

OBITUARY

PERRINE MILLAIS MONCRIEFF

Perrine Moncrieff, a former president of the Union, was born in 1893. She died at Wakapuaka, Nelson, in South Island, New Zealand, in December 1979 aged 86 after infection with influenza.

Mrs Moncrieff, who was a person of strong convictions, had an irrepressible sense of humour and a deep interest in people. To illustrate her determination she still drove her car at 85. She was the granddaughter of Sir John Millais, PRA, painter of landscapes and a person active in the Pre-Raphaelite movement of mid-Victorian England. Her grandmother, née Effie Gray, married first the illustrious John Ruskin but that marriage was annulled. Her father, Sir Everett Millais, published travellers' tales in 1884 about Victoria and of Rotorua in New Zealand. In addition J. G. Millais, who sculpted, painted ducks and wrote about gamebirds, gardens, big-game shooting and travel, mostly between 1892 and 1927, was her uncle. Perrine, who was influenced by his interests, including painting, aspired to his artistic skill but, as she told a friend, without reaching his standards. No evidence survives, however, to show how she rejected his love of the chase in favour of bird protection.

She spent her early years living in London, Brussels and Perthshire in Scotland. In 1914 she married Captain Malcolm Moncrieff, who predeceased her. Having been disabled in the Boer War of 1899–1902, he served in Britain during the Great War of 1914–18, when the Moncrieffs met colonials from the Antipodes. After the war ended, they left Britain to settle in Canada but, decided to visit New Zealand on the way, because Perrine had a relative with a sheep station at Timaru in South Island. A sudden economic depression, which hit New Zealand, endangered their finances; so they decided to stay. They chose Nelson in the north-west of South Island as the best place to live because its vegetation was good for birds, besides having other attractions.

In Nelson Mrs Moncrieff at first put priority on study of birds after she joined the RAOU in 1923. In 1925 she published a book, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them*. It ran to five editions by 1957, with a final reprint in 1961. She wrote articles for the *Emu* on subjects relating *inter alia* to distribution, bird migration, nesting habits, behaviour of South Island Robin, problems of bird protection and reactions of birds and animals to the great Murchison Earthquake in 1929.

She was elected President of the Union in 1932 (photograph *Emu*, Vol. 33), an event which attracted attention of ornithologists in Australia, Britain and the United States, because hitherto women had been regard-

ed as unsuited to these posts. Her presidential address described attitudes of women to birds but the significance of her references to Australian personalities (Ada Cambridge and Aeneas Gunn) in that context is no longer apparent. Also she failed to mention in that address Baxter and Rintoul, two women contemporaries, who expanded knowledge of the subject in Britain.

As time passed, she became more interested in problems of bird protection, nature conservation and other activities, particularly after 1940. Her name did not appear in a list of members of the New Zealand Ornithological Society published in 1947 though she had written short items for its magazine a few years before. At various times she was the president of scientific and cultural bodies in Nelson and a vice-president and representative of the Royal New Zealand Forest and Bird Protection Society. Organizations interested in nature conservation cited her work.

Both Mrs Moncrieff and her husband bought land and jointly presented it to the Government to keep as public reserves. She was active in establishing the Abel Tasman National Park in Nelson Province and for her efforts the Netherlands Government gave her the Order of Oranje-Nassau in 1974; the locality has significance in the history of Dutch voyages of geographical discovery in the seventeenth century. Her book, *People Came Later*, published in 1965, among other matters gave background to the establishment of the park. In 1975 she was awarded the CBE. Next year, Perrine Moncrieff published an historical novel about Scotland before the Union, entitled *The Rise and Fall of David Riccio*.

In pursuing the cause of bird protection Mrs Moncrieff risked adverse criticism in New Zealand, particularly before 1940. By tradition, custom there is to regard persons having unusual views and interests with disfavour. Fortunately her activities escaped notice possibly because she was known as a public benefactor. That escape had important consequences. The cause of bird protection would have been retarded and possibly destroyed in New Zealand if she had been silenced by vested interests.

Ornithologists and birdwatchers must also pay tribute to her for producing her book in 1925. It attracted more buyers than the bigger costlier works written by Edgar F. Stead and W. R. B. Oliver on sale about the same time, judged by its several editions. It therefore started a trend towards taking more interest in bird study.

H. L. SECKER
16 February 1980