

His flycatcher

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Edward H. Burt and
William E. Davis

ALEXANDER WILSON
The Scot who founded American ornithology
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On January 30, 1810, Alexander Wilson set off from Philadelphia on the second leg of what might now be called his author's tour. He had with him a heavy pack containing copies of the first two volumes of his monumental *American Ornithology* and a synopsis of the whole work (which was to run to nine large volumes), and his first objective was to promote it and sell subscriptions to underwrite the rest of the project. At the same time, he was gathering material for the volumes to come – in the form of field notes, sketches and physical specimens of interesting species, so he was out in the wilds, too, whenever possible, with greatcoat and gun. He went on foot and alone, walking across the Allegheny Mountains and arriving, on February 15, after a journey of some 300 miles, at Pittsburgh, where he obtained nineteen new subscriptions. There he bought a rowing boat, cheerfully painted the name “Ornithology” on the stern and headed off through the floating ice down the Ohio River, making for Louisville, Kentucky, some 720 miles downriver. The journey was predictably arduous, though he did have the pleasure on the way of seeing large flocks of Carolina parakeets (now extinct), some of which he shot for anatomical study and one of which he befriended as a travelling companion.

At Louisville he set about visiting various local merchants, to try to sell subscriptions. His diary note for March 19 reads as follows:

Rambling round town with my gun. Examined Mr A's drawings in crayon. Very good. Saw two new birds he had, both Motacillae [presumably American wood warblers].

Mr A was, of course, John James Audubon. Audubon was inclined to buy a subscription from Wilson, but was dissuaded at the last moment by his partner, who told him his own drawings were far superior. Wilson and Audubon spent a couple of days together hunting, and found some sandhill cranes and passenger pigeons; then they parted, apparently on good terms, never to meet again. Audubon was, however, stimulated by their meeting to plan the work that became his own magnum opus, his celebrated *Birds of America* (1827–38). And ever since then the paternity debate has continued: which of them was the true “father” of American ornithology?

The world at large would certainly answer Audubon. His extraordinary art has thrilled generations of admirers; he has yet another hugely popular exhibition currently devoted to him in New York (ecstatically reviewed in the *New York Times* of March 7, 2013); an original set of *Birds of America* recently sold for \$11.5 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for a printed book; and he gave his name to the Audubon Societies in North America (the rough equivalent of the RSPB in Britain), which have hundreds of thousands of members countrywide. Wilson, by contrast, is scarcely known to the general public. His only memorial is a modest headstone in the Jones family plot at Old Swedes' Church, Philadelphia; and he has given his name just to a handful of species, such as Wilson's petrel, snipe, phalarope and warbler,

which only a keen birder would have heard of and only real experts could confidently identify in the field.

Edward H. Burt and William E. Davis, in *Alexander Wilson: The Scot who founded American ornithology*, disagree. They are in no doubt that their man is the one to deserve the title of “Father” (and they always capitalize the word reverentially throughout their volume). And it is a strong case, convincingly made in this important scholarly publication in Harvard's prestigious Belknap Press imprint. Wilson was a pioneering field ornithologist, one of the first to study birds in their natural habitat and to describe in detail their behaviour and the ways they interacted with their environment. He wrote a total of 304 accounts of North American birds between 1807 and 1813, of which twenty-six were of new species first identified and described by Wilson himself. His work was systematic, comprehensive and remarkably accurate for its time, being based not only on

complete the engraved plates, but when the cash flow from subscribers was failing in the winter of 1812–13, he took over the work himself and coloured the plates for each of the two volumes: these featured nine plates per volume and an average of four birds per plate, so over the editions of 450 copies of each volume he must have hand-coloured some 32,400 bird illustrations, as well as writing all the descriptions, overseeing the engravings and planning the layouts.

