

For Leading Articles, Index to Contents, and Answers to Correspondents see the centre pages (422 and 423).

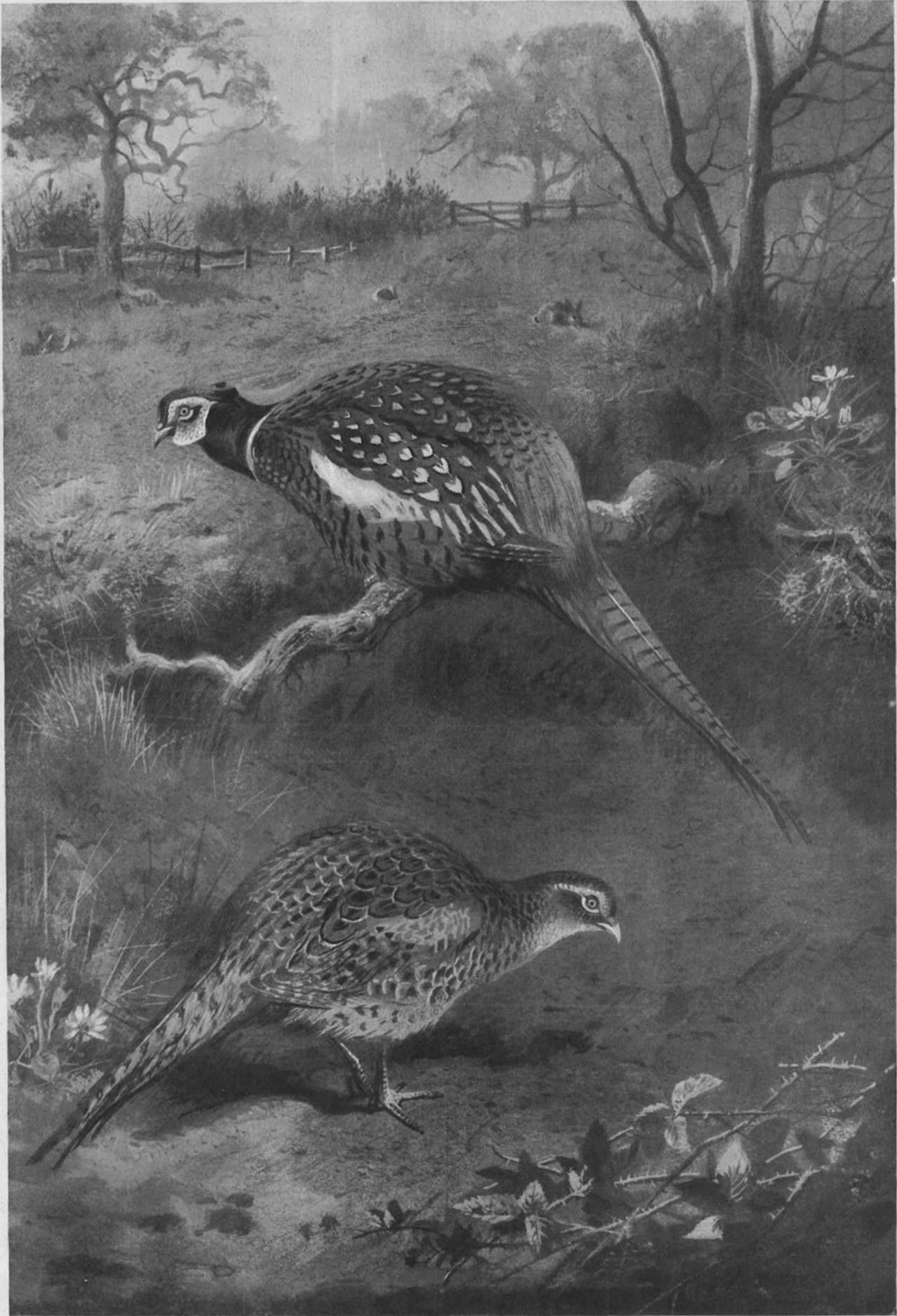
THE FIELD

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BY THE COVERT SIDE IN SPRING.

FROM A PAINTING BY THE LATE LIEUT. H. E. O. MURRAY DIXON.

