just 18 he became captivated by the parrots in the Zoological Gardens. Using the only assets he possessed – those of an artist – he set about painting them life-size in watercolour. Unable to afford to employ someone to make prints from his drawings, he also taught himself the recently invented process of lithography to cut down his expenses and give him total artistic control over the finished print.

Lear's role in teaching Elizabeth lithography was crucial in showing the way to achieve John's dream. Without his employment of Lear, and of Elizabeth's learning and mastering the process, the Gould folios could never even have begun. Lear would write on hearing of John's death in 1881:

In this earliest phase of his bird-drawing, he owed everything to his excellent wife, & to myself, – without whose help in drawing he had done nothing. (Noakes 1968: 40)

Lithography is a printing technique based on the antipathy of water and grease in which an artist draws on a block of fine-grained porous limestone with a greasy material (ink, crayon, chalk). The process was invented by Alois Senefelder (1771–1834), an amateur printer, in Germany in 1798. It spread to England in the early nineteenth century and one of the first and finest to set up a lithographic printing press,



in Great Marlborough Street, a few streets from the Goulds' house, was Charles Joseph Hullmandel (1789–1850).

In 1824 Hullmandel published *The Art of Drawing on Stone* in which he described in minute detail every stage in the lithographic process, from the tools to use and the materials to draw with to the techniques needed to bring out the best results. He was also ready to help clients master the process by welcoming them into his workshop and offering advice. It is probable that this is where Lear learnt lithography.

Hullmandel hired out the heavy stones to artists such as Lear and Elizabeth, and once they had finished their drawings the stones were taken back to Hullmandel's for printing. The stones were wetted and greasy ink was rolled over the damp surface, where it adhered only to the drawn lines. Paper was then laid over the stone and pressed down in a special press to make as many monochrome prints as were required – these prints showing the mirror image of the drawing on the stone.

Figure 6: Photograph of Edward Lear (1812–1888) taken circa 1866–67. Lear taught Elizabeth the art of lithography. An exceptional ornithological artist, Lear is more commonly remembered for his prose and limericks.

It was, however, painstaking, back-breaking work, as it involved leaning over a large stone for long periods. Lear found the work unbearable, referring to it as 'this lampblack & grease work' (Tree 1991: 45). The artist George Scharf (1788–1860), who drew and lithographed the anatomical plate of a toucan's bill for the Goulds' *Ramphastidæ*, described the laborious task of stippling texture onto a lithographic stone to render the shading on bones with minute accuracy. It is hard to imagine a more soul-destroying task for an artist, and especially for Elizabeth, who continued to work on the stones during her pregnancies.

All of Elizabeth's bird lithographs were hand-coloured. The watercolours applied by the colourists therefore conceal most of her work, so that all that can be seen after colouring are the black outlines of leaves or birds' legs. Only the Australian birds' heads in the *Synopsis* to which line drawings of legs, wings, beaks and claws were added, and left uncoloured, show the exquisite delicacy of Elizabeth's lithographic skill.

But Elizabeth's job did not finish there. At Hullmandel's prints were taken from the stones and lettering provided by John was added: the title (name of bird in Latin) and credits to the artist, lithographer and printer. A proof print was returned to the house for checking, and once approved by John, Elizabeth had to colour a single print to use as a pattern plate for the colourists' firm of Gabriel Bayfield (1781–1870).

The process was the same for every one of the 600 plates that Elizabeth would eventually produce. Afterwards the coloured plates and John's letterpress (printed separately) were delivered to the house and put together in wrappers for distribution – thankfully Elizabeth was at least spared this task.

Only a few women mastered lithography, which makes Elizabeth's skill and legacy even more noteworthy. One artist, Mary Ann Meyer (c.1804–1880), who was of a similar age to Elizabeth and had, like her, a large family, assisted with the 313 lithographs for her husband Henry Leonard Meyer's book *Illustrations of British Birds* (1835–41).



Figure 7: This uncoloured proof plate of Crimson-headed Finches *Pyrrhula erythrina* was drawn from life and on stone by the Goulds for *The Birds of Europe* (1832–37). Never published, it demonstrates Elizabeth's mastery of the technique of lithography.

Figure 8: Type specimen of an Adelaide Rosella *Platycercus adalaidae* from John Gould's collection and now held in the collections of the NHM at Tring. Elizabeth created most of her paintings and lithographs from such skins as well as taxidermy specimens, as opposed to living birds.