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# WILSON THE ORTHOLOGIST

A NEW CHAPTER

LIFE.

Embodying many letters and reports.

BY  
ALLAN PARK PATON.

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## ALEXANDER WILSON.

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THROUGH the love and study of Birds, two names have become strangely associated in Natural History. They are to be found in the title of a work which stands at the head of its class: "American Ornithology, by Alexander Wilson and Charles Lucien Bonaparte;" the one originally a Paisley weaver and packman, in whose Journal kept in 1789 are these words, "I have this day, I believe, measured the height of a hundred stairs and explored the recesses of twice that number of miserable habitations, and what have I gained by it? only two shillings of worldly pelf;" and the other a Prince, a nephew of the great Napoleon. Here they are in close and constant fellowship, and the Prince often speaking of the Pedlar in terms like these: "All his pencil or pen has touched is established incontestibly; by the plate, description and history he has always determined his bird so obviously as to defy criticism and prevent future mistake."

Although about half a century has passed since Alexander Wilson was, with public honours, laid in his grave beyond the Atlantic, the Sculptor (Mossman of Glasgow) is, while these remarks are being written, modelling a Statue of him to be erected in his native town, and the design for which represents the Naturalist, his gun slung on his back and his sketch book and pet parrot at his feet, gazing on a bird which he has just shot and lifted. It seems, therefore, an appropriate time to add, as we are enabled to do, a new Chapter to his brief Life.

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With the biographical memoirs connected with the various editions of the Ornithology and his Poems—for the subject of our remarks was also a poet of no mean genius—about sixteen letters of Wilson have been published. About an equal number, with one exception, never published, so far as we are aware, and certainly not incorporated in any of the Lives of him, now lie before us. They were written by him while labouring obscurely as a village schoolmaster in the Backwoods, and were addressed to a fellow countryman, Charles Orr, also an exile in the New World, and engaged in teaching in Philadelphia. One of his biographers, and we think the best of them, has said, “It is unfortunate that as the life of Wilson becomes interesting, the materials for writing it become more scant and meagre. We arrive at a period, 1794, when we are compelled to draw our authorities from a few letters of his own, written at considerable intervals, and mostly addressed to such individuals as were more interested in knowing the state of his domestic circumstances, than the history of his public life and adventures;” and again, “From 1798 there is *an interval of no less than seven years, in which we lose sight of him entirely*, and only learn from his next epistle, dated 1st June, 1803, that his occupation was that of a teacher.” The letters we refer to were written in 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802, and, therefore, are valuable new materials, and must go far to fill up this gap in his history.

A brief statement of Wilson’s Life, as already known, will enable the reader who may be ignorant or forgetful of it, to appreciate the new Chapter now to be added.

Alexander Wilson was born in Paisley, on the 6th of July, 1766. His father, an unusually intelligent and highly respected man, was a handloom weaver: he survived his illustrious son three years, dying in 1816, and had the pleasure of receiving on its publication a copy of the first volume of the American Ornithology—to which every monarch in Europe was a subscriber—bearing the words, “To my aged father, from his affectionate son, the author.” It was intended that Alexander Wilson—one of a family of six—should be edu-

cated for the Church, and he accordingly was sent to the grammar school, where he first obtained that literary taste and love of study by which he was characterised. When he was about ten years old his mother died, and his father, finding it necessary for the sake of his young family, married again. His circumstances were thereafter changed, and his former purpose connected with his son was abandoned. The boy was, therefore, at the age of thirteen, bound apprentice for three years to his brother-in-law, a weaver, and, after fulfilling his indenture, wrought as a journeyman weaver for four years. It was principally during this time that he wrote his Poems, some of which were attributed to Burns, with whom Wilson afterwards became acquainted. To one so fond of liberty and nature the occupation of handloom weaving must have been, through its confinement and monotony, peculiarly painful and fretting. We can imagine how often he, who afterwards roved freely ten thousand miles in what he calls "the western woody world," in an enthusiastic study of the beautiful, would, while "handling the pin," lift his eyes from the weary warp to steal a glance at the blue sky. In his twentieth year, however, his restless and independent spirit rebelled, and, throwing aside the shuttle, he rose, stored and strapped a green pack on his shoulders, took a hazel staff in his hand, and started as a Pedlar. For three years he now travelled Scotland like a second Autolycus, with muslins "of all the colours of the rainbow," and "songs for men and women of all sizes," for, proposing to publish a volume of Poems, he carried samples of them, saying in a metrical handbill of his stock, which he circulated:

" Now, ye Fair, if ye chuse my piece to peruse,  
 With pleasure I'll instantly show it ;  
 If the Pedlar should fail to be favour'd with sale,  
 Then I hope you'll encourage the Poet."

He was by no means successful in his new vocation, either as regards his goods or his verses, and his volume, published in 1790, made small progress. Disappointed greatly, he reluctantly returned to his former trade. Continuing to write in the interval, Wilson, in 1793, committed a sad mistake by

indulging in a personal satire against a respectable manufacturer in Paisley. For this he was prosecuted, and not only was imprisoned three days, but was obliged to burn the obnoxious production on the stair in front of the jail, within a trifling distance of the site of the proposed statue. It has been asserted that it was while he was confined in the tolbooth that he wrote his best poem, "Watty and Meg," of which it is said a hundred thousand copies were sold in a few weeks. This was publicly ascribed to Burns, and Mrs Burns, the poet's widow, told, in the presence of Mr Robert Chambers, (whose *Life and Works* of our national bard seems to have been a true labour of love,) that, as her husband sat one day at his desk by the window, a hawker of repute called Bishop passed, looking we suppose "before and after," according to the manner of his kind, and bawling "Watty and Meg, a new Ballad by Robert Burns!" whereon Robin looked out, and said, "That's a *lee*, Andrew, but I would make your plack a bawbee if it were mine." In connexion with the libellous stanzas for which Wilson paid so dearly, it is now understood that, taken in his sourness, he acted in this matter as the tool of others. Before leaving Paisley for America, he called on the party against whom his lines had been directed, and begged to be forgiven; and when a brother, who, with the prospect of joining him abroad, had carefully gathered all his pieces of a satirical cast, produced them at their meeting, believing that they would form an acceptable gift, Wilson, the instant he received them, pushed them into the fire, with the words, "These were the sins of my youth, and had I taken my good old father's advice, they would never have seen the light."

