



ALEXANDER WILSON

STATUETTE BY ALEX. CALDER

PRESENTED BY HIM TO

THE ACADEMY OF NATURAL SCIENCES OF PHILADELPHIA

# CASSINIA

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## PROCEEDINGS OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

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### Wilsoniana

BY WITMER STONE

In the United States Gazette for August 23, 1813, just one hundred years ago, there appears the following notice: "Died, this morning, Mr. Alexander Wilson, author of the American Ornithology. His friends and acquaintances are invited to attend his funeral, from Mr. William Jones', No. 233 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, at 9 o'clock to-morrow morning."

Thus briefly is chronicled one of the greatest blows that has ever befallen American Ornithology. Wilson was but forty-seven years of age, and in the prime of life. His great work was little more than half completed, and he had reaped no financial return for the labor and privation that the publication had cost him, while that return ever dearer to the author's heart, the praise of the scientific world, had scarcely begun to reach him.

As we contemplate Wilson's career, its premature termination stands out with striking prominence. We often hear his work compared with that of Audubon, yet the impossibility of such comparison is obvious. Audubon's ornithological interests

date from his earliest days, and he was permitted to round out the usual term of years allotted to man, while Wilson's entire ornithological career, from the day he announced his intention of making a collection of "all our finest birds," to his premature demise, covered but ten years. Who of us, with no artistic training, could learn in that time to depict birds as well as Wilson did, and who could have produced such a book as his, with only such works as those of Catesby, Bartram and Pennant to supplement his own observations. Baron Cuvier, in commenting on Wilson's Ornithology, stated that "he has treated of American Birds better than those of Europe have yet been treated," and his work was one of the first scientific productions of America, one that opened the eyes of Europe to the possibilities of the New World in a field that up to that time had been regarded as belonging exclusively to countries of long established literary and scientific reputations.

It is difficult after the lapse of one hundred years to find much that is new in the history of a man, whose life has been so carefully traced as has been that of Alexander Wilson, and the two items that have come under my observation and lay claim to place under the head of *Wilsoniana*, have really nothing to do with the ornithologist's life.

About a year ago I was surprised to learn that there was in Philadelphia a statue of Alexander Wilson, which had been exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, sometime in the seventies. Since then this has been presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences, and now adorns the library. It is by Alex. Calder, a well known sculptor, and represents the Ornithologist in pursuit of his favorite study. He is bending over with one foot on a boulder, upon which his gun and note-book are resting, while his cap and knapsack are on the ground; in one hand he holds a pencil, in the other a freshly killed bird, which he is studying intently. Mr. Calder informs me that the gun was copied from Wilson's own fowling-piece, in possession of Mr. J. M. Wade, then of Philadelphia, while the features of the ornithologist were based on a study of all the available engravings. The result, however closely it may agree with any one of the engravings, is strikingly like the water-color now in

the possession of the Academy, and formerly the property of George Ord, but which Mr. Calder assured me he had never seen until I showed it to him.

This statue attracted much attention when exhibited and the suggestion was made that it be cast in life-size bronze and placed in Fairmount Park. Although this was never realized, it seems very desirable that the idea should now be carried out and the statue be located in the park or on the new Parkway, which will pass by the front of the Academy.

My second item under Wilsoniana deals with a certain trunk belonging to Wilson, which was in the possession of a member of the Rittenhouse family<sup>1</sup> of Germantown and came to the notice of Wm. Redwood Wright Esq. In response to my request Mr. Wright has furnished the following memorandum regarding his experience with this trunk.

“October 27th, 1913.

“My dear Mr. Stone: You ask me for some particulars in reference to my purchase of Alexander Wilson's trunk and contents.

“As a boy I had become very fond of observing bird life, and was a great admirer of Alexander Wilson's Ornithology, a copy of which I had access to in a friend's library.