See "Sportsman and Artist," page 408.

SPORTSMAN & ARTIST—XV.

The Work of the Late H. E. O. Murray Dixon.

By FRANK WALLACE.

Previous contributions to this series have been by Mr Walter Winans, Dec. 22; Lieut. Frank Wallace, R.N.V.R., Dec. 29, 1917; Mr Hugh Wormald, Jan. 5; Major Allan Brooks, Jan. 12; Mr G. E. Lodge, Jan. 19; Mr Abel Chapman, Jan. 26; Major G. D. Armour, Feb. 2; Mr J. C. Tunnard, Feb. 9; Commander Dayrell Davies, R.N., Feb. 23; Mr F. W. Frohawk, March 2; Lieut.-Commander J. G. Millais, R.N.V.R., March 9 and March 16.



A YOUNG WILD DUCK. MAY, 1911.

SECOND-LIEUTENANT HENRY EDWARD OTTO MURRAY DIXON, Seaforth Highlanders, was the eldest son of the Rev. J. and Mrs Murray Dixon, of Swithland Rectory, Loughborough, Leicestershire. He was born in 1885, being thus only thirty-two years of age at the time of his death, though he seemed much younger. On the outbreak of war he joined the United Arts Corps, from which he transferred on obtaining his commission in the 4th (Ross Highland) Battalion Seaforth Highlanders on Nov. 16, 1915. He was devoted to everything appertaining to Scotland, and satisfied one of his ambitions on being gazetted to a Highland regiment.

It must be nearly ten years ago that I saw a picture of a hoodie crow standing in the snow beside a sheep's skull, and realised at once that a new bird artist had arisen who would in time arrive at the first rank. Subsequently we met, and, having similar tastes, were in constant communication until he fell, mortally wounded, on the Vimy Ridge, April 9, 1917. The public were best acquainted with his work through the pages of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, in which many of his pictures appeared. Anyone familiar with them is at once struck by the pronounced similarity in style to the work of Archibald Thorburn. So pronounced, indeed, were certain characteristics that he was accused by some critics of being a copyist. Such an insinuation was certainly not justified by facts. Mr Thorburn is rightly regarded as our premier sporting artist of bird life. He sets a standard to which it is given to very few to attain. Murray Dixon admired his work with a fervour which almost amounted to a religion, and set himself, early in his career, to model his style on that of the older artist. Such an ambition is perfectly well-founded, and as distinct from mere copying as that of a student who sets himself to acquire the characteristics of a master in any other of the arts. That he should have followed his example so closely in this particular instance may have been a mistake, for had he allowed himself fuller scope I think it quite likely that he would have evolved a more distinctive style of his own. But that he should be accused of copying is an unjust slur on his work. He never knowingly, I am convinced, transferred the work of any artist into his own compositions.

