

## OBITUARIES

### DONALD FERGUSON THOMSON

Formerly a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Melbourne and Professor Emeritus from 1968, Donald Thomson O.B.E., D.Sc., who died on 12 May 1970, was accorded international recognition in this field of his first love.

His published research is evidence of his achievements in anthropology. Reference to his expeditions to Cape York, Arnhem Land, to the Great Sandy and Gibson Deserts, and to his study of the Bindibus may be found in anthropological literature. Ornithology he listed as a recreation in *'Who's Who in Australia'*, 1968. He also bred Poll Hereford cattle and kept Scottish deerhounds.

Born in Melbourne in 1901 and educated at Scotch College and the Universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Cambridge, he served in the Second World War as a Wing Commander in the RAAF, and was wounded. His war service included two other activities of note. He played an active role in the Northern Territory in the days of impending Japanese invasion during 1942, when his knowledge of the country and the Aborigines was invaluable. In 1943 he was seconded to the army to carry out two patrols covering more than 1,200 km of jungle and swampland of the Obaa-Wildemann Rivers in Dutch New Guinea. Anyone familiar with the tropics will be aware of the trials and magnitude of the task which he successfully accomplished with the help of three RAAF sergeants and five Torres Straits islanders.

Collections of anthropological, zoological and botanical specimens steadily grew from his field-work and, now housed at the University of Melbourne,

are a tribute to his expeditionary zeal, his breadth of knowledge and interest, and his tirelessness in the field. Indeed, to see him in the midst of these collections was to see the traditional expeditionary naturalist; to be aware of the privations endured in their collection was to understand the tenacity of his regard for them.

As listed by Whittell, Dr Thomson's published work in ornithology began in 1917 and consisted chiefly of short and general notes. During the 1940s he also published popular natural history articles under the heading 'Nature Diary' in the *Sun News-Pictorial*. His *Birds of Cape York Peninsula*, however, was a particularly useful contribution to Australian ornithology, reflecting an intimate knowledge of the country and a documentary approach too often lacking in contemporary papers of this kind. Intended at first for the EMU, it was published separately and is now not easy to obtain. His ornithological diaries for the period 1919-26 are preserved in the archives of the National Museum of Victoria. His earliest ornithological notes that I know refer to birds in Middlesex in 1913; he had been a member of the RAOU from 1917.

A man of physical courage and wide knowledge, Dr Thomson's distinctive personality reflected elements of romantic idealism and strong individuality, attributes that are not uncommonly associated with creative contribution to dedicated pursuits. In his pursuits Dr Thomson was a distinguished Australian.

A.R.McE.

### NOEL FULFORD LEARMONTH

Noel Learmonth, whose death occurred at Portland on 9 September 1970 at the age of 90, was born at Ettrick, near Tyrendarra, about 27 km from Portland in south-western Victoria. His family was among the early pioneers, arriving shortly after the Hentys settled at Portland; his grandfather was first Mayor of the town.

Noel Learmonth was a pupil at Geelong Grammar School from 1895-98. His first job was with the survey team for the Mildura Railway line from 1899-1903; he was the last surviving member of this group. (The hardships and experiences of those years have been told in his book, *Four Towns and a Survey*.) At the end of the survey he became Private Secretary to a Minister for Lands, M. K. McKenzie,

who, incidentally, was blind. This experience of Government procedure stood him in good stead later when he became a great fighter in the cause of conservation. After 1905 he selected land in Queensland, near Gayndah, but, like many others, was forced off, seven years later, by the prickly pear, a menace not then controlled.

From his early days on the Survey, he had started writing, concentrating on pars and stories for *The Bulletin*, published under the pen name of 'Leo'. He continued this interest over the years, with a great many contributions to the local papers on matters of natural history and historical interest, as well as notes and articles for general and specialist journals. His style was always clear concise and spiced with wit.

(Those of us who saw his letters to the paper on conservation matters, particularly on the issues of the Little Desert and the Lower Glenelg National Parks, remember the chuckle they contained, which drove home the point he was making).

His interest in birds seems to date from about 1919, when he returned to his birth-place, Tyrendarra. He and his wife settled not far from his boyhood home, at 'Carramar', where he was sheep farming for about 40 years. (The spreading pines and trees he planted in the garden are a living memorial; the property is now owned by a nephew).

In 1951 Mr and Mrs Learmonth retired to live in Portland. This gave him more leisure to enjoy his birding, historical and sporting interests. He was very keen on all sport, particularly cricket, and was always at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for any Test Match.

With other enthusiasts, he started the Portland Field Naturalists' Club in 1945. He joined the RAOU in 1948, and he and his wife were on the Camp-out in central Australia in 1952. He did not attend many of the Union's annual congresses, but so many people came to Portland and enjoyed his hospitality that he was better known to members than many who attend camp-outs regularly.

After the World Bird Day Counts were started, Noel and his companions continued the practice. He kept meticulous records and diaries of his observations, and these valuable records are now in the possession of Cliff Beaglehole. With Cliff and Hilda Beaglehole doing much of the long miles of beach-combing, Noel recorded a mounting total of beach-washed specimens. The latest, recorded in BOC Notes in August 1970, was the Broad-billed Prion *Pachyptila vittata*. This gave Portland the distinction of all six species of prion being recorded there.

The pages of the EMU contain many contributions from him, mainly recording observations from his own area.

His knowledge of the Portland district was encyclopaedic—historically, botanically and ornithologically. Local people always went to him for answers to their questions, and in correspondence and personal visits people came to him from all over the Commonwealth. To all he was generous with his knowledge.

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria recognized his contribution to the history of the State

by making him a Fellow. He received a Citizenship Award from the Town of Portland and was a Life Member of the Portland Field Naturalists' Club. As a member of the Western Victorian Conservation Committee he was instrumental in having the Lower Glenelg National Park proclaimed, and earlier he had worked untiringly to secure several smaller reserves near Portland. He was on the Board of Management of Mt Richmond National Park; in 1969 a new lookout tower was built, and a bronze plaque marks it as the Noel Learmonth Tower.

Those of us who knew him remember him as a gentle but stimulating friend; his forthrightness was always tempered with courtesy, his knowledge with wit. A day in the bush with Noel was a happy one; he knew exactly where to go to find ferns, flowers and birds. A walk along the beach to find specimens was made interesting by his stories of the wrecks along the coast. He loved it all so much.

A friend has written, and it is worth quoting as it sums up the Noel Learmonth we knew: 'I've known and admired many fine men, but never one who was gentler, more courageous nor more complete . . . He touched so many people old and young in so many varied spheres, and not one but was richer for the contact.' His sight had failed very much, but he was still young in spirit. His friends are grateful that the end came suddenly and peacefully in his own home.

Noel Learmonth will be remembered for a long time. He wrote four books: *The Portland Bay Settlement*, 1934 (now out of print and considered Australian); *The Story of a Port*, 1960 (out of print); *The Birds of Portland*, 1967 (a detailed bird list donated to the Portland Field Naturalists Club; practically sold out); *Four Towns and a Survey*, 1970 (released late 1970, though he never saw the finished production).

He lost three sons, one in infancy, two in the Second World War—John, as a prisoner of war after Crete, and Charles who was killed flying at Rottneest Island. Charles was awarded the DFC and bar, and the air base of Learmonth is named after him. Mrs Learmonth died in 1964. He is survived by a daughter, Mrs Don Baulch, five grandchildren and a brother, Cecil.

I.M.W.