

## Obituary

STEPHEN MARCHANT

1912–2003

‘In the beginning...’ is always a good place to start. Our beginnings, our early years, do much to establish those interests that develop in later years. Stephen was born in Weston-under-Lizard, a small village in the English county Shropshire, on the Welsh border. Shropshire is a land of hills and woods, moorlands and marshes, bypassed by the industrial traffic of the Midlands, yet having, in Ironbridge, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. There is a parallel here to Stephen’s influence on Australian ornithology. Just as the achievement of the iron bridge is unknown to the captains of multinational industries, so are Stephen’s achievements unknown to many of those who are household names in Australian ornithology today. To them Stephen Marchant is only the name on the cover of two volumes of *HANZAB*. Yet his influence on the course of the development of ornithology here has been profound.

As a boy in Shropshire he was inspired by his father, a countryman and naturalist of great talent, to explore the natural world of his home. Stephen benefited as well from the company of gamekeepers, shepherds and farmhands, who showed him the secrets of the meadows and hills, and taught him how to learn by watching the birds and animals of that peaceful landscape. The family lived in Shropshire until 1924, when they moved to Cumbria, an even wilder part of Britain. By then the early years of freedom, when he was taught at home, were curtailed, as they are for most of us without our consent and without our appreciation of our loss, by the imposition of school. In 1921 he went to boarding school at New Barnet, Hertfordshire, and later to Shrewsbury School, where Stephen studied ‘solid Classics’ which he considered ‘one of the greatest bits of good fortune in my life. The ability to trot out a tag from Horace has never helped me much to earn a living but intangibly it has helped me greatly to come to terms with life’. So the die was cast. The naturalist and the scholar. Although his life was involved with science, he maintained his view that real civilisation stemmed from the classics. A few lines he wrote to Dom Serventy in 1981 encapsulate his outlook:

‘I realized with despair that the next generation would remain ignorant for all their lives of a huge body of knowledge that I consider to be essential or normal for anyone who is to lay pretensions to be an educated, cultured and civilized person. They might pass by Naseby or find themselves at Valmy in France and never realize what vital actions had been fought at those places, ones that changed the whole course of history; they would never know who Pericles was, would have to ask to be enlightened about Herodotus and would most surely never hear of Montagne or read “Candide”.’



The integration of humanities and science, the two cultures, as C. P. Snow called them, is rare, but it generates both vision and critical thought, characteristics of Stephen that underlie his great achievements. When he left school he did not go straight to university, but spent four years in London, working in the world of commerce. He commented that he found himself with very little to do in the office, and he thought that ‘it may have been then that I developed my addiction to *The Times* crossword puzzle’. He could complete it in 15 minutes and continued this addiction until he was over eighty. After London he went to Caius College, Cambridge, initially to study biology, but in his final year, geology, because the university regarded birds with disfavour as subjects of scientific study and because geology offered better ‘prospects’. It is comical that he wrote when he was nearly seventy, ‘...it is nonsense to claim that life has anything whatever to do with earning money, specially with much money’. Nevertheless, we have to be grateful that he did geology and spent the next twenty-five years posted to various remote parts of the world in the search for oil. In those years he wrote classic papers on the bird life of the Red Sea, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Indonesia, Borneo, Ecuador and Iraq. His international work was recognised by the award of the British Ornithologist Union Medal in 1971 and, later, election as a Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists Union.

After returning to Britain in 1962, Stephen tried to join the English Nature Conservancy, but was rejected. One can

only thank the inept British bureaucrats for their failure to recognise his potential, because he then migrated to Australia. Ornithology in Australia has benefitted for forty years from his vision, skill and enthusiasm, given to it in an entirely honorary capacity. His professional appointment took him to the Bureau of Mineral Resources in Canberra. He soon became a leading member of the local ornithological community. His own account of the steps that led to the foundation of the Canberra Ornithologists Group and the blossoming of the RAOU has recently been published (*Canberra Bird Notes* 2002, **27**, 14–24); the essay gives a vivid account of the events, documenting his vision and persistence in helping to achieve the reforms that he could see were needed to equip the RAOU for the twenty-first century.