This unpleasant episode further darkening his home prospects, he now resolved to emigrate, and, with this fixed object, sat down to his loom again. His determination and self denial are manifested in the fact, that he limited the expense of his living to *one shilling a week*, till he had accumulated the passage money. Then, bidding his relatives and friends farewell, he walked to Port Patrick—nearly a hundred miles—crossed to Belfast, took ship (the "Swift," with 350 passengers), and sailed on the 23d of May,

1794. About the 14th of July, "the sun rising, they found themselves within the Capes of the Delawares, the shores on land having the appearance of being quite flat, and only *a complete forest of trees.*" These are his words, and Providence had arranged, that in that "complete forest of trees" he should be a solitary and wandering student for years. Many a night was he to lie down, alone, in that leafy wilderness, "with his gun in his hand and his pistols in his bosom," and many a long day was he to spend there, Indian-like, tracking its strange and precious forms of beauty, and patiently gathering the materials for that noble work, on which his fame now rests so securely. Landing at Newcastle, with not a line of introduction to a creature, and with only a few shillings lent him by a fellow passenger, Wilson, excited with the appearance of the new land, and filled with fresh hope, set off, gun on shoulder—how much was that gun to do, and what treasures of delight and knowledge was it to be the means of gaining!—for Philadelphia, thirty-three miles away. Upon the road, everything delighted him, particularly the plumage of the birds, and he inaugurated his destined career by shooting a red-headed woodpecker, "than which," to use after words, "no bird in North America is more universally known. His tri-coloured plumage, red, white, and black, glossed with steel blue, is so striking and characteristic; and his predatory habits in the orchards and cornfields, added to his numbers, and fondness for hovering along the fences, so very notorious, that almost every child is acquainted with the red-headed woodpecker." Reaching the city of Franklin, he sought anxiously, but unsuccessfully, for employment at the old "stand by" of weaving, and wrought for a short time with a countryman who was a copper-plate printer. When, ten years after, we find him, in writing to Mr Bartram, the botanist and naturalist, and one of his best friends, say, "I have been amusing myself this some time in attempting to etch; I will send you the first impression I receive after I finish the plate," we think we see the meaning of this odd passage in his story. He soon gave up the strange work, and, engaged by a person living about ten miles from the city, again sat down to the hated, but we may

now almost say, faithful loom, so constant a drudge was it unto him, serving him at his sore need. Restlessness, however, prevailed once more, and again, wallet on back and staff in hand—this time *not* the hazel—he traversed a great portion of the State of New Jersey. This tour was more successful than the Scottish ones which we have noticed, and the results may have assisted him in finally abandoning the web, and adopting an occupation more in keeping with his tastes and ambition, namely, that of a schoolmaster. It is from him, as a teacher in Milestown, in August, 1798, that we have the last letter previous to those contained in these pages. It was a long one to his father, ending with this sentence, “I must now bid you farewell, as my paper is almost done. May Providence continue to bless you with health, peace, and content, and, when the tragic-comic scene of life is over, may all meet in regions of bliss and immortality. I am till death, dear father, your affectionate son, Alex. Wilson;” and, among the news in it which he thought would be interesting from the New World, is this, “Mr Orr, of King’s Street, writing master, is well;” this being the friend to whom the unpublished letters were addressed.

Here, therefore, seems the proper place to introduce them.

The first of our materials is but a fragment, without date, and now wanting the signature. It was evidently written some time after the 28th of April, 1799, and, there having been on Wilson’s part, and as regards him, a dead silence since August in the previous year, this—abrupt and unfinished—suggests the sudden and imperfectly caught sound of a voice from the forest, and the voice of “a man living manlike.”

“Dear Sir,—Will you please to call at Mr Biggs, mathematical instrument maker, No. 81 Front Street, and employ him to make me a stile of brass 1-6th of an inch thick, exactly corresponding with the enclosed pattern. I suppose he may be able to finish it before Mr —— leaves town, and who will pay you. I finished the other dial completely to my mind, and employed a clumsy blacksmith to make me a stile, who ruined the whole marble in driving it in, and I broke it to

pieces. If Biggs cannot finish it in time, I shall wait until you find an opportunity of sending it, or shall bring it out yourself. I had a letter from my nephew, dated Ap. 28, at which time he was in excellent health, sweeping away and burning down the woods. I am” . . .

The earliest complete letter is distinctly the cry of a social and intellectual man feeling the want and necessity of companionship; and it is a fair specimen of that essayish style of letter-writing which characterised the epistles of Burns and Wilson, following the manner of Johnson and others of his time.

“ Mr Charles Orr,

At Mr Dobson’s Book Store,

Second Street between Market and Chesnut Street.

Milestown, May 25, '99.

Sir,—Considering the short distance between this and Philadelphia, the many pressing invitations you have received to come and see me, and the friendship and respect I most sincerely declare I have for you, it is matter of regret to me that you seem insensible to them all, nor ever do me the pleasure of *one visit*. Have I injured you? Am I unworthy your acquaintance? Are you afraid of contaminating yourself with the rusticity of my manners and address? I have liv’d, to be sure, five years in the woods, pursuing a business the most apt of any to render peevish and pedantic the best disposition in the world, and it were vain indeed in me to hope that I had escaped without a touch of both the one and the other; but what of that? Have not we all our failings and vanities? and ought we not rather to smile at and forgive, than to be too sensible and feeling on these occasions? Come out, Mr Orr, and see me; you shall find an open and frank hospitality such as my brother or best friend would receive. The sight of the green meadows, the singing of birds, the fragrance of flowers and blossoms, and the conversation of myself and the rest of our clod-hoppers, will be an excellent contrast to the burning streets, the growling oyster men, the

stinking sewers and polite company of Philadelphia. You will receive from the bearer the money you paid for me to the mathematical instrument maker, with my thanks for your trouble; and if you are determined never to visit me, your good disposition, I hope, will not refuse to let me know by letter what I have done to deserve such neglect and contempt, that I may correct myself for the future, if I have done amiss.

