

THE JAMES CRAW PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDER WILSON

BY JOHN M. MCWILLIAM AND CASEY A. WOOD

Plate 9

It is not generally known that the Father of American Ornithology, born in Paisley, Scotland, was a poet and illustrator of no mean rank. His 'Poems and Literary Prose' was not, however, published until 1877, more than half a century after his death. Those interested in this phase of Wilson's early career are referred to an informative sketch by George Ord. The present review deals briefly with the subject of his portraiture. Here, again, for a full account of what is known of original paintings of Wilson, their copies and the engravings based upon them we are chiefly indebted to papers by Bayard Christy and Frank L. Burns. The contributions of the latter to the 'Wilson Bulletin' are especially valuable. In this sketch we confine our remarks mainly to the Crow portrait.

In 1924, one of us bought from a Glasgow dealer a picture which we believe to be the earliest (and missing) oil painting of the celebrated Scotch-American ornithologist (1766-1813). It was formerly in the possession of Mr. Patrick Comyn MacGregor of Paisley, Renfrewshire, who collected objects of interest relating to natives of that town. This canvas measures 17 inches in height by 15 inches in width. The gilt frame has every appearance of being the original one. The picture is rather dark from age, and there are two slight tears in it, each about an inch long (see the accompanying photographic reproduction, Plate 9). The portrait is obviously closely related to the engraving of Wilson which forms the frontispiece to Volume 1 of the small four-volume edition of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' Edinburgh, 1831. The engraving is there legended as "Painted by James Crow, Engraved by W. H. Lizars." There are several minor differences between these pictures. The painting shows five buttons on the breast of the coat, whereas the engraving has four. The painting lacks the curtain that appears on the top left-hand corner of the engraving. The book in the extreme lower-right corner of the engraving has its fore edge in view, while in the painting it is turned the opposite way, with the 'spine' showing. The engraving provides Wilson with a more elaborate inkpot than is given him in the painting. Except for a few slight differences of this nature the two are entirely similar, down to the shape of the ribbon in the hair and the shape of the quill pen in Wilson's hand. The engraving is on the whole a more artistic affair, though it might



PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDER WILSON (1766-1813) BY JAMES CROW

Photo by James M. McWilliam

be said that the alert expression on Wilson's face in the engraving is not as pleasing as the rather more serious expression in the painting.

Although we have diligently searched for such information we have not been able to unearth much about the artist, James Crow, nor about his oil portrait of Wilson. The Rev. James Thomson, minister of Mochrum Parish, Wigtownshire, who was formerly a minister in Paisley, took at one time considerable interest in Wilson, and published in 'The Paisley Daily Express,' 18th November, 1925, an interesting biography of Wilson, entitled 'Alexander Wilson, Poet and Ornithologist,' which was later reprinted in pamphlet form. We quote from that pamphlet. "Now for the portraits. To James Crow, of whom nothing was known publicly until I had the good fortune to gain touch with his descendants, we owe it that Wilson's face has been (accurately) preserved for us. Crow was a housepainter and lived in Dyer's Wynd. The date of his birth is unknown. The late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries were days of bitter, bad trade, and he enlisted. A pathetic letter from Stirling to his wife bewails his comfortable home and lingers tenderly over a lock of her hair. Poor fellow, in 1794, the year of Wilson's emigration, he was to die in Lower Germany."

"The date of his painting in oil has been given as 1788, when Wilson was 22 years of age." Then follows Mr. Thomson's 'List of Authentic Portraits': (1) Crow's original, (present) location unknown; (2) copy from Crow by Cairns, a local amateur, Paisley Museum; presented by Provost Clark. "Frequently taken for the original. Search in the museum records has resulted as above."

Mr. Thomson also notes (3) a very freely made copy of the Crow portrait by Sir John Watson Gordon. "Sir John apparently copied the head, and invented the birds, gun, etc. [Present] location [of his original copy] unknown." (4) "Engraving by Lizars from the preceding" in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and (5) "small photograph in Paisley Museum" which is there recorded as "made from the oil painting in possession of his niece, 1862." This photograph is rather puzzling. It is not, we believe, definitely stated to be from the Crow portrait, and it certainly does not appear to bear a close resemblance to any engraving of that picture. In Mr. Thomson's list there follow descriptions of the other well-known portraits. Practically all that can be deduced from the foregoing is that the location of Crow's original portrait could not be traced in 1925.

About the painting itself, it may confidently be claimed that it has every appearance of being the missing (original) James Crow portrait, or (conceivably) a copy of it made at a very early date, although

the latter conjecture seems very unlikely. The painting is unsigned. It and the frame have the appearance of being as old as the late eighteenth century.

Unless a picture is quite famous or has always remained in the possession of one family it is often difficult or impossible to trace its history or successive owners. A book may have the names of owners marked on or in it, but that is seldom the case with a picture. Cases have been known where an artist made a second version of his portrait, but nothing, so far as we know, has ever been heard of an earlier copy of the Crow portrait than the one in hand by the artist or by any other person. We do not see how at this time the history of this Wilson portrait can ever absolutely be cleared up. Probably it was owned by successive people in Paisley. It may at least be said that it is a very old and possibly the oldest representation of Wilson; that it is obviously very closely related to the well-known engraving by Lizars, and that there is no reason to believe that it is not the *missing* portrait. The fact that it was owned by Mr. P. C. MacGregor is a strong argument for its importance. Not very long after we got possession, it was exhibited at the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh. One of us recently wrote Mr. Thomson about the whole matter but so far he has been unable to learn anything new on the subject.

Finally, one of us was put in touch with Miss K. A. MacGregor, a niece of the late owner of the portrait, and sent her a photograph of it, asking whether she remembered it, and could tell us anything of its history. She very kindly replied, in January 1940: "I received your letter and regret that I cannot give you any information *re* the enclosed snapshot. The picture belonged to my Uncle, who died, I believe, in 1884. He was Patrick Comyn MacGregor of Brediland."

The foregoing report relates the known history of the Crow portrait for fifty-six years; and it may be presumed that Mr. MacGregor owned it for some time prior to 1884 (possibly eighty years or so ago), which would bring it fairly close to 1831, the year when the engraving was made by Lizars. Thus we have at least its history for one half of the period between 1831 and the present day.

Toward the end of 1940, through the efforts of both of us, the precious Crow painting was acquired by a Canadian repository. It is, at this writing, securely housed "somewhere in Scotland" for the duration of the present war; and there it will remain until it can with safety be transferred to the Wood Library of Ornithology, McGill University, Montreal, where it will be hung for public inspection.