

OBITUARIES

ROSCOE GANNON

During his long interest in ornithology, extending over forty years, Roscoe Gannon's only official capacity in the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union was when he served for a few years as a Member of the Council for New South Wales. However, he was known and respected by most people interested in the study of birds. He was quiet and unassuming in character, yet acquired over the years a good working knowledge of many aspects of bird study, through active participation in outings, regular attendance at monthly meetings in Sydney, and reading.

He was born at Thalia, Victoria, on 2 November 1891, but moved to Sydney in 1911. For most of the time since then until his retirement, he was employed as a supervising technician in the Postal Department. He was married in 1936, and his wife, Jessie, who survived him by only four months, possessed also a keen interest in bird observation, and regularly attended meetings with her husband. There were no children.

Mr N. Chaffer has informed me that he first made Roscoe Gannon's acquaintance when they accidentally met one day in 1928 in Rocky Creek Gully, Gordon, near where they both resided. A close friendship followed over the years, and they enjoyed

many field outings together. Roscoe Gannon was keen on RAOU camp-outs, and was the organiser for the one held at Mt Keira in 1954. He contributed in all 21 articles and papers to the 'Emu', extending over a 35-year period, the best-known being: 'Observations on the Satin Bower-bird with regard to the material used in painting of its bower' (30: 39-41), 'Observations on the bird populations of the Sydney Botanical Gardens' (32: 12-16), 'Some checks to the increase of the bird population' (32: 95-98), 'Associations of small insectivorous birds' (34: 122-129), 'Nesting activities of the Grey Thrush' (44: 290-304), 'Group nesting of mixed passerine birds' (53: 201-208), 'Distribution of Australian honeyeaters' (62: 145-166), and 'The influence of habitat on the distribution of Australian birds' (65: 241-253). In recent years he was active on the Council of the Gould League of New South Wales. In 1968 he published a small book entitled 'Mixed Poetry'.

During the past few years he suffered from a bone disease, causing him serious handicap in pursuing many interests, although with the aid of a stick he still managed to attend meetings. He passed away on 9 September 1969 in his 78th year.

A. R. McG.

SIR CHARLES BELCHER

The last survivor of the founding fathers of the RAOU, Sir Charles Frederic Belcher, died at Harding, Natal, on 7 February 1970. He was in his ninety-fourth year, having been born at Geelong in Victoria on 11 July 1876. Such a long life made him also, it would appear, the oldest link with his school, his university and the legal profession in Victoria.

Son of the Hon. G. F. Belcher, MLC, Charles Belcher was educated at Geelong Grammar School and the University of Melbourne. His career in scholarship was notable, including, as it did, honours in classics, comparative philology and Shakespearian study. He was admitted to legal practice in Victoria in 1902 and followed his profession in the country for a few years. Then in 1907 he went to England, there enrolling at Gray's Inn and being called to the English Bar after taking first-class honours in the final examinations of 1909.

Following the death of his father, he returned to Geelong and, for about four years, functioned as a member of the legal firm of Birdsey and Belcher.

But in 1914 Australia virtually lost him forever, because he then took up a legal appointment in Uganda as a member of the English Colonial Service, and after that he had a remarkable career as a jurist and public figure in various countries. These positions included those of Assistant Judge in Zanzibar, Puisne Judge in Kenya, Member of the Appeals Court of East Africa, Attorney General and later High Court Judge of Nyasaland, Chief Justice of Cyprus, Chief Justice of Trinidad and Tobago, and President of the Appeal Court of the West Indies. From the last position he retired in 1937. Meanwhile in 1931 his services had been recognized by a knighthood, this following an earlier award of the O.B.E.

Upon retirement Sir Charles returned to Africa, settling first in Kenya and later in Kokstad, South Africa. During World War II he presided over a number of public committees in Nairobi and Mombasa, indicating the fact that he had, as in earlier years, retained his British citizenship.

Possibly the surprising thing, in regard to Charles Belcher's retirement from active duties, was that he did not return to Australia to live. He had been from early boyhood closely attached to the natural history of this country, especially in relation to ornithology, and therefore it may well have been supposed that the visits he made here, from 1923 onward, would ultimately have extended into residence. Indeed, I said as much to him during one of those visits.

'Why do you persist in staying in darkest Africa?' I asked. 'Your writings indicate that you really *belong* to this country, and there is still plenty of scope here for an ornithologist of your calibre. Why not come back to us?'

Belcher smiled as he replied, 'Just put it down to the fact that I'm scared of Australia's taxation!' Actually, the fact appears to have been that the interest in Africa engendered over many years had got into the Belcher system; and moreover he may have feared that it would be difficult, in advancing age, to readjust himself to the changed scenes of his youthful days.

In Australian annals, the name of Charles Belcher will always be known as that of the ornithological historian of the Geelong area. His devotion to birds began there as a boyish collector of eggs, and as a young man he began to write papers embodying field observations. His 'Notes on birds of the Geelong district' appeared in the local 'Wombat' in 1897, and to the first volume of the 'Emu' in 1901-2 he contributed a brief but informative article that included the district's first record of the breeding of the Purple-crowned Lorikeet. Several other short papers, notably one on the Rufous Bristlebird, appeared in the 'Emu' or the 'Geelong Naturalist' in following years, and in 1914 they were extended

into a substantial book, *Birds of the district of Geelong, Australia*.

That volume is the work that will perpetuate the name of Belcher in Australian ornithology. A pioneer of its kind — as a 'locality' book — rivalling F. M. Littler's Tasmanian handbook of 1910, it is no mere list of birds, but a well-written and well-illustrated presentation replete with informative field notes and lively comments. Inevitably, it went out of print within a few years and is now a valuable item of Australiana.

It was, no doubt, the impact of the Geelong-based book that caused Gregory Mathews to award nomenclatural honour to its author. With that in mind, plus the fact that the name C. F. Belcher, M.A., LL.B., had figured in 1905-7 as one of the honorary editors of the 'Emu', Mathews created the term *Belchera* for the Rose Robin, when he was splitting the five members of the genus *Petroica* into five genera; and in addition he applied the name to several subspecies.

Public duties appear to have kept Belcher engrossed during most of his post-Australian period. ('We are having difficulties here at the moment,' he wrote me at one time, 'and ornithology has to give way to other "aims".') Yet, wherever situated, he continued to maintain interest in his life-long recreation — in 1930 he published *Nyasaland Birds* — and between whiles he kept up contact with old associates in Australia.

Sir Charles lost his wife, whom he had married in 1908, in 1965. He is survived by a daughter, Mrs Elizabeth Cowling of Sussex, England, and a son, W. R. M. Belcher, an engineer of Franklin, Cape Province, South Africa.

A.H.C.