



George Ord

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Science owes much to men almost unknown to fame and whose names but rarely appear upon the page of the historian or biographer. It is indeed strange that we must place in this class one who accomplished so much, in a quiet, unassuming way, as did George Ord, the companion, patron and literary executor of Alexander Wilson, the ornithologist. The seeker after materials for even a brief memoir of this once honored and respected savant, who, between the years 1815 and 1858 was accorded nearly all the highest offices of trust within the gift of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the American Philosophical Society, is puzzled at the scarcity of recorded data. When he died, in 1866, the Philosophical Society appointed Isaac Lea to prepare an obituary notice of him, but no such tribute can now be traced either in print or manuscript. By the Academy of Natural Sciences no action whatever was taken.

Consequently, in the brief space of time and pages allotted for this article, only a few facts not already stereotyped in some of the biographical dictionaries can be presented regard-

ing the character and life-work of George Ord. He was born March 4, 1781, but whether in Philadelphia or England I have been unable to ascertain.

According to the Philadelphia Directory of 1796, Ord's father, also named George, was a sea captain, living at 354 South Front Street. This is confirmed by his tombstone in the Old Swedes churchyard, which further states that he was born in Great Britain, March 26, 1711, and died in Philadelphia, October 13, 1806. On the same stone is the notice of his wife Rebecca, who died in 1823 (1825 ?) as nearly as can be deciphered. A further study of the old directories shows that Capt. George Ord became a ship chandler and rope-maker on Willings and Francis Wharf in 1798, and that sometime after, say about 1800 took his son George, Jr., into partnership—"George Ord and Son, Ship Chandlers." Ord's home at that time, and ever afterward, was in his father's house on Front Street. After the death of his father in 1806, young George became partner with his mother, as "George Ord & Co.," in the same business. His mother was a Swede, one of five married daughters of George and Judith Lindemeyer, probably very early settlers in the city. Her parents' graves adjoin those of the Ords, and her married sisters' in a corner against the northwest shoulder of the church. How long Ord actively continued his father's business is not exactly determined, but about 1829 he ceases to be listed as a ship chandler. He was always known to his later associates as a wealthy gentleman of leisure, though far from idle in his chosen scientific pursuits. He married, presumably, about 1815, and had a daughter, who died in infancy, and one son, Joseph Benjamin, who was an artist of much ability in the painting of fruit studies. He was recorded as a portrait painter in 1835 and a picture restorer in 1855. Ord's wife was for many years an inmate of the Pennsylvania Hospital, owing to a mental affliction, and it was largely due to his gratitude for their good care of her that he gave that institution various sums, amounting to about \$20,000, the greater part of which was devoted to a fund for the study and cure of mental diseases.

Just when he began to take an active interest in nature study

is not apparent, but it probably began in youth, and was no doubt stimulated by association with the coterie of more advanced naturalists who finally organized the Academy of Natural Sciences in 1812. He was elected a member and a curator of that body in 1815, and made their vice-president in 1816, a sufficient indication that the worth of his editorial labors on Wilson's Ornithology was being recognized. That his education and literary attainments were already of a high order is not only attested by Waterton's letter of introduction, quoted later, but is further shown by his being appointed one of the original members of the Publication Committee of the Philadelphia Academy in 1817.

How gladly would we know the history of his earlier acquaintance with and growing friendship for Alexander Wilson. We fondly hope there may be old letters yet preserved which will shed more light upon that sacred chapter in American ornithology. Ord was Wilson's junior by fifteen years, and at the time the latter seriously began the preparation of his Ornithology was only twenty-four years old. He accompanied Wilson on many of his bird excursions, and was with him on his last visit to Great Egg Harbor, N. J., in the spring of 1813. It is safe to say that to no single person did the author of the "American Ornithology" owe more by way of personal and financial encouragement than to George Ord. If Wilson had not enjoyed this loyal patronage during his life, or had been deprived of so talented and yet so modest a biographer to finish his uncompleted labors, we can hardly estimate the resultant loss to both the student and the lover of birds in the present generation. The history of Ord's editorial labors in Wilson's behalf are better known to-day than perhaps any other of his literary efforts. For a history of the additional volumes and editions of the "American Ornithology" which he edited, the reader is referred to Dr. Walter Faxon's article in the eighteenth volume of "The Auk," 1901, pages 216-218.

