

A WILSON MEMORIAL

BY BAYARD H. CHRISTY

A receipt-book kept by Alexander Wilson preserves the record of work done on plates for the "American Ornithology"—engraved plates, colored by hand. The book was an item of a collection of Wilson memorials displayed at Pittsburgh, in connection with the meeting there of the Wilson Ornithological Club in December, 1935. It came from the Thayer Collection and was courteously loaned by the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

It is a humble record—a slender book in faded, marbled-board covers, five inches by seven and a quarter in size, containing six leaves, twelve pages. The earliest entry is one of January 9, 1810; the latest, February 16, 1811. The thirteen months that intervened between those dates were the most notable in the story of Wilson's *magnum opus*. When, early in 1810, the second volume had appeared, the enterprise was still in equivocal case: the element of doubt was large, whether the purpose and hope of this amateur carried with them substance such as to become value received in the hands of an adequate number of subscribers. But in the round of the following year Wilson extended somewhat the list of his subscribers, enlarged in much greater measure the store of his data, brought to completion his third volume, and gained for the undertaking in its commercial aspect a very much wider and surer recognition. Thereafter the story is one of the plodding heavy work of actual performance.

The receipts that this book contains are written in Wilson's hand and are severally signed by the payees. There are thirty-seven receipts, given by ten persons, for the aggregate amount of \$1,657.35½. Here (September 3, 1810) appears Alexander Lawson's vigorous signature, set down in acknowledgment of \$229, payment "in full for engraving the four first plates of Vol. Third of American Ornithology"; here (February 6, 1811) appears George Murray's acknowledgment of the receipt of \$25, for "etching and work done on the Carolina Parrot". (The Carolina Parrot plate is the eighth of the nine plates of the third volume). In a letter written six days later (Grossart, LXXXVI) Wilson said, "I have now no farther dependence on Murray; and I mean to make it consistent both with the fame, and the interest, of Lawson to do his best for me."

Here are receipts given by Joseph Brown, for printing in all 5,838 prints, chiefly from the nine plates of volume three; and here are the receipts given by the artists for coloring 4,868 of these prints. The engraving of a plate cost Wilson from \$50 to \$60; the printing,

1.6 cents a print; and the coloring, 25 cents a print. The seven colorists whose names appear are Alexander Rider, John H. Beck, E. Leslie, Anna C. Peale, John H. Hopkins, Louise Adlersterren, and Prosper Martin.

Alexander Rider was, according to Miss Lavinia Lawson (a daughter of the engraver), "the artist who undertook the coloring of Wilson's first edition"; he was, she says, "a Swiss painter in oils."¹ Dunlap thought he was a German, from Württemberg²; but Mr. Frank L. Burns, who is well qualified to speak, seems to think that Miss Lawson

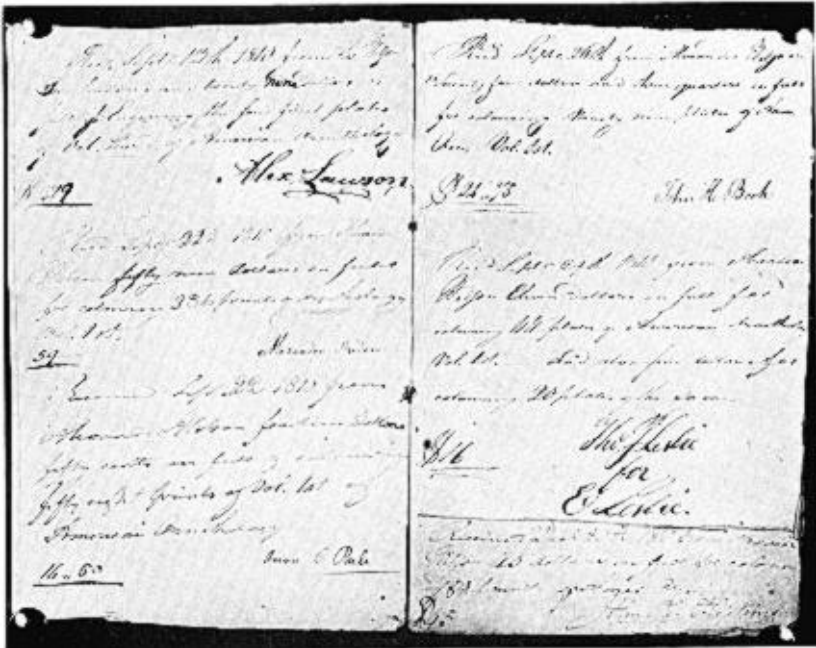


FIG. 1. A page from Wilson's Receipt Book.