I believe this is the first letter I ever wrote to you. You used to visit me,—perhaps I seemed sorry to see you and happy when you went away. If so, may every soul that I visit spit in my face and kick me from their company. If otherwise (which your own heart must testify) may every friend I love receive me with as sincere pleasure as Wilson *has* received and *would* receive Orr.—I am with respect, Sir, your obedient servant,

ALEX. WILSON."

More than a year again elapses before we learn aught further of Wilson, but then come three letters written close upon each other, and from their being addressed to Mr Orr *at* Milestown, we are led to believe that the latter had, about the 10th of July, 1800, left the city on a fortnight's visit, and that, even while they were together, Wilson had proposed and carried on this correspondence for the purpose of improvement. In the volume of Wilson's Poetical Works there is included an "Epistle to C. Orr," of the date we have just mentioned, inviting him to visit him, and this invitation he accepted. The original of this poem lies now before us; it is nearly twice as long as the version published, and is, in our opinion, much more beautiful.

"Mr Charles Orr, Philomath,  
Milestown.

Dear Sir,—You and I have often conversed together on the use and pleasure of epistolary correspondence, which is, in fact, nothing more than artificial conversation, with this advantage, that we are in no danger of being interrupted by the person we are in conversation with, and are always certain to be listened to, whereas in verbal conversation it often happens

that, through impatience to give vent to the ideas that strike us while our friend is speaking, or from something advanced by him that we think absurd, we can hardly hear him out, and so the dispute becomes a mere battle of *words*, and instead of producing pleasure or conviction to either party, begets ill-will and bigoted obstinacy of opinion. Now, Mr Orr, as you and I are both lovers of truth—as we are subject to the failings of human nature as well as others, and as we are both capable of giving and receiving information and advice to each other—why may we not avail ourselves of the advantages that this method of communicating holds out? I, for my part, have many things to enquire of you, of which at different times I form very different opinions, and at other times can form no distinct decided opinion at all. Sometimes they appear dark and impenetrable; sometimes I think I see a little better into them; now I see them as plain as broad day, and again they are as dark to me as midnight. In short, the moon puts not on more variety of appearance to the eye than many subjects do to my apprehension, and yet in themselves they still remain the same.

I have also many things of a more interesting and secret nature which I will in confidence entrust to your examination, that may at least afford you matter of diversion to laugh at, and an opportunity of laughing me out of them likewise.

I have nothing more at heart at present than the propriety of pursuing a plan of economy, and of observing the strictest frugality for the future in all my proceedings. Tell me if you think my resolutions laudable, and what advantages I may expect to reap from a rigid adherence to them. You see I have only scrawled this hasty preparatory billet. Do you the same. It is the matter, not the manner, I care for.—I am with sincerity, yours affectionately,

ALEX. WILSON.

Monday, noon, July 21, 1800.”

“ Mr Charles Orr,

Milestown.

Dear Sir,—We don't always feel in a mood for conversation. Just so it is in writing. Sometimes the sprightly ideas

day. Rose half an hour before day. Sauntered abroad, surveying the appearance of the fields, and contemplating the progressive advances of morning, the appearance of the moon, &c., without suggesting or having suggested one sentiment of grateful adoration to the great Architect of the Universe, without learning one truth that I was before ignorant of. Wrought one solitary problem before breakfast, composed eight lines of rhyme at noon, and am now writing these observations near evening. Thus fourteen hours have passed almost unimproved away, and thus have thousands of precious hours so perished! Not one prayer said, not one thought of matrimony entered my mind. An old bachelor, verging to the gloomy regions of celibacy and old age, and clusters of dimple-cheeked, soft-eyed females in every log hut around, and sighing for a husband. O shame! By the Immortal Gods, time and youth and opportunities were not given to be so thrown away. We must improve time. We must make advances in some one or all of these important duties, which, Mr Sterne says, devoid of, a human being is undeserving the name Man. That is, to write a book, plant a tree, beget a child (I ought to have said marry a wife first), build a house, and learn something every day that he did not before know. Without this done, Sterne won't allow us to lay claim even to the name of *Man*. But while I am thus reprobating the waste of time, I am guilty of a double crime this moment, in losing my own time to write, what perhaps you will consider also lost time in reading.

Excuse blunders.—I am, my dear friend, yours sincerely,  
ALEX. WILSON.

Milestown Monastery, August 6, 1800."

The high spirits and prevailing sentiment of this letter are scarcely monastic, and were destined to receive an unexpected and serious check; for the next one, written about five weeks after, and in a feeble hand that confirms its intelligence, informs us of Wilson's having had such an illness as induced him to resign his situation. By the address, we learn that his friend had returned to the city.

“ Mr Charles Orr,

Care of Mr Dobson, Bookseller, second Street between  
Market and Chesnut Street, Philadelphia.

Milestown, Sept. 15, 1800.

