

OBITUARY

WILFRID BACKHOUSE ALEXANDER

When W. B. Alexander died at Parkstone, Dorset, on December 18, 1965, he left a record of distinguished service to ornithology, and to biology in general, in both Britain and Australia. He also left memories of a gracious personality—an amiable, balanced, well-informed, and ever-helpful colleague.

W. B. Alexander was born at Croydon, England, on February 4, 1885. He concluded formal education at Cambridge (King's College, M.A.), and after brief experience as a naturalist in the Department of Agriculture he was appointed, in 1912, assistant in the natural history section of the Western Australian Museum, Perth. Two years later he became Keeper of the Biology Department in the museum. Following experience in the library of the C.S.I.R.O. in Melbourne, he transferred to Queensland in 1920 to serve as biologist to the Prickly Pear Board, and he occupied that position until mid-1925, soon after which he returned to England.

All the work done by Alexander during his 14 years in Australia was significant. As may be noted from the records in Whittell's *Literature of Australian Birds* (1954), he began soon after arriving in Perth to investigate the history of zoology in Western Australia, with highly useful results, and during subsequent years he extended that service into numbers of informative papers in *The Emu* and elsewhere. His historical notes on Australian ornithology had, indeed, the effect of clearing away some of the fuzziness imparted to this subject by native-born writers; and, in addition, when he became established in Queensland he wrote quite a few informative articles based on personal observations, especially of birds of the central and northern districts.

Other products of his Queensland experience were important booklets relating to the control of prickly pear. Having a working knowledge of entomology and botany as well as ornithology, he was well placed, both in Central Queensland and at a laboratory near Brisbane, as a fighter against the appalling "pear" pest, and there is reason to suppose that he did not get all the credit merited for his part in the ultimate remarkable success of the campaign achieved through the medium of that devastating insect, *Cactoblastis cactorum*.

Aside from contributions to journals, his chief ornithological writings in Australia were the notes on birds which he produced for the first edition of *The Australian Encyclopaedia* (1925-26). These could be regarded, perhaps, as rather too formal, but in the aggregate they provided a sound coverage, and in fact I was able to use many of them, with few modifications in the light of later knowledge, in the greatly enlarged edition of that publication issued in 1958.

Administratively, Alexander gave considerable assistance to the R.A.O.U., notably as a member of the Checklist Committee (appointed 1918) and as Hon. Editor of *The Emu*: work which was a factor in causing him to be given the honour of Fellow of the Union. He took over the editorial position on the retirement of J. A. Leach in 1924, and produced the journal from January 1925 to January 1926, inclusive. A conscientious and capable editor, he found little merit in mere lists—though he himself kept a tally of all the bird-species, an enormous number, that he had seen throughout the world—and thus he made, unobtrusively, enlightening additions to various articles published in the period.

A particular paper that bears the marks of the Alexander "treatment" is one dealing with birds of the campout in Central Queensland in 1924 (*Emu*, January-April, 1925). The author, Harry Wolstenholme of Sydney, was a modest fellow who really did not want to do the job, regarding himself as insufficiently informed on northern birds, and so he made his notes on each species rather brief. But they came to life in print. As one example, the editor undoubtedly enjoyed himself in adding to the entry on the tropical Rufous-breasted Bronze-Cuckoo, *Chalcites russatus*. "Its most distinctive call is a trill of silvery, grasshopper-like notes repeated many times in rapid succession. Indeed, Mr Chisholm maintained that the notes were made by an insect until he was convinced by the sight of the cuckoo actually uttering them." That was true enough: I did dispute the point with Alexander, even though he had met the bird earlier, and he was greatly bucked when I was forced to recant.

However, the position was reversed in England about a dozen years later. W.B.A. assured me then that I was wasting time in seeking documentary relics of the Gould party's visit to Australia—all searches, he said, had proved fruitless—and when I did in fact discover a wealth of material, including John Gilbert's Queensland diary of 1844-45, he was thoroughly astonished. Also, though, he was very pleased.

