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## ALEXANDER WILSON: A SKETCH

BY MRS. H. J. TAYLOR

Wherever life attains a fullness of development and gives to the world expression out of its fullness, with such a life we need intimate acquaintance to find the well-spring of inspiration that led to its growth. Alexander Wilson's is such a life.

Between 1808-1813, he published "American Ornithology" in eight volumes. The ninth volume was published by his friend, George Ord, who also wrote a memoir of Wilson for this volume. Each of the full page plates in these volumes contains several species, sketched in outline and colored by hand. The description of each bird, its habits and life history in its natural abode is written from his own observations in the field. Three hundred and twenty species are described, and of these fifty-six were new. This work is standard today and contains all the birds of the Middle States save about twelve. Such a contribution to the world by one man, poor in all material things, but rich in courage and perseverance, merits the title, "Father of American Ornithology."

Wilson's introduction to his Ornithology contains these simple, direct, deepfelt words: "My hopes on this head, are humble enough; I ask only support equal to my merits, and to the laudability of my intentions. I expect no more; I am not altogether even certain of this."<sup>1</sup> Volume I contains two plates colored by Wilson's own hand, and in the Ord edition, Malvina and Helen Lawson colored by hand practically all of the plates. Wilson's style is natural and unaffected. It radiates a joy and an out-of-door atmosphere. The original edition of nine thin volumes, 11x14 inches, sold by subscription at \$120, is now rare.

The following extracts are from Wilson's letter to his father on the completion of the first volume of his American Ornithology:

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<sup>1</sup>American Ornithology; or the Natural History of the Birds of the United States. By Alexander Wilson, and Charles Lucian Bonaparte. Edited by Robert Jameson, Esq. Edinburgh: 1831. Volume I, page xc.



ALEXANDER WILSON

This portrait is a halftone reproduction of the engraving which appears as a frontispiece in the Jameson edition of Wilson's work, and which was after the original painting by James Crow.

“ . . . I have transmitted to you . . . the first volume of my American Ornithology . . . and shall, if I live to finish it, send you regularly the remaining nine volumes as they appear. In giving existence to this work, I have expended all I have been saving since my arrival in America. I have also visited every town within 150 miles of the Atlantic coast, from the river St. Lawrence to St. Augustine in Florida, . . . and would willingly give a hundred dollars to spend a few days with you all in Paisley, but like a true bird of passage, I would again wing my way across the western waste of waters, to the peaceful and happy regions of America. . . . I trust the publication I have now commenced, and which has procured for me reputation and respect, will also enable me to contribute to your independence and comfort, in return for what I owe you. To my stepmother, sisters, brothers, and friends, I beg to be remembered affectionately, Your grateful son.”<sup>2</sup>

Alexander Wilson was born in Paisley, Scotland, July 6, 1766. He died in Philadelphia, August 23, 1813, aged 47 years. He lies buried in the churchyard of Gloria Dei, the old Swedish church at Swanson. He inherited the sterling qualities that characterize the Scotch: industry, thrift, courage, perseverance and absolute integrity. His father, a man of superior intelligence, was a master weaver; he also distilled whisky on his own premises. This was no disgrace at that time and he lost none of the people's respect for illicit distilling. He expected to give his son a liberal education, and entertained the hope, almost universally found in the hearts of humble Scottish parents, that Alexander might some time preach the gospel of peace. The family was poor and became still poorer when the mother died, leaving a family of three small children—three other children had died in infancy. Alexander was at this time ten years old. The father soon married a widow with a family of children, and others followed by this union. Alexander's school days were over. He had gotten a foundation in the old Scotch school that opened at six in the morning and closed at six in the evening. But his education was scarcely begun for he had an inherited taste for learning.

The oldest sister married Wm. Duncan, also a weaver. To him Alexander, aged thirteen years, was bound apprentice for three years. The original indenture bears the date July 31, 1779, and at the end there appears in Wilson's own hand writing these lines:

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<sup>2</sup>The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson, the American Ornithologist. By the Rev. Alexander Grosart. Paisley, 1876. Volume I, pp. 168-170.

“Be’t kent to a’ the world in rhyme,  
 That wi’ right meikle wark and toil,  
 For three lang years *I’ve ser’t my time*,  
 Whiles feasted wi’ the hazel oil.” Agst 1782.