Dear Sir,—The day on which the Trustees were to meet arrived, but I said not a word to either of them, partly through shame and partly through pride. About five in the evening they assembled, accompanied by a candidate for the school; a very genteel young man. They spoke of me looking much better than I did a few days before. I talked with the candidate about the average income of the school, which he had been told was at least fifty scholars a quarter. I told him what it had nearly averaged me, which never amounted to forty, one quarter with another. His own school contained at present forty-five, with a good dwelling-house. The Trustees said that I looked so well that, perhaps with a few days' more relaxation, I might be able to begin again myself. I told them that I had twice given up the school from the same reason, want of health, and if they could suit themselves with a person with a constitution better fitted to encounter the hard duties of a school, I was satisfied, but I was sorry still to part with them. I was attached to the children and to the people, and, if they would allow me one week more to ramble about, I would once more engage, though I should die in their service. My request was immediately acceded to, and I am once more the dominie of Milestown school.—I am most sincerely yours,  
ALEX. WILSON.”

This is a valuable and interesting letter, and shews the estimation in which he must have been held, both by the Trustees and the inhabitants of the place.

About ten days afterwards, on his landlord's visiting Philadelphia, he again writes Mr Orr to the same address:—

“ Dear Sir,—I take the opportunity of Mr ——'s going to town to write you a few lines by way of refreshing your memory, as I am afraid that you have forgot the mutual agreement we made, to correspond as often as convenient. I have

begun the old way again, have about 30 scholars, which number may increase to 40 before the quarter is concluded. I study none, and take my morning and evening ramble regularly. Our debating society commences again on Saturday first. The proposed question—"Is the cultivation of the vine an object worthy the attention of the American farmer?"—will produce I think an agreeable debate. I am anxious to hear from you. Do you spend any of your leisure hours with the puzzling chaps, algebra, trigonometry, &c., or are you wholly absorbed in the study of mechanics? You must write me particularly. I think I shall take a ride 15 or 20 miles on Saturday. I find riding agrees better with me than any other exercise. I always feel cheerful after it, and can eat confoundedly. Have you made any new discoveries in the Heaven above, or the earth beneath, with your telescope or microscope? I expect to hear from Billy in less than a week, as two persons have gone up more than three weeks ago. Do not forget to write.—Your sincere and affectionate friend,

ALEX. WILSON.

Milestown, Sept. 24, 1800."

For about eight months from this time, we again lose sight of the future Ornithologist, although it is evident from the commencement of the next letter of our series, that the correspondence of the friends had been continued. This letter has a special interest. In all the biographical memoirs of Wilson now before the world, one circumstance is recorded as being a strange one in the life of a man of such a temperament. "*He had never,*" says one of these, "*yielded to the soft but potent sovereignty of love.*" In this respect he is almost alone among the warm-hearted sons of song. Rarely does he write of love, and when he does, it is like a man who might have thought about it, as about any other interesting mental phenomenon, but had never experienced its subduing power." Another writes, "Like many sons of toil, he was not bound by very strong ties of sentiment to his native country; and what is a little remarkable in a poet's life, *he never formed any attachment of the heart;*" while a third tells us, "His morals

were correct, his piety sincere, and his affection for his natural or adopted friends no change of time or place could influence or alter. With the high born feelings of a poet, he had few of the defects that cling to the poetic character. *Female attachments he had none, or he wisely allowed them to hold him so lightly, as neither to interrupt his pursuits or disturb his peace.* To those who have read the letters we have just recorded, with apostrophising of “sweet charmers,” “endearing females,” and “dimple-checked, soft-eyed maidens,” this must sound somewhat strange. But, even supposing the statement to hold good as regards his previous life, it has fallen to us to shew that this element of romance was not to be wanting in the otherwise romantic life of Wilson, although there may have been unfortunate circumstances connected with it, as we are only allowed to gather. Of actual misconduct there is no evidence whatever; and in the too frequent instances of similar attachments in the lives of eminent men, very few indeed have acted with the same promptness and spirit of honour as Wilson, who, as we shall see, at once sacrificed his situation, and effectually and for ever, separated himself from the object of his regard. That such a mutual feeling should have insensibly grown, we can hardly wonder, when we consider his peculiar temperament and isolated life, and, what we believe was the fact, that the person referred to by him in the following letters, was a woman characterised by many excellent qualities.

“Mr Charles Orr,

Writing Master, Dock Street, Philadelphia.

My Dear Sir,—I have received all the Orations. I am indeed much obliged to your friendship, and request that you would come out this evening and stay with me till Sunday evening. I have matters to lay before you that have almost distracted me. Do come. I shall be so much obliged. Your friendship and counsel may be of the utmost service to me. I shall not remain here long. It is impossible I can. I have now no friend but yourself, and *one* whose friendship has involved

both in ruin or threatens to do so. You will find me in the schoolhouse.—I am, most affectionately yours,

ALEX. WILSON.

May 1st, 1801.”

In one of the biographies of him it is recorded, that “Wilson next changed his residence at Milestown for the village of Bloomfield, New Jersey;” and by another we are informed that, “about the beginning of 1802, Wilson removed to the village of Bloomfield, in the State of New Jersey, where he again taught a school.” This is a mistake, for, as the reader will presently see, he was settled there in the summer of 1801.

The reason of this change it has been our part to make thus public. In his own words, “it was impossible he could remain long” at Milestown, and accordingly, in little more than a month, the scene has changed.

“Mr Charles Orr,

Care of Mr Dobson, Bookseller, Philadelphia.

Bloomfield, near Newark, N. Jersey,

July 12th, 1801.

