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IN MEMORIAM: THOMAS MCILWRAITH.¹

BORN 25th DECEMBER, 1824.—DIED 31st JANUARY, 1903.

BY A. K. FISHER.

With Portrait.

SINCE the last memorial address was delivered the American Ornithologists' Union has lost two of its Fellows. Scarcely had it recovered from the shock caused by the death of Doctor Merrill when the sad announcement came that our venerable Canadian Fellow, one of the Founders of the Union, Thomas McIlwraith, had passed away at his home in Hamilton. For a year or more there had been a gradual breaking down of the system and while many at a distance had no idea that he was seriously ill those close to him felt assured that the final dissolution was inevitable, and it came quietly and peacefully. Four sons and three daughters survive: Thomas F. McIlwraith of Hamilton, H. P. McIlwraith of Newcastle, Penn., J. G. McIlwraith of Anderson, Ind., Dr. K. C. McIlwraith of Toronto, Mrs. Service of Detroit, Mrs. Holt of Quebec, and Miss Jean McIlwraith, the authoress. Another daughter died in infancy, in 1864, and death did not again enter

¹An address delivered at the Twenty-first Congress of The American Ornithologists' Union, Philadelphia, Penn., Nov. 17, 1903.



Yours truly
J. M. Seeverath

this happy household until 1901 when his good wife passed away — a calamity from which he never fully recovered.

The genial influence of Mr. McIlwraith's life has been associated with my own for many years. Early in the seventies, while the nucleus of my natural history library was forming, there came into my possession a paper entitled 'A list of Birds observed near Hamilton, Canada West,' by Thomas McIlwraith. This publication, although not exhaustive, for some reason appealed to me and I often wondered about the personality of its author, then a stranger. I was much impressed with his account of the capture of a fine Eagle having the bleached and weathered skull of a weasel attached to the skin of the throat by its locked teeth, and shared the interest and surprise he must have experienced when this odd memento of a former struggle came to his notice. Later when this genial-hearted Scotch-Canadian came to New York in 1883 to assist in organizing the American Ornithologists' Union, this early association, simple as it was, had the effect of bringing us together and soon paved the way to lasting friendship.

Mr. McIlwraith was born in Newton, Ayrshire, Scotland, on Christmas day, 1824, and therefore at the time of his death, January 31, 1903, was a little over 78 years old. Early in 1846, soon after he became of age, he went to live in Edinburgh where he remained for nearly three years completing his education and fitting himself for the varied duties of life. At the end of this period he returned to his native town to assume the management of the gas works.

In October, 1853, he married Miss Mary Park, daughter of Baillie Hugh Park, and sailing with his bride for America reached Hamilton, Canada, on November 9. He was called to that city to superintend the gas works, as manager of the corporation, and served in that capacity until 1871, when he bought the Commercial Wharf with the coal and forwarding business connected with it. He continued in this business until about ten years ago, when he retired and was succeeded by his eldest son, Thomas F. McIlwraith. Besides being successful in private business, he held prominent positions on the boards of directors of banks and insurance companies, and was for many years president of the Mechanics Institute. Mr. McIlwraith was a Liberal in politics and in 1878 took an active part in municipal affairs, representing his ward in

the city Council. He was a prominent member of the Central Presbyterian Church of Hamilton. When the American Ornithologists' Union established the Committee on the Migration of Birds he became a member and was appointed Superintendent of the Ontario District, which position he held for a number of years. In 1889 he was elected a member of the Council of the Union for that year.

It is stated that his early interest in Canadian ornithology was aroused by seeing some stuffed specimens, including a Flicker and a Kingfisher, which had been brought from the Provinces to Scotland. Although actively engaged in business enterprises of various kinds he nevertheless was able to devote odd moments to his favorite study of ornithology, and before he had been long in Hamilton had formed quite an extensive collection of mounted birds. This collection, which grew to be a representative one, is said to have been made up of selected specimens and included many birds that are very rare or no longer found in Ontario at the present day.

