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LAFRESNAYE¹

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Plates 10-11

NOËL-FRÉDÉRIC-ARMAND-ANDRÉ, BARON DE LA FRESNAYE, French ornithologist, was born on July 24, 1783, at the Château de La Fresnaye in Falaise, Département du Calvados, Normandie, France. He died in his ancestral home on July 14, 1861.

Frédéric de Lafresnaye, as he called himself, belonged to one of the most prominent and best families of France, which gave to Normandie historians and magistrates and to France military leaders and poets. He was a descendant of Jean, Vauquelin de La Fresnaye, celebrated French poet of the sixteenth century, presiding magistrate and Lieutenant Générale in the Baillage de Caen; and also of Nicolas, Sieur des Yveteaux, Lieutenant Générale at Caen, Preceptor to the Duc de Vendome (the son of Henri IV) and later to the Dauphin (Louis XIII). His father was André de La Fresnaye, Chevalier de Saint Louis, famous hippologist and author of historical works on Normandie and Falaise.

Born to fortune, Frédéric de Lafresnaye, like many another in his circumstances, might have lived a life of idleness and pleasure. From his earliest youth, however, he clearly showed higher aims in his pursuits. He had continually before him the good example of his distinguished father who gave much of his time to historical research.

¹ The following paper was prepared by the late author following extensive research on the subject, but the manuscript was mislaid after his death (1936) and has only recently been found and submitted for publication.—Ed.

But young Lafresnaye was not destined to follow the footsteps of his father nor those of his illustrious ancestors. From the very beginning he directed his energies along other lines that pointed unmistakably to his love of nature. When the children of the neighborhood brought him small animals they had caught, he took keen delight in stuffing and mounting them, and this amusement soon became a passion with him.

During his early life he devoted himself not only to ornithology, but more especially to entomology, conchology, and geology. In his studies he had the good fortune to find, even within the boundaries of the town of Falaise, two excellent guides—M. de Bazoches and M. de Brébisson, the latter the father of the well-known botanist. Thus initiated into the branches of science which interested him most, Lafresnaye—young, active, independent—resolved to delve deeper into the mysteries of nature. It was then that he, in company with other young naturalists, under the leadership of M. Leon Dufour, made long, successful excursions into the Pyrenees, collecting day by day the specimens which formed the nuclei of his future magnificent collections.

There could no longer be any doubt about his lifework. Natural history became the chosen field of his intellectual pursuits. Irresistibly drawn, he yielded to its allurements and gradually widened the circle of his acquaintances with men of science. He came to know M. Dejean, the noted entomologist, and entered into correspondence with him, as a result of which his collections were enriched by many rare species. Entomology became his favorite study, and to it he applied the best part of his efforts.

At about this time, he married Mademoiselle de Bazoches, the daughter of one of his first masters in natural history. But his happiness did not last long, for his young bride died within a short time (about 1825), leaving him a daughter, Louise. To drown his sorrows, he applied himself more than ever to his scientific studies, and began a series of excursions into the Alps. While on one of these expeditions on the shores of Lake Bourzet in Savoie, he had an opportunity to buy a collection of European birds. Then and there he determined to devote his energies entirely to ornithology, and the few hundred birds of this humble collection became the nucleus of an ornithological cabinet that grew to be one of the most magnificent in Europe. Lafresnaye was thus more than forty-two years old when he decided to embark upon an ornithological career. Yet soon the ornithological journals began to receive valuable contributions from his pen.

But much as he loved his science, he loved his home more and

sought the happiness of family life in a second marriage. He married Mademoiselle Tsaure de Montbeillard, granddaughter of Guéneau de Montbeillard, distinguished litterateur and naturalist, friend of Buffon and collaborator with him in the ornithological part of his 'Histoire Naturelle.'

With unusual devotion to his family and pride in the affairs of his native town, Lafresnaye continued his studies of the birds of the world. He left his fireside only for short excursions into his own and neighboring provinces, to the Pyrenees, the Alps, or to Holland and England. He never visited America, in whose birds he was so much interested, and never undertook long voyages to distant lands in quest of ornithological information. Rather he contented himself with the reports of naturalists who went on such expeditions, from which he was able to draw the interesting conclusions that attracted the attention of the scientific world and won for him the distinction he so richly merited.

When he came from his halls or his natural history galleries he enjoyed taking care of the waterfowl which he had introduced on his place when there was talk of a 'Jardin d'acclimation.' He loved his trees, his flowers, and his gardens. As a private citizen, he was known to all in his native town. He had constantly at heart the welfare of his community and was a friend to all institutions of merit, ever ready to oblige and with a wholesome sympathy towards everything that might be of advantage or glory to the town he loved. This was clearly evident in the various assemblies in which he always took a prominent part, whether municipal, agricultural, or academic.

