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SUPPLEMENT

DEDICATED TO STEPHEN MARCHANT IN RECOGNITION OF HIS SERVICES TO EMU

STEPHEN MARCHANT EDITOR 1969-1981.

At Caius College, Cambridge
In nineteen thirty seven-
(A time which to nostalgic minds
Now seems terrestrial heaven!)
Young Stephen Marchant happily,
Sat, getting rather tight,
Oblivious that, across the board,
Sat, facing him, the bright,
Fast, far-ascending, shining star
Of Austral-Avian skies,
Our Dom Serventy, rising then
In fame, and still to rise.

He would, one thinks, on Stephen M.
Have made a clear impression.
Alas! Alack! it was not so.
We've Stephen's own confession.
He can't remember meeting Dom,
And of that feast so fine
The sole thing he remembers is,
The vintage of the wine.

So wrote Derek Goodwin.

The list of members of the Cambridge University Bird Club for 1936 contains not only the names of Stephen Marchant and Dom Serventy but those of the author of this tribute and of W. Weatherly, father of the artist, Richard.

It was a time of excitement in the ornithological world of the Northern Hemisphere. Roger Tory Peterson had published his *"Field Guide to the Birds"* in 1934. David Lack had just retired as Vice-President and was writing *"The Life of the Robin"*. The *"Handbook of British Birds"* (£ 6 the set of 5 volumes) was not to be published until 1938, but the revision of its predecessor *"The Practical Handbook"* was under way. The Nest Record Scheme began in the same year. The British Trust for Ornithology, aiming to co-ordinate the activities of serious amateurs (there were no professional ornithologists), had

been founded in 1932. Two years earlier, W.B. Alexander had started the Library which became the nucleus of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. Bernard Tucker was Editor of *"British Birds"*.

These details are important for an understanding of Stephen's role in Australian ornithology. Undoubtedly, but for Hitler's War, similar changes would have taken place in Australia earlier than they did: but, when in 1963, Stephen arrived to live in Canberra, there were no Field Guides, no Handbook (there still is none), little co-ordination of amateur work, no Institute of Ornithology. Contributors to *The Emu* received no technical advice about how they should present their papers. It is interesting to compare the "Advice to Contributors" contained in Vol. 69 Part 2, the first issue to bear Stephen's mark, with similar advice given in Vol. 1 No. 2 of the journal of the BTO, *"Bird Study"* (Interestingly, it did not appear in No. 1). Not for Stephen, the deprecatory note of *"Bird Study"* "The following suggestions are offered, not in criticism of other conventions, but to secure some uniformity and to lighten the task of the Editor". But the two sets of advice belong to the same genus.

At school, Stephen had studied "solid Classics" ("I have little doubt that this was the greatest bit of good fortune in my life"). He then had four birdless years in the City of London with the Asiatic Petroleum Company, during which he received (in his own words) "a rather liberal education in the ways of the world", before going up to Cambridge to read Geology, Botany and Zoology.

Coming down in 1938, he was posted by his employers, the Shell Company, to Egypt as a field geologist in Sinai, the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea. Early in the war, he was transferred across the African continent to Nigeria, and, when geological operations in that country closed down, he was sent (with six weeks leave in South Africa en route) via Batavia to Borneo. There he contracted

tropical typhus, from which the death rate at that time was 90%.

But Stephen survived, though it was not until September 1942 that he was fit for active service. By chance he had been evacuated, together with the other halt and lame, the women and the children, first to Batavia and then to Fremantle.

After six months in the Army Inventions Directorate ("a crazy outfit"), he joined the AIF and, after spells in Milne Bay and with a "disgracefully useless" radar unit, he became a Coast Watcher on the northern coast of New Guinea from Lae to Vogelkop and then in New Britain, where he had "absolutely no effect on the war effort but amassed a huge collection of butterflies".

In October 1945 he was repatriated to the UK and for the next four years, from 1946, he was back with Shell in Nigeria. His life continued to move in Olympiads of four years; for, in 1950, he quit Shell and taught Geology at Birmingham University, learning by experience that academic life was not for him.