My dear Friend,—If this letter reach you it will inform you that I keep school at 12s per quarter, York currency, with 35 scholars, and pay 12s per week for board, and 4s additional for washing, and 4s per week for my horse. After I parted with ——, the Quakers not coming to any agreement about engaging me, I left Wrightstown and steered for New York through a country entirely unknown to me, visited many wretched hovels of schools by the way; in four days reached York, and from every person who knew the ——, I received the most disagreeable accounts of them, viz., that —— had by too great a fondness for gaming and sometimes taking his scholars with him, entirely ruined his reputation and lost his business, and from his own mouth I learned that he expected jail every day for debts to a considerable amount. And —— is lost for every good purpose in this world and abandoned to the most shameful and excessive drinking,

swearing and wretched company. He called on me last Thursday morning in company with a hocus pocus man for whom he plays the clarionet. New York swarms with newly imported Irishmen of all descriptions, clerks, schoolmasters, &c. The city is very sickly, ——— and all the rest to whom I spoke of you believed that your labour here would be even more unsuccessful than in Philadelphia, and related so many stories to that purpose that I was quite discouraged. Mr ——— attempted it there, but was obliged to remove, and is now in Boston wandering through the streets insane. I staid only one night in York, and being completely run out except about 3 11-penny bits, I took the first school from absolute necessity that I could find. I live six miles north from Newark and twelve miles from New York, in a settlement of canting, preaching, praying and sniveling ignorant Presbyterians. They pay their minister 250 pounds a year for preaching twice a week, and their teacher 40 dollars a quarter for the most spirit-sinking laborious work, 6, I may say 12 times weekly. I have no company, and live unknowing and unknown. I have lost all relish for this country, and, if Heaven spares me, I shall soon see the shores of old Caledonia. How happy I should be to have you beside me. I am exceedingly uneasy to hear from you. Dear Orr, make no rash engagements that may bind you for ever to this unworthy soil. I shall arrange all my affairs with Billy as expeditiously as I can. In the meantime I request you, my dear friend, to oblige me in one thing if you wish me well. Go out on Saturday to ———'s and try to get intelligence how Mr ———'s family comes on, without letting any one know that you have heard from me. Get all the particulars you can, what is said of me, and how Mrs ——— is, and every other information, and write me fully. I assure you I am very wretched, and this would give me the greatest satisfaction. ——— will tell you everything, but mention nothing of me to any body on any account. Conceal nothing that you hear, but inform me of everything. My dear friend, I beg you would oblige me in this. I am very miserable on this unfortunate account. I shall write you more fully on a variety of things I have to inform you of next week

or as soon as I hear from you. Direct as above dated. I shall try to get information from a friend in Albany how matters would do there.—I am, most sincerely, your affectionate friend while

ALEX. WILSON.

P.S.— ——— got the letter I wrote, but was so swallowed up in extravagance I suppose that he never replied to it.

Let us contrive a plan to leave this country and try old Scotia once more in company.

The bones of a mammoth or some gigantic animal are digging up here, of which I shall send the particulars in my next. I shall superintend the whole process.”

He hears from his friend, and, ten days after, writes the following letter, which is unusually interesting on many accounts:—

“Mr Charles Orr,

Care of Mr Dobson, Bookseller, Philadelphia.

Bloomfield, July 23, 1801.

My dear Friend,—I received yours last evening. O how blessed it is to have one friend on whose affection, in the day of adversity, we can confide! As to the reports circulated in the neighbourhood of Milestown, were I alone the subject of them they would never disturb me, but she who loved me dearer than her own soul, whose image is for ever with me, whose heart is broken for her friendship to me,—she must bear all with not one friend to whom she dare unbosom her sorrows. Of all the events of my life nothing ever gave me such inexpressible misery as this. O my dear friend, if you can hear anything of her real situation, and whatever it be disguise nothing to me. Take a walk up to ———’s, perhaps she has called lately there, and go out to ———’s on Saturday if possible. Let nobody whatever know that you have heard anything of me. In my last I told you ——— was on the threshold of the jail. He has now passed the threshold and is fairly cag’d. ——— is traversing the country with a hocus-pocus man in a poor scurvy plight playing the clarionet. The gentleman who dis-

covered the bones of which I spoke is a Mr Kenzie, who was sinking a well for his paper mill in a swamp supposed formerly to have been the bed of a small creek that runs near. Six feet from the surface, under a stratum of sand 4 inches deep, they found several bones apparently belonging to the tail, 6 inches in breadth, with part of a leg-bone measuring upwards of 7 inches diameter at the joint, part of a rib 4 feet long, and many fragments in a decayed state. For want of hands no farther search has yet been made, but it is intended to obtain the head and teeth if possible. The greatest curiosity in this State is the Falls at Paterson where the river, which is about 40 yards broad, flows along a bed of solid rock. A sudden earthquake or some great convulsion has split this rock asunder across the whole breadth of the river, 6 or 8 feet apart and upwards of 70 deep, down which the whole river roars with a noise like thunder. This place is but 8 miles distant, and I went alone on Saturday to see it. The cotton works are completely deserted. I looked in at the weaving shops and saw nothing but hens roosting on the breast beams, and everything desolate. While I was in York a teacher there offered me his school-room, benches, &c., with all the scholars, amounting to 40 or 45, for 60 dollars cash, as he wished to decline the business. It is needless to add that I declined the honour of the bargain. The school-house in which I teach is situated at the extremity of a spacious level plain of sand thinly covered with grass. In the centre of this plain stands a newly erected stone meeting-house, 80 feet by 60, which forms a striking contrast with my sanctum sanctorum which has been framed of logs some 100 years ago, and looks like an old sentry box. The scholars have been accustomed to great liberties by their former teacher. They used to put stones in his pocket, &c., &c. I was told that the people did not like to have their children punished, but I began with such a system of terror as soon established my authority most effectually. I succeed in teaching them to read, and I care for none of their objections. The following anecdote will give you an idea of the people's character. A man was taken sick a few weeks ago and got deranged. It

was universally said that he was bewitched by an old woman who lived adjoining. This was the opinion of the Dutch doctor who attended him, and at whose request a warrant was procured from the Justice for bringing the witch before the sick man, who, after tearing the old woman's flesh with his nails till the blood came, sent her home and afterwards recovered. This is a fact. The Justice who granted the warrant went through among the people with me. I intend to visit the poor woman myself and publish it to the world in the Newark newspapers for the amusement of the enlightened people of New Jersey. My dear Orr, I trust to your friendship for the intelligence I mentioned; write me fully as I will you on receipt. I left my great-coat with a Mr —— in Wrightstown where —— and I lodged. —— will tell you his name. I wish you would write for it without letting —— know anything of the matter. I left it in the stable. I owed him nothing. I shall be much obliged if you drop a line to him that it may be sent to Philadelphia, and this will be your warrant. Farewell. I shall write more fully next time.—  
Yours most sincerely,

ALEX. WILSON."