was right.³ Mr. Burns says of Rider that "he appears to have been the only professional 'fancy painter' of that time in Philadelphia"; he alludes to Miss Lawson's characterization of Rider's work—"he understood water colors however, but to facilitate his work, spoiled a great many copies by using opaque colors both in Wilson's and afterwards in Bonaparte's works"⁴; and he quotes Bonaparte who "in an outburst of impatience wrote Lawson: 'That confounded Rider has enraged us

¹Burns, "Miss Lawson's Recollections", Auk, July, 1917; XXXIV, p. 279.

²Dunlap, "History of the Arts of Design in the United States", Bayley & Goodspeed ed. 1918, II, p. 392.

to a pretty considerable extent. Look at volume first [of Bonaparte], all the red and orange tints have been obliterated! Shame on him for employing such colors!" Mr. Burns says, "The work of Alexander Rider probably occurs more or less in every volume" of Wilson. Dunlap's further notation, that Rider "made miniatures and historical compositions in Philadelphia between 1818 and 1825",⁵ is, of course, to be accepted.

Eliza Leslie (1787-1858), author, daughter of Robert and Lydia (Baker) Leslie, was an elder sister of Charles Robert Leslie, the artist, and of Thomas Jefferson Leslie, the soldier.⁶ She was a contributor to "Godey's Ladies Book", and editor of "The Gift". Her writings have to do chiefly with housekeeping subjects. Her brother Charles Robert (1794-1859) also was one of Wilson's assistants. Born in England, he returned to that country and became a painter of note and a Royal Academician. In his *Recollections*,⁷ written about 1850 and published after his death, Leslie said, "Mr. Bradford, the same liberal patron who enabled me to study painting, enabled Wilson to publish the most interesting account of birds, and to illustrate it with the best representations of their forms and colours, that has ever appeared. . . . I assisted him to colour some of its first plates. We worked from birds which he had shot and stuffed, and I well remember the extreme accuracy of his drawings, and how carefully he had counted the number of scales on the tiny legs and feet of his subject." Wilson's bodily appearance then is swiftly characterized—"He looked like a bird; his eyes were piercing, dark, and luminous, and his nose shaped like a beak. He was of a spare bony form, very erect in his carriage, inclining to be tall; and with a light elastic step, he seemed perfectly qualified by nature for his extraordinary pedestrian achievements."

Anna Claypoole Peale (1791-1878), daughter of James, and niece of Charles Willson Peale, the artist and proprietor of Peale's Museum, became herself an artist of some distinction and a miniature-painter. She was the wife, first, of the Rev. Dr. William Staughton, and, second, of Gen. William Duncan.⁸

John H. Hopkins (1792-1868), then an unknown young man, was destined to become a clergyman, rector of Trinity Church in Pitts-

³Burns, "Mechanical Execution of Wilson's American Ornithology", *Wils. Bull.*, March, 1929, XLI, p. 21.

⁴*Auk*, 1917, XXXIV, p. 279.

⁵Dunlap, *op. cit.* III, p. 330.

⁶Her portrait may be found in Appleton's *Cyclopaedia of American Biography*.

⁷Leslie, "Autobiographical Recollections" (with portrait), Boston, 1860, p. 163.