Mr. McIlwraith's home, 'Cairnbræ,' was situated on the shores of the bay, and, surrounded as it was by extensive grounds filled with trees and shrubbery, formed an ideal home for a student of ornithology. It was a natural resting place for numerous migrants, and there in the early morn or cool of evening he secured many rare specimens with which to enrich his cabinet. There on May 16, 1884, he found the remains of a Yellow-breasted Chat, and thus added a new bird to the list of Ontario species. But though much of his material was drawn from this place, yet it must not be understood that other collecting grounds were neglected because they were less promising or more difficult of access, for he knew every nook and corner of the surrounding country where the rarest species might be found, and he did not hesitate to brave exposure and fatigue in search of them. It was not until his youngest son, Kennedy C. McIlwraith, became interested in ornithology and accompanied him in field excursions that the collection of bird skins reached any considerable proportion. Association with his young companion increased his enthusiasm for collecting and made field excursions much more attractive to him.

Mr. McIlwraith evidently worked out his early ornithological problems alone and had to depend largely on his own resources for the identification of the specimens he was collecting and mounting. His 'List of Birds of Hamilton, C. W.,' published in the *Canadian Journal*, in July, 1860, was arranged after the system of Audubon, showing pretty conclusively that the personal aid and encouragement of Professor Baird, that great man to whom so many naturalists are profoundly indebted, had not reached him, though he probably had some of Professor Baird's publications in his library. The absence of published records of the birds of Ontario, and of ornithological companions did not discourage him, for with patient observation and study he soon was able to outline a list which served as a foundation for his later works. This experience, coupled with his genial, friendly nature, made him ever anxious to give encouragement and advice, and many there are who will miss his long and instructive letters. My own correspondence with him commenced in the winter of 1884. In the course of time his letters came with a good deal of regularity and were always interesting whether they related to field experiences, the routine of everyday life or were more strictly personal in their character. Our intercourse closed with a letter which I wrote about a month before his death, for on the double anniversary of Christmas and his birthday I rarely neglected to write to wish him the compliments of the season. I afterwards heard through his son that he was pleased when he received the letter but was too indisposed to pen even a brief acknowledgment.

His style was always lucid and entertaining, whether in private correspondence or in published papers, and it is much to be regretted that his publications were not more numerous. His earliest contribution to ornithological literature appeared in the '*Canadian Journal of Industry, Science and Art*,' for July, 1860, under the title 'List of Birds observed in the vicinity of Hamilton, C. W., arranged after the system of Audubon.' "The object," he says, "in preparing the following list, has been to afford such information as may be of use, should inquiry at any future period be made regarding the birds frequenting this part of the country. In its present state, the list has been drawn up from observations made during occasional excursions within a period of four years.

Those who are acquainted with the subject will see that it is necessarily incomplete; but it will be easy to add the names of such species as may yet be found. In order that the list may be strictly local, no species has been mentioned which has not been found within six miles of the city limits."

The list included 202 species, which speaks well for his ornithological activity during the four years prior to its appearance. Many of the annotations are of interest from the standpoint of distribution and abundance forty years ago. Under the capture of *Lanius ludovicianus* he says: "Two individuals shot in April, 1860. Not observed prior to that date." In a footnote he makes the following statement: "It is possible that this may prove to be the *Collyrio excubitoroides* of Baird, as, according to that author, *L. ludovicianus* is found only in the South Atlantic and Gulf States; while *C. excubitoroides* has been gradually advancing from the west, and might be expected to occur about this time. Without comparing specimens, it is difficult to distinguish between the two."

It is of interest to note that the only trinomial appearing in the list (in the case of the Lesser Scaup Duck) is written in the recent approved style, without the interpolation of var., comma, or Greek letter. In the 'Canadian Journal' for January (pp. 6-18) and March, 1861 (pp. 129-138), appeared 'Notes on the Birds observed near Hamilton, C. W.' In these notes Mr. McIlwraith gives a most entertaining account of the birds found in the vicinity of his home, treated in groups and prefaced by remarks on Wilson, Audubon and the recent ornithological activity in the United States.

