

## Obituary

### WILLIAM RAE McLENNAN

In the year 1898 I settled in the western Victorian town of Casterton. Possibly I was influenced in doing so because my old chum, the late Dr. W. MacGillivray, was in practice eighteen miles away, at Coleraine.

I was not long there before it became known that I was interested in birds, and one day a patient said to me that I should see the birds (in captivity) that a young man named McLennan possessed. I was told he spent all his spare time studying the habits, etc., of birds. In due course I met this young enthusiast and found that his bush knowledge was excellent, but, having no means of access to the scanty literature available, he had queer local names for most birds and, of course, some of the more widely-known ones. I was able to let him have a copy of Ramsay's "List," which I had myself copied from one lent me by Dr. MacGillivray. He was able to inspect my collection of skins and eggs at any time, and I showed him how to skin and preserve specimens and to collect the data necessary. Campbell's *Nest and Eggs* and Hall's *Key* were also called into use, and it was not very long before McLennan—then employed in the local farrier's shop—had completely mastered the technical names and the old local vernacular ones were discarded.

Together we went far afield in the surrounding country, and as he knew the district from childhood it was difficult or impossible for him to get "bushed," a faculty which later on was to prove of very great benefit to him in his excursions far from his native town. It was in one of these local explorations that he came across the huge nesting swamp, across the border, in South Australia, viz., Kaladbro, where the White and the Straw-necked Ibis were breeding in thousands. Here it was that McLennan made one of his records, for he found the Royal Spoonbill nesting *in* the swamp—it usually nests in trees—and it was at the time the furthest southern record. In the Casterton district he also discovered the breeding hollows of the Masked Owl and with his cousin and the writer investigated one which contained one young one. At the foot of the tree were the two halves of the incubated egg, broken almost exactly. The two sections were easily joined and the united whole sent to the late A. J. Campbell, who recorded the dimensions of the egg—at that time undescribed. McLennan was a wonderful climber, using a method, which he perfected, of ascent on finely-tempered harrow spikes, which he hammered with a tomahawk into the tree as he ascended and knocked out as he descended. By such means he could go up and down a tree as often as he choose before finally removing the spikes.

In 1906 I left Casterton and I think that helped in McLennan's leaving also, at the same time. As he was going to a situation in Broken Hill, I gave him a letter to Dr. MacGillivray, and later the Doctor found he had a valuable ally in McLennan in the field of ornithology. The two made many excursions together, the results of which formed many papers for this journal, and further increased McLennan's ornithological knowledge, both general and technical, to a very high degree. So reliable were his observations, so very wonderful his eyesight and his faculty for arriving at conclusions based on both, that at times the results were almost uncanny. Dr. MacGillivray later employed McLennan to explore and collect for him new species and sub-species on the Cape York Peninsula and around the Cloncurry area. The results of these trips were the discovering of either new species for Australia or rare birds, the accounts of which from time to time the Doctor reported in these pages.

Later the late H. L. White employed him and we find him wandering away into "the Gulf" country in a lugger. It was on one of these expeditions that he was thought to be lost, and the Federal Government was on the eve of sending out a search party when news came through that he had turned up, nearly exhausted, at a mission station, much to the relief of mind of all who knew him. Of the hardships and dangers he endured and encountered, he said little publicly, but he recounted many thrilling episodes to me of his life in "alligator" and snake-infested regions of the north. It was during one of these excursions that he secured the biggest and most venomous of our snakes, measuring up to twelve feet, and which was subsequently named after him.\* The swarms of flies and mosquitoes and huge "insects" of all sorts, such as five-inch scorpions, were constant sources of trouble to him and he describes the rush it was to cook food and then dash under his net before the host of flies had time to enter also. The same hardships were encountered when, after a tiring day, he returned to his camp and skinned specimens and wrote up his notes in the confined space of a mosquito-net "tent."

In 1917 he enlisted and in due course went to England as a machine gunner. On his voyage to Europe, he made a note of all the sea-birds he saw, and later meeting Dr. MacGillivray in camp in England, with his help identified all of them. Unfortunately, when in the front line in France he was gassed, and although sent to the field hospital, he persuaded those in command to allow him to resume duty, vowing he was only slightly attacked. This was typical of the man. Later on he was to pay the penalty.

After demobilization, he returned to Australia and was soon upon the "Peninsula" again, but his interests were deflected to the search of gold. He had acquired some work-

\* *Oxyuranus maclennani* = *O. scutellatus*.—Ed.



The late W. R. McLennan.

ing knowledge of prospecting and elementary assaying, and this he made use of in his wanderings. Finally he was working a "show" at Coen. The sort of life referred to was definitely what he should not have chosen. A mine-shaft and workings is not an ideal place for a man who has been gassed, and it was not long before the deadly tubercle bacillus began to make itself evident. From then on his health gradually grew worse, until finally he returned to his native district, Casterton, where he passed away on September 22, 1935.

Wilrae McLennan was born at Sandford on August 20, fifty-two years ago. Later the family moved to Casterton, and it was there that he grew up. He was one of those whom we term a "born" naturalist, whose bent turned out to be ornithology. His love of birds and nature was encouraged as a boy at his home, and, as his cousin, Miss Rebie McLennan (Pira, Vic.), writes of him, "From his mother he was sure of sympathy, interest and practical help. To the boy's pets she gave careful, interested, enthusiastic attention. Her pride in them was equal to his. That pride, that interest, that enthusiasm, never waned." Endowed with exceptional powers of observation, great physical endurance and keen intellect, he was of the stuff of which explorers and pioneers are made. Quoting his cousin again, "Difficulties arose, to be overcome. Fearless, patient, painstaking and thorough, he never turned his back, but marched forward. He never doubted that clouds would break. . . . He gave nothing slipshod, haphazard or second-rate—he tolerated such in no one else. Only the tested and the tried was passed on. Thus everything he gave was reliable."

His comparatively early death is a distinct loss to the science he loved. Had he been living more amongst the city dwellers—as distinct from the lonely camp—his knowledge and personality would soon have been more publicly recognized, although such was not sought by him. As his cousin says—and all who knew McLennan will agree—"He had no use for housetops from which to trumpet forth his achievements. The cause in which he laboured was advanced. What matter who, or if anyone, got the credit."

From the writer a friend and collaborator of upwards of forty years has gone into the great unknown land. Only one more word need be added. McLennan's name can never be forgotten, for, along with those who have advanced the science of ornithology\* and whose names are "writ upon the scroll," will be found his by those seekers of knowledge who follow in the long years to come.—E. A. D'OMBRAIN.

\*See also *Aust. Av. Rec.*, Vol. V., p. 107, for an account of McLennan and his work.—Ed.