

CANON XL, A. O. U. CODE.

BY D. G. ELLIOT, F. R. S. E.

THE CODE formulated by its Committee, and adopted by the American Ornithologists' Union has deservedly received the general approval of naturalists, not only of those devoted to the particular science for which it was prepared, but also of those whose attention has been directed to other lines of zoölogical research. And while all zoölogists may without reserve and with great profit to themselves cheerfully adopt and assist in maintaining the general doctrine and special precepts embodied in the Code, yet unhappily we find, like all human productions, it has its element of weakness which, in the opinion of a considerable number of naturalists, seriously impairs the general effectiveness of its armor of proof. Amid so much that is excellent and conceived in judicial equity upon the broadest and fairest foundations, it is somewhat amazing to find that in one of its most important articles a premium is offered as a reward to ignorance, carelessness, and a general lack of ability to perceive that which alone is proper and right. To spell correctly is the first qualification of any one claiming to have received an education, and one who is unable to do this should not be encouraged to commit errors by the assurance of a committee of a scientific society that his faults should be made perpetual, and that all the efforts of those competent to correct his blunders should be resisted to the utmost by the fulmination of this extraordinary Canon XL of an otherwise excellent codification of rules. The writer imputes to those responsible for this Canon, only the best and purest motives, an honest effort to establish a fixity of nomenclature, and if in the course of this paper his remarks may appear almost too earnest in his criticism of a proposition which he regards as a huge mistake and one apt to create more instability in scientific nomenclature than any injury the abuse !!! of all the purists and classicists in the world could effect, yet he believes at the time this article was formed the majority of the committee considered they were acting in the true

line of advancement and scientific progress. This acknowledgment, however, only emphasizes the fact that even good men can go very widely astray.

Let us look at this Canon XL and see what are the reasons adduced why errors should be permanent and all efforts to correct them and in many cases cause terms that are simply gibberish to assume shapes possessed of intelligent meanings, be frustrated. The great and only evil feared is "the abuse on the part of the purists and classicists who look with disfavor upon anything nomenclatural which is in the least degree unclassical in form" and therefore, it continues, as may be naturally inferred from the rule that follows, let us place the results of ignorance and carelessness beyond the reach of such learned marplots, so that no blunders may ever again be corrected, and in this way we will achieve an eternal stability in our nomenclature! And so, if when the genus *Somateria* was first proposed, some printer's devil with a catarrhal affliction had caused it to appear as 'Sobaberia,' under the dictum of this enlightened and highly classical Canon that extraordinary combination must remain forever as the author's idea of expressing a downy or woolly body! Of course refuge might be taken in the provision afforded in Canon XL that typographical errors had been committed and therefore the spelling might be corrected; but this opens a very wide door for the exercise of individual opinion, and unless an author's original MS. was accessible, proof for or against this fact could not be produced. And in reference to this point so little has the Committee believed in the fact that typographical errors exist, that the writer is able to recall very few instances where on this account any word has been corrected by it. No doubt every one who has any knowledge of the matter, whether or not he belongs to the reprehensible and excommunicated bodies of purists and classicists, is convinced that *σωμα* and *ἔριον* never could properly compose 'sobaberia' neither could *πεδιον* and *οικέτης* be correctly compounded into *Pediacetes*, two blunders in one word; yet the latter is solemnly adjudged by this wise and strictly educational Article to be the only proper way of spelling the generic term for the Sharp-tailed Grouse!

Is not this terror of the amount of damage these dreadful pur-

ists and classicists may commit, who in the timid minds of the majority of this Committee, as originally composed, are rightly enough ever ready to overthrow nonsense words, and bring to the fold in their proper shapes, ungrammatical terms, rather strained and manufactured for the occasion? Is there such a preponderance of ill-spelled words, and ill-formed compounds in ornithological nomenclature as would overthrow it if corrected? Is it such a dreadful misfortune to be put right when one has gone astray? And would chaos and confusion arise if occasionally a 'purist' or a 'classicist' should have the temerity to point out to an erring brother the faults that he in his happy unconsciousness of evil had committed? Did the authors of this article stop to consider what effect it would have upon those same purists and classicists? Did they for a moment suppose that these malevolent creatures, imbued, as the gentlemen of this Committee rightly supposed, with a settled antagonism to wrongdoing wherever it might exist, would meekly surrender their opinions and renounce their conviction that right is right and error is error wherever found, and become advocates of the holiness of blunders at the command or teachings of this article? And if they did not do this, where is the stability of nomenclature so much desired? For the writer is happy to think there are more 'purists and classicists,' that is to say, educated men, to-day devoted to scientific ornithology, than there are of that class, who, in good faith but in all ignorance, commit the blunders that so sorely need correcting.

