

OBITUARY



ANGUS HARGREAVES ROBINSON

Angus Robinson, ornithologist and grazier, Fellow and former council member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, died at his home in Coolup, Western Australia, from cancer after a brief illness on 17 October 1973. He was born in London on 22 July 1907 and came to Australia with his family as an infant. He was, perhaps, the most outstanding of the recent amateur ornithologists in his State and his achievements brought him an international reputation.

Angus was keen on natural history, particularly birds, as a schoolboy and at Scotch College, Swanbourne (1918-23), he was an enthusiastic egg-collector, enjoying the companionship in this hobby of the headmaster's son, Neil Anderson. One of their discoveries was that the Little Shearwater nested on Rottnest Island (Parrakeet Island), which it no longer does. In fact they are the only naturalists who had seen it there. His observations in the Claremont area in those years are indicated in a paper he published years later, in 1955. The suburbs of Graylands, Floreat Park and City Beach did not exist and in the bushland then present Angus recorded nesting by Yellow Robins, Scarlet Robins and Shrike-thrushes and in Butler's Swamp Australian Bitterns and Restless Flycatchers, all now a vanished avifauna locally. Other species had disappeared just before his time; he did not encounter the Red-winged Wren, which lingered on at Herdsman's Lake at least until 1901 and probably for some years later.

After leaving school he went north as book-keeper and jackaroo on The Peake (now part of Wyloo), a sheep and cattle station in the Ashburton country. His diary of these experiences gives a vivid account of the life led by a youth over fifty years ago in lonely parts of

the State, accessible only by coastal steamer, with visits back home practicable only at intervals of years. He and his family and his friend Neil Anderson travelled by train from Swanbourne to Fremantle on 26 June 1923, a rough rainy day, when he was farewelled on the wharf as he sailed for Onslow on the State steamer *Bambra*. He was seasick but noted down the seabirds that followed the ship to Geraldton. It was too rough to enter the harbour and passengers were put ashore in the ship's launch. Shark Bay was reached on 29 June and their experiences in trying to steam out in darkness indicate the primitive navigation facilities available in those days: 'Early in the afternoon they sent the ship's launch to light up the buoys. The first buoy was 12 miles [19 km] away. Before they got to the second the engine of the launch broke down. So at night when the *Bambra* tried to get out it found the launch stranded. They got it alongside and the Mate got in and started to look for the buoy. The launch went in front and the *Bambra* followed behind. At 11 o'clock she stuck on a bank. About 2 o'clock they found the buoy was quite near.' Carnarvon was reached without further mishap and on the evening of 1 July they arrived at Onslow. Angus disembarked at night, landing by launch, and then went by horse-tram the six kilometres to the town. This was Old Onslow, about to be evacuated to a new site at Beadon Point, twenty-two kilometres north-east, the re-settlement starting late in 1924. Angus put up at the Rob Roy Hotel where on the following day he 'had Wild Turkey for tea'. In Onslow he saw interesting things and was witness to the passing of one age of travel and the dawn of another. He took a photograph of a camel team with fourteen camels and saw an aeroplane come in. This was only about eighteen months after Major Norman

Brearley pioneered his airline service to the North-West and it then operated only between Geraldton and Derby. Later he was to become familiar with the camel team held at Gascoyne Junction to haul motor cars across the bed of the Gascoyne River. On 6 July he left on the lengthy journey to The Peake homestead.

On the first night his party slept at Una but because there were seventeen visitors there (among them the grazier-ornithologist Jack Higham, of Glen Florrie, who was to become a firm friend and companion later) he had to sleep in the store. He arrived at The Peake on 8 July and was hard at work next day. Within a week, in his spare time, he 'went looking for birds eggs' and finds of nests are frequent entries in the diary, including the occasion when he 'fell from a tree after kingfisher nests.' Mail-days were important events, always dutifully recorded. His first letters from home arrived on 23 July, the day after his sixteenth birthday. In the evenings he developed his own photographic films and did a lot of reading. On 16 January 1924 he mentions that he had read six books since Christmas, including *Eugene Aram* (Lord Lytton), Ian Hay's school stories and *Damascus Gate* (Ernest Raymond). Later he was reading *World Crisis* (Winston Churchill) and *Labrador's Doctor*. All of the multifarious chores of station life are chronicled and there is a terse description of his first cyclone: 'January 21, 1925 — During the night the blow came. Started about 2 o'clock. Listening all night to the wind tearing the sheets of iron off the roof above us.' He describes his first taste of Emu meat and of Bungarra, the large monitor lizard of the North-West ('it was jolly good, something like fish and something like fowl'). On 31 May 1925 'I weighed myself — 9 stone 4 lb.' Occasionally notