

John Abbot in England and North America: his accomplishments as artist and naturalist

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Lured by the exotic and uncharted, the English naturalist John Abbot left his native London in 1773 to explore the natural history of British North America. In this quest he was not alone. Beginning with the 1662 chartering of the Royal Society of London, a community of naturalists had emerged with headquarters in London and contacts throughout the British Empire. These individuals increased their knowledge of natural history through observation of living organisms and preserved specimens, and through accurate illustration, and thus contributed significantly to the development of natural taxonomy, the formal exposition of scientific knowledge. Most stressed the importance of publication to advertise new discoveries and inspire others to explore the wonders of nature.

Abbot, however, neglected classification and never attempted to publish on his own. He sought instead to perfect his skills as collector and artist, achieving distinction in each. His colleague and correspondent William Swainson (who took to New Zealand the set of 103 Abbot watercolours now held by the Alexander Turnbull Library) described him as a 'most assiduous collector and an admirable draftsman of insects' whose specimens were 'the finest ever transmitted as articles of commerce'.¹ Abbot stuffed birds and large spiders with cotton, spread the wings of butterflies and moths, and inflated caterpillars to make them appear lifelike. The fragility of these specimens doomed most, but thirty of his bird skins survive at Merseyside County Museums in Liverpool, England as testimony to his skill.

However, it was Abbot's ability as an artist that would yield lasting fame. His colleagues in Europe and North America valued the meticulous accuracy of his watercolours illustrating plant and animal life and the accompanying descriptions detailing size, life cycle, habitat, and behaviour of the featured species. During a career in North America spanning almost seven decades, Abbot completed over five thousand watercolours. Of these, more than a thousand were bird portraits; an equally large number depicted life cycles of insects usually with typical food plants. His remaining work illustrated arthropods as individual figures alone or in