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THE DUNSCOMBE PARKER ILLUSTRATIONS

When discussing natural history illustrators the names of Gould, Audubon, Selby, Wolf, Lear and Thorburn immediately spring to mind. However, few curators would have heard of Richard Dunscombe Parker, not surprising since even Strickland's "A Dictionary of Irish Artists" fails to mention this little known artist from Co Cork.

In June 1932 Parker's niece bequeathed to the City of Belfast a collection of 170 water-colours of Irish birds painted by her uncle. The collection remained unresearched for nearly fifty years until in the summer of 1980 Mr Martyn Anglesea of this museum's Art department placed the collection on display, the exhibition proving a tremendous success with the museum's viewing public. It was during the preparations for the exhibition that the few known biographical details about Parker were revealed.

It was in 1843, during the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cork, that as a contemporary newspaper recorded "Mr Thompson then read a valuable report on the fauna of Ireland, during which some beautiful paintings of birds by Mr Parker were exhibited". An eminent English ornithologist H. G. Strickland (not the author of the aforementioned dictionary of Irish artists) expressed his gratification at Mr Parker's paintings; in fact, they were only second to Mr Gould's of London, and fully equal to Audubon's. William Thompson went even farther since 'in life-like appearance they excelled even Mr Gould's, beautiful as the latter were'.

Why have we not heard more of this Irish Audubon? The truth is simply that, as Martyn Anglesea points out, in comparison with the great illustrators of the past and despite the obvious high esteem in which Parker was held by leading naturalists, he can only be regarded as a primitive, lacking the artistic finesse of Audubon or the detail of plumage, stance and flight, characterising the work of Wolf or Thorburn. Parker

drew from museum skins and mounts, the latter usually being of poor quality. This of course was not uncommon for illustrators of the early 1800's, but the result, inevitably, lacked the realism or the ornithological accuracy of the great illustrators of the nineteenth century or of the more recent works by Tunnicliffe, Lodge or Ede.

The paintings are, nevertheless, not without considerable ornithological interest. The birds are often placed in instantly recognizable Irish landscapes and include species which could only have been recently recorded in Ireland when Parker completed his illustrations.

In his summary Martyn Anglesea states, "The collection is a valuable document of endeavour, and to see it for the first time as a whole should be a revealing experience". It was. It seems, however, that Richard Dunscombe Parker's moment of recognition has come and gone and he is now condemned to the eternal isolation and gloom of the vaults of the Ulster Museum. Unless, of course, you know different.

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'Richard Dunscombe Parker's Irish Birds', a catalogue of the exhibition and illustrated by 20 plates of the work of the artist is available from the Ulster Museum.