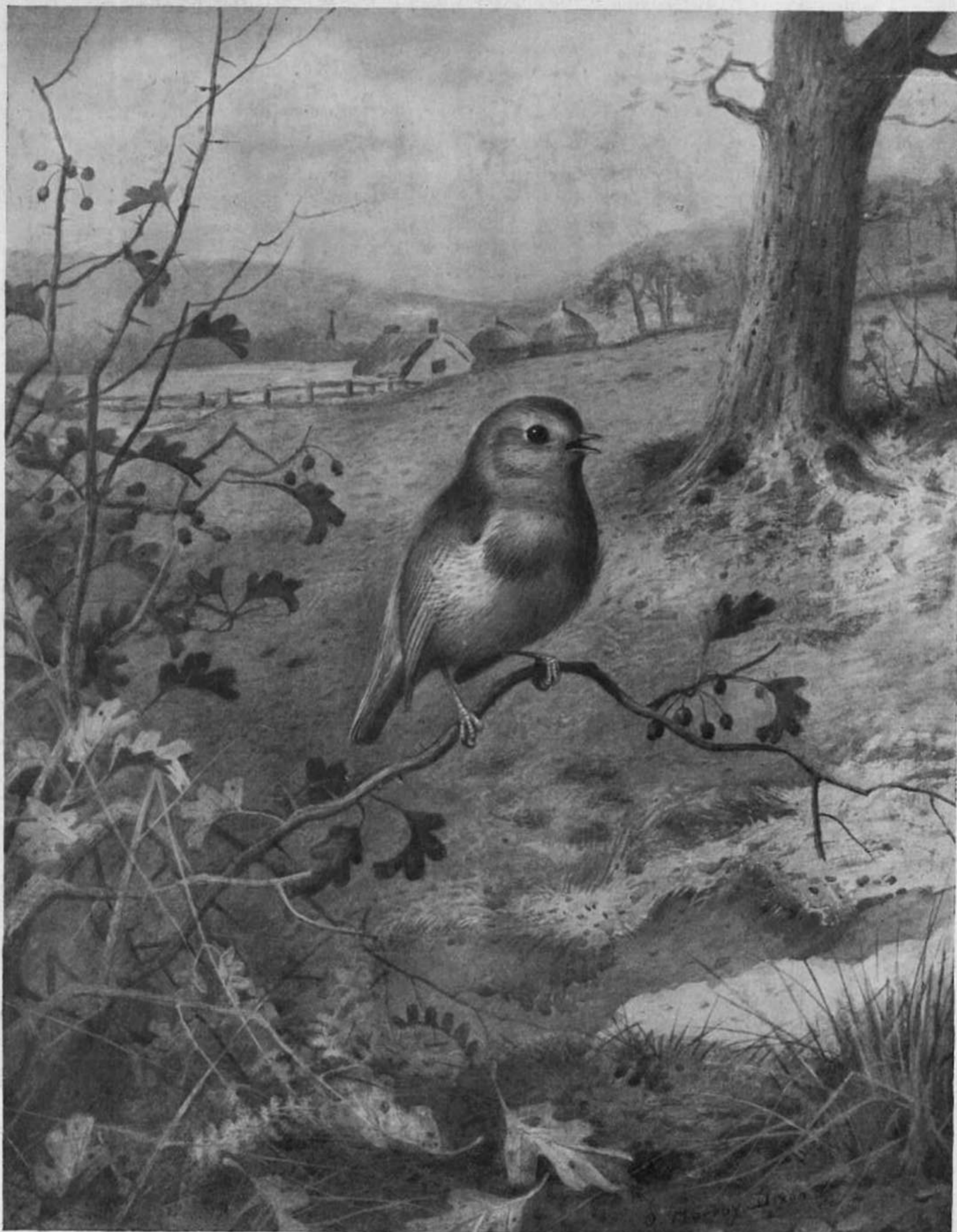
From his earliest boyhood he took a keen delight in the various branches of natural history, and this, coupled with his evident artistic talents, settled his future career. He studied drawing at the Leicester School of Art, and afterwards at Calderon's School of Animal Painting, and the Royal Academy Schools. A member of his family writes: "The power of producing work so true to nature was derived from the long hours of patient observation spent in swamp, field, and wood. He always drew from life,

to the study of which he grudged no time nor effort, often physically of a very arduous nature, carried on, as it was, at all hours of the day and night under most trying atmospheric conditions. The woods and large stretches of water in the neighbourhood of his home afforded him peculiarly valuable opportunities for the study of plant life and the observation of a large variety of waterfowl and shore birds. He was a keen botanist and entomologist."

His sketch books, indeed, are full of most careful and accurate pencil and wash drawings of the various plants which he wished to introduce into his pictures. His detailed work, too, of birds' wings, feathers, legs, &c., was remarkably finished and delicate. Sporting subjects particularly appealed to him, though his