“Sometime not long after my return from the army in 1865, I learned (just how I have forgotten) that Wilson had been very intimate with a member of the Rittenhouse family, who in his time lived in a house on the bank of the Wissahickon below where Poor House Lane (now Rittenhouse Street) joins the Wissahickon Drive, and that when Wilson died he left his trunk and contents to this person. Knowing at that time, by sight at least, every man, woman and child, in Germantown, and most of the dogs and horses, I very soon located the trunk in the possession of a lady living on Poor House Lane near Greene Street, and by the exercise of a little diplomacy got her to show me the contents, which consisted almost entirely of printed matter and papers connected with Wilson's lifework.

<sup>1</sup> A descendant, apparently, of Sarah Miller, to whom Wilson was engaged to be married and who with George Ord was an executor of his estate.

“It seemed a great ‘find’ to me, but the price she put upon it (\$100) seemed an immense amount of money, and I did not quite see how the deal could be financed. I mentioned the matter to a Scotch friend and ornithologist, Wm. P. Turnbull, who at once said, ‘I will furnish the money and we will divide the contents,’ which was accordingly done, very much on the lines of the celebrated division between white man and Indian of a gamebag consisting of a turkey and a turkey buzzard.

“My share, however, was about as much as I could carry, and when I toted it home and arranged the ‘odds and ends’ that fell to my lot, I found I had a complete set of the letter press and plates, a good many duplicates and some original matter that must have been hidden in the letter press. I believe the part that did not fall to my share enriched the collection of some institution in Scotland, but I was never furnished with an inventory of what Mr. Turnbull considered as the capitalist’s share.

“I enclose you a few papers that may be of interest.

“It is somewhat of a coincidence, that while my sympathies and enthusiasm were all with Wilson, my great-grandfather (Miers Fisher) was the legal adviser of the Audubon family, and Audubon, the naturalist, was much at ‘Ury’, Miers Fisher’s residence near Fox Chase, now in the 23d Ward. The tradition in the family is that the naturalist Audubon was not only a good shot with a gun, but was capable of drawing a very ‘long bow’.

Very sincerely yours,

“WM. REDWOOD WRIGHT.”

The papers consisted of two original drawings, supposed to be by Alex. Wilson, one being a sketch of Wilson’s schoolhouse at Kingsessing, and the other a portrait of Michael Heinego. Also a manuscript account of Michael Heinego, of York Co., evidently written at request of Alex. Wilson by an unknown correspondent, after Wilson’s visit to Heinego; and uncolored plates 57 and 64.

In response to an inquiry Mr. Ruthven Deane writes me as follows concerning some of the contents of the trunk that constituted Mr. Turnbull’s share. “Certain of these Wilsoniana relics

were in the possession of Mrs. Elizabeth Gray of Edinburgh, Scotland and were originally presented to her husband Robert Gray by his friend Wm. P. Turnbull. Among them were a long letter from Wilson to Miss Sarah Miller dated Nashville, Tenn., May 1, 1810, which was published in 'Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson' by Alex. B. Grosart 1876, pp. 203-206; the negative of Wilson's Silhouette (the original is now in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh); a colored drawing of the Hermit Thrush, under glass with the following inscription on the back: 'This drawing by Alexr. Wilson (and cut by him so as to occupy its place in the plate) being part of the contents of his trunk, left by his will to Miss Sarah Miller who afterward married a Rittenhouse) and purchased by me from her son's widow E. R. Rittenhouse, William P. Turnbull, Phila. 1866.'"

No one realizes better than I the comparatively trivial nature of the items I have described, but every scrap of information about such men as Wilson seems worthy of our notice. If only as an excuse to bring to our attention for a moment the man and his work, they have perhaps served a good purpose. The impetus that such a work as Wilson's produced in America and by the support of American subscribers gave to American science is hard to estimate, as is also the attention that it must have directed toward America, as a country which not only possessed a rich fauna and flora, but which gave promise of producing men thoroughly capable of making known its riches to the scientific world, and in the van of this assemblage will ever stand Alexander Wilson, a Scotchman by birth but an American in his interests and sympathies.