For only one cause may an error be made right under the Canon introducing this rule, viz.:—when "a typographical error is evident." Who is to determine this? Must all such apparent faults be submitted to this committee for their decision as to whether the error is a typographical one or an author's misspelling? And suppose one has the audacity to form his own opinion from as good evidence as that at the disposal of the Committee, who is likely to be right if they disagree, and what is to be done with the obdurate (of course not with the Committee, Oh, no!) if he persists in his wilful way? It is amazing in these days of public schools and general knowledge that a committee of a scientific society should solemnly announce as it does in this Canon that "correctness of structure or philological propriety be

held as of minor importance and yield place to the two cardinal principles of priority and fixity," or in other words that the ability to spell properly or to write grammatically is of no consequence beside a Utopian effort to maintain a stability that is not stable and never can be under the teachings this article would inculcate. The writer understands perfectly well that Canon XL, as well as all the others in the Code, is not mandatory, the Committee would not for a moment consider them as presented to ornithologists in that spirit, but offered for their consideration as the best it was able to do in its judgment under the circumstance. All philological emendations are rejected, especial stress being placed on the change of the initial letter of a name, as when the Greek aspirate has been omitted, so that if it was English the Cockney pronunciation of 'Enery' instead of Henry would be preferred if it only was first printed. And here perhaps it may be well to say something about the law of propriety in reference to this subject. It is very difficult to see in what way it could possibly be affected. The misspelt word or ungrammatical phrase when corrected would still be accredited to the original author. It is yet his child, even if its clothes do fit it better and give it a more respectable appearance, and no one else is likely to pose as its father, even if he had a hand in tidying it up a bit.

Now let us come to the conclusion of the whole matter: This rule has been in *print*, it cannot be said in *force*, for nearly fifteen years. Has it accomplished the result contemplated or desired? Is nomenclature by its assertions a greater fixity to-day than when this rule was promulgated? Do those who know better accept bad spelling and employ ungrammatical phrases, because it advises them so to do? We know they do not. Has it made any converts among educated men, or has it been of any assistance to those not educated save to encourage them to continue in the valley and shadow of ignorance? The doctrine it teaches is unworthy this age and the source from which it had its being. It has utterly failed to accomplish its purpose, and should be dropped from the Code. It is satisfactory to know that one at least of the Committee that assisted at the advent of its unlovely offspring, born out of due season, did not at the time, although an accomplished accoucheur, regard with favor this result of combined

efforts, and Dr. Coues of late both with tongue and pen has expressed his disapproval of this article and advocated its suppression. Let it therefore be eliminated from the Code. Let us instead of listening to its baneful teachings, advocate the beauties of grammatical construction, and the propriety of correct spelling and we will do more towards the stability of ornithological nomenclature than any number of Canons XL, which teach the rightfulness of wrongdoing. The writer has always repudiated this Canon. He will always spell as well as he knows how, and will be as grammatical in his writings as he is able and will always reject misshaped compounds and ill-spelt words, and when he errs and blunders he is thankful to the kind friend who sets him right upon his way, and he would strongly advise all young ornithologists, beginning the study of the most attractive of earth's creatures, to reject entirely this Canon XL and its advocacy of illiteracy, and when uncertain of any portion of their writings consult some one who can aid them, but in all cases, adopt only that which is grammatically, typographically and philologically correct.

A DEFENSE OF CANON XL OF THE A. O. U. CODE.

BY J. A. ALLEN.

IN THE foregoing article Mr. Elliot has, let us say unwittingly, given a very unfair representation of the purpose and results of Canon XL of the A. O. U. Code of Nomenclature. The members of the A. O. U. Committee who formulated Canon XL, instead of deliberately offering "a reward to ignorance, carelessness, and a general lack of ability to perceive that which alone is proper and right," are probably as much shocked by misspelled or wrongly constructed names in scientific nomenclature as is Mr. Elliot, and did not adopt Canon XL without careful deliberation and consideration as to which of two grave evils is the lesser,—