

OBITUARY

JOHN LE GAY BRERETON

John Le Gay Brereton, Professor of Zoology at the University of New England, Armidale, died on 18 February 1976, at the age of 56. Through his death this university lost one of its most stimulating and distinguished faculty and Australian ornithology a close friend. In his twenty years there John sponsored ornithology at a time when it received scant attention in academic circles and developed the only formal university course in ornithology, as part of the curriculum for external biology students.

John had a distinguished career as a pilot during the war. When he returned to Australia he intrigued his friends by bringing back an American bride, at a time when virtually all the marital traffic was west to east across the Pacific. He then attended the University of Sydney, obtaining First Class Honours in Zoology. Thereafter he went to Oxford where, as a member of the famous Bureau of Animal Populations, he worked with such distinguished ecologists as Charles Elton and H. N. Southern. His speciality was population biology and his Oxford research was centred mainly on grain beetles and slaters (terrestrial isopods). In his first paper (*Oikos* 8: 85-106, 1957) he demonstrated how five species of slaters in Wytham Great Wood and eight in the Oxford Botanic Gardens were able to coexist by occupying different microgeographical habitats. An outgrowth of his insect work was a paper, 'Evolutionary Regulatory Mechanisms of Population Control', in the Darwin Symposium volume, *The Evolution of Living Organisms* (G. W. Leeper Ed., Melbourne University Press, 1962).

On taking up his appointment at the University of New England, John switched his major research to birds, specifically parrots. At the XIII International Ornithological Congress at Ithaca, New York, in 1962, he presented a comprehensive paper on the evolution of parrots, bringing together anatomical and behavioural characters in an endeavour to come

up with a more realistic picture of the relationships of the Australian, New Guinean, New Zealand and South American parrots. John's particular love were the rosellas and over many years he and his students worked on the social organization and population dynamics of these birds. Members of flocks were individually tagged so that they could be recognized; he was thus one of the first workers in Australia to carry out extensive banding on birds. Aspects of these studies have been presented at various congresses and symposia and have appeared in several journals.

John maintained a considerable interest in factors governing avian distribution and in conservation. He co-authored a paper with Dr J. Kikkawa on factors governing diversity in avian species (*Aust. J. Sci.* 26: 12-14, 1963). He co-edited, with L. J. Webb and D. Whitelock, the book *The Last of Lands, Conservation in Australia* (Jacaranda Press, 1969). His chapter in this book, jointly authored with B. N. Richards and J. B. Williams, was a scholarly work on the origin of Australian ecosystems.

John Brereton was a delightful companion, diversified in interests and with an exceptional sense of humour. This writer had the good fortune to work with him in the field on several occasions. The first was in 1950, as members of a team doing limnological and invertebrate studies along creeks on the New England plateau. One fondly remembers John's enthusiasm and vigor for all phases of the work, despite the freezing temperatures of the water in July. The evening discussions round the camp fire that followed a hard day's work were a delight.

Enthusiasm was the hallmark of John Brereton. He was a biologist because this was his great love. In a career that extended through three universities he stimulated colleagues of all ages. It was this gift of enthusiasm that made him such a distinguished teacher.

A.K.