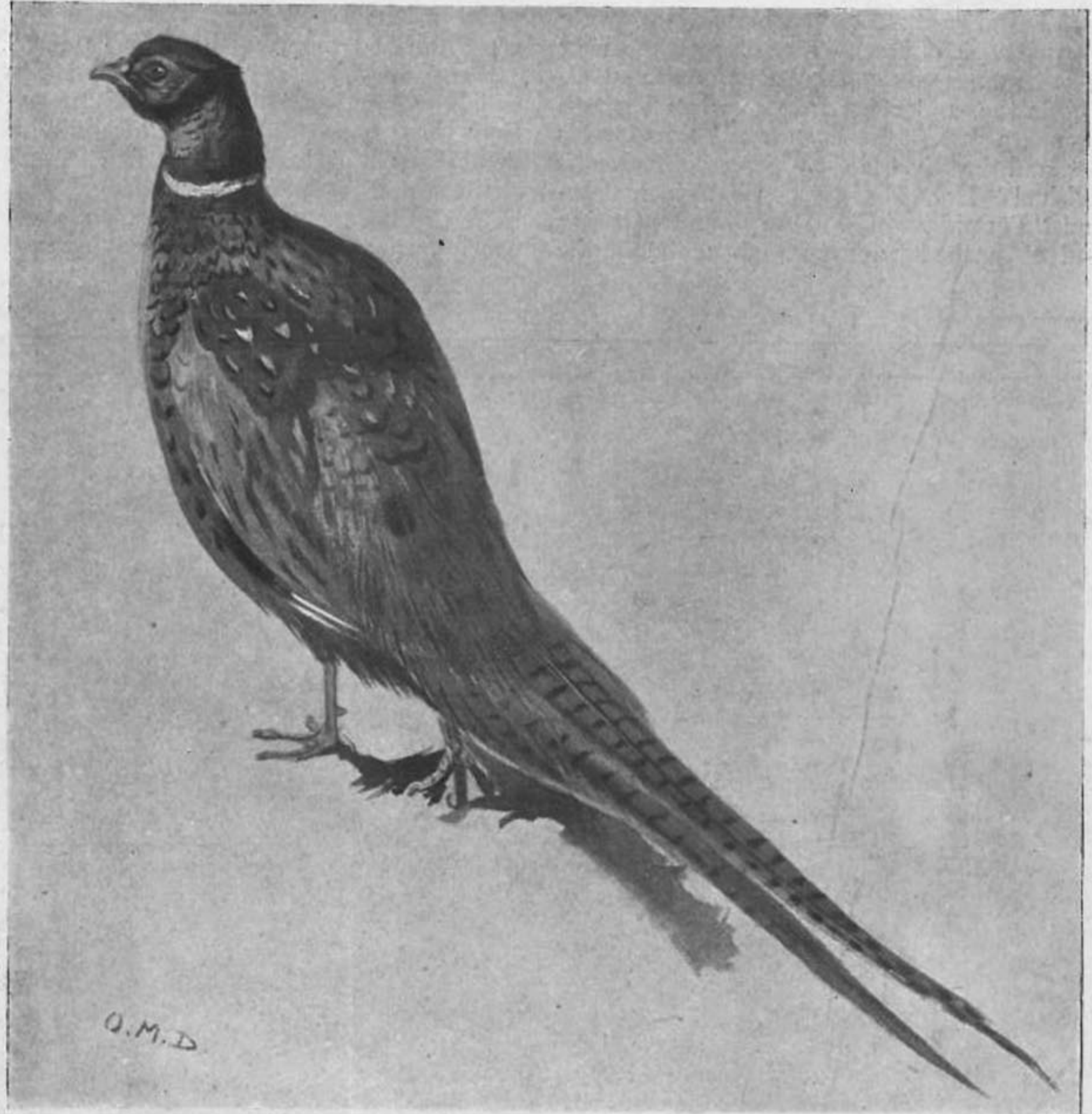
pictures of the smaller birds and animals mirror his gentle and sensitive nature. One picture in particular, called "Just out of the Burrow"—a young rabbit sitting among some anemones—exhibits in the most masterly way the alert innocence of a young wild thing ready to take alarm. He was particularly happy in his compositions of wild duck.

Mr Thorburn writes: "Murray Dixon used to come and see me, and always seemed very keen and enthusiastic for his art. I have not had an opportunity of seeing many of his later pictures, but of those I did see one of a flock of tufted duck alighting out at sea—of which a good reproduction was given in Millais' 'Diving Ducks'—struck me as being very true and lifelike, and showed careful study of the birds from life. I remember also some excellent studies giving detail