In 1968 Stephen was installed as the Editor of *Emu*. During his twelve years in that position he raised the standing of the journal from a local quarterly to a scientific journal held in high regard internationally. The position of Editor gave Stephen a seat on the RAOU Council and the opportunity to promote projects that he could see were essential. In his early years he had worked with many who so effectively sowed the seeds of organised ornithology in Britain. Amongst other adventures he had, in company with Robert Lockley, made an attempt to land on the remote Scottish islet of Rockall and had spent ten days with a broken rib on Bull Island off the west coast of Ireland while counting gannets for James Fisher. Inspired by his early contacts with these pioneers, as well as Lack, Nicholson, Witherby, Alexander and others, he had initiated the RAOU Nest Record Scheme in 1964 and was a founding member of the RAOU Field Investigations Committee when it was set up in 1969. The editing of *Emu* took most of his energy in the 1970s. Once that was over and the Atlas of Australian Birds project neared completion, he set about seeing that the RAOU produced the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* along the lines of the British publication, *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. He was editor-in-chief of the first two volumes and set the standard and design that the series has followed ever since.

His contribution to the RAOU was recognised by his election to a fellowship in 1975, and his contribution to Australian ornithology generally when he was made an Honorary Member in the General Division of the Order of Australia in 1994.

Once he had retired to his estate near Moruya in New South Wales, he developed a field study of the local birds, putting into practice the stringent observational and recording techniques that he had applied so successfully overseas. Stephen revelled in his domain. He never seemed happier than when showing his latest discovery about his birds to visitors during the day and regaling them with anecdotes and discussions ornithological in the evenings. He maintained this study for twenty-five years, including his term as editor of *Emu* and *HANZAB*, publishing the results of

the first twelve years in 1992. Stephen did not confine his activities to his own 'patch'. He had always considered local natural history societies an important focus for a network of observation and conservation action. Indeed, one of his earliest published papers appeared in a local journal, the *Cambridge Bird Report* of 1936. At Moruya he promoted the establishment of the Eurobodalla Natural History Society in 1986, serving as its president for some years and acting as the editor of its journal *Nature in Eurobodalla*. After the death of his wife Mary, who had been a loyal support throughout his adventurous life, Stephen found it increasingly difficult to maintain the household. In 1998 he moved to a retirement village in Moruya and in 2001 to a nursing home near his daughter in Perth. When she and her husband prepared to retire in 2003 and live in the old home at Maulbrooks Road, Moruya, Stephen returned to a nursing home between Moruya and Narooma, where he died in August 2003.

In 1994 Peter Higgins wrote a splendid appreciation of Stephen's contribution to Australian ornithology (*Wingspan* **16**, 6–7). For those of us fortunate enough to have known Stephen personally, and to have been treated to his entertaining letters and conversations, his passing is a great loss. But the legacy he left behind is monumental. Stephen was a powerhouse, both of bold concepts and of bold action. Whatever he aspired to do had behind it a wealth of knowledge and experience; in its execution his energy and persistence were inspiring. And inspire many of us he did. But it is the structures bearing the stamp of his influence that are so important. A Newton Professor of Zoology at Cambridge, Carl Pantin said 'Structure is function', and Ramsay, Archbishop of Canterbury, commented 'Creation is beyond convention'. Stephen followed both dictums. He did not overthrow, like a revolutionary, what he found. Rather he developed it, made it grow and fruit, and left behind a structure on which his successors could reliably depend. One of the greatest tributes to Stephen will be the successful completion of *HANZAB*. Another is the great number of professionals and amateurs whose communication has been made lucid by their contact with Stephen. Birds Australia itself, as a vigorous and effective society, owes much to his foresight and example.

I am most grateful to Sarah for her help with the preparation of this article. We pass on to Sarah and Richard our sympathy in the loss of a father and offer thanks from all who regard birds as 'something special' for Stephen's life and work.

Other tributes to Stephen will be found in:

Anon. (1971). *Ibis* **113**, 403–404.

Anon. (1975). *Emu* **75**, 244.

Garnett, T. (1983). *Emu* **82**, 241–243.

Higgins, P. J. (1994). *Wingspan* **16**, 6–7.

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