The following extract relating to Grebes is of interest at the present time: "In some parts of the European continent the skin of the Grebe is much prized as trimming for ladies' dresses; and in olden time, when the fowling piece was a less perfect instrument than at present, considerable difficulty was found in supplying the demand, as the Grebe being a most expert diver, disappeared at the first flash of the gun, and was under water ere the shot could reach it. Since the invention of the percussion cap, however, they are more readily killed, and were any of our Hamilton ladies desirous of having a dozen or two of Grebes skins for trimming, I have no doubt the birds would be forthcoming. At present there

being no demand for the *skins*, and the *flesh* being unsuitable for the table, they are not much disturbed.”

In 1866 he published in the ‘Proceedings of the Essex Institute’ (Vol. V, pp. 79–96) an annotated ‘List of Birds observed near Hamilton, Canada West,’ which included 241 species. This list was prepared in the same careful manner as his previous papers, and its wide distribution brought Mr. McIlwraith more prominently to the notice of leading ornithologists in the United States, with many of whom he maintained a life-long correspondence that proved of mutual benefit. A few notes followed in the ‘Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,’ Vol. VIII, pp. 143–147, in ‘The Auk,’ Vol. I, pp. 389, 395, and in the ‘Canadian Sportsman and Naturalist,’ Vol. III, pp. 198–200, 207. Finally in 1887 he published his most important work, ‘The Birds of Ontario.’ On April 2, 1885, he had read before the Hamilton Association a paper entitled ‘On Birds and Bird Matters’ which was most enthusiastically received and the Association at once requested the privilege of publishing the communication with any additions which he cared to furnish. Accepting the offer he promptly prepared the manuscript, but delayed publication so that the new arrangement of the American Ornithologists’ Union Check-List, then in press, might be adopted. In the twenty-one years that had elapsed since the previous list was prepared 61 species of birds had been added to the fauna of Ontario, making a total of 302 species for the Province. This publication was so highly appreciated, and the consequent demand for copies so great, that the edition was speedily exhausted and a new one was of necessity planned. Thus was evolved the enlarged and revised edition of the ‘Birds of Ontario,’ covering 317 species, which appeared in 1894 and formed a most fitting and lasting monument.

A reviewer in ‘The Auk’ speaks of this work as follows: “It is with great pleasure that we welcome this valuable handbook, revised to date, much enlarged, and in a dress more befitting its scientific importance and popular interest. In place of the introductory essay ‘On Birds and Bird Matters’ of the first edition, we have here a few pages on the general subject, with special reference to migration, followed by a dozen pages of directions as to how to collect and prepare specimens for the cabinet.

“The species treated number 317 as against 302 in the first edition, to which nearly 400 pages of the work are formally devoted, giving about a page and a quarter to each species. The technical, descriptive portion of the text is printed in small type, the biographical in much larger type. The whole has evidently been carefully revised, and much new matter added to the biographies, which in many instances have been to a large extent rewritten, the recent literature of the subject having been placed under contribution. As the author himself says: ‘In the present edition, it has been my object to place on record, as far as possible, the name of every bird that has been observed in Ontario; to show how the different species are distributed throughout the Province; and especially, to tell where they spend the breeding season. To do this, I have had to refer to the notes of those who have visited the remote homes of the birds, at points often far apart and not easy of access, and to use their observations, published or otherwise, when they tend to throw light on the history of the birds observed in Ontario.’ Credit is of course duly given for the information thus obtained.

“As ornithologists well know, the author of the ‘Birds of Ontario’ is well equipped for his task, and, as would be expected, has done his work well, the second edition being fully abreast of the subject, the few faults of the first edition having been corrected, and the more important recent discoveries in the field here covered being duly incorporated. The text is illustrated with numerous cuts, though none of them appear to be here for the first time published. An excellent portrait of the author forms a fitting frontispiece to the volume, which will doubtless prove a boon to the bird lovers of Ontario and adjoining Provinces and States.”