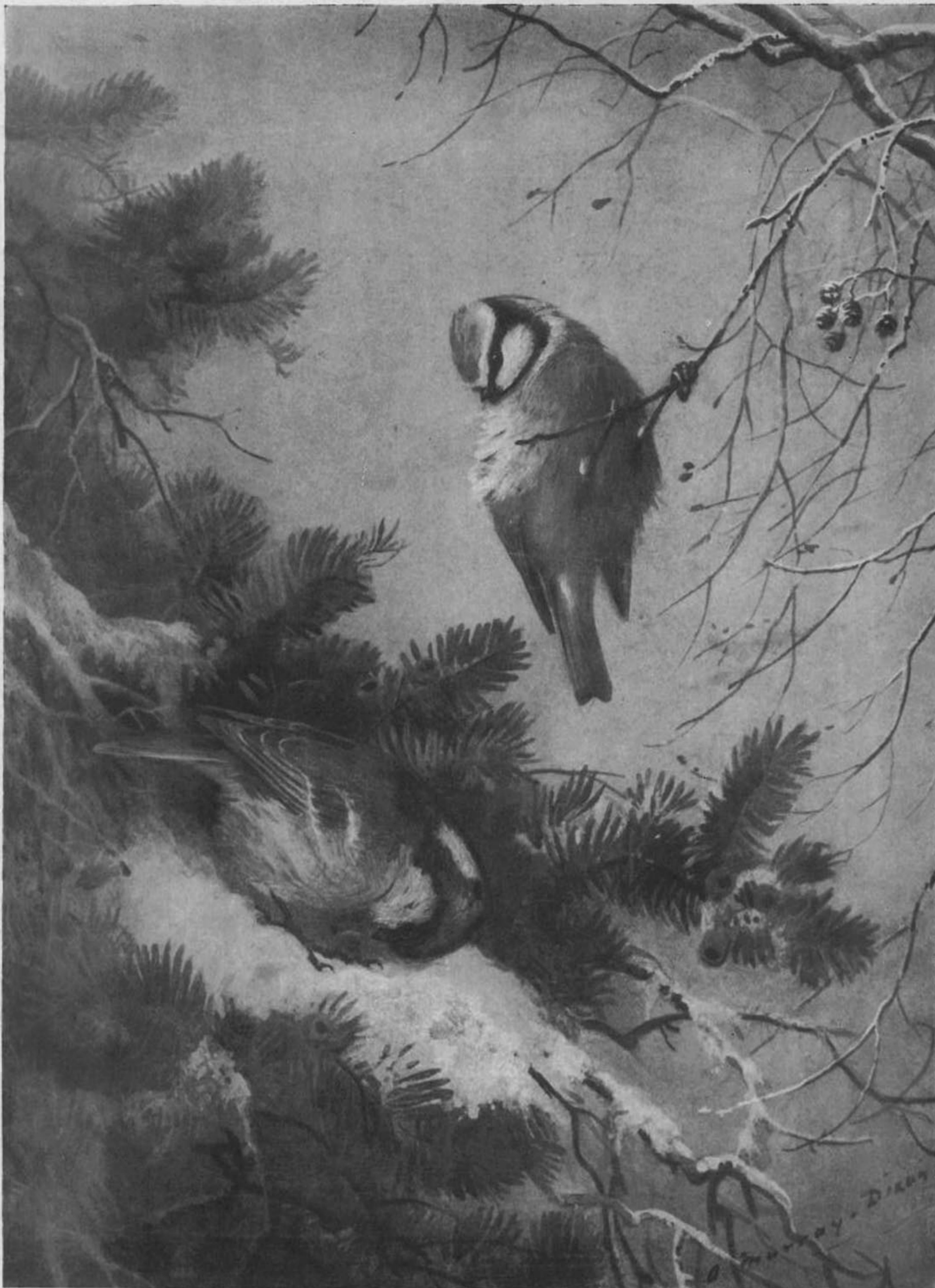


THE WINTER SONG OF THE ROBIN.