For seven years Wilson worked at the loom. It was irksome to him. He was restless and ill content. Confinement became almost unbearable. He longed for freedom and the out-of-doors. Paisley in 1782 had forty-five houses, eighty families, and sixty-six looms. This must have been monotonous to one whose life had the creative instinct.

The loom was not very lucrative and Duncan decided to make a tour of Scotland, taking Wilson with him. This was delightful relief. Wilson showed poetic feeling early in life by publishing some verse in the local newspaper. His poems are not great, but they are expressive and reveal a soul struggling to break out of the narrow bounds of earning bread, to live under a boundless horizon. In “Groans from the Loom,” he says:

“Good gods! Shall a man with legs  
 So low uncomplaining be brought!”

No wonder he was called “The Melancholy Poet.”

In the four years as traveling pedler, he visited all the places in Scotland renowned in song and story. No place was too out of the way, if it led him to the haunt of poet or Scottish Chief. These years gave him opportunity for observation, reading and expression. He had poems enough for a book, for which, while he was offering his muslins for sale, he solicited subscriptions. He met with many disappointments, and often his pride was deeply wounded. His keen perception convinced him that much of this was due to his vagrant appearance as a pedler, which was a lower grade of work than weaving. In a letter to a friend dated November 10, 1789, from Edinburgh, he says:

“. . . I assure you, sir, that my occupation is greatly against my success in collecting subscribers. A *Packman* is a character which none esteem, and almost everyone despises. The idea which people of all ranks entertain of them is, that they are mean spirited, loquacious liars, cunning and illiterate, watching every opportunity, and using every low and mean art within their power to cheat. . .”<sup>3</sup>

His poems published in 1790 had little success. His most successful poetic effort was “Watty and Meg,” published anonymously in 1792. It was ascribed to Burns, who said he would be proud to claim its authorship. One hundred thousand copies were sold in a

<sup>3</sup>From Grosart: *Op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 49.

few weeks, and Wilson's share of the sales was twelve copies of the book. On reading the story of "Watty and Meg," a wife exclaimed to her husband, "D'ye ken what Sandy Wilson has done? He's poem'd us."

Wilson also wrote satire, one published anonymously was judged libelous. He frankly acknowledged its authorship and was condemned to burn the satire and pay a heavy fine. The satire he burned publicly at Paisley Cross. Being unable to pay the fine of £12. 13s. 6d. he was imprisoned. He felt the disgrace and the hurt was deep. On his release he was broken in spirit. He was suspected and looked upon as dangerous because of his sympathy with the French people in the oncoming revolution. Poetic success was impossible. Accounts of free and vast America must have opened a door to him. With his nephew, Wm. Duncan, he determined to enter its boundless forests. To earn money for his passage, he returned to the loom for four months and lived on a shilling a week.

He slept on the deck of a crowded sailing vessel, seven weeks, reaching Newcastle, N. J., July 14, 1794. He walked from Wilmington to Philadelphia, thirty miles. He shot the first bird he saw, a Red-headed Woodpecker, and thought it the most beautiful bird he had seen. His description of this walk reveals his interest in birds and out-of-door life. Wilson worked at most anything obtainable while preparing himself in writing and arithmetic. He began teaching and continued nearly ten years; at Milestown, Pennsylvania, he taught about six years. His poem "The Schoolmaster," has a place in Spoford's Choice Literature.

While teaching at Milestown, Pa., he writes to his father in a letter dated August 22, 1798, ". . . I should be happy, dear parents, to hear from you, and how my brother and sisters are. I hope David will be a good lad, and take his father's advice in every difficulty . . . I should wish also that he would endeavour to improve himself in some useful parts of learning, to read books of information and taste, without which a man in any country is but a clodpole; but beyond everything else, let him indulge the deepest gratitude to God, and affectionate respect for his parents. . ."<sup>4</sup>

In 1802, he went to Gray's Ferry, four miles from Philadelphia. This was his last and most fortunate move while teaching. Here he made lasting friendships and received help and encouragement for his great work. George Ord was an unfailing friend and often a companion on expeditions. William Bartram, the botanist, gave him

<sup>4</sup>From Grosart: *Op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 65.

free access to his library and gardens. Lawson, the engraver, gave him lessons in drawing, coloring and etching. So excellent was his drawing of birds, and so encouraged was he, that he determined to make a collection of birds.

