

A JEFFERSON LETTER OF HISTORICAL AND
ORNITHOLOGICAL INTEREST.

BY J. GREENWAY, JR.

READERS of Alexander Wilson's 'American Ornithology' must often have wondered at the savage attack that George Ord, his good friend, made upon Thomas Jefferson in his preface to the ninth volume. If Ord was correct, why did the great president refuse the scientist permission to go with the Pike Expedition, or why, as Ord affirms, did Jefferson disregard utterly Wilson's request to go? The following letter throws a new light on the matter. It is believed that the letter has never before been published, and it is reproduced here through the courtesy of Harold Jefferson Coolidge, Esq., of Boston, in whose collection it lies.

Monticello, Oct. 27, '18.

Dear General:

I never saw till lately the IXth vol. of Wilson's Ornithology to this a life of the Author is prefixed by a Mr. Ord, in which he has indulged himself in great personal asperity against myself, these things in common I disregard, but he has attached his libel to a book which is to go into all countries & thro' all time. he almost makes his heroe die of chagrin at my refusing to associate him with Pike in his expedition to the Arkansa, an expedition on which he says he had particularly set his heart. now I wish the aid of your memory, as to the main fact on which the libel is bottomed, to wit that Wilson wished to be of that expedition with Pike particularly, and that I refused it. if my memory is right that was a military expedition, set on foot by General Wilkinson, on his arrival at St. Louis as Governor and Commanding officer, to reconnoitre the country and to know the position of his enemies, Spanish and Indian: that it was set on foot of his own authority, without our knolege or consultation; and that being unknown to us until it had departed, it was less likely to be known to Wilson, and to be a thing on which he could have set his heart. I have not among my papers a scrip of a pen on that subject; which is a proof I took no part in it's direction. had I directed it the instructions etc. would have

been in my hand writing, & copies in my possession. the truth is this, I believe, after the exploration of the Missisipi by Lewis & Clarke and the Washita by Dunbar, we sent Freeman up the Red River; and on his return we meant to have sent an exploring party up the Arkansa, and it was my intention that Wilson should have accompanied that party. but Freeman's journey being stopped by the Spanish authorities, we suspended the mission up the Arkansa to avoid collision with them. will you be so good as to lay your memory and your papers under contribution to set me right in all this?

Can you, without involving yourself in offence with Stewart, obtain thro' any channel, a frank and explicit declaration on what ground he detains my portrait? for what term? and whether there is to be an end of it? I think he has now had it 10, or 12 years. I wrote to him once respecting it, but he never noticed my letter.—I am on the recovery from a sickness of 6 or 7 weeks, but do not yet leave the house. our family all join in affectionate recollections and recommendations to Mrs. Dearborne and yourself, and none with more constant affection and respect than myself.

Thos. Jefferson.

In his preface to the ninth volume of the 'American Ornithology,' George Ord wrote as follows of the business: "About the commencement of this year (1806), information was disseminated through the medium of the public prints, that the president of the United States had it in contemplation to dispatch parties of ingenious men, for the purpose of exploring the waters of Louisiana. Mr. Wilson, aroused at the intelligence, now conceived that a favorable opportunity was afforded him of gratifying a desire, which he had long indulged, of visiting those regions, which he was well convinced were rich in the various objects of science; and particularly where subjects, new and interesting, might be collected for his embryo work on the ornithology of our country. He expressed his wishes to Mr. Bartram, who approved them; and the latter cheerfully wrote a letter to his friend and correspondent, Mr. Jefferson, wherein Mr. Wilson's character and attainments were distinctly stated, recommending him as one highly qualified to be employed in that important national enterprise. This introductory, couched in the

most gentlemanly terms, covered an application from Mr. Wilson himself, which, as faithful biographer of our deceased friend, we think proper to insert entire:

"To His Excellency Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States.

"Sir,

"Having been engaged these several years, in collecting materials and furnishing drawings from nature, with the design of publishing a new Ornithology of the United States of America, so deficient in the works of Catesby, Edwards, and other Europeans, I have traversed the greater part of the northern and eastern districts; and have collected many birds undescribed by these naturalists. Upwards of one hundred drawings are completed; and two plates in folio already engraved. But as many beautiful tribes frequent the Ohio and the extensive country through which it passes, that probably never visited the Atlantic states; and as faithful representations of these can only be taken from living nature, or from birds newly killed; I had planned an expedition down that river, from Pittsburgh to the Mississippi and thence to Neworleans, and to continue my researches by land in return to Philadelphia. I had engaged as companion and assistant Mr. William Bartram of this place, whose knowledge of Botany, as well as Zoology, would have enabled me to make the best of the voyage, and to collect many new specimens in both those departments. Sketches of these were to have been taken on the spot; and the subjects put in a state of preservation to finish our drawings from, as time would permit. We intended to set out from Pittsburgh about the beginning of May; and expected to reach Neworleans in September.

"But my venerable friend, Mr. Bartram, taking into more serious consideration his advanced age, being near seventy, and the weakness of his eye-sight; and apprehensive of his inability to encounter the fatigues and deprivations unavoidable in so extensive a tour; having to my extreme regret, and the real loss of science, been induced to decline the journey; I had reluctantly abandoned the enterprise, and all hopes of accomplishing my purpose; till hearing that your Excellency had it in contemplation to send travellers this ensuing summer up the Red River, the Arkansaw and other tributary streams of the Mississippi; and believing that

Dear General

Monticello Oct. 27. 18.

