

JOHN ELIOT THAYER.

1862-1933.

BY JOHN C. PHILLIPS.

LANCASTER, in Massachusetts, has been identified with the Thayer family for nearly a century and a half. It stands there today, an aristocrat among towns, solidly planted near the west bank of the Nashua River some thirty-five miles from Boston. Its comfortable homes, well-kept lawns and shrubbery, above all its splendid shade trees, bear mute testimony to the loving care of a generation of Thayers now unhappily gone. And among these none will be longer remembered than John Eliot Thayer.

In a part of the world where rural centers long ago lost their cultured leaders and much of the old social tradition, John Thayer stands out as the finest example of what a New England country gentleman ought to be. Indeed I can think of no other alive today who is filling quite the same niche that he did.

People of means now identify themselves almost wholly with city life and city interests, migrating to the country for short summer seasons, but John fixed upon Lancaster and his bird collections as almost his sole interests. In Lancaster he could be found winter and summer, in fair weather or foul, at his home on George Hill Road, and his fellow townsmen knew that in case of need his genial spirit would not fail them. He despised the city. In several places in his little diary of winter bird notes appear remarks such as this: "Had to go to Boston, how I hate it."

Lancaster is an old town. It was settled by colonists from Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1643, who probably were attracted by the rich bottom lands along the river. Even today when New England agriculture has reached a very low ebb, those fertile meadows produce fine crops of hay and vegetables, while on the slopes of the hills are flourishing orchards of Mackintosh and Baldwin apple trees. In some of these orchards John Thayer loved to work.

The town runs mostly along a single street for a mile or more and in its southern part stands the beautiful Thayer Museum of Or-

nithology where the huge collection of North American birds was housed.

John Eliot Thayer was born in Boston in April 1862 and died in Lancaster July 22, 1933. His grandfather, Reverend Nathaniel Thayer, came to Lancaster from Hampton, New Hampshire, and began preaching there in 1792.

John graduated from the Hopkinson School in Boston and from Harvard with the class of 1885. He was first marshall of his class and one of its most popular members. He was given an honorary A.M. from Harvard in 1910. He married Miss Evelyn Duncan Forbes in 1886 and soon after, in 1888, moved into the large cheerful house, on George Hill Road, where with his family he spent the best part of his life. He is survived by Mrs. Thayer and five children, all married.

It seems rather odd to find that John was not actively interested in birds when he was a boy. I dare say he went through the usual stages of nest and egg collecting, but he seems to have dropped that interest and not to have taken it up again for some time. During his college period he, with his brother Bayard, maintained large kennels on George Hill Road where they raised fox terriers, deer hounds and old-fashioned English bull dogs.

Next followed an absorbing interest in horses which lasted through the middle nineties. In 1892 he bought the famous trotting stallion, Ralph Wilkes (2.06 $\frac{3}{4}$) who died in 1895. Then followed a stallion named Electricity (2.17 $\frac{3}{4}$). After this he purchased Baron Wilkes from a Kentucky breeder, reported at that time as the greatest living son of the renowned George Wilkes. At this time John Thayer was President of the New England Trotting Horse Breeders' Association and of the Worcester East Agriculture Society. In the late nineties he turned from horses to his permanent interest in birds.

At first his aim in ornithology was chiefly to get together a collection of all the local birds and he paid special attention to nests and eggs. About this time his eldest son was of an age to go into the field and John was keen on showing the local avifauna to him. Soon, however, his interest broadened so as to include the whole of North America. His collections were at first housed in several wooden buildings close to his home, but when these became unsafe

and crowded he built the beautiful brick building in the town of South Lancaster and opened it to the public in November, 1904. The lower floor contained his little office, all his skin, nest and egg cabinets and a few habitat groups of local birds. The upper floor was devoted to a very complete mounted collection from all of North America.

In the visitors' book of the Thayer Museum appear the names of nearly all the ornithologists of the time, and it is interesting to note that in spite of the fact that Lancaster thirty years ago was rather far off the beaten path, more than ten thousand visitors came to the museum in the first six years. After that no tally seems to have been kept.

From now on John strove in every way to make his collections as complete as possible with large series of beautifully prepared specimens. He sent out collectors to Alaska, north-eastern Siberia, the Queen Charlotte Islands, Lower California and northern Mexico. In 1931 the whole of this collection was given to the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy at Harvard, but it is to be hoped that the Lancaster Museum, with at least a synoptic collection of mounted birds, will remain as a memorial to his enthusiasm. His library of ornithology was kept in his house, all save a few working books. This was sold and dispersed in 1931.

Space is lacking in which to enumerate more than a few of the outstanding rarities in the Thayer collection, but among them may be mentioned a magnificent mounted specimen of the Labrador Duck, another of the Great Auk with eleven eggs of that species, four specimens of the rare western race of the Carolina Parakeet, a series of Eskimo Curlew, a series of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and Imperial Woodpeckers; eggs of the California Condor, the Surf Bird, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and a set of Knot's eggs taken by Admiral Peary on his last trip to the Arctic.

