

Alexander Wilson Returns to the Academy

Alan Brady

The 1913 *Cassinia* contains a photograph of a statuette of Alexander Wilson, sculpted by Alexander Milne Calder, that was on display in the library of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

In the delightful prose of DVOC founder Witmer Stone, it depicted the ornithologist, Wilson, "bending over with one foot on a boulder upon which his gun and note-book are resting, while his cup and knapsack are on the ground; in one hand he holds a pencil, in the other a freshly killed bird, which he is studying intently. Mr. Calder informs me that the gun was copied from Wilson's own fowling-piece, ... while the features of the ornithologist were based on a study of all available engravings."

Calder's work was first exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts of Philadelphia in the 1870s. After it was again exhibited in Philadelphia, it remained in the Calder home until it became a gift to the ANSP in 1913, and was displayed in the library. Several years later, it was placed in storage for fear of damage to the vulnerable plaster.

Its existence appeared to be forgotten until the 1980s, when Carol Spawn, archivist in the



ANSP library, unearthed in the files the history of the missing statuette. With her assistance, we traced its history.

Among the statuette's admirers while it was on display here was Dr. Arthur Allen, a founder

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of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University, who requested it after it was stored. So Alexander Wilson went to Cornell on permanent loan.

Once in Ithaca, the plaster continued to disintegrate, and, in 1962, a bronze copy was cast, and the original was stashed in Dr. Allen's garage. After Dr. Allen's demise, the contents of his garage, including the original statuette, apparently were hauled away by a trash collector.

Years later, the story is told, this trashman happened upon the bronze Wilson that stood in the Laboratory of Ornithology and noted the similarity to the copy that now stood in his back yard.

Edward S. Brinkley, who was teaching at Cornell in 1993, searched in vain for the statuette but finally ran out of clues as to its whereabouts. It was lost forever.

We decided to ask to borrow the bronze to make a duplicate for the Academy and, with the aid of many persons, we moved the bronze to the Johnson Atelier in Princeton, New Jersey, where a hydrocal duplicate was made and delivered to the Academy on December 5, 1995. The bronze was then returned to Cornell.

The reinforced statuette is now displayed outside the Academy Library on the second floor. It was presented to the Academy as a gift from the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club.

It should hold up well, if not unduly disturbed.

The creator of this splendid and delicate work of art was Alexander Milne Calder (1846-1923). He was the first in a dynasty of sculptors, including his son Stirling and grandson Sandy. The senior Calder arrived from Scotland in 1868 at the age of 21 and settled in Philadelphia. Among

his famous works in this city is the sculpture of William Penn that stands atop City Hall.

Alexander Wilson, also a Scotsman, died in Philadelphia at the age of 47 in 1813 and is buried at Gloria Dei, Old Swedes Church, near the intersection of Delaware and Washington Avenues. He spent only the last ten years of his life endeavoring to illustrate and comment on "all our finest birds." His nine-volume *American Ornithology* is one of the first scientific works of our new country and may be seen in the Free Public Library of Philadelphia's Rare Book Department.

For that pioneering work, he wrote portions of the text and completed 76 plates of more than 300 individual birds, as well as helping to hand-color the plates for each of several hundred original sets.

It was Calder's dream that a full-size statue of Wilson be made from the statuette and that it be placed in Fairmount Park. Dr. Stone suggested it be placed outside the Academy, overlooking Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

A full-size statue would be a fine tribute both to Wilson, an early member of the Academy, and to Calder, for his splendid work of art.

Among those whose help make the statuette's move possible were Scott Sutcliff, executive director of the laboratory; Dr. Frank Gill, then head of the Ornithology Department at the Academy; Walter Peoples, whose truck and driving were invaluable; and Thomas Reeves, who added the extra mechanical lifting power needed.

We also wish to thank the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences, the DVOC, Sally Conyne, Robert Sehl, Jean and Stephen Wing and others who materially aided the cause. □