A fortnight<sup>12</sup> after, we have the following wanting the address, but what it was, he states in the immediately succeeding letter.

"Bloomfield, August 7, 1801.

My dear Friend,—I received yours yesterday. I entreat you keep me on the rack no longer. Can you not spare *one* day to oblige me so much? Collect every information you can, but drop not a hint that you know anything of me. If it were possible you could see *her* or any one who *had*, it would be an unspeakable satisfaction to me. My dear Orr, the world is lost for ever to me and I to the world. No time nor distance can ever banish her image from my mind. It is for ever present with me, and my heart is broken with the most melancholy reflexions. Whatever you may think of me, my dear friend, do not refuse me this favour to know how she is. Were

your situation mine, I declare from the bottom of my soul I would hazard everything to oblige you. I leave the management of it to yourself. But do not forget me. ——'s debts amount, as I have been informed, to two or three hundred pounds. —— is weaving in an old cellar at Elizabeth Town. My school increases: it is now 40. I have done nothing yet toward visiting the supposed witch. Some day soon I shall make it my business. There is a copper mine about 300 yards from my school-house which was lately wrought and many tuns of ore obtained from it. It is now neglected. Among the other effects of superstition here there lives just beside me a man who, being the seventh son, has power to cure the most inveterate 'king's evil' by simply laying his hands on it. He has had three patients since my coming, and tells me he has cured hundreds. He says he can feel the disorder ascending his arms and commonly is indisposed while performing a cure on his patients. They have come 100 miles to him. He is now a man of forty-five, and has practised this 'laying on of hands' since he was a boy. The people with whom I live are the veriest zealots in religion, in praying, singing psalms and hymns. I was urged to ask blessing at table the first-day and refused, but was insisted on till through mere shame I was obliged to perform, and am obliged to officiate every evening. God forgive me, for my heart is as distant from my lips then as from you to me. I consider it a monstrous hardship. I read the few lines of poetry you sent me to the old fellow, who wanted me to find out a tune for them that he might have the godly comfort of singing them by way of hymn, which shall certainly be done. As for myself I have recourse to a thousand expedients to unburden my mind. I am really sometimes almost distracted on seeing how and where I am situated. Sometimes I try to turn it over to diversion, as in the following verses which I wrote this morning, and enclose without preface or apology as you know my situation:—

Here ox-headed ignorance gapes and is courted,  
 And curst superstition with visage distorted;  
 Sweet science and truth while these monsters they cherish,  
 Like the Babes in the Wood are abandoned to perish.

Here ten times a day they are hymning and praying,  
 And 'glory to God' most religious paying.  
 Should misery implore—that's a quite different story.  
 They lock up the cash—but to God give the glory.

Young Venus ne'er lent to our females her graces ;  
 Like a duck's is their gait, like old Punkins their faces,  
 No heart-winning looks to decoy or to charm us,  
 Their teeth like corruption,—their breath, O enormous !

Here old wither'd witches crawl round ev'ry cabin,  
 And butter from churns are eternally grabbing ;  
 Ghosts, wizards, seventh sons, too, to cure the king's evil,  
 One touch of their hand—and 'tis gone to the Devil.

Here the grim man of God, with a voice like a trumpet,  
 His pulpit each Sunday bestampt and bethumpet,  
 On all but his *own* pours damnation and ruin,  
 And heaves them to Satan for roasting and stewing.

There lonely and sad in his centry box standing,  
 The windows unglazed, . . .  
 A wretched exile murmurs A. B. C. grieving,  
 In sounds slow and solemn from morning to even.

Before you write take a walk up to ——'s as if to enquire for me, and try if you can get any information there. I know that she used sometimes to go and see her. Forgive me, my dear friend, if in anything I have offended you. The more of mankind I see the more sincerely I value your friendship, and trust it shall only dissolve when time to me shall be no longer.

ALEX. WILSON."

About a month having passed, he again writes :

" Mr Charles Orr,

Care of Mr Dobson, Bookseller, Philadelphia.

Bloomfield, Sept. 14, 1801.

My dear Friend,—The last letter I wrote you I fondly thought would be answered, but I have waited now three weeks in vain. It was directed to you at M'Phail's China Store, Dock Street. I conjure you, my dear friend, by all that friendship which I always flattered myself you had for me that you will write me on receipt of this. ——'s father arrived here last week from Scotland and found his two sons, one in drunkenness and poverty, the other in a jail. Think with yourself what were the feelings of the poor old man on

this occasion. — is since liberated. I remain here perfectly secluded from the world. Your letters were all my company and amusement, but you have deprived me of even that. As I have now no hopes of ever being in Philadelphia, I ask it as a last favour that you would go out to the house where I lodged and request them to bring my trunk into Philadelphia that you may send it to me to New York. If my nephew has written me it will be in Mr M'Innes', where I wish you would enquire. I again implore you to let me know how the family I mentioned are doing. You promised you would, and I shall take it as the utmost kindness. Orr, I wish it were possible for you and I to unite our talents and exertions as we have often thought of doing. Would it not do by making a bold push? I can engage the reading, grammatical, and what other parts we should agree on—you the rest. I will with pleasure join you if you are willing, for if I must teach I will strain every effort to make something of it. This would be the best moment to attempt it. Think on the business, and I shall dispose of my horse, and unite with you to rise or fall together. There are hardly two on earth better acquainted with each other, and I think in conscience, without boasting of myself or flattering you, that we would do well. It is want of confidence alone that has kept us from both fame and fortune in our respective pursuits. At all events write me per return of post. A French gentleman from St Domingo has been with me to-day from Newark to teach him English. He is almost unintelligible. I have amused myself since I came here with writing detached pieces of poetry for the *Newark Centinel*, and have grown into some repute with the editor and his readers. A song entitled 'My Landlady's Nose' has been reprinted in a New York paper, and in a periodical publication called the *Museum*. Please to let the circumstances of the ——'s be confined to your own breast. You may let —— know of the old gentleman's arrival. Once more I ask you to oblige me with an answer to this, and to excuse the hurried way in which it has been scribbled. In return for your next, I will send you something more entertaining. I am so uneasy to know how you come on, that I am

every night conversing with you in my sleep.—I am, my dear friend, yours most sincerely,

ALEXANDER WILSON.”