It would appear that when Alexander went to England in 1926 he intended only to stay a while and then return to Australia. A note in *The Emu* in January 1926 states that the editor was about to visit England and had been given leave of absence by the R.A.O.U. Council, and on that expectancy I took over as acting-editor. But, in fact, he did not return. Instead, he settled down to the production of his notable book, *Birds of the Ocean* (published 1928 and again in 1955, and in a German translation in 1959), and then he became caught up in various ornithological jobs, extending from census work into the position of first director of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. On retiring from the directorship he stayed with the institute as librarian, and the library there bears his name. That and other service rendered to ornithology

caused him to be awarded in 1955 the Tucker Medal of the British Trust for Ornithology and in 1959 the Union Medal of the B.O.U., of which body he was a vice-president at the time of his death. Much earlier, he had been appointed a Corresponding Fellow of the A.O.U., so that he had won ornithological awards in three countries.

It was a pleasure for me, when visiting England in the late 1930s, to fraternise again with Alexander. He was then as keen as ever on field outings, and obviously enjoyed himself in acting as introducer to such notabilities as the nightingale, the nightjar, and the grasshopper-warbler, which last, by the way, produced a curious stridulation that reminded us both of that trilling cuckoo of Central Queensland.

In following years he continued to give me, with the old relish, accounts of adventures among birds made possible through the co-operation of friends. (At this stage he had retired from active work, and, being a bachelor, was living in lodgings at Swanage in Dorset). But as time passed, and his health failed, the handwriting, formerly so neat, deteriorated sadly, and thus it became evident that the end of a notable career in ornithology was at hand.

Perhaps I may fairly add that a happy and quite appropriate reminder of an old friend reposes at the moment in front of me. Three small but very well produced volumes of the Oxford edition of the plays and poems of Shakespeare, they were given me by W.B.A. as a wedding gift, in Queensland, over forty years ago—and they remain, as far as memory serves, the only item born of that occasion still in my possession. —A. H. CHISHOLM

MR H. G. BARNARD

Ornithology in Australia, and possibly the world, lost its oldest experienced devotee when Harry Greensill Barnard died in Brisbane, on October 7, 1966. He was aged 97 years, having been born in Rockhampton, Queensland, on April 11, 1869. His contributions to the study of tropical fauna in this country rank as important and cover a wide time-span, beginning with his part in the discovery of the first specimen of the adult male Golden Bowerbird, *Prionodura newtoniana*, on Mt Bellenden-Ker early in 1889.

At the age of four Harry Barnard was taken by his parents, along with two older brothers, west from Rockhampton to a station, then unstocked, near Duaringa on the Dawson River. That property, with the sonorous name Coomooboolaroo (accent on the "la"), was to become renowned in Australian zoology. It did so partly because of the entomological enthusiasm of the senior Barnard and the artistic skill of his wife, and also because of the remarkable bushmanship developed by the sons. These lads amazed the Norwegian naturalist Carl Lumholtz, author of *Among Cannibals* (London, 1889), when he spent a few weeks at Coomooboolaroo in

the mid-1880s. Their skill was "matchless", he declared, and he marvelled at the manner in which they scampered bare-footed over rough ground, caught insects in mid-air, and swarmed up trees in search of beetles and birds' nests as smartly as any of the aborigines with whom they associated.

When Harry Barnard was aged 19 his father allowed him to go off with Archie Meston, sometime Protector of Aborigines, on a government-sponsored expedition to examine the tropical and lofty Bellenden-Ker Range, then virtually unknown. Useful geographical knowledge was acquired by that small party (it functioned in the height of summer, January 1889), and one rugged portion was given by Meston the name of Barnard's Spur, in tribute to his young assistant. Other "christenings" were made by the leader, but, wisely, in some spots he retained the native names, as for example Chickaringadingadee, which (said Archie) "corresponded in a remarkable manner with the sounds of the waters" falling over its steep face. Also, whenever possible he referred to Bellenden-Ker by its aboriginal name, Wooroonooran—a worthy rival to Coomooboolaroo!

