



*Charles L Bonaparte
Prince of Musignano*

CASSINIA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

No. IX.

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

1905.

Charles Lucien Bonaparte

BY SPENCER TROTTER

IN one of his essays Emerson speaks of the interest that we take in a man who has some pursuit in life other than that which appears upon the surface of his daily affairs. The most common-place fellow is seen in a new light when we find that behind the business or professional face there lurks a knowledge of birds, or botany, or butterflies. This view of the personality of a man becomes still more interesting when his name is associated with that of deeds vastly different from the quiet pursuit of a science.

Here is one whose name conjures up the thought of empire and the pageant of war, but whose joy in life was far removed from such vainglories. To most minds there is but one Bonaparte. As a young ornithologist I used to connect the name of Bonaparte's Gull with that of *Le Petit Caporal* and it was somewhat of a surprise, one of those agreeable surprises, to find that a near kinsman of the emperor was an ornithologist.

The subject of this sketch was the eldest son of Lucien Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon, and Charles was therefore a nephew of the emperor. He was born in Paris on the 24th of May,

1803, and christened Charles Lucien Jules Laurent Bonaparte. Neither Lucien nor his son Charles appears to have acquired that lust of power which characterized the emperor, though Charles was more or less active in certain reform movements after he had settled in Italy. Lucien, the father, was a man of scientific and literary attainments, and though active in French politics during the Emperor's prosperity he later retired and made his residence in Italy. His line was excluded by Napoleon in his scheme for establishing his brothers on the European thrones. In 1814, Pope Pius VII made him Prince of Canino, a title, together with that of Prince of Musignano, which Charles assumed after his father's death. Joseph Bonaparte, elder brother of Napoleon and Lucien, and created King of Spain by Napoleon, fled to America after Waterloo and settled at Bordentown, N. J., and also took up his residence in Philadelphia, where he occupied a house on Ninth street above Spruce. This house is now the home of a personal friend of the writer and has suffered little change in the lapse of time. Charles joined his uncle Joseph in America (probably about 1822) and married his first cousin, Zenaide, Joseph's eldest daughter. In 1825 Princeton University conferred upon him the honorary degree of Master of Arts, though he apparently never attended the college as a student. He left this country in 1827, when he took up his residence in Italy, where he spent the remainder of his life, engaged in scientific, mainly ornithological work. He died in Paris on the 29th of July, 1857.

During his few years' residence in and near Philadelphia Charles Lucien Bonaparte, then a young man in his early twenties, was engaged in the study of ornithology and in the preparation of his work—the continuation of Wilson's "American Ornithology." These four volumes have always associated his name with that of Alexander Wilson, though the latter died when Bonaparte was but a lad ten years of age, and before he had set foot in America. With Audubon, however, Charles was personally acquainted. He first met the "backwoodsman" when the latter was in Philadelphia taking painting lessons under the artist Thomas Sully and seeking a possible publisher for his great work. Audubon's journal contains the

following notice of this meeting : " April 10, 1824, I was introduced to the son of Lucien Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon, a great ornithologist, I was told. He remained two hours, went out, and returned with two Italian gentlemen, and their comments [upon the bird paintings] made me very contented." A warm friendship sprang up from this meeting, and though the two saw little of each other's society, many letters passed between them. We have a glimpse of Bonaparte from the pen of Audubon, written in 1827, when the former was in London, having just arrived from America. "His fine head was not altered, his mustachios, his bearded chin, his keen eye, all was the same." At Bonaparte's lodgings Audubon was surprised to hear the servant address Bonaparte as "Your Royal Highness." "I thought this ridiculous in the extreme," says Audubon, "and I cannot conceive how good Charles can bear it; though probably he *does* bear it because he *is* good Charles." Again on December 4, 1827, Audubon writes: "A letter from Charles Bonaparte tells me he has decided not to reside in America, but in Florence; this I much regret."

Another ornithologist with whom Bonaparte was in close touch in his early years was Titian R. Peale, whom he sent to Florida at his own expense to secure material for his American Ornithology.