Five months now pass before we hear further of the subject of our notice, and then, after his recent statement of having no expectations of ever being again in Philadelphia, we are surprised to find him writing his next communication in that city. We are told in the Lives of him, that, soon after going to Bloomfield, he had heard of a more desirable situation at a short distance from Grey's Ferry, and within a few miles of Philadelphia, and upon application to the Trustees of it had been appointed. Here it was that the tide of his fortune was to turn, and that he was to conceive the design and make a commencement of his great undertaking. We now, through this correspondence, learn definitely that he entered on his professional duties at Grey's Ferry on the 25th of February, 1802, and it is probable that it was during the time that he was in the city on the matter of this situation that the two following letters were written. We find also that a cloud had fallen on the friendship between Wilson and Orr, and are led to believe that, influenced by unfavourable reports connected with the attachment formed at Milestown, the latter must have received his friend coldly.

“Philadelphia, Feb. 7, 1802.

Mr Orr,—I have no faults to reproach you with. If I had, a consciousness of the number of my own would justly impose silence on me. My disposition is to love those who love me with all the warmth of enthusiasm, but to feel with the keenest sensibility the smallest appearance of neglect or contempt from those I regard. Of your friendship I have a thousand times been truly proud, have boasted of your intimacy with me and your professional abilities almost wherever I went. I have poured out my soul into your bosom. If I have met or only supposed that I have in the moments of anxiety and deep mental perturbation met with cold indifference from the only quarter where I expected the sweets of friendship, they little

know my heart who would expect it to make no impression on me. But Mr Orr, you can never make me your enemy, and alas I have friendship for no one. Distress preys continually on my mind. I have no friend, I ask for none. No friend on earth can ever remove my source of misery, and my acquaintance with you would but distress you. I wish you every happiness possible, and I doubt not but much is reserved for you. Above all I wish you to banish from your mind all suspicions of disesteem. I entertain none. I know there are people who are happy in insinuating their ideas to you, but I regard *their* love or hatred with equal indifference. I think so much necessary as explanation, but no more. You shall always share the good wishes and regard of

ALEXANDER WILSON.

Mr Charles Orr.”

Whatever its cause, this difference between the friends was not to be of much longer duration. In a week the shadow had entirely passed.

“ Mr Charles Orr, Philadelphia.

Philadelphia, Feb. 14, 1802.

Dear Sir,—It is too much. I cannot part from you after what you have said. I renounce with pleasure every harsh thought I hastily entertained of you. From this moment let all past grievances be eternally forgotten. For myself I give them to the winds. I know the value of a friend, and of such a friend, too well to hope ever again for another on losing you. What is the world to that solitary being whose happiness only glads his own bosom and who weeps neglected? Its joys to such an insulated wretch are tasteless, its sad reverses almost insupportable. Friendship sweetens the most common occurrences of life, multiplies all our pleasures, lightens all our losses. When the sun of our prosperity sinks even in the deepest midnight of misfortune friendship sheds its cheering radiance around the unhappy wanderer, fills his heart with serenity, and points to happier prospects. I hope, my dear sir, you will excuse the melancholy turn my letter has taken.

I cannot help it. It is always so, this sometime. I never spent ten weeks more unhappy than these have been, and it will be some time before my mind recovers itself. Past hopes, present difficulties, and a gloomy futurity have almost disarranged my ideas and too deeply affected me. The conduct and conversation of those who perhaps think me a dependant for residence is such that my spirit can never assimilate with. Amidst all these your friendship returns to me once more like the blessed beams of heaven after a night of clouds and darkness. Let us now, dear sir, mutually forgive and henceforth enjoy the sweet interchange of conversation and unreserved sociability. Rocks and islands may separate for a while the stream that has long been united, but these past, the congenial waters will again meet, mingle, and be blended together. A small accident may break a bone, but once judiciously reunited it is stronger than ever, *so be our friendship*. I shall leave this at your lodgings to-night, and to-morrow evening after nine shall call on you and take a walk together. On the 25th of this month I remove to the schoolhouse beyond Gray's Ferry to succeed the present teacher there. I shall recommence that painful profession once more with the same gloomy sullen resignation that a prisoner re-enters his dungeon or a malefactor mounts the scaffold; fate urges him, necessity me. The agreement between us is, they engage to make the school equal to 100 dollars per quarter, but not more than 50 are to be admitted. The present pedagogue is a noisy, outrageous fat old captain of a ship, who has taught these ten years in different places. You may hear him bawling 300 yards off. The boys seem to pay as little regard to it as ducks to the rumbling of a stream under them. I shall have many difficulties to overcome in establishing my own rules and authority. But perseverance overcometh all things.—I am, with sincere esteem, your still affectionate friend,

ALEX. WILSON.

P.S.—Your coming up this afternoon has altered my resolution of not calling on you till to-morrow evening, Let it be this afternoon or evening. I am a little engaged till then.—A. W.”