Botanical and zoological results obtained by the expedition also were useful. They included in particular the discovery of the economically-valuable Meston mangosteen, *Garcinia mestonii*, and the full-plumaged male of the beautiful Golden Bowerbird. Harry Barnard has recorded for posterity (on tape) the circumstances in which that bird was obtained at the 3600-ft level on the jungle-crowned mount, and I have related in *The Emu* (vol. 56, pt. 1, 1956: a lengthy article that was reprinted for sale) how distressed Meston was at learning, soon afterwards, that his lovely bird was not new, as he and others supposed, when it was termed *Corymbicola mestoni*, but was simply the adult male of an uncoloured specimen that had been named, seven years previously, *Prionodura newtoniana*.

Returning to Duaringa, Harry Barnard worked among cattle again for a few years, and then he and his brother Wilfred went off with A. S. Meek, the competent collector for Lord Rothschild, to islands east of New Guinea. There they acquired large numbers of butterflies and birds, and also turned with success, on Woodlark Island, to the garnering of gold; but eventually they had to give up—routed by fever.

For more than forty years afterwards Harry Barnard's extraordinary energy persisted, work on Coomooboolaroo and in the management of Rio cattle station (300 square miles of brigalow and prickly-pear country near Rockhampton) being varied by numbers of collecting expeditions to north-eastern Queensland and the Northern Territory. Earlier, he and other members of his family had been frequently in touch with Dr E. P. Ramsay of the Australian Museum, Sydney, who assisted them with identifications; but

now he worked mainly on behalf of H. L. White, the eminent pastoralist-ornithologist of "Belltrees", Scone, N.S.W. The name of Barnard, therefore, figures importantly in the great H. L. White Collection in the National Museum, Melbourne.

Records of Harry Barnard's researches are contained in various volumes of *The Emu*, beginning in 1902 with a note entitled "The Dire Drought". That appalling dry spell was mainly responsible, it would appear, for the decimation of the many species of birds (including the beautiful Paradise Parrot, now so very rare), that used to be familiar and safeguarded on Coomooboolaroo. Later papers include discussions of birds of both Central Queensland and spots farther north, all of them highly informative.

Detailed references to Harry Barnard's writings, and to those of his father and his brothers Charles and Ernest as well, are given in Whittell's *Literature of Australian Birds* (Perth, 1954), and need not be repeated here. It should be remarked, however, that the family's record in service to Australian ornithology is outstanding, and that it was rounded off by the fact that Charles (who was two years older than Harry and who died in 1942) served as President of the R.A.O.U. in 1922-23.

Harry Barnard, too, was closely associated with the R.A.O.U., having enrolled in 1901 and long been the Union's oldest Honorary Member. Anyone who can cast his or her mind back to the campout held at Byfield, Central Queensland, in 1924, will recall that the veteran birdman, acting on request, threw off his boots and socks and, aided by a tomahawk, climbed sturdy trees without difficulty. A photograph of one such feat appears as Plate 44 in *The Emu* of April 1925.

With the onset of old age, and because he had outlived all members of his original family and his wife as well, Harry Barnard was persuaded to settle down with his married daughters, first in Rockhampton and later in Brisbane, there being under the alert eye of a medical son-in-law, Dr A. Freyberg, Queensland's Director-General of Public Health. More recently he had been with another daughter, Mrs Marion Upfold of Ascot. In this advanced period the former keen hearing and eyesight had both weakened; nevertheless the mental faculties remained virtually unimpaired, and as the oldtime good nature and desire to share knowledge still prevailed, it was always a pleasure for any acquaintance to call at the home in Ascot, even when Harry was approaching the century mark.

Personally, on each return to Brisbane I much enjoyed renewing association with Harry Barnard and hearing his stories of adventures among tropical birds. Now, with the last story told, a sense of loss is inevitable, and that although reflection suggests there is no reason for grief over the passing of one who had lived such a full life and attained such a great age. The fact remains that this event has left a significant gap in Australia's ornithological ranks. It marks, in effect, the end of an era.—A. H. CHISHOLM.