In the course of his work Wilson also made a number of new scientific discoveries about avian diet and breeding biology, pioneered quantitative analyses of such things as flock sizes and migration, and initiated studies of what would now be called economic ornithology – the positive impacts of birds on human husbandry, agriculture and the environment. Moreover, he was the first ornithologist in America to employ the Linnaean system of classification and nomenclature to organize the volumes and to explain the interrelationships of species. His work as a whole can now be seen as an early and major contribution to the modern, burgeoning interest in the cultural significance of birds.

He was entirely self-taught and for the most part operated quite independently, without modern optical or laboratory equipment, working much of the time in challenging wilderness conditions, and then undertaking the marketing, representation and selling

the age of twenty-eight. There he worked variously as an engraver, weaver, pedlar and teacher, responded happily to the individualistic spirit of the country and its outdoor ethos, and was inspired by the scale and novelty of the natural world he encountered. He had the luck to fall in with a near neighbour, the naturalist William Bartram, through whom he developed the interests, new skills and contacts that eventually led to his work on *American Ornithology*.

These themes, and the deeper biographical questions they prompt, are not fully developed in this book. The heart of it is the extended central chapter (forming about half of the book), which reproduces all the unpublished drawings Wilson prepared for the nine-volume *Ornithology*. This will be a very valuable resource for scholars, and the drawings themselves are attractive and persuasive evidence for the authors' claims about Wilson's originality and importance. The authors and publishers have done full justice to these illustrations in this handsome volume and they are beautifully laid out and reproduced. The associated editorial material, by contrast, is useful but rather scrappy at times, and the publisher's design of the different headings and sections does not always make for easy reference. That problem and the dispersal of the more biographical material in somewhat discontinuous ways through the work could have been partly mitigated by a full and detailed general index, which would have allowed for particular themes or topics to be followed through more readily. But the index is very light on general concepts, and many of the key words that appear first in the Preface and repeatedly thereafter in the text (for example, “behaviour”, “habitat” or “species”) do not feature as headings in the index.

Alexander Wilson, so Burt and Davis tell us, had its origins in work begun in 1967 and has been their active preoccupation for the past ten years. It does have something of a devotional quality to it and would have benefited from more rigorous editing in places. It successfully engages our sympathies with its subject, not least his diverse talents and extraordinary energies; but it isn't, and doesn't claim to be, the full critical biography one would now like to see and for which this is in effect the propaedeutic study.

As for the issue about paternity rights, this is mainly a dispute conducted by the partisan successors of Wilson and Audubon, though the latter did give it an initial impetus and an unpleasant twist when, after Wilson's death, he accused him of plagiarizing his drawing of a small-headed flycatcher. In fact, as Burt and Davis demonstrate, Audubon was the one to plagiarize Wilson, and on a considerable scale. In technical terms Audubon was clearly the superior artist and had no need to make such dubious allegations, which would inevitably rebound and expose him. The irony is that their “small-headed flycatcher” has never been seen since and was evidently misidentified, so Wilson and Audubon are responsible for jointly fathering at least one ornithological misconception.



Illustration of wading birds (Little blue heron, Snowy egret, Virginia rail and Clapper rail) from *American Ornithology* by Alexander Wilson (1824)

Wilson's own careful observations from his many journeys through wild America and on reports from his extensive network of informants, but also on the later examination of specimens he obtained (shot) and dissected. His drawings and illustrations represent the birds in natural poses and are a major advance on the work of precursors such as Belknap, Bartram, Lawson and Catesby (the last of whom described and illustrated just 109 species). The sheer labour involved in producing his illustrations was extraordinary in itself. Initially Wilson hired colourists to

in person. Such a man has to have a history and a hinterland, and Burt and Davis sketch some of this in for us, though the material is distributed rather disjointedly between several short chapters. Their subtitle is *The Scot who founded American ornithology* and we learn of Wilson's tough childhood in Paisley, his apprenticeship in the weaving trade, and his political activism. He had early ambitions to be a people's poet in the mode of Burns, but after various run-ins with the authorities, including a short spell in prison, he finally emigrated to America in 1794, at