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The Emperor of Nature: Charles-Lucien Bonaparte and His World

Patricia Tyson Stroud

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In the early years of the Republic, America was a land filled with uncharted flora and fauna, a treasure-trove for every naturalist in the world. One such naturalist was Charles-Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Musignano and Canino, nephew of the Emperor Napoleon. Called the father of American descriptive ornithology, Charles-Lucien was the author of the monumental *American Ornithology: or, The Natural History of Birds Inhabiting the United States not given by Wilson*.

Born in 1803 to Lucien, a younger brother of Napoleon, Charles spent his early childhood in Rome, where his father, an ardent republican and opponent of the Empire, had sought papal protection. In 1810, at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, the family left Italy with the intent of emigrating to the United States; instead, they were apprehended by the British off Sardinia and taken to England, where for four years they lived publicly as celebrated captives. Charles was privately tutored, learning English and concentrating on his favorite subject, natural history.

With his wife—and first cousin—Zenaide, Charles joined his uncle Joseph in exile in Bordentown, New Jersey, in 1822. Stroud recreates the lives of these not quite Americanized Bonapartes in splendid and startling detail. Point Breeze, Joseph's estate, encompassed 1700 acres dotted with formal French gardens and a large artificial lake stocked with imported European swans. Here Charles hunted and studied birds, and encountered such purely American animals as the skunk and the rattlesnake. It was here, too, that American Ornithology took shape, and that he first collaborated with the still-unknown John James Audubon.

When Charles left America in 1828, he traveled to Italy and wrote works of comparative zoology, as well as a magisterial study of the mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish of that country. Throughout the next decades he was instrumental in setting up scientific congresses in Italy, where scientists the world over were welcome. Yet he was also involved in the growing republican movement in Italy, and it was because of this that he was forced to flee the country and eventually settle in France under the protection of his cousin, the hated Napoleon III.

Based extensively on archival sources, including many unpublished letters still in the possession of the Bonaparte family, *The Emperor of Nature* is the first biography ever written of Charles-Lucien Bonaparte. Forced by the circumstances of his birth to be a perpetual visitor, he nonetheless carved out a place for himself in the science of the natural world. It is at once a compelling story of the fate of Europe's imperial family, and an impressive contribution to the history of nineteenth-century science.

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