In all these Ord strove to put himself into the background, and for that reason did not receive the credit due him until after his death. His "Life of Wilson," however, appeared under his full name, and it is as the author of that work more than

of any other single publication that he is popularly known, for the majority of his writings were anonymous or signed only with initials. The biographic notices of Ord state that he employed much of his leisure in lexicographic researches. I am informed by his cousin, Mr. Gregory B. Keen, that Ord compiled much data for the first edition of Webster's dictionary. This was used without acknowledgment by Webster, a fact silently resented by Ord until Webster wrote him some years later for assistance on the third edition. In reply Ord reminded Noah of his discourtesy, and being a great admirer of Dr. Johnson wrote him that if he would make his new edition conform to the Johnsonian spelling he would aid him. Webster was compelled to refuse. Soon after, Latham, of London, secured from Ord the whole MSS. of nearly forty years' work in philology, and in every instance where he used it in compiling his new edition of Johnson's Dictionary he makes acknowledgment to the "Ord MSS." Alexander Wilson secured his work of compiling the natural history portion of Bradford's American edition of Rees' Encyclopædia in 1806, and there is little doubt that Ord, as much as any one, secured him this important employment, which might be called the "first edition" of Wilson's "Ornithology." While we have no data at hand to prove it, it is more than probable that Ord assisted Wilson greatly in this labor besides contributing to other departments of this, the largest literary undertaking attempted up to that time in America.

After the death of Wilson, in August, 1813, Ord, then thirty-two years of age, completed the "Ornithology," editing Volume VIII and writing all the text of Volume IX. This work, however, does not appear to have exhausted his energies, for Johnson and Warner, publishers of Philadelphia, induced him to compile the zoölogical portion of their so-called "Second American Edition" of Guthrie's Geography. This was published in 1815. Strangely enough, only three copies of this work are known to exist, namely, Ord's private annotated copy owned by Dr. Solis Cohen of Philadelphia, another lately obtained in Wilmington, Del., by my friend C. J. Pennock of Kennett Square, Pa., and an excerpt of the zoölogical portion

in the library of the Academy of Natural Sciences. Owing to the rarity, as well as the scientific value, of Ord's contribution to this work the writer re-published that portion in 1894. The reader is referred to the Introduction of that reprint for an estimate of Ord's modest services to North American zoölogy in that connection. Briefly stated, it appears to be the first systematic work on the zoölogy of North America by an American. Several species of mammals and birds are there described and named for the first time, and four new bird names there given are tenable. Most of these novelties were secured by Lewis and Clarke's Expedition, then lately returned. On page 314 Ord pays tribute to the labors of his beloved Wilson, stating that he had "published and prepared an account of two hundred and sixty-five species, fifty-four of which were nondescripts, when the Almighty disposer of events saw fit to close his useful labors by death;" and in a foot-note adds: "He left drawings of thirteen species more." Ord was so prominently the loyal champion of Wilson's cause that on more than one occasion he was forced to throw aside his anonymous cloak and openly enter the lists in defense of his deceased friend. The most striking of these contests was waged against Audubon's accusations of plagiarism on Wilson's part made in the last volume of the Ornithological Biography. In Ord's rejoinder, which was published in the Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society (Vol. I, pp. 272 *et seq.*), he places Audubon in a most unenviable light, not only disproving the charge against Wilson, but showing that Audubon had been guilty in more than one instance of stealing from Wilson without acknowledgment. A copy of this article was also sent to the Linnæan Society of London, of which Ord was a Fellow. In his letter of transmittal, a copy of which is in the archives of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, he states:

"There are some circumstances related in it which may give rise to reflections by no means advantageous to the reputation of Wilson's calumniator. However he who resorts to the stiletto can have no reason to complain should its point be reverted to his own breast. The career of this adventurer in Great Britain has been truly a brilliant one, he has left an impression on

your community of no ordinary kind but whether it be for good or evil only time can determine."

Ord was a great friend of Charles Waterton, the English naturalist, South American traveler and author. This gifted and rather erratic enthusiast, so much Ord's reverse in many characteristics, was born one year later and died one year earlier than his comrade. They traveled together in England and Europe,* and kept up a lively correspondence, some of which is in the archives of the Academy.

