CASSINIA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

No. XIII. PHILADELPHIA, PA. 1909.

Thomas B. Wilson, M. D.

BY WITMER STONE

It is an open question whether the patron who endows scientific institutions or the investigator who carries out the scientific work is deserving of the greater credit.*

In every generation we find men of each class working together for the advancement of human knowledge.

In proportion to the standards of his time, science in America has had few if any more liberal patrons than Thomas B. Wilson, but so modest was he that few outside of his native city know anything of him to-day and probably no one ever knew the full extent of his gifts for the advancement of science.

Dr. Wilson was, however, not merely a patron. He was a close student of nature in its broadest sense and his knowledge in several branches was equaled by few. The results of his investigations, however, he never published. The same extreme modesty which made any public acknowledgment of his benefactions distasteful to him, also led him to contribute to others

* For most of the general matter in the present article, I am indebted to the Memoir by Prof. Jacob Ennis, published by the Entomological Society of Philadelphia in 1865. To the same society we are also indebted for the lithographs of Dr. Wilson.
any important discoveries that he made with the request that
they publish them to the world. So it is that his name is miss-
ing from the rolls of eminent American Ornithologists, Ento-
mologists and Geologists upon any of which his qualifications
would have given him a high place.

Thomas Bellerby Wilson was born in Philadelphia, January
17, 1807. His parents, Edward Wilson and Elizabeth Bellerby,
having both come over from England and married in America
in 1802, Thomas was educated at one of the Quaker schools in
Philadelphia during 1818 and 1819, but for the next two years
attended school at Darlington, in Durham, England, having
accompanied his father on a trip to his native country early in
1820.

At the age of sixteen he was back in Philadelphia studying
pharmacy in the establishment of Frederick Brown of that city,
where he remained for six years. His parents being quite
wealthy and he being under no necessity of engaging in busi-
ness pursuits, he decided to devote his whole time to scientific
investigations. He had always been interested in natural his-
tory and during his pharmaceutical studies had become deeply
engrossed in chemistry, mineralogy and geology.

In 1828 he entered the medical school of the University of
Pennsylvania and graduated in 1830, after which he spent two
years in Europe attending lectures in Paris where he studied
under Cuvier and other notable men and also in Dublin.

In 1832 he returned home with apparently no thought of
practicing professionally; but, having had experience with the
cholera while abroad, he rendered valuable and generous aid to
the poor of Philadelphia during the outbreak of this disease
which occurred at this time, and later at different times gave
gratuitous medical assistance to those in need.

In the spring of 1833 Dr. Wilson bought a farm at New Lon-
don, Chester County, Pennsylvania, where he lived until 1841,
when he removed with his brother to the vicinity of Newark,
Delaware. At all times, however, he maintained a suite of
rooms in Philadelphia where he spent portions of each year.
He never married.

During the period from 1833 to 1841 Dr. Wilson devoted him-
self continually to the pursuit of natural history, collecting assiduously about home; insects, birds, and geological specimens especially claiming his attention. He also took more extended trips on foot and horseback, visiting all the states east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio as well as Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and portions of Canada. He also visited Europe in 1842–1843, again in 1844 and for the last time in 1851. On these trips he collected material of all sorts and in Europe purchased many valuable collections for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, some of them at that time the most famous collections of their kind in existence.

Dr. Wilson’s connection with the Academy began in June, 1832, when he was elected a member, but his active participation in its affairs did not begin until after the death of his father in December, 1843.

Starting in 1844 with the gift of a collection of insects obtained near his home at Newark, Delaware, and a series of minerals from the north of England, there flowed into the Academy an almost continuous stream of donations covering various departments of natural history while all available books were imported for the library regardless of expense. It has been said that all one had to do in those days was to express to Dr. Wilson his desire to see a certain work and it was procured.

Mr. Edward Wilson, who was living in England at this time, acted as his brother’s agent in securing many of the books and specimens and presented the Academy with many others on his own account. John Cassin was just about to publish his first ornithological contribution when Dr. Wilson began his gifts to the Academy and no doubt through his influence ornithology received most of Dr. Wilson’s attention at the start. Later vast collections of fossils, mollusks, crustacea and minerals were purchased, many of them rich in types; while after 1860 Dr. Wilson transferred his interest almost entirely to the Entomological Society of Philadelphia, now intimately associated with the Academy as its entomological branch and became an authority upon the Diptera, although he steadfastly refrained from publishing the results of his studies.

It is the ornithological collections that interest us most in the
present connection, and the progress of their accumulation is
well set forth in letters of John Cassin to Spencer F. Baird.

