

The single most outstanding collection of turtle illustrations ever produced and a true rarity

Thomas Bell, *A Monograph of the Testudinata*. London: Samuel Highley, 1832–1836. 15 1/2 inches x 11 3/8 inches (394 x 289 mm), 242 pages, 40 color plates.

Turtles — a term that includes both tortoises and terrapins — are at once one of Nature's most recognizable life forms and the most generally beloved among living reptiles. Myriad books have been published on these creatures in recent years, and modern color photographs provide accurate records of individual animals. But the plates in Thomas Bell's rare monograph, are in many ways more satisfying. James de Carle Sowerby, a member of the greatest English dynasty of artist-naturalists, and Edward Lear, perhaps the finest natural history lithographer of his age, gave an uncanny spirit and personality to the drawings.

Bell's book represents the most ambitious attempt ever undertaken to summarize all the world's turtles, living and extinct, both in words and illustration. The geographical scope of the *Testudinata* was global and Bell, the unrivaled authority on the subject when he started his project, discusses every aspect of nomenclature, anatomy, natural history, and distribution.

Turtles are troublesome subjects, all too often drawn as mere doorstops with, at best, the vivacity of snails. Edward Lear's lithographic excellence imparted to them curiosity and individuality — a roving eye or quizzical alertness. No one since has equaled him in conveying the gestalt of the turtle. These remarkable drawings deserve new lease on immortality and are a testament to the enduring value of outstanding illustration.

Bell's *Testudinata*, an extremely rare book (there may be fewer than a dozen copies in the United States today), was left uncompleted by the publisher's bankruptcy. It was presumably intended that the fascicles forming the book should be substantially rearranged upon completion. The introduction, for instance, was printed little by little on any spare leaves left over on a sheet

once the descriptive letterpress for the plates had been printed. As a result, portions of the introduction appear in fascicles 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7; the total amounts to only twenty-four pages and the last ends in mid-sentence. The species of turtle were figured as materials came to hand: arranging the species by genera was the obvious way to impose some systematic order. This is apparently what the binder attempted here.

This copy of *A Monograph of the Testudinata* was presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia by its author Thomas Bell, who was also a corresponding member. It is bound in contemporary black quarter cloth over beige paper boards; the spine has been rebacked in green library buckram. A printed label is pasted onto the front board.

Octavo code: Beltda