One of the most famous international bird-controversies arose in 1833-'34 between Waterton and Audubon regarding Audubon's disbelief in the use of the sense of smell by the Turkey Vulture in the discovery of its food. Audubon's views were embodied in a paper presented to the Wernerian Society of Edinburgh soon after his arrival in Scotland and which constituted his first publication. It was promptly attacked by Waterton and vigorously sustained by Audubon's admirers in both continents. Swainson, Bachman and a half-dozen more kept the magazines busy in this quarrel. It is supposed that Ord may have instigated this trouble and retired behind the scenes as Waterton's second. A letter from the latter to Ord, dated March 4, 1834, says: "You will see that the Charleston parson [Bachman], Doctors, Surgeons and Professors are up in arms against me and are determined to cut off the Vulture's nose. But do not be alarmed for me, I promise you that I will answer them to your heart's content and tomorrow I shall send up a paper to Loudon for his May number which will make your Philosophers appear very small and put Audubon's claim to literature and ornithology in so clear a light that no one will be in doubt hereafter * * * Audubon's gulled friends and supporters in London are in the highest spirits and feel sure that I cannot answer the Charleston letter. By the first of May next their crowing will cease." Time has proved that Ord and Waterton were on the winning side in this debate.

The following extract from a letter of introduction given by Waterton to Ord, and found among the latter's papers, gives us

* Ord was in Italy in 1823 and in England and France in 1851.

some insight into his character and attainments: "You will find him a most delightful acquaintance, with vast knowledge and extended abilities." Waterton in another letter, after urging Ord to visit him again at his English country seat, says: "I am fully of the opinion that your polished mind was never destined to waste its learning in Pennsylvania's matted woods." Audubon, in this connection, refers casually to Ord's knowledge of languages (Audubon and his Journals, Vol. I, p. 189); when describing a meeting of the Royal Society of London, December 18, 1826, he notes: "Prof. ——— gave a long, tedious and laborious lecture on the origin of languages. * * * It seemed a very poor mess to me. * * * My friend Ord would have doubtless swallowed it whole."

As time advanced and his physical activities lessened, Ord, at sixty years of age, writes under date of 1841: "My natural history studies are nearly at an end. As age creeps upon me I feel the necessity of retirement, but in yielding to that necessity I derive consolation from pursuits which more than counterbalance the pleasure of those which I relinquish." This alludes, no doubt, to his philological studies, which I am assured both by Mr. Gregory B. Keen and Dr. I. Minis Hays of Philadelphia, who were for some years associated with him, were of the most profound character. His valuable library, especially rich in such works, from fear of fire, was removed by him from his house to a room in the Philadelphia College of Physicians. Part of it remains there, part is in the Ridgway branch of the Philadelphia Library, and the remainder was purchased by Dr. J. Solis Cohen of Germantown.

Respecting Ord's personality I am much indebted for a lively description from both of the above-named gentlemen, much of which, however, is hardly germane to a sketch of this character. Dr. Hays remembers him as a tall, rather spare and decidedly stoop-shouldered man, using a cane in his walks about town. An abundant shock of gray hair covered his head, even in old age. He talked deliberately, but once aroused upon a favorite theme, with much enthusiasm. His benign countenance comported well with a tender-hearted, kindly disposition. His literary humility, care and rigorous self-censorship not only

deprived the world of much that was worthy of publication, but was carried to such an extreme that the tasks of his biographer have been increased tenfold.

The portrait which prefaces this sketch was etched from a photograph of the oil painting supposed to have been painted by his son, Joseph Benjamin Ord, now in the gallery of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. It represents him somewhat past middle life.

George Ord lived to be eighty-five years of age, dying in 1866. He was buried in Old Swedes churchyard, Philadelphia, in the old family plot of the Lindmeyers, Swedish grandparents on his mother's side and early settlers on the Delaware. Not far from Ord's grave is the simple monument over the tomb of Alexander Wilson, that congenial and gifted fellow-spirit whom fifty years before his comrade had sadly laid to rest.

A chronological list of George Ord's appointments to honor and service in the two leading American scientific societies of his day are as follows: Elected a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, September, 1815; Curator, December, 1815, to December, 1817; Vice-President, December, 1816, to December, 1834; and original member of the Publication Committee, 1817 to January, 1821, serving again 1832 to 1833. Elected a member of the Philosophical Society, October 17, 1817; Secretary, 1820 to 1827 and 1829 to 1831; Vice-President, 1832 to 1835; Councilor, 1839; Treasurer and Librarian, 1842 to 1847; and President of the Academy, December, 1851, to December, 1858.

Ord's scientific papers listed in the catalogue of the Royal Society number fourteen, two being in conjunction with Thomas Say. Four relate to birds. His other works comprise the completion of Wilson's Ornithology; two subsequent editions of this work in 1824 and 1828-29, both containing original matter; the "Zoölogy" in Guthrie's Geography; the Life of Wilson and a beautifully written Life of Thomas Say, another of his friends; and one of C. A. Lesuer, together with his philological contributions.