The Thayer museum was also enriched by some very fine original Audubon paintings which have already gone to the Museum in Cambridge.

He had been an Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union since 1898 and was elected a Member in 1905. All his important contributions were published with Outram Bangs as co-author.

And now a few words as to the real John Thayer. You felt

rather than saw his easy, beaming presence almost before you were aware that anyone else was in the room. His simplicity and directness, rarest of human attributes, were almost childlike, but they served to put any group of people immediately at ease. It was not what John said or did at a meeting, for he was far too modest to trumpet his own views; it was his comfortable presence that gave us all a sense of well-being.

With children he had a rare gift. Open-hearted and simple himself, he won their love and confidence without effort and the hosts of letters in which his youthful friends expressed their sorrow after his death show better than anything else how "Uncle John" was appreciated.

He almost never traveled, and he never went on an ornithological collecting trip. Once when a youth he went to Europe and this with several early journeys to the West and to Mexico seem to have satisfied any slight curiosity for sight-seeing that he may have had. In one place in his winter bird diary he says under March 17: "Off for Florida for two weeks. This is a mistake for the weather here (Lancaster) is like summer and what more can anyone ask?"

The winter and early spring birds seen around his orchards and at his feeding boxes gave him the keenest possible pleasure and these with his ever growing family (he could boast of eighteen grandchildren before he died), as well as positions in town, church and library, and in his beloved museum, kept him busy every day of the year.

John was not an especially keen sportsman, but he was an excellent shot. He belonged to the grand old Currituck Club and went there for a two weeks' duck shoot every year, until five or six years ago. Then he found that times had changed too much. His old shooting companions were mostly dead and he complained that cocktails and cards and federal regulations had ruined the less sophisticated customs of the early days that he loved so well.

In his bird journal there is only one allusion to his sporting proclivities. On January 6, 1898: "Shot a rabbit and brought him home for a pie." January 9—"Had my rabbit pie today. Whether the cook doesn't know how to cook rabbits or whether this one was as old as the Ancient Mariner, I can't say. At any rate it was very

tough and gave me a terrible indigestion; moral: don't shoot rabbits." Many of the winter bird notes, written in a beautifully small, rounded hand, are touched with a quaint humor and would bear repeating here if space allowed.

John enjoyed robust health up to the time of his severe illness early in 1928. His stocky, athletic figure was full of energy as the following quotation taken from his diary of July 22, 1926, when he was sixty-four years old, will prove: "Temperature 103°, the hottest day to date in the history of Boston. I worked all day in my orchard thinning apples. It was 100° in the shade at my house. I dismissed my help at four o'clock, but worked myself until six. Pretty good for an old fellow."

No notice of John Thayer's life would be complete without some reference to the positions of trust which he filled in Lancaster and elsewhere. He was the oldest Vice-President in point of service in the Massachusetts Forest and Park Association (Vice-President for Worcester County since 1908). He was also for many years a trustee of that ancient Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, dating back to the eighteenth century. He served for at least ten years on the Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Fish and Game Association. He held the position of tree warden of Lancaster ever since the State Tree Warden law went into effect in 1901. But that was not the beginning of his active interest in trees for in his first report he says "For the last ten years, as a member of the Road Commission, I have taken this department under my care, so that in reality we have had a tree warden for a good many years."

As a member of the Board of Trustees of the Lancaster Town Library, he served from 1888 to 1933, without doubt the longest individual membership on any board in the town. But this is not the most important, for as the resolution upon his death says, it was his regularity of attendance, his generosity, tact and cheerfulness that made his long service so noteworthy. As a trustee of the Clinton Hospital Association, as a Selectman of his own town for thirty years, as President of the Lancastriana Society and as benefactor of his local church his memory will last for many years. During the War he served on the draft board of Division 14 for

Clinton, Leominster and Lancaster, financing the office work entirely from his own pocket.

It would be impossible to list or even hint at his benefactions save to say that after attending to charities at home in Lancaster, as was fitting, his name was found wherever worthwhile philanthropy asked for aid. But chiefly, his interests were in the domain of agriculture, horticulture, conservation and the study of birds. His best friends were the men of his own town and the few ornithologists who were closest to his heart, Outram Bangs and William Brewster. Outram's death was one of the severest blows of later years, from which I dare say he never recovered.

John was never able to lead an active existence after the winter of 1927-28. Although naturally gay and light-hearted, life with its ever increasing limitations was too much for him. Fortunately he was spared a long, painful illness for he was actually confined to his bed for a few weeks only.

And so we must leave him, safe in the knowledge that his rare qualities will be perpetuated in the character of his descendants and in the hearts of his friends. He was in very fact the first and probably the last "John of Lancaster."

"God gave all men all earth to love,
But since our hearts are small,
Ordained for each one spot should prove
Beloved over all;
That as He watched Creation's birth,
So we, in godlike mood,
May of our love create our earth
And see that it is good."

Wenham, Mass.