So back to the field, first to Ecuador and then, between revolutions, to Iraq, where he was able to cover the whole bird-rich country from Kurdistan to the Basrah marshes. Few ornithologists have had such opportunities to widen their experience, though Stephen has never been a "twitcher".

In 1962, Stephen returned to England and, after a fruitless attempt to enter the Nature Conservancy with Max Nicholson, he reached Australia in May, 1963 and went to work in Canberra for the Bureau of Mineral Resources.

As Chairman of a newly-formed group of the RAOU in that city, he was closely involved in the events which led up to the AGM in Brisbane in 1966 at which it was resolved to set up a Committee, under the chairmanship of Keith Hindwood, to consider the reform of the Union. That first Committee collapsed and was replaced by a second Committee of one, that same Dom Serventy of whom Stephen had not been aware at Caius College, Cambridge thirty years earlier. It was Dom Serventy's report which led to an Extraordinary General Meeting in 1969 and the beginning of the New Age.

It is still too early to recount all the details of that stormy period. (At one special meeting of Council, Stephen, not all that tactfully but characteristically, had begun business by quoting William Cobbett: "Now, you lying

varlets, let us see how a plain tale will get you down".) In 1968, Council had found no one to nominate as Editor and, once more, it was the Canberra group (which had resisted a siren voice, urging it to set up a splinter group separate from the Union on its own) which put forward the name of Stephen Marchant, and, faux d'autre, he was elected – to the consternation of some members of Council.

As Editor, he seized the Emu, tidied up its somewhat bedraggled feathers and lifted its head so that it could face the inspection of international ornithology without apology – and made enemies on the way.

The trouble was that Stephen was intent on compelling the professional scientists to write English and the amateurs to write Science. Both groups found the exercise as painful as a raw recruit does his first experience of Army PT. Stephen *could* be very gentle – with those whose inexperience was palpable and who were willing to learn; but he could be demanding – as some thought, cruelly so – even with those novices as they became more confident, taking in a few turns of the screw for each new contribution, but especially with those whom he suspected of being vain-gloriously casual. Though he might tell those who wrote for him that they must use words of one syllable, he did not regard himself as necessarily subservient to the same monosyllabic discipline. His mind was full, his wit was sharp, his pen (or type-writer) ready. Like many of those who have studied Classics, the orotundities and rhetorical balance of Dr Johnson appealed to him and, as with the Doctor, consistency was of comparatively little importance.

Bernard Tucker, an Olympian Editor before whom few contributors did not quake, was his exemplar. And those who wrote for him set out to reach a high standard, knowing that, if they wrote ill (and sometimes if they wrote well) they would be castigated. Thus was the whole level of writing raised; and there were many for whom friendship sprouted from wounds inflicted.

On his editorship, let Derek Goodwin have the last word, as he had the first.

Ah, bitter for the editor.
When his stint is through,
And no-one-writes to him no more;
It makes him très ému.

Finally, here is a portrait of Stephen, the man, in retirement, looking rather like the Ancient of Days, happy on his fifty acres (no use, of course, has he for metrics) at Moruya, the property meticulously divided into squares for the better studying of *Eopsaltria australis*.

Moruyan Blues 1978

The wallabies eat that bloody rose.
I can't imagine how it grows.
I try to keep it up with string.
I *hate* the bloody awful thing;
 But Mary likes it.

The bloody cat climbs up the wire.
It kills the gliders. I enquire
What next the bloody thing will bring.
I *hate* the bloody awful thing;
 But Mary likes it.

This wall I'm building, stone by stone,
To house the plants which Mary's grown -
I've wrecked my back with labouring.
I *hate* the bloody awful thing;
 But Mary likes it.

The kitchen garden down the slope
Produces little else but hope.
The birds do all the gathering.
I *hate* the bloody awful thing;
 But Mary likes it.

The birds - it's they who save the day -
Their nests, their flight, the eggs they lay.
I welcome every bird which sings.
I love the bloody, silly things;
 But Mary hates them.

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