

Obituary

JAMES DAVID MACDONALD

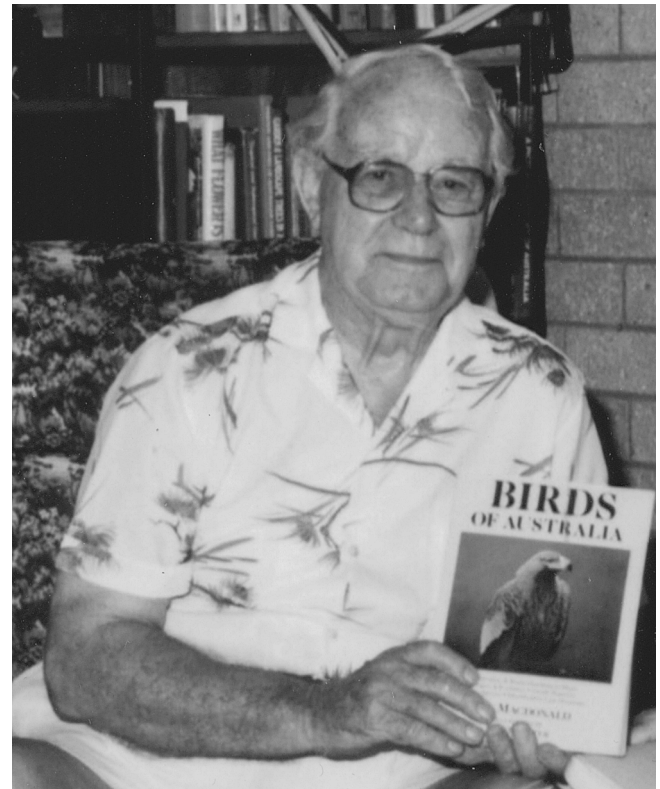
3 October 1908 – 17 September 2002

The Estate of Fraser of Foyers, tucked away on the south shore of Loch Ness, Scotland, in a small parish long famous for its prized deer herd, by 1845 had a declining human population of fewer than 1800 people and an ever-increasing herd of 30000 Cheviot sheep. Fifty years later, further decimated by continuing massive emigrations to America, this remote Highland farming community in Invernesshire was catapulted into the industrial age. The picturesque 36-metre Fall of Foyers was chosen as the site of driving power for an early hydro-electric scheme. Diverting water through granite rock via a 2.5-km tunnel from nearby Loch Mohr enabled the generation of enough cheap electricity for the British Aluminium Company's new smelting factory. Built under the technical guidance of Lord Kelvin, it yielded the first commercial ingot in 1894. In the first year of mass production, the factory's output was close to the world's total supply of commercial aluminium.

It was into this now bustling village that James David Macdonald was born on 3 October 1908. His father, James Ross Macdonald, had been a gamekeeper on the Estate. Like many of his Highland neighbours, he had secured employment at the Aluminium Company's factory. His mother, Mary David from Wales, although having little formal education, was clearly an intelligent woman. Like many Scottish communities of the time, it was to house factory workers that cottages had been built and the village at Foyers created. Born into a family of three sisters, with another soon to follow, young Jamie Macdonald enjoyed a stimulating boyhood in a magnificent Highland setting, encouraged by his father's love of the outdoors and his mother's love of learning. I can empathise as my own childhood was one of tramping the moors and lochside, often alone, discovering the natural world through a curiosity that was to provide a lifetime of enjoyment and a source of satisfaction.

Jim attended Foyers Public School from 1913 to 1924. At age 14, with the encouragement of supportive parents and schoolmaster, Mr Murray, taking great interest in fostering his academic career, Jim secured a bursary enabling him to complete his secondary education at Inverness Royal Academy. While attending the Academy, he cycled weekly the 30 km between Foyers and Inverness, which must have provided more than ample opportunity to observe Loch Ness in its many moods.

Graduating as the Dux in Art in 1927, and although entertaining an ambition to draw, Jim doubtless disappointed his Art teacher by not following what he considered a fickle profession. Instead, he entered the University of Aberdeen where he studied Forestry, excelled in Botany and graduated with a B.Sc. in 1930. He had hoped to obtain a Civil Service posting overseas, but unfortunately an economic slump pre-



cluded advancement along his expected career path and he sought other employment. For a time he worked with the Forestry Commission in Scotland. He also obtained some practical experience with the Bavarian State Forest in Germany before returning to Aberdeen University to undertake another B.Sc. in Pure Science (Botany and Zoology). There he was much influenced by the teachings of Professor Sir J. Arthur Thomson and Professor J. Ritchie, both of whom were keenly interested in birds. He obtained this degree in 1932, earning a Kilgour Research Scholarship and various grants. In his postgraduate years he worked at the Laboratory of the Scottish Fisheries Board in Aberdeen, studying the distribution of larval decapod crustacea, and later at the Marine Laboratory at Plymouth, where he studied development of hermit crabs. With a Carnegie Scholarship for 1934–35, he was prepared to continue his research at Aberdeen.

But about this time, Jim Macdonald's career began to take some unexpected twists and turns. His old schoolmaster, Mr Murray, so helpful to Jamie as a lad in Foyers, had since settled with his wife in Aberdeen. There was also a young lady pursuing a degree in Medicine at Aberdeen University. Her mother was well acquainted with the Murrys, and so Elizabeth Clark Fraser and Jim Macdonald found themselves invited one evening to the Murrys' home. This first meeting was the beginning of an adventure they would share for a lifetime. Jim then took a step that terminated his research at Aberdeen. Interviewed by the British Museum (Natural

History) he was subsequently appointed as an Assistant Keeper. Although a vacancy existed in the Crustacean Section, for which he felt well qualified, he was appointed to the Bird Section. Despite his protestations of complete ignorance about birds, he found himself in February 1935 in a position of considerable responsibility in national ornithology. Meanwhile, Betty Fraser had graduated from Aberdeen University in 1936 and headed south to work in Essex. The two married in London in 1938. They purchased a house near Kew Gardens, where they lived until emigrating to Australia. But that did not happen until Jim retired in 1968.