Under date of June 17, 1846, he writes "The most important
item I know of in the ornithological line is the purchase recently
made by Dr. Wilson, a notice of which you have probably seen
in the papers. The Doctor has just been here to talk about it.
He says there are at least 10,000 specimens and nearly five
thousand species all mounted unfortunately and therefore re-
quiring much space for their arrangement. He has I find hardly
made up his mind as to the disposal of this collection; upon the
whole he is rather inclined to erect a building at his residence
in Newark, Del., expressly for a museum, though I was glad to
perceive that he inquired very particularly about the practic-
cability of accommodating the collection in the hall of the Acad-
emy which course I encouraged. . . . If the Doctor succeeds in
getting the collection safely to the United States it will be a most
important acquisition to American ornithologists answering the
purpose as it will of a standard collection—think of 5,000
species!" This was the Rivoli collection which was purchased
for Dr. Wilson by J. E. Gray whom he had consulted as to the
best means of forming a representative collection of birds, and
who has described his amusing experience in Paris when he made
the purchase and the consternation of the French ornithologists.*

By July 25 Dr. Wilson had arranged to alter and enlarge the
Academy's building and fit it with the necessary cases to hold
the collection. "A large number of boxes has already arrived,"
writes Cassin; "one box has been opened containing vultures
and eagles. Dr. Wilson proposes to buy not only specimens
but ornithological books also."

By November 16, 1846, they were "nearly done unpacking
the Rivoli collection. It is enormous," and by the end of the
next year it was arranged in the cases, Cassin being paid by Dr.
Wilson to do the work. Cassin's enthusiasm is not surprising:
he writes August 11, 1847, "I to-day complete the arrangement
of the woodpeckers. There are two very fine Picus imperialis
as well as all other—I was going to say all other possible wood-
peckers!

"Five hundred additional parrots and coniostral birds and a large number of hummingbirds have been purchased in Paris and about 2,000 more are on the way to Philadelphia. Dr. Wilson has been in the city nearly all summer engaged in the arrangement of the geological collections in which very considerable progress has been made. The importation of books goes on in the most astonishing manner. Dr. Wilson has now nearly all the books in the lists furnished by you and lots of others. All of Gould’s works—all, not a single plate missing. Dr. Wilson is in a treaty with Gould about his collection of Australian birds and has authorized his brother who is in England to buy it at Mr. Gould’s price—$5,000. This collection contains all known species of Australian birds except five which said five Mr. G. pledges himself to use his best endeavors to apprehend.

"I tell you what it is, I begin to believe, in some sort of an ornithological farieland or El Dorado or something of that sort in which I think Wilson ought to be Jupiter Ammon at least!"

In September, 1848, Pease’s Mexican collection was purchased and in December the Des Murs collection of eggs. Then in June, 1849, the arrival is announced of the Gould collection and Bell’s Panama collection as well as others. The Boys’ Indian collection came later and Cassin remarks of it “Gould has had his paw on ‘em—they will be sour grapes for me!"

Cassin states again and again that Dr. Wilson is working with him in identifying the unnamed species and some papers he says Wilson helped him with while one on the Caprimulgidae "Wilson wrote a good part of it himself."

One paper only was issued under Doctor Wilson’s authorship, a joint paper with John Cassin, entitled, ‘On a Third Kingdom of Organized Beings.’

During the examination of the Rivoli collection Cassin constantly mentions attacks of sickness brought on by exposure to the arsenical preparations used in curing the specimens, and Dr. Wilson having, in 1858, suffered twice from similar affections, he decided to give up all further contact with specimens preserved with arsenic. Consequently on March 20, 1860, he sent a brief note to Dr. Joseph Leidy, then curator of the Academy, presenting the entire collection of 28,000 specimens
which had hitherto been on deposit. No resolutions of thanks were adopted, as Dr. Wilson had upon a previous occasion made it plain that such action was exceedingly painful to him, and if persisted in would compel him to stop his gifts to the institution.

He has, however, been honored by several ornithologists, who have named birds after him, such as Leptodon wilsoni Cassin, Schlegelia wilsoni Bonaparte, Glaucopis wilsoni Bonaparte, etc. Even this attention apparently offended his modesty, as Cassin never named another specimen in his honor.

In addition to the immense donations of books and specimens already referred to, Dr. Wilson also bore a large part of the expense of the Academy’s publications and rendered financial assistance in other ways, and eventually bequeathed $10,000 for the care of the library. In all, his gifts to the Academy and the Entomological Society amounted to upwards of a quarter of a million dollars—a very large sum for the time in which he lived.

In 1863, upon the death of Dr. S. G. Morton, Dr. Wilson was induced to assume the presidency, but on June 23d following he tendered his resignation, not having presided at a single meeting. His sympathies during the Rebellion were always with the South, and he therefore differed politically with the great majority of his associates at the Academy, which was the chief reason for his resignation.

He spent all of his time now in study at his home in Newark surrounded by his books, and often continuing his work until well after midnight.

Early in March, 1865, he was taken ill, his sickness rapidly developing into typhoid fever. Refusing to leave his study in the early stages of his illness, he had a couch moved in upon which he could rest, and here, upon the fifteenth of the month, he passed away literally in the midst of his work.

The thousands of students who have had occasion to consult the famous library of the Philadelphia Academy, or the ornithologists who have studied the magnificent collection of birds which for years placed the institution at the head of the ornithological museums of the world, can well appreciate the debt that American science owes to that quiet, unassuming gentleman, Thomas B. Wilson.