We now come to our last letter, written at Gray's Ferry within a year of the date of the next letter of Wilson that we know of, June 1803, and in which we have the very earliest intimation of his purpose with regard to the Ornithology of his adopted land. "Close application to the duties of my profession, which I have followed since November 1795, has deeply injured my constitution; the more so that my rambling disposition was the worst calculated of any one in the world for the austere regularity of a teacher's life. I have had many pursuits since I left Scotland,—mathematics, the German language, music, drawing, &c., *and I am about to make a collection of all our forest birds.*" At the period of the letter now to be inserted, his ambition evidently pointed in another direction.\*

" Mr Charles Orr,

At Mr Dixon's, Dock Street, Philadelphia.

July 15, 1802, Gray's Ferry.

My worthy Friend,—I expected you all last Sunday, and walked out towards the ferry several times to meet you. I hope you were entertained more to your satisfaction than you could have been in the company of an insignificant country dominie rendered peevish and melancholy by the daily cares and confinement of a most consuming employment. However, as I once told you before, I have a variety of resources in times of irritation and perplexity, but in none have I found consolation such as to banish every pedantic pesteration as in renewing my old pursuit of the Muses. My harp is new strung, and my soul glows with more ardour than ever to emulate those immortal bards who have gone before me. I have transcribed a variety of old pieces that have never been published, at least not in my book, which gave me the most exquisite sensations, not from their excellence, but by recalling ideas, and *interesting* ones too, that have been, I may say, forgotten ever since my arrival in America. I have also collected all my productions since '94; these I intend to polish

\* This letter was published several years ago in one of the volumes of the *Glasgow University Album*.

and improve occasionally, and to add to them all those contained in my last edition which I think meritorious, and to copy the whole when corrected to my mind in one volume. I have an irresistible desire, which seems to come from inspiration alone, to attempt some Scots pastorals descriptive of the customs and rural manners of our native country, interspersed with scenes of humour, love and tenderness. In Burns, Ferguson, Ramsay, and all our Scottish songs these are the charms that captivate every heart. I believe a Scotsman better fitted for descriptions of rural scenes than those of any other nation on earth. His country affords the most picturesque and striking scenery; his heart and imagination warm and animated, strong and rapid in its conceptions, its attachments, and even prejudices, his taste is highly improved by the numberless pathetic ballads and songs handed down from generation to generation. There is not an ignorant ploughman in Scotland but who has a better taste and relish for a pastoral, particularly if interwoven with a love intrigue, than most of the pretended *literati* of America. Where is the country that has ever equalled Scotland in the genuine effusion of the pastoral muse, or where so many tears of joy, sympathy, and admiration have been shed by the humblest peasants over her bewitching strains? Had Thomson not possessed this ardent spirit of enthusiasm his Seasons would never have seen that immortality to which they are so justly entitled; but he was a Scotsman and glow'd with all their energy of enthusiasm while ranging o'er the beauties of nature. But both Thomson and Burns, Ramsay and Ferguson, with all who have yet followed them, have left a thousand themes unsung equally interesting with the best of their descriptions, a thousand pictures of rustic felicity that will yet be pourtrayed by the striking pencil of some future genius. My heart swells, my soul rises to an elevation I cannot express, to think I may yet produce some of these glowing wilds of rural scenery—some new Paties, Rogers, Glauds, and Simons, that will rank with these favourites of my country when their author has mixed with his kindred clay; that my name will be familiar in farms and cottages, in circles of taste and at

scenes of merriment five hundred years hence, when the statues of bloody ambition are mouldered and forgotten. By heavens! the idea is transporting, and such a recompense is worth all the misfortunes, penury, and deprivations here that the most wretched sons of science have ever suffered. But I beg pardon for occupying so much of your time. Come out on Saturday or Sunday morning. Leave that cursed town at least one day. It is the most striking emblem of purgatory, at least to me, that exists. No poor soul is happier to escape from bridewell than I to smell the fresh air and gaze over the green fields after a day or two's residence in Philadelphia, were it not attended by the regret of parting from my friend, whose obliged and unalterable brother I am while

ALEX. WILSON."

The next published letters after this,—to Mr Lawson, the engineer, and Mr Bartram, the naturalist and botanist, whose gardens and residence were in the neighbourhood of Wilson's school,—show him, to use his own language, "earnestly bent on pursuing his plan of making a collection of all the birds in that part of America." Henceforward he had a great fixed aim, and in it the sympathy and assistance of eminent men. His American biographer recording the fact of his being liable to seasons of great despondency and depression, and attributing it to his being "addicted to the writing of verses and to music," says that his friends, seeing his dangerous state through this dejection, suggested drawing as a substitute for these pursuits, and that Mr Bartram recommended him to attempt the sketching of birds, which succeeded beyond all expectation. This new chapter of Wilson's life has given a better reason for his mental trouble.

After traversing about ten thousand miles, and enduring alone the most trying perils, privations, and fatigue for many years, Wilson had concluded the materials of his nine noble volumes, and seen all of them but the last published, when his death suddenly occurred on the 23d of August, 1813, and when he was 47 years old. As his first act on landing in America, in the shooting of a red-headed woodpecker, was an

appropriate commencement to his career, so the reported circumstances causing his death close it fittingly. He was sitting in a friend's house at the window one day, we are told, when his keen eye caught a glimpse of a rare bird that he had long yearned to see. Seizing his gun, he rushed out, and was soon engaged in an exciting pursuit of it, during which he swam across a river. He succeeded in securing it, but at the cost of his life. A severe cold had been caught, which was succeeded by dysentery, and in ten days the sensitive and intellectual countenance, and tall graceful form, of our enthusiastic fellow countryman, lay silent under the hand of death. It had been his wish to be "buried in some rural spot where the birds might sing over his grave;" but this was not known in time to be acted on, and his dust lies in the Cemetery of the Swedish Church in Southwark, Philadelphia, whither his remains were conveyed with public honours.

**Wilson, Alexander**

**"Letter from Lexington"  
p. 499-519. June 1810.**

**Port folio, ser. 3, v. 3,**





