

“The Humming-bird” from *Sketches of Natural History* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834).

This poem informed Alderson's appreciation for the tiny ruby-throated hummingbirds common in Ohio. “Never did I feel the beauty of any poetry more than when I read Mary's piece ‘The Humming Bird,’” she wrote to her sister in July 1845: “its truthfulness & poetic beauty threw even a charm over the bird itself” (Writing Home 235). Paradoxically, Howitt's own knowledge was derived second-hand, hummingbirds being native only in the Americas and, contrary to the poem's suggestion, not on any “radiant islands of the East.” Yet Alderson's comment illustrates how thoroughly inflected was the perspective of this “American mother” by her English background and relationship to her sister.

The Humming-bird! the Humming-bird,

So fairy-like and bright;

It lives among the sunny flowers,

A creature of delight!

In the radiant islands of the East,

Where fragrant spices grow,

A thousand thousand Humming-birds

Go glancing to and fro.

Like living fires they flit about,

Scarce larger than a bee,

Among the broad Palmetto leaves,

And through the Fan-palm tree.

And in those wild and verdant woods

Where stately Moras tower,

Where hangs from branching tree to tree

The scarlet Passion-flower;

Where on the mighty river banks,

La Plate or Amazon,

The Cayman like an old tree trunk,

Lies basking in the sun;

There builds her nest, the Humming-bird

Within the ancient wood,

Her nest of silky cotton down,

And rears her tiny brood.

She hangs it to a slender twig,

Where waves it light and free,

As the Campanero tolls his song,

And rocks the mighty tree.

All crimson is her shining breast,

Like to the red, red rose;

Her wing is the changeful green and blue

That the neck of the Peacock shews.

Thou happy, happy Humming-bird,

No winter round thee lowers;

Thou never saw'st a leafless tree,

Nor land without sweet flowers:

A reign of summer joyfulness

To thee for life is given;

Thy food the honey from the flower,

Thy drink, the dew from heaven!

How glad the heart of Eve would be,
 In Eden's glorious bowers,
To see the first, first Humming-bird
 Among the first spring-flowers.

Among the rainbow butterflies,
 Before the rainbow shone;
One moment glancing in her sight,
 Another moment, gone!

Thou little shining creature,
 God saved thee from the Flood,
With the Eagle of the mountain land,
 And the Tiger of the wood!

Who cared to save the Elephant,
 He also cared for thee;
And gave those broad lands for thy home,
 Where grows the Cedar-tree!