I never saw till lately the 1st vol. of Wilson's Ornithology. to this a life of the Author is prefixed, by a Mr Ord. in which he has indulged himself in great personal asperity against myself. these things in common I disregard, but he has attached his libel to a book which is to go into all countries & thro' all time. he almost makes his horse die of chagrin at my refusing to associate him with Pike in his expedition to the Arkansa, an expedition on which he says he had particularly set his heart. now I wish the aid of your memory, as to the main fact on which the libel is bottomed, to wit. that Wilson wished to be of that expedition with Pike particularly, and that I refused it. if my memory is right, that was a military expedition, set on foot by General Wilkinson, on his arrival at S^t Louis as Governor and Commanding officer. to reconnoitre the country, and to know the positions of his enemies, Spanish and Indians: that it was set on foot of his own authority, without our knowlege or consultation; and that being unknown to us until it had departed, it was less likely to be known to Wilson, and to be a thing on which he could have set his heart. I have not among my papers a scrip of a pen on the subject; which is a proof I took no part in it's direction. had I directed it. the instructions &c would have been in my hand writing, & copies in my possession. the truth is this, I believe. after the exploration of the Mississippi by Lewis & Clarke and of the Washita by Dunbar, we sent Freeman up the Red river; and on his return we meant to have sent an exploring party up the Arkansa, and it was my intention that Wilson should have accompanied that party. but Freeman's journey being stopped by the Spanish authorities, we suspended the mission up the Arkansa to avoid collision with them. will you be so good as to lay your memory and your papers under contribution to set me right in all this?

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Th Jefferson

my services might be of advantage to some of these parties, in promoting your Excellency's design; while the best opportunities would be afforded me of procuring subjects for the work which I have so much at heart. Under these impressions I beg leave to offer myself for any of these expeditions; and can be ready at a short notice to attend your Excellency's orders.

"Accustomed to the hardships of travelling; without a family; and an enthusiast in the pursuit of Natural History, I will devote my whole powers to merit your Excellency's approbation; and ardently wish for an opportunity of testifying the sincerity of my professions, and the deep veneration with which I have the honor to be,

"Sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"ALEX. WILSON."*

Kingsess, Feb. 6, 1806.

"Mr. Jefferson had in his port-folio decisive proofs of Mr. Wilson's talents as an ornithologist, the latter having some time before transmitted to his Excellency some elegant drawings of nondescript birds, accompanied with scientific descriptions. Yet with these evidences before him, backed with the recommendation of a discerning and experienced Naturalist, so little did Mr. Jefferson regard the pretensions of Genius, and the interests of Science; so unmindful was he of the duties of his exalted station, or the common civilities which obtain amongst people of breeding and refinement; that so far from accepting the services of our accomplished ornithologist, he did not even deign to reply to his respectful overture; and Wilson, mortified at the cold, contemptuous neglect, locked up his feelings in his breast, not even permitting a sigh to reach the ear of his most intimate friends. This treatment he did not expect from one, whom his ardent fancy had invested with every excellence; who had been the object of his encomiums, and the theme of his songs: "Omne ignotum pro magnifico."

Audubon, in the preface to his 'Delineations of American Scenery and Character' has his own explanation for Wilson's mis-

*Mr. Wilson was particularly anxious to accompany Pike, who commenced his journey from the cantonment on the Missouri, for the sources of the Arkansas, &c. on the 15th July, 1806. [Footnote by Ord.]

adventure. He speaks of a visit to Washington in 1831 to procure letters to authorities in the Carolinas and Florida where he had planned a trip. " * * * * I need not say that towards our President and the enlightened members of the civil, military, and naval departments, I felt the deepest gratitude for the facilities which they thus afforded me. All received me in the kindest manner, and accorded to me whatever I desired of their hands. How often did I think of the error committed by Wilson, when, instead of going to Washington, and presenting himself to President Jefferson, he forwarded his application through an uncertain medium. He, like myself, would doubtless have been received with favour, and obtained his desire. How often have I thought of the impression his piercing eye would have made on the discriminating and learned President, to whom in half the time necessary for reading a letter, he might have said six times as much as it contained. But, alas! Wilson, instead of presenting himself, sent a substitute, which, it seems, was not received by the President, and which, therefore, could not have answered the intended end. How pleasing was it to me to find in our Republic, young as she is, the promptitude to encourage science, occasionally met with in other countries. Methinks I am now bidding adieu to the excellent men who so kindly received me, and am still feeling the pressure of their hands indicative of a cordial wish for the success of my undertaking. * * * *"

[As a matter of fact there seems to be no evidence except Ord's statement that Wilson had set his heart on accompanying Pike or any special expedition nor that he felt any resentment against Jefferson. His only allusion to the matter that we find is in a letter of February 26 in which he attributes the failure to receive an answer to the fact that "a brush with the Spaniards was expected or that his letter and Bartram's had not been received. It is evident that Jefferson did receive the letters and possibly replied later to Bartram and that Ord was not informed of this fact.—Ed.]

*Museum Comp. Zool.,
Cambridge, Mass.*