In October, 1804, with his nephew, Wm. Duncan, and Isaac Leech, the son of his landlady, he made an expedition to Niagara Falls and back, reaching Philadelphia December 7, having walked nearly 1300 miles in fifty-nine days. He made forty-seven miles the last day. In a letter to his father at this time, he says: "My heart has ever preserved the most affectionate veneration for you and I think of you often with tears." In a letter to William Bartram dated December 15, 1804, Wilson writes: "Though now snug at home, looking back in recollection on the long, circuitous journey which I have at length finished, through deep snows, and almost uninhabited forests; over stupendous mountains, and down dangerous rivers; passing over, in a course of thirteen hundred miles, as great a variety of men and modes of living, as the same extent of country can exhibit in any part of the United States . . . yet so far am I from being satisfied with what I have seen, . . . that I feel more eager than ever to commence some more extensive expedition; . . . With no family to enchain my affections, no ties but those of friendship, and the most ardent love of my adopted country; with a constitution which hardens amidst fatigues, . . . I have at present a real design of becoming a traveller. . ."<sup>5</sup>

On the Niagara Falls expedition Wilson wrote his longest poem, "The Foresters." Dr. Elliott Coues advises every one to read this "for the interesting facts." It also contains many beautiful descriptions.

On his return from Niagara Falls, Wilson records in his journal, "I have seriously begun to make a collection of drawings of birds in Pennsylvania." In a few months he extended his plan to include the whole of the United States. Wilson never lost an opportunity of defending the value of a bird if to some one it seemed a nuisance. Once he encountered an old German who accused the Kingbird of eating his *peas*. Wilson denied the charge, "They never ate a pea in their lives." The German said emphatically, "Vell, I have seen 'em with mine two eyes, blaying about the hifes and snapping up de pees." I suppose the ornithologist and the accurate observer were both satisfied.

Between 1805 and 1813, Wilson explored different parts of the country to enlarge his observations, to collect specimens and to study

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<sup>5</sup>From Grosart: *Op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 112.

the life of birds in their native haunts. With his friend, George Ord, he spent four weeks at Egg Harbor. This was the last of six trips to New Jersey coast to study water birds. Wilson traveled through New Jersey and the New England States to Maine, and south to Florida. He made an expedition to New Orleans, going from Pittsburgh to Louisville by skiff.

The summer of 1807 taxed Wilson's strength to the limit with close and constant application to his manifold tasks. September, 1808, his first volume, an edition of 200 copies, appeared. The text, 158 pages, nine beautiful plates, with thirty-four hand-colored specimens. Wilson set out for subscribers. He received compliments on his work, but subscriptions at \$120 for the set were not easily obtained. It is of interest that Robert Fulton subscribed. Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, also was a subscriber, and wrote to Wilson thus: "Th: Jefferson having a few days ago only received a copy of the printed proposals for publishing a work on American ornithology by mr. Wilson, begs leave to become a subscriber to it, satisfied it will give us valuable new matter as well as correct the errors of what we possessed before. he salutes mr. Wilson with great respect. Washington, Oct. 9, 07."<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Wilson visited the professor of Natural History at Princeton. He wrote in his journal, "I found to my amazement that he scarcely knew a sparrow from a woodpecker." Wilson also solicited the Governor of New York, D. T. Tompkins, and relates that "he turned over a few pages, looked at a picture or two, and asked me my price, and while in the act of closing the book added—'I wouldn't give \$100 for all the birds you intend to describe even if I had them alive'."

On June 6, 1811, Wilson wrote the following lines to his brother, David:

". . . By the first opportunity, I will transmit a trifle to our old father, whose existence . . . is as dear to me as my own. But, David, an ambition of being distinguished in the literary world, has required sacrifices and exercises from me with which you are unacquainted. . . . Since February, 1810, I have slept for several weeks in the wilderness alone, in an Indian country, with my gun and my pistols in my bosom, and have found myself so reduced by sickness as to be scarcely able to stand, when not within 300 miles of a white settlement, and under the burning latitude of 25 degrees. . ."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Alexander Wilson, Poet-Naturalist. A Study of His Life with Selected Poems. By James Southall Wilson, Ph. D. New York and Washington. 1906. Page 84.