⁸Dunlap, *op. cit.* III, p. 322; Appleton's *Cyclop. Amer. Biog.*

burgh, and eventually the first Protestant Episcopal bishop of Vermont. Of this episode in his career Bishop Hopkins's son has written (somewhat condescendingly):⁹ "A more congenial sort of drudgery was soon thrown in his way. Wilson the ornithologist had begun the publication of his *Birds of America*; but, in the infancy of the arts among us at that time, he was unable to find any one competent to color the splendid plates of that great work from Nature. My Father was at length induced to attempt it. The price paid was lucrative, to him: and his proficiency in the art of painting, his delicacy and accuracy of both eye and hand in observing and imitating the hues and the forms of Nature, ensured him a degree of success which delighted his employer, besides being for a time, very agreeable to himself. [In a footnote the eulogist adds, In water-colors, he had, at that day, no superior in this country; and his love for his art, as for music, continued unabated during his whole life.] Mr. Wilson always shot a fresh bird for his colorist, so that there should be no chance of the fading or changing of the brilliant tints of life. But constant repetition at length brought weariness, where the work had been begun with so much of zest and conscious self-improvement: and when other assistants had been sufficiently well trained, the task-work was willingly transferred to humbler hands."

Of neither John H. Beck, Louise Adelersterren, nor Prosper Martin has any certain knowledge been gained. Dunlap mentions an artist named Beck¹⁰; but he became a teacher in Lexington, Kentucky, and died in 1814; so he can hardly have been in 1810 Wilson's colorist. Louise Adelersterren, with her German name, may, as a guess, have been a protégée of Rider's.

The further story of the task of getting out an edition of several hundred copies with their laboriously colored plates is told by Ord in his "Life of Wilson":¹¹ "Independently on that part of his work which was Mr. Wilson's particular province, viz., the drawing of his subjects and their histories, he was necessitated to occupy much of his time in coloring the plates: his sole resource for support being in that employment, as his duties as assistant editor of the Cyclopædia had ceased. This is a circumstance much to be regretted, as the work would have progressed more rapidly if he could have avoided that confining drudgery. The principal difficulty, in effect, attending this work, and that which caused its author most uneasiness, was the coloring of the

⁹Hopkins, "The Life of the Late Right Reverend John Henry Hopkins" (with portrait), 1873.

¹⁰Dunlap, *op. cit.* II, 382.

¹¹American Ornithology, 9, XLIV.

plates. If this could have been done solely by himself; or, as he was obliged to seek assistance in this delicate process, if it could have been performed immediately under his eye, he would have been relieved of much anxiety; and would have better maintained a due equanimity; his mind being daily ruffled by the negligence of his assistants; who too often, through a deplorable want of skill and taste, made disgusting caricatures of what were intended to be modest imitations of simple nature. Hence much of his precious time was spent in the irksome employment of inspecting and correcting the imperfections of others."

In a letter to the Editor of the WILSON BULLETIN for September, 1928 (XL, 208), the present writer intimated that William Bradford, Wilson's publisher, maintained "a shop of colorists". From what has now been set down it is manifest that he spoke with too great assurance and to erroneous effect. In this he afterward was very properly corrected by Mr. Burns (WILSON BULLETIN, March, 1929; XLI, 20).

Surely this receipt-book and the associations that cluster about it go far to restore, to create before the mind's eye, a picture of the episode—a major episode in the story of Wilson's life. And as we contemplate that picture, our sympathy must be quickened, and our appreciation deepened of the accomplishment of this inspired school-master.

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SNOW-KILLING OF THE BOB-WHITE

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Reports of ground-roosting birds imprisoned by snow or sleet may be found in various ornithological publications, and occasionally popular articles with illustrations appear relating to birds killed by exposure to the weather. However, convincing evidence that snow imprisonment occurs and actually results in death to the prisoners is scarce.

The data included in this paper may provide conclusive evidence that, at least in one instance, reasonably strong Bob-whites (*Colinus virginianus virginianus*) were imprisoned and killed by drifting snow. In addition, it will be pointed out that other birds of the same covey met death by exposure to severe weather in spite of apparent physical fitness and the protection of normally acceptable cover.

The notes supporting this paper were incidental to observations upon emergency feeding practices. However, the notes are detailed

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