While in Philadelphia Bonaparte was an active member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, having been elected in 1824. At this time we have an interesting sketch of him in a letter written by Dr. Edmund Porter, of Frenchtown, N. J., to Dr. Thomas Miner, of Haddam, Conn., dated October 25th, 1825.* Among a number of worthies who were present at a meeting of the Academy, Porter mentions Bonaparte in the following words: "*Bonaparte* is the son of Lucien Bonaparte and nephew to the Emperor Napoleon; he is a little, set, blackeyed fellow, quite talkative, and withal an interesting and companionable fellow. He devotes his attention to ornithology, and has published a continuation of Wilson's work on the above subject. . . . C. L. Bonaparte read a Memoir on the Golden Plover.

* See article by Witmer Stone in *The Auk* for April, 1899.

To a novice it seems curious that men of the first intellect should pay so much attention to web-footed gentry with wings."

In that trio of early American ornithologists—Wilson, Audubon and Bonaparte—names that must always be associated together—Bonaparte stands out distinctly as the systematist, the one whose logical mind saw more clearly than that of any other ornithologist of his time the fundamental problems of relationship. His first paper published in the Academy's journal was entitled "Observations on the Nomenclature of Wilson's Ornithology." Here was in fact, and I think in name also, the first appearance of "nomenclature" in ornithological science. To quote Coues, it "introduced a new feature—decided changes in nomenclature resulting from the sifting and rectification of synonymy. It is here that questions of synonymy—to-day the bane and drudgery of the working naturalist—first acquire prominence in the history of our special subject." When we realize that when he prepared this paper Bonaparte was barely twenty-one years of age, it is obvious that we are dealing with a man of extraordinary ability. Furthermore he wrote his scientific contributions in the next few years in three different languages, and though he was constantly apologizing for his "bad English," he had little to be ashamed of. His comprehensive knowledge of ornithology was not confined to the bird life of any single country; it was cosmopolitan in its range and character, as is attested by his great work, the *Conspectus Avium*, published in 1850. Bonaparte's *Synopsis*, published in 1828, was the first attempt at a definite and systematic arrangement of the species and genera of North American birds. It is the original of the modern check list and the various systems of classification. The copy of the "Synopsis" carried by Audubon on his Labrador trip, and with his marginal notes on the various species of birds observed is now, among other interesting Americana, in the collection of a Philadelphia gentleman. Another fact of interest relates to the names of the two genera of American doves described by Bonaparte—*Zenaida* and *Zenaidura*. These evidently bear the name of his wife, Zenaide, a fact, and one of the very few facts, overlooked by Dr. Coues in his bibliographical researches.

During his residence in Italy, Bonaparte published the *Fauna Italica*, 3 vols., which appeared between the years 1833 and 1841. He also published two smaller works—the Comparison of the Birds of Rome and Philadelphia, and of Europe and North America, while he was a frequent contributor to many scientific journals.

Bonaparte, as shown by letters that are still preserved, was a liberal patron of the Philadelphia Academy in those early days when it was a struggle indeed to keep such institutions in existence. His letters show also a decided appreciation of humor, for on one occasion he writes from New York commenting on the grand opera that he had attended, and states that owing to the prevailing influenza the audience was constantly coughing and sneezing, "which supplied in a pretty awkward manner the deficiency of instruments in the orchestra." This letter ends with a plea to his friend Dr. Hays of the Academy, "For God sake," he says, "don't throw a feather away of those East Indies birds before I have examined them. Some may prove interesting."

No direct issue in the male line survive to perpetuate the name of the ornithologist, though he had a number of children—one Cardinal Bonaparte, of Italy, died in 1895, and another, Charles, died in 1899. A brother of the ornithologist, Louis Lucien Bonaparte, was celebrated as a philologist, especially for his work on the Basque language and on various European dialects.

Alexander Wilson will always hold a distinctive place as the pioneer worker in American ornithology. Audubon was the artist, the gifted painter of our bird life. Both of these men were poet and artist rather than scientist. It was Charles Lucien Bonaparte who first placed American ornithology on the firm basis of science.