<sup>7</sup>Grosart: *Op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 226.

The accommodations in Virginia, the Carolinas, and indeed all through the South, Wilson found desolate and wretched. Everything was conducted by negroes. Rooms with barren broken walls, a place to lie down and a broken chair or bench were everywhere the same. He says, "The meals were so served up that a wolf would have shrunk back in dismay. These 'hospitable mansions' were raised from the ground on posts, leaving a retreat below for hogs, which kept up their serenade all night."

In 1810 Volume II was ready. Again Wilson set out on a strenuous expedition for specimens of birds and subscribers to the *American Ornithology*. The latter was a much more difficult task than the former. From Pittsburgh to Louisville he went by skiff, then on foot through almost an impenetrable wilderness to Natchez and New Orleans, sleeping in the woods and subsisting on biscuits and whatever his gun could procure. Soliciting for subscriptions was full of disappointments, hard rebuffs, indifferences, insults. He had letters of introduction to possible subscribers in Louisville, but not one subscribed. He met almost by accident, Audubon, who had a store in Louisville. Wilson requested Audubon's patronage. Then and there between these two remarkable men, the only active ornithologists of that time, began quarrel and strife, the embers of which have been kept aglow for more than a century. Two men more different in personality, and more marked in family background, could scarcely be found. The Scottish life of toil, industry, poverty, struggle, with its sterling qualities of truth and faith and perseverance, were all typified in Wilson. Audubon was born, according to Herrick,<sup>8</sup> at Les Cayes, Haiti, on April 26, 1786. A part of his education was obtained in Paris. He studied design under the eminent painter, David. He inherited lands near Philadelphia. He was a graceful dancer—at times, a charming dancing master. He had open door to the most exclusive social life of the day.

Wilson, a man of forty-four, was working beyond his limit, enduring disappointment, rebuffs and insult in his attempt for subscribers. Audubon, a young man of twenty-four, had not yet received any of the hard knocks which Wilson had known from childhood. These are the two men as they met face to face in Louisville, March 9, 1810. Audubon wrote, "I felt surprised and gratified at the sight of his [Wilson's] volumes, turned over a few of the plates, and had already taken a pen to write my name in his favour, when my partner rather abruptly said to me in French, 'My dear Audubon, what induces

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<sup>8</sup>Audubon the Naturalist, A History of His Life and Time. By Francis Hobart Herrick, Ph.D., Sc.D. New York, 1917. Page 53.



you to subscribe to this work? Your drawings are certainly far better, and again you must know as much of the habits of American birds as this gentleman.' Whether Mr. Wilson understood French or not, or if the suddenness with which I paused, disappointed him, I cannot tell; but I clearly perceived that he was not pleased. Vanity and the encomiums of my friend prevented me from subscribing."<sup>9</sup> And just a few lines further along (page 439) he wrote: ". . . I did not subscribe to his work, for, even at that time, my collection was greater than his."

A weeks' canvass in Louisville produced for Wilson not a single subscriber. He wrote in his diary, "Science or literature has not one friend in this place." His lines,

"Though western forests deep and drear  
Far from the haunts of science thrown,  
My long laborious course I steer  
Alone, unguided and unknown."

must have expressed his feelings on leaving Louisville.

I know of no value to science that has come through the long continued controversy. It is of no great moment whether Wilson or Audubon first saw the small flycatcher. Time helps us all to evaluate life. Looking out over a wider horizon, the experiences of the years are softened and blended into the background. Bitterness that thrives in the tenseness of rivalry, withers when life is seen in its reality.

In 1836, when Audubon was 50 years old, he visited the scenes of his youth in and around Philadelphia. In his journal under date of October 15, 1836, we read, "Passed poor Alexander Wilson's school house and heaved a sigh. Alas! Poor Wilson! Would that I could once more speak to thee and hear thy voice!" This was the expression of a great soul to a soul whose greatness he had been unable to recognize twenty-six years before. Battle and strife are over. The essence of these two lives, expressed through their work on ornithology, has enriched the world. We are grateful debtors to Audubon and to Wilson.