At the Museum, Jim was quick to learn about birds, publishing his first descriptive paper on an anatomical feature of the Redshank in 1936. A series of further papers reflected his long service in the Bird Room of the British Museum; he not only curated the bird collection, but published extensively on taxonomic and distributional matters as well as exposing many interesting morphological features that had previously evaded functional description. His emphasis was always on studying birds, not merely listing them. His field work was exciting. In 1938–39, he led an expedition to the mountains along the border of southern Sudan, assisted by the Sudan Army and Civil Service. In 1950–51, another expedition traversed the arid regions of western South Africa from the Cape to the borders of Angola with a final transect across the Kalahari Desert. His success in raising funds dedicated for exploration was considerable, and in 1962 he led the first of the Harold Hall Expeditions to study the birds of Australia. There were five such Expeditions, though Jim was in the field on only the first. Jim's wife Betty was also a participant in some of these great field adventures, often serving the dual functions of cook and medical officer.

From 1941 to 1944 Jim served away from London with the Admiralty. Following a bombing in 1944 that destroyed much of the display area of the British Museum, Jim received authorisation to return to London where he set about designing a new bird gallery. Some readers may remember the clever display of suspended waterfowl in flight beneath the great dome. Sir Peter Scott advised on the accuracy of the details of this display while Jim designed and oversaw its production.

In 1968 Jim Macdonald retired as Senior Principal Scientific Officer and Deputy Keeper of the Zoology Department. During his working life, his contributions to the science of ornithology were recognised by many. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society, London; the Institute of Biology; and the Zoological Society, London. Perhaps he was most proud of his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was a member of the British Ornithologists' Union and served on their Council from 1952 to 1955 and as a Vice-President from 1966 to 1969. He was elected an Honorary Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1949. He served as a Member on the Permanent Committee of the International Ornithological Congress from 1938 to 1968. He was also a member of the Royal Aus-

tralasian Ornithologists Union. He was elected to Honorary Life Membership of the Queensland Ornithological Society, and that Society (also known as Birds Queensland) named its library *The J.D. Macdonald Library* in recognition of donations he made to the library and the many years of support he provided the Society.

Both Betty and Jim had fallen in love with Australia during their travels in 1962 – and Harold Hall had strongly supported Jim's desire to write an account of Australian birds – so following his retirement the Macdonalds quickly made their way to establish a new home in Brisbane in December 1968. That was an exciting time for ornithologists in Australia. The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union was undergoing dramatic organisational changes and, in the secluded northern reaches that were Queensland, local amateur and academic ornithologists were viewing the national organisation as one that poorly served any population outside Victoria. The Queenslanders were keen to establish their own group – one that would provide stimulation through discussion at meetings and through regular outings and field camps. I had arrived in Brisbane in September 1968 just in time to attend the last few meetings of the RAOU's Queensland Branch. It was a time with much growing interest in bird research at the University of Queensland, the Queensland Museum, and among many non-academics, including writers, illustrators, and photographers keen on natural history. The first modern field guide to Australian birds had yet to be published. Those sufficiently keen had to struggle with books by Cayley or Leach for field identification. In 1969, the Queensland Ornithological Society was formed. Jim Macdonald, who spent most of his first year of retirement driving around Australia in a Ford Transit caravan brought from England, attended the inaugural meeting and suddenly found himself elected to the position of first President. Both he and Betty always claimed to have been utterly shocked by this unexpected turn of events. He put much energy into his new position, from helping guide the writing of submissions to Government on issues of wildlife conservation to actively participating in early field outings and camps in south-east Queensland.

As well as travelling extensively and becoming reacquainted with the places and people he and Betty had met on their previous great expedition, Jim was actively compiling the information that was to become his *Birds of Australia*, a handbook summarising current knowledge, much of which had its origins in the Harold Hall Expeditions. The book, published in 1973, was illustrated by Peter Slater, also an active member of the Brisbane ornithological community. During his career, Jim Macdonald published about 70 scientific papers and 13 books. He also published articles and letters in the popular press, some later in life obviously rekindling an earlier interest in marine biology as he explored the feasibility of discovering what creatures inhabited the depths of Loch Ness.

As its Foundation President, Jim Macdonald led the fledgling Queensland Ornithological Society through its first two years, encouraging active discussion at meetings and publishing a number of short notes in the Society's new journal, *The Sunbird*. In his retirement he pursued his interest in writing, contributing a number of papers, notes, and reviews to the Australian ornithological literature. In this period he produced another five books, some with reworked earlier material designed to stimulate newcomers to the study of birds, others with fresh material providing new reference sources to established ornithologists. Even in his declining months, he worked avidly on his writing until, to his often-voiced regret, he could go no further.

Jim Macdonald, aged 93 years, died on 17 September 2002 at Sinnamon Village in Brisbane, Queensland. He will

be remembered by many as, at times, a man who wasted few words, but a man who never lost his Highland wit and sense of humour, who went out of his way to be helpful to those who showed a willingness to learn, and who treated his friends always with graciousness and good nature. He is survived by his wife Betty. His contribution to Australian ornithology has been substantial. He will be remembered not only through his published work, but by the personal encouragement he gave to many younger ornithologists. From his simple Scottish Highland beginnings at Foyers to his prominent position in the British Museum in London and his active retirement in Brisbane, Jim Macdonald's life touched those of a great many ornithologists around the world. His influence remains with us.

Douglas D. Dow