As a scientific man, Lafresnaye was considered one of the foremost ornithologists of his time. His opinion was frequently sought by his contemporaries, and his contributions to ornithological literature were of the greatest importance. He published chiefly in the: *Revue de Zoologie*, 1838-1848; *Magazin de Zoologie*, 1832-1845; *Revue et Magazin de Zoologie*, 1849-1856; *Écho du Monde Savant*, 1834-1837; *Séances Publiques*, 1832-1836; *Mémoires de la Société Académique*, 1836-?; *Dictionnaire Universelle d'Histoire Naturelle*, 1841-1844.

Minor writings are scattered in: *Mémoires de la Société Linnéenne*; *Ferussac Bulletin*; *Congrès Scientifique de France*; *Annuaire des cinq départements de l'ancienne Normandie*; *Annales de la Société Entomologique*; *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London*; *Contributions to Ornithology* (of Wm. Jardine); and probably many other obscure publications.

Lafresnaye gave much time to a study of the species described by Vieillot in the 'Nouveau Dictionnaire d'Histoire Naturelle.' This

work appears to have been neglected by the ornithologists of the early part of the nineteenth century and thus Lafresnaye was able to rectify errors in nomenclature and establish the priority of many of the names proposed by Vieillot, based on the works of Azara.

Soon after his interest in birds had largely obscured his other hobbies, he was invited by Alcide d'Orbigny to collaborate with him in the identification and classification of the splendid lot of birds brought back by this naturalist from South America, and with this circumstance appears to have begun his interest in American birds. From that time forward, he was a regular buyer from Boissonneau, Dupont, Parzudaki, Verreaux frères, and other dealers who were receiving birds from all over the world, particularly from México, the West Indies, Colombia, and other parts of South America.

He was greatly interested in the Tracheophones and more especially the Dendrocolaptidae. For many years he worked on this difficult family and finally published a valuable monograph of the entire group.

He gave particular attention to the structure and classification of birds and sought to establish the bearing of the structural characters of the bill and feet upon the habits of the species. He published several articles on this subject and, whenever occasion presented itself, called attention to relevant facts.

He collaborated with, or assisted, several ornithologists including Guérin-Méneville—'Nouveaux Oiseaux d'Abysinnie'; Dubus—the authority is sometimes given as 'Lafr. et Dubus'; Des Murs—'Iconographie ornithologique'; Pucheran—some types in the Paris Museum bear the authority 'Lafr. et Pucheran'; Boissonneau—authority sometimes referred to by Lafresnaye, himself, as 'Boiss. et Lafresnaye.'

To Charles d'Orbigny's 'Dictionnaire Universelle d'Histoire Naturelle,' Lafresnaye contributed no less than 384 articles of various lengths. These are in the first four volumes. Subsequent volumes contain no items by him. It is interesting to note that Hartlaub, the well-known German ornithologist, expressed his disappointment when Lafresnaye withdrew as a contributor, saying that the articles by Lafresnaye were always full of interest, whereas those by his successor, Gérard, were valueless.

Lafresnaye also described new species of birds from collections other than his own, including the collection of the Paris Museum, that of Charles Brelay of Bordeaux, and also the Delattre collection which was bought by Dr. Wilson and presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, where the types now are. Altogether, he created at least 40 new genera and described nearly 500 new species and subspecies of which 161 were in collaboration with Alcide d'Or-

bigny. His known bibliography includes about 250 items exclusive of the separate articles, 384 in number, contained in d'Orbigny's 'Dictionnaire Universelle.'

Lafresnaye was a member of many learned societies. He was a founder of the Société Académique des Sciences, Arts, et Belles Lettres of Falaise, of which he was the president after the death of Pierre David. He was also one of the founders of the Société Cuvérienne and of the Journal de Conchyliologie. He was also a member in the following societies: L'Association pour les progrès de l'Agriculture de l'Industrie et de l'Instruction dans l'Arrondissement de Falaise, which merged with the Société Académique in 1837; L'Association Normande, the proceedings of which were recorded in the *Annuaire de cinq départements de l'Ancienne Normandie*; Société Linnéenne du Calvados; Société Linnéenne de Paris; Société Linnéenne des Antiquaires de Normandie; L'Institut des Provinces. In many of their meetings Lafresnaye took active part and read a number of papers, at least some of which were published. He represented the Société Académique at several congresses of learned societies at Paris and was invariably called upon to preside at one of the sessions. Even the year before his death, he attended one of these meetings and made important communications of which the *Annuaire des Cinq départements* has made mention.

At the Congrès Scientifique de France in 1833, Lafresnaye had indicated his intention of attending Section 1—Natural History, Section 5—Literature and Fine Arts and Section 6—Social Economy, showing his wide interest; but he was unanimously elected to preside over the Natural History section which undoubtedly took all his time, as there is no evidence in the records of the Congress of his participation in the activities of the other sections. He read several *Mémoires* at the *Séances publiques de la Société de Normandie*, held at Falaise (1834), Bayeux (1835), and elsewhere, and at the regular meetings of this society and the Société Linnéenne du Calvados. As a proof of the great esteem and confidence he inspired, he was appointed a member of the high commission to report on conditions and to recommend improvements and reforms in the vast collections in the Paris Museum. This committee, which was very small, consisted of the greatest scientific men of France.

Lafresnaye had many friends and held the admiration and respect of men of learning throughout the scientific world. His scientific relations and correspondence included the most distinguished ornithologists of the time. Letters he received bore ample testimony of the high esteem in which he was held. At one time or another he

was in communication with the following well-known naturalists: De Jean, Dufour, Bonaparte, Natterer, Schlegel, Sclater, Gray, Gould, Eyton, Wied Neuwied, Guérin Ménéville, Alcide d'Orbigny, Charles d'Orbigny, Lesson, Boissonneau, Jules and Édouard Verreaux, Pucheran, L'Herminier, Léotaud, and Des Murs. Always welcome at the Chateau de La Fresnaye, many of these men came to examine the specimens of his magnificent collection or to consult with him in matters of common interest.

In recognition of his scientific achievements and his service to the public, Lafresnaye was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and the French government, in conferring upon him this great distinction, honored itself no less.

COLLECTIONS

The Lafresnaye collections of natural history specimens were housed on the first floor in the right hand end of the chateau, for which an extension had apparently been necessary. In a letter to me, M. Christian de La Fresnaye, the son of our ornithologist, wrote (translated): "You do not need to thank me for the very incomplete information I give you. It is I who owe to you the pleasure of recalling the time when as a boy I roamed through my father's galleries, among his many birds, which I all but forget now, and which I see again in my mind—

"The Calao with its big bill, the Goatsucker with its enormous mouth, the Secretary, a big bird with its feet on a snake, the long-legged Flamingo with its head hanging down . . . etc., etc., old friends with whom I was loath to part when they were taken away."

Four years after Lafresnaye's death on September 4, 1865, his collections were sold at public auction. According to a notice in the *Revue et Magazin de Zoologie*, there were a bird collection consisting of 9000 specimens and containing about 700 types, and a collection of shells consisting of 25,000 specimens. In addition, there were also collections of birds' eggs, birds' nests, and insects. M. Jousseau, French conchologist and a friend of M. Bureau of Nantes, vaguely remembers that the shells were sold to an English dealer, Sowerby, Wright, or Damon. M. Husnot, a botanist who had heard of the coming auction from M. de Brébisson, was present. He said that many had come to attend the sale which was to last about a week. Among these was M. Milne-Edwards of the Paris Museum. But on the day of the sale, when all had gathered at the chateau, it was announced that the entire bird collection had been purchased by the City of Boston. We know, of course, that the buyer was Dr. Henry



LAFRESNAYE (BARON FRÉDÉRIC DE LA FRESNAYE).

FROM A CRAYON SKETCH, THROUGH THE COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY OF NANTES.

Bryant, who attended personally to the packing and shipping of the specimens and presented the entire collection to the Boston Society of Natural History.

M. Husnot bought some hummingbirds, about 100 nests which he distributed among his friends, and the collection of birds' eggs, which he got very cheaply—all but two eggs of the Cassowary which commanded a very high price. The eggs were mostly of exotic birds, the names of which were usually, but not always, written on the larger shells. Husnot remarks that Lafresnaye probably never studied his birds' eggs. A catalogue of the ornithological collection intended for use at the auction had been prepared by Jules Verreaux, who remained at the Château three months to do the work.

The bird collection is now in the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy. The specimens have been taken from their mounts, straightened, and properly distributed in the cases. A large scrapbook contains the labels which were taken off the stands and pasted in the book. For many of the specimens there were several labels containing remarks by Lafresnaye. It was apparently his custom to make out new labels whenever the status of the species had been subject to change. Many manuscript names are to be found on these labels, at least some of which would have been valid today had Lafresnaye seen fit to publish them with proper descriptions of the species.

His library was less extensive and, according to M. Husnot, contained no works on botany. A list of the scientific books prepared for the sale contained volumes on entomology, ornithology, conchology, and general subjects. In the copy in the Library of the British Museum, there is an article by O. Des Murs in which he praises the work of Lafresnaye and remarks that his collection of birds as a whole surpassed that of Prince de Massena, whom he recalls meeting at Lafresnaye's home and who marvelled at the richness of the Lafresnaye collection. He adds that the collection, containing types worth their weight in gold, should not be dispersed at a detailed public auction but that it should find a purchaser to buy it as a whole for his own cabinet or for his country.

We cannot go into further details here, but let me say in closing that it is remarkable that an ornithologist whose work dealt so largely with American birds should be so little known here or, for that matter, elsewhere. American Ornithology owes much to Frédéric, Baron de Lafresnaye.

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