Wilson never married. It is not revealed whether the little lass mentioned in some of his early poems was a deep heart affair. Soon after coming to America, another came into his life, stirring the depths of his heart with fulness and power. Realizing she was not for him, because she belonged to another, he moved away with a heart sore and distressed. Intense work to earn bread; intense study that he might live more abundantly; intense heartache that could not be satisfied—were enough to cause melancholy days at Gray's Ferry.

<sup>9</sup>Audubon's Ornithological Biography, Volume I, pp. 438-439.

Here another romance came into his life with Ann Bartram, granddaughter of the botanist and niece of Wilson's friend, Wm. Bartram. Ann's father sternly refused his consent. A poor school teacher was no match for his daughter. Parental authority was final in those days. Ann soon married, and perhaps Wilson came to know that not all of life's happiness comes through one avenue. He laid hold of his ornithology as a profession and worked more seriously than ever. Years later he became engaged to Miss Sarah Miller, sister of Congressman Miller of Pennsylvania. Death called him before they were married. She and George Ord were executors of Wilson's estate.

The great strain under which Wilson worked for so many years, and at manifold tasks, proved too much for even his strong constitution. He had been realizing this for some time. His unbounded perseverance knew no limit. Early in July, 1813, the eighth volume was ready. The strain was telling—still he pursued. While talking to a friend, about August 12, he saw a bird of a species he wanted. He followed it, swam the river with his clothes on. He secured the bird. A severe cold followed. In ten days the struggle was over. His brother, David, who had emigrated to America in 1811, reached his bedside a few hours before the end. David says, "I caught his hand, he seemed to know me and that was all. He died next morning at nine o'clock and was buried the next day with all the honors due his merit."

Wilson had sometime expressed the wish "to be buried in some rural spot, sacred to peace and solitude." This wish, no doubt, would have been carried out had it been known at that time. He was laid in the little churchyard of Gloria Dei, the old Swedish church at Swanson. The tomb which covers the grave was erected by Miss Sarah Miller and the inscription reads:

THIS MONUMENT  
COVERS THE REMAINS OF  
ALEXANDER WILSON  
AUTHOR OF  
"AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY."  
HE WAS BORN IN RENFREWSHIRE, SCOTLAND,  
ON THE 6TH OF JULY, 1766,  
EMIGRATED TO UNITED STATES  
IN YEAR 1794  
AND DIED IN PHILADELPHIA  
OF THE DYSENTERY  
ON THE 23D AUGUST, 1813,  
AGED 47.

Alexander Wilson lived forty-seven years of intense earnestness. The expression of his life has enriched the world not only through his ornithological work, but also through his character, so strong in its purpose that it became indomitable through hardships and suffering. His work on birds grows in value with the years, and the old churchyard of Gloria Dei will be a Mecca because it holds the grave of Alexander Wilson.

SIoux CITY, IOWA.

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### NOTES ON A COLLECTION OF HAWKS FROM SCHUYLKILL COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

Illustrated with diagrams by Leo A. Luttringer, Jr.

On October 19 and 20, 1927, the writer visited the region of Dreherstown, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, for the purpose of observing a remarkable migration of hawks which had been reported by Game Protector Archie C. Smith of Lavelle, Pennsylvania, as occurring at certain points along Blue Mountain. A study of the local aspects of the migratory movement of these birds will appear in a subsequent paper after further investigations have been made. Interesting data were gathered, however, concerning the weight, food, and plumage of the birds collected and it seems advisable to present this material separately.

On October 17 Mr. Smith and certain sportsmen from Dreherstown, Pottstown, and Reading, secured, among other birds of prey which were not saved, eighteen Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter velox*). On October 19 four Goshawks (*Astur atricapillus*) were secured. On October 20, while on Blue Mountain, we collected five more sharp-shins. On October 22 several gunners accompanied Mr. Smith to a point along the mountain past which the hawks flew in numbers, and secured, in a remarkably short time, a total of ninety sharp-shins, sixteen Goshawks, eleven Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperi*), thirty-two Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo borealis borealis*), and two Duck Hawks (*Rhynchodon peregrinus anatum*).

Specimens were taken from 8 A. M. until almost 5 P. M., but unfortunately no data were preserved as to just when individuals were secured so that we cannot correlate our information on stomach contents with the time of day the specimens were taken, and cannot say, therefore, at just what periods migrating hawks are likely to spend time in capturing prey and eating their meals. It would seem from the evidence at hand that prey is captured actually *en route* and that