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John Laporte's *Characters of trees* (1795–1801)

James J. White and Gavin D. R. Bridson

John Laporte (1761–1839) was a prolific landscape painter in watercolours and oils. Contemporary exhibition records reveal that he exhibited some 289 works (14 at New Society of Painters in Miniature and Water Colours [which in 1808 became the Associated Artists in Water Colours and in 1810 the Associated Painters in Water Colours], 110 at the Royal Academy, 102 at the British Institution and 18 at the Society of British Artists). He was also an early practitioner of that unusual printmaking process known as soft-ground etching. Prints made by this method shared much of the quality of chalk-style lithography and in England, at least, it was in-

deed a moderately successful forerunner as a landscape medium. Soft-ground etching quickly fell into disuse, however, when lithography swept into overwhelming popularity in the early nineteenth century, and its technique was soon forgotten.

Laporte, presumably of French origin, lived and exhibited his paintings in England, though there is reason to believe he may have had an Irish connection, possibly being born of Huguenot parents in Dublin. At least he is known to have studied under the engraver John James Barralet, born in Dublin of French extraction. His children were Mary Ann Laporte (who painted portraits and fancy subjects) and

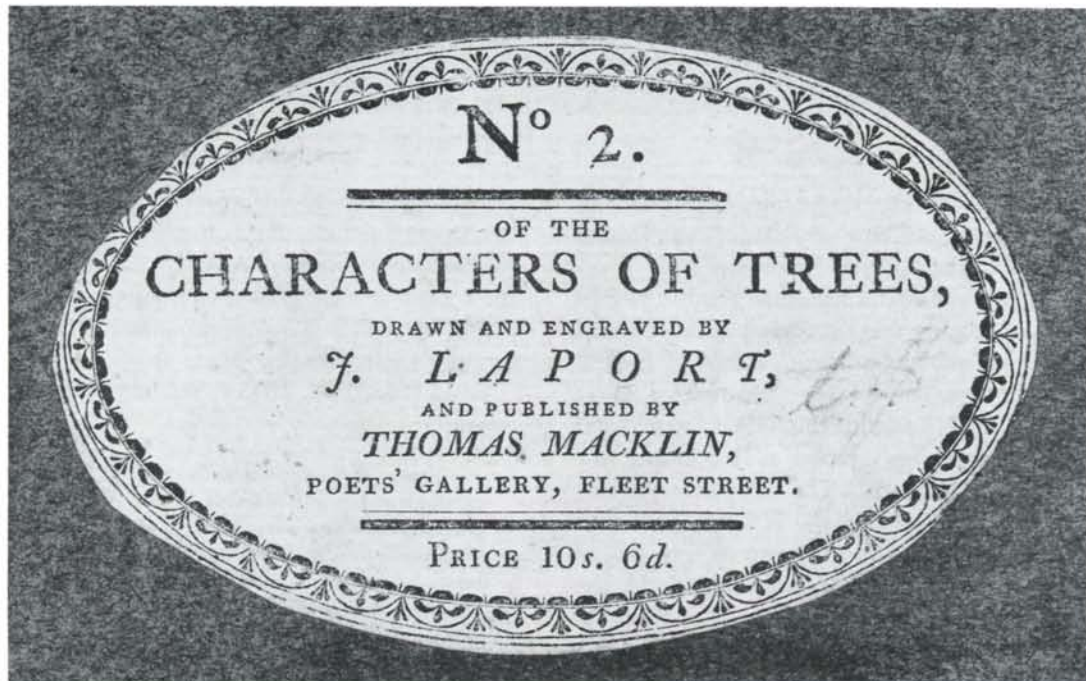


Figure 1. Letterpress wrapper label from *Characters of trees*.

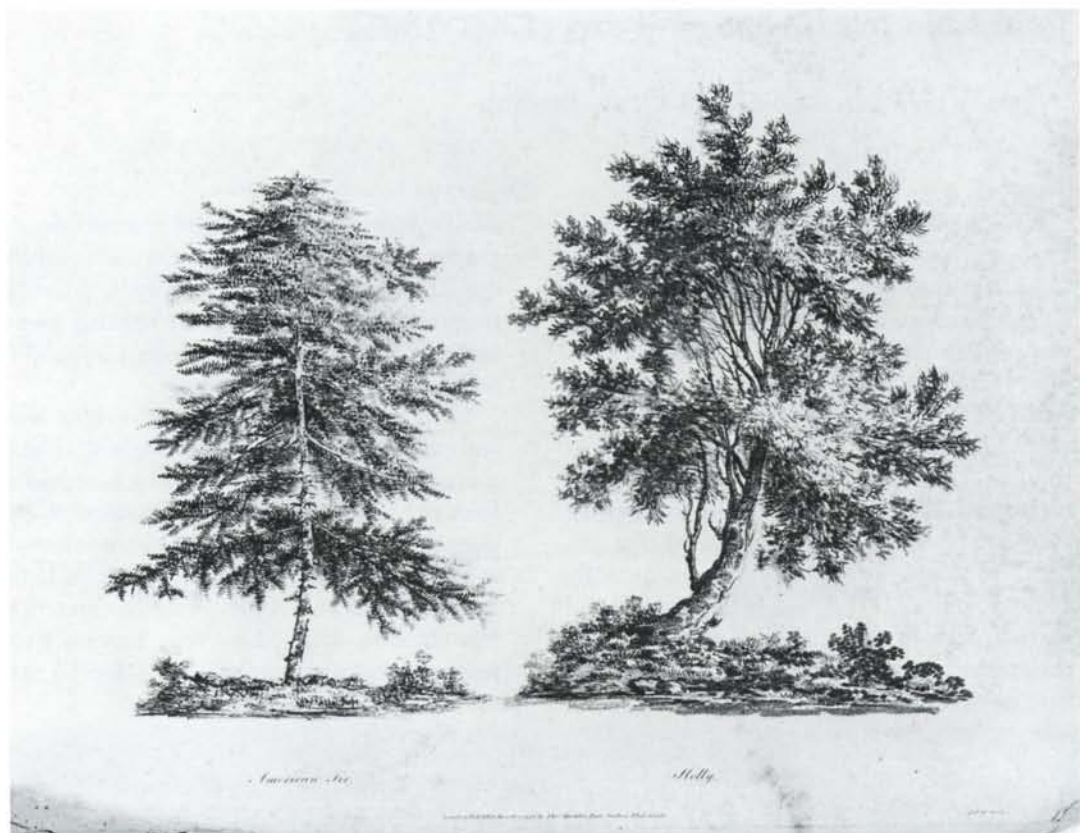


Figure 2. "American Fir. Holly" by John Laporte.

George Henry Laporte (painter of animals and hunting and military subjects; he was animal painter to the King of Hanover).

Laporte's most distinguished venture in soft-ground etching was his contribution of plates for *A collection of prints illustrative of English scenery, from the drawings and sketches of T. Gainsborough*, London, 1802-1803, which Col. M. H. Grant has praised as "a volume unequalled in beauty." The 72 plates for this work were engraved by William Frederick Wells (1762-1836), Professor of Drawing at the Addiscombe Military College, and Laporte while he was a drawing master at the same college. Wells, like Laporte, had been a pupil of Barralet and the two obviously shared much in artistic terms, not least their feeling

for the process of soft-ground etching as a landscape medium. As a drawing master at Addiscombe, Laporte employed the medium for a series of instructional drawing books in the 1790s, and it is one of those books that is brought under scrutiny here.

Long (1922, pp. 13-14) reported the following:

... Laporte produced nine series of plates for the use of his pupils, and doubtless for sale also to the general public. The first of these was issued on 1st May, 1798, and the last on 18th April, 1801; each contained four plates, except the 7th series, which comprised twenty-four plates. All were apparently drawn and engraved by Laporte [footnote 1, p. 14: a few of the plates do not bear the artist's name], and were published by J. P. Thompson of Great Newport Street. They are mostly soft-ground etch-



Figure 3. "Brier. Acacia" by John Laporte.

ings, but include a few aquatints, etc. They illustrate methods of drawing different kinds of tree trunks, branches and foliage, plants and bushes, rocks, bridges, fences, gates, castles and ecclesiastical ruins, churches, barns and mills, and show how to indicate various materials used in building, etc. The eighth and ninth series illustrate the processes of sketching landscapes of eight varieties: some of these landscapes are excellent compositions.

The seventh series, of twenty-four plates (1800), is devoted entirely to trees. James Roberts, in his *Introductory Lessons . . . for . . . painting in Water-Colours*, published in the same year, describes these tree studies as 'characterized with taste and truth,' and remarks that if Laporte "had superadded a few of his excellent rules, his work would have been still more useful."

This series surely is Laporte's *Characters of trees*, which Long compares with similar publica-

tions by La Cave, John Powell, William DeLamotte (*Forest trees*, 1804, and *Forest scenery*, 1806), John Varley (*Studies for drawing trees*, 1818–1819), H. W. Burgess (*Eidodendron*, 1827, and *Studies of trees*, 1828 and 1837), A. Aglio (*Studies of various trees, etc.*, 1831) and W. M. Craig (*Complete instructor in drawing*, 1806).

Laporte's work is probably intended to provide landscape artists with some examples of the appropriate "treatment" of any trees that they might wish to include in their landscape studies. His tree images are suggestive of tree identity rather than accurate representations of living specimens. For this purpose the peculiar qualities of soft-ground etching succeeded in producing a "painterly," rather than



Figure 4. "Bull Rush. Occidental Plane" by John Laporte.

an engraved, feeling to Laporte's images. Just who might have used these tree studies is open to surmise. One can scarcely believe that a painter would bring a half-finished landscape back to his studio to add suitable tree forms copied from Laporte; even less can one see an artist taking Laporte's studies into the field with him and consulting them rather than the living landscape before him! More likely, perhaps, is that they were used for classroom instructional purposes by drawing masters.

The publication of three issues of Laporte's work over a span of six years suggests a continuing market. Indeed there seems to have been a general demand for engraved studies of the characteristic forms of trees over several decades. Laporte's *Characters* had been preced-

ed by Alexander Cozens, who issued sets of tree images "For the use of painting and drawing" in 1771, 1786 and 1787 (see Bridson & White 1990, nos. C308, C351, C353). In the two decades following the republication of Laporte's *Characters*, several other artists are known to have produced engraved tree studies in the same genre, e.g., another series by Laporte, known as *Studies of trees*, 1798-1801 (C370), and works by T. Burrows, 1804 (C400); François Huet-Villiers, 1806 (C411) & ca. 1808 (C417); François L. T. Francia, 1813 (C441); John R. Cozens, [1814] (C445); Edward Kennion, 1815 (C450); John Martin, 1817 (465A); J. Phillips, [ca. 1819] (C479); John Varley, [1819?] (C480); and George Harley, 1821 (C492), etc.



Figure 5. "Fern. Hazel" by John Laporte.

Apart from the interest in Laporte's use of this medium for plant depiction, Laporte's *Characters of trees* is so rare and little known to bibliographers and print curators that this brief study will perhaps attract more information from our readers (see Bridson & Wendel 1986, no. 26, for a description of the process and a reproduction of Laporte's Bullrush and Occidental Plane). The evidence available to us indicates that the work was published in six numbered fascicles. We know of only four copies (two incomplete!) and these indicate that the suite was thrice issued in about five years, a first issue without lettering (this we deduce from the existence of fascicle number 2–5 in unlettered state), a second issue in 1795–

17?? and a third issue in 1798–18??. The first lettered issue indicates that the work was published by T. Macklin. (Thomas Macklin was a well-known printseller of Fleet Street, his establishment boasting the title of "Poets' Gallery.") The second lettered issue has the imprint of J. P. Thompson (i.e., John Peter Thompson, engraver, also of Great Newport Street in ca. 1792–1813. Thompson held the appointment of Engraver to the Duke & Duchess of York from 1799 to 1819). Macklin died in 1800, aged only 40, and Laporte's *Characters* was reissued in 18?? with Thompson, who also published Laporte's other series of studies, as publisher. (See Appendix for a listing of subjects, publishers and dates of plates



Figure 6. "Furz. Carolina Poplar" by John Laporte.

in copies of *Characters* from the libraries of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University [Cambridge, Massachusetts], Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine [London] and one of the authors. The figures are from the latter's copy.) Apparently each fascicle of the Macklin edition was stitched into bluish-grey wrappers with a numbered oval letterpress label pasted on the upper cover. We have seen labelled wrappers for fascicle numbers 2, 5 and 6 and a label for number 1. Since no title page is known to have been issued, these letterpress labels provide the only title statement for the whole work (see Fig. 1). On the evidence on one of the Wellcome copies, it appears that the Thompson issue was provided with a new

(this time engraved) title label which reads "CHARACTERS of TREES, / Drawn and Engraved / By J. Laporte. / London Published by John P. Thompson, G^r. Newport Street." At any rate their copy has such a label (measuring 40 × 92 mm, height before width) mounted on the upper cover of its contemporary vellum-backed boards.

Laporte also published *Studies of trees, drawn from nature in the summer of 1813, by J. Laporte* . . . consisting of five parts dated 1814 to 1821 (Henry reports a copy in the Victoria and Albert Museum); *The progress of a water-coloured drawing; A picturesque guide to Bath, Bristol hot-wells, the river Avon, and the adjacent country; Lessons in landscape; and Laporte's sketch book,*



Figure 7. "Weeping Willow. Poplar" by John Laporte.

of various subjects from nature. Bryan notes that three of his paintings are at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington.

We appeal to readers for additional information on the artist and on the location of additional sets of *Characters of trees*. We hope to be able to publish a later note on this rare work that will provide a complete bibliographical description.

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Appendix
List of plates in selected copies of Laporte's Characters of trees

Plates	Arnold Arboretum	Wellcome copy 1	Wellcome copy 2	J. White
1. Beech. Willow. Fir Ash. Birch. Fir Oak. Elm. Weeping Willow Beech trunk. Willow. Fir Ash. Birch. Fir Oak. Elm. Weeping Willow Ash. Oak Beech. Elm	20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin	20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 20 Apr. 1795, Macklin 20 Apr. 1795, Macklin unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin	1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin
2. Birch. Larch Fir Weeping Willow. Poplar Sycamore. Thorn Fir. Willow	1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin	unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin
3. Maple. Black Thorn Lime. Horse Chestnut Alder. Aspen Spanish Chestnut. Cypress	22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin	unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered	22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin 22 Feb. 1796, Macklin	1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin
4. Bramble. Mountain Ash Broom. Oriental Plane Coltsfoot. Walnut Thistle. Cedar	unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered	26 Nov. 1796, Macklin 26 Nov. 1796, Macklin 26 Nov. 1796, Macklin 26 Nov. 1796, Macklin	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin 1 Jan. 1796, Macklin
5. Brier. Acacia Bull Rush. Occidental Plane Burdock. Abele Fern. Hazel	unlettered unlettered unlettered unlettered	7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin 7 Dec. 1796, Macklin
6. American Fir. Holly Furz. Carolina Poplar Ivey. Yew Laburnum. Weymouth Pine	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson 24 May 1800, Thompson	1 Mar. 1798, Macklin 1 Mar. 1798, Macklin 1 Mar. 1798, Macklin 1 Mar. 1798, Macklin

Macklin = published by Thomas Macklin, Poets' Gallery, Fleet Street, London.
 Thompson = published by John P. Thompson, Great Newport Street, London.