of the magpie's plumage which were most promising." One of his best pictures is called "Overtaken," a most spirited drawing in which a teal has just been struck down by a hawk. The detail is beautifully rendered without over-weighting the composition. Ducks, indeed, were among his favourite subjects, and whether he was painting a mallard rising from the rushes by a frozen weir, a duck sitting on her nest in springtime, or pochard and goldeneye seeking shelter from the winter storms in a quiet inlet, he brought an intense enthusiasm and fervour to his work, without which he could never have insured the success he attained. In his choice of subject he was guided to a great extent by the season. In the winter, duck and woodcock; in spring, returning migrants and small birds; in summer and autumn, game birds, pigeons, etc. Some visits to Scotland were followed by pictures of grouse, ptarmigan, black game, and deer, bearing witness to the keenness of observation which he brought to the study of these subjects. He had certain faults, like all artists, but none which would not have been overcome in time. It rarely happened in his important works that he failed to secure a pleasing and attractive composition, for he had a true artist's eye for colour and effect. Although birds were his favourite subjects he painted fur extremely well. In his own opinion, one of his most successful pictures is a black and white drawing of a wild cat snarling in the snow over a dead blackcock. A reproduction of this work appeared in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* and was much praised by artists. He called it "Tragedy." Subjects of such a nature were not those in which he chiefly delighted



RING-NECKED PHEASANT CROSSED WITH MONGOLIAN. JAN. 7, 1910.



COAL AND BLUE TITS.

(though in another picture he showed golden eagles attacking a hind and carrying off her calf). Usually he chose quiet scenes of peace and happiness which reflected his own character. Snipe coming in to the marshes at dusk, woodcock nestling under a holly bush or stepping bravely among the dying bracken, grouse by a loch side, partridges calling on the stubble, pheasants in the glory and russet of autumn, these were the subjects which he loved, and to each he brought the same careful study for principal and accessories and the same patient observation.

He was particularly overjoyed when Mr J. G. Millais gave him a commission to paint certain illustrations in colour for his work on "British Diving Ducks"; I know the following tribute from his pen would have pleased him even more. Millais writes: "His early work showed exceptional promise, and his excellent draughtsmanship, delicate handling of details, and close observation proved him to be one who in time would have taken a high place among artists of bird life, of which, unfortunately, we have far too few worthy exponents. His pencil work was especially good, and the numerous careful studies he made of parts of birds which he had shot reached a level seldom exceeded by any artist of his time. That branch of art, however, was only educative, and though it evinced the artist's desire to go through the mill of labour before any complete work could be achieved, it nevertheless showed that he had grasped the essential necessity of laborious study before final success could be won. He was full of genuine enthusiasm and love of nature, and when I found that his ambition was to have his work better known, I gave him a commission to do certain illustrations in colours for my book on 'The British Diving Ducks,' and thought it might help him. This work he did well, and although it failed to satisfy him it at least gave him the encouragement he required, for at all times he was of the artistic temperament, alternately enthusiastic or depressed. Had he lived I am sure he would have made a name for himself outside the small *clientèle* of naturalists and artists who knew and appreciated his work."

He had cultivated his gift of drawing from memory, though for his finished compositions he relied chiefly on the pencil and colour notes which he was always making from life and the carefully finished detailed studies with which his sketch books are full. That this power of visualising the scenes he loved was of help to him the following letter from a near relative proves: "Even during the strenuous days and unceasing hard work at the front his eyes were busy noting details of bird and plant life that came in his way, and his letters home contain many little word-pictures and descriptive touches of the sort, lists of the different kinds of birds he had seen, notes of trees and indications of flora in woodlands and hedges."

He possessed a remarkable power of visualising natural objects and scenes and of transporting himself in spirit to them, a faculty which proved a source of infinite comfort and solace to him.

In one of his letters, written from France in the

winter of 1916, he says: "It is a blessing having a memory for natural objects. I can recall the wild flowers of any month to mind in every detail, butterflies and birds too, and often I do so when I get to bed—it is such a rest." He even found time for his beloved art, and the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* published "Hooded Crows on a French Corn-stack" and "Partridges in No Man's Land" (with a background of barbed wire entanglements) in the

early spring of last year. "Rats in the Trenches" was published very shortly after his death. These, however, are not the pictures by which he will be remembered, nor when his name occurs are they those which will spring to the minds of those who knew and loved him. The sunlit moor, the shaded woodland, the spring hedgerow on the edge of the forest and the frozen mere are alive with his gentle spirit, and in them, for many of us, he still lives.



A SUNNY CORNER. WOODCOCK AND WREN.



BLACKCAPS. APRIL, 1911.



GREAT WHITE EGRETS AT NESTING COLONY.