

BOOK REVIEW

By Eleanor E. Dater

Alexander Wilson, Naturalist and Pioneer, a biography by Robert Cantwell. Illustrated, 319pp., J.B. Lippincott, New York & Philadelphia, \$15.00.

A live mouse brought to schoolmaster Alexander Wilson by one of his pupils was his inspiration to paint live birds. The mouse was given to Wilson to kill and put in the talons of a stuffed owl he had on his school room desk at Gray's Ferry, Pa.

While Wilson worked painting the live mouse he felt the anguished expression in the eyes of the mouse and realized he could capture such expression on paper and add life to his paintings of birds. From that time on, Wilson's pupils brought him innumerable live animals for painting - o'possums, snakes, crows, hawks and others. For birds he paid ten cents apiece. The school room and his room at the boarding house became virtual aviaries. From these he was able to study to his own satisfaction the plumage sequence of such birds as the hummingbird and the "summer red bird" which had puzzled European ornithologists for many years.

Ten years after he had arrived moneyless and unknown in America, he was resolute on writing an ornithology that would contain paintings and descriptions of all American birds.

The town of Paisley, Scotland (well known for its Paisley shawls) where Alexander Wilson was born on July 6, 1766, was visited by Robert Cantwell in his search for little-known facts about Wilson. His father was a smuggler and a weaver. Here Cantwell found documents, never before studied for Wilsoniana, which told volumes about his early life, his family and associates. All of this contributed to the character and moods of the young man who was destined to become America's First Ornithologist. Eighty-four pages of this biography are devoted to the 28 years of Wilson's life in Scotland.

Wilson came from a family of weavers. Weavers are artists and it is not strange that a weaver, which Wilson was in his early life, should transfer that talent to painting. Neither is it surprising that he should seek nature as a source of inspiration in which to express his artistic ability. Wilson also was a peddler in Scotland. His journeys were made on foot and he travelled alone. This "alone" trait stayed with him all his life. He seldom sought company on his journeys through the wilderness in America when he was gathering material for his books and selling subscriptions to them.

Many prominent men, such as Dr. Witherspoon of Princeton, were among Wilson's acquaintances here in America. He purposely avoided these emigrants from Scotland, preferring to make his way without using influence.

His mind was impregnated with the desire to shake off the unhappiness and misfortunes of his life in Scotland and find an entirely new life in a new country. Instead of pursuing his trade as a weaver, Wilson decided to teach school. He was successful and it gave him time to wander through the forest, the life he loved best.

A great deal of American history is retold in detail throughout the book without very much continuity. Scandals relating to Alexander Hamilton make spicy reading, but seem unrelated to American ornithology or to Wilson as a man.

Cantwell speaks of Beasley's tavern at the mouth of the Tuckahoe River, Great Egg Harbor (in New Jersey). Maps show Beasley's Point. I wonder if there is any remnant of the tavern there, and which spelling is correct.

Wilson died before completing his ten volume set. There were a few paintings for the 10th volume found among his papers by his executors. His death was recorded by his doctor as August 23, 1813.

In the time between 1808, when his first volume was published, and his death, Wilson attained the remarkable feat of producing nine volumes of his ornithology. Not only did he paint and write, but he supervised the making of the copper plates and the hand coloring of the finished plates in the books. He also canvassed or peddled the books for subscriptions. It was on one of his subscription trips in the South that he met Audubon in an obscure book shop in Kentucky. It was that meeting with Wilson and the perusal of his two volumes that challenged Audubon to paint birds.

One of the first, if not the first, breeding bird census in America was done by Wilson in Bartram's eight acres near Philadelphia. Fifty pairs of nesting birds (listed in this book) were recorded. Imagine a report like this appearing now in the Audubon Field Notes - 625 nesting pairs per 100 acres!

The eight excellent color plates featured in the book include the famous ones of the Snowy Owl and the Mississippi Kite. They were reproduced from originals in a set owned by Columbia University.

The appendices of the book contain some of Wilson's famous poetry, court records (10 pages) of his arrest and trial in Paisley, and a biography (18 pages) of the subscribers to his ornithology. There is a list of sources of material (some unpublished) both in Scotland and the United States.

An index completes a splendid book which should be enjoyed by historians of Americana as well as by ornithologists. It will, I am certain,

add many to the long list of Wilson admirers and give Wilson his rightful position as "first" as an American ornithologist.

Eleanor E. Dater

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WHOSE BAND IS THIS?



(Approximately 3 times its natural size)

An aluminum band (pictured above at 3 times its natural size) was found on the leg of a male Evening Grosbeak trapped January 3, 1962, by George M. Smith, 116 High St., Strasburg, Virginia. The band was replaced with an F & W band and the original sent to the banding office, which replied that they had no information as to who used it.

George Smith writes further: "Although our experience with this species has been somewhat limited, we suspect that a sizeable number of bands of the split-ring type are being removed by grosbeaks (and cardinals) shortly after banding. Repeats of recent grosbeaks frequently appear in our traps with partially open bands."

(Ebba News editors will welcome any information about this band -- and will also welcome answers to George Smith's remarks about bands being opened by grosbeaks.)

★ ★ ★

EGAD WHAT COWBIRDS! writes Betty Knorr on her Christmas card. She continued, "In the past couple of weeks I've banded more than 4,000 of them without even making a dent in their population!" Betty bands at So. Amboy, N.J.

★ ★ ★

BANDING PLIERS

These pliers have proved invaluable in Operation Recovery use as well as for home station every day banding. Ask any bander who has used them or has seen them in use.

These KENNARD type pliers have holes bored in flat-nosed pliers that fit standard band sizes to avoid lapped bands and make it quite easy to get a perfect fit. A band opener on the plier enables the user to open the band evenly with one operation. A spring provides tension to keep the opened band in the plier while handling the bird.

One plier will handle band sizes 0, 1, 1B and 1A (price \$6.00) and the other will handle sizes 2 and 3 (price \$5.00) -- prices include postage within the U.S. Send your order to the originator and manufacturer - Roger N. MacDonald, 850 Main St., Lynnfield Center, Mass.