

ON THE ARRIVAL OF PARAKEETS AT ALBANY, NEW YORK, IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

DANIEL MCKINLEY

In 1799, Benjamin Smith Barton, in commenting on the natural history of Pennsylvania, wrote: "I may add, that a very large flight of parakeets, which came from the westward, was seen a few years ago, about twenty-five miles to the northwest of Albany, in the State of New York.

"The arrival of these birds in the depth of winter (January, 1780) was, indeed, a very remarkable circumstance. The more ignorant Dutch settlers were exceedingly alarmed. They imagined, in dreadful consternation, that it portended nothing less calamitous than the destruction of the world."

For some reason this unusual happening was placed by DeKay (1844, p. 183) in 1795: in that year, "... a large flock of these birds was seen in the middle of winter, 25 miles northwest of Albany; probably transported by a whirlwind." Eaton (1911-1914, vol. 2, p. 130) followed DeKay in dating the incursion of the parakeets.

In the diary of a contemporary visitor to New York (Miranda, 1928, pp. 72-73), I have discovered enough evidence to indicate that Barton was probably right in his date of 1780; certainly the event took place before 1795. Miranda, famous South American revolutionist, visited Saratoga Springs and the Schoharie region in June, 1784, where he picked up some gossip about "Mother Ann" Lee and the Shakers. He went on to say (my free translation): "In the year '79-'80 in the winter a band of parakeets [*loros*"] appeared there (a thing never seen on this continent) and the house near where they appeared was the first that the enemy burned a little while afterwards..." (If Miranda's date was precise, the burning referred to perhaps took place during an invasion in October, 1780, by 800 British troops based in Canada (Wood & Gabriel, 1927).

That was a period in history when the trend of the frontier was not always so comfortably to the westward (Wood & Gabriel, *loc. cit.*). Indian-English raids were frequent, and it is little wonder that parakeets from the west were thought to portend disaster from that direction. Both Miranda and Barton mention the superstitious dread that their visit caused.

Miranda, of course, was wrong in saying that parakeets never occurred in America.

References Cited

- Barton, Benjamin Smith. 1799. Fragments of the natural history of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, The Author (not seen; quoted from Bent, 1940, p. 2).
- Bent, Arthur Cleveland. 1940. Life histories of North American cuckoos, goatsuckers, hummingbirds and their allies... U. S. National Bull. 176.
- DeKay, James Ellsworth. 1844. Zoology of New York, , , Part II. Birds. Albany, Carroll & Cook, Printers to the Assembly.
- Eaton, Elon Howard. 1911-1914. Birds of New York. N. Y. State Mus.; my copy issued as 63d and 66th Repts., N. Y. St. Educ. Dept. for 1909 and 1912; 2 vols.
- Miranda, Francisco de. 1928. The diary of Francisco de Miranda; tour of the United States 1783-1784; the Spanish text edited... by William Spence Robertson. N. Y. Hispanic Soc. America.
- Wood, William, & R. H. Gabriel. 1927. The pageant of America. Yale Univ. Press. vol. 6, fig. 458, pp. 226-227.

Bowdoin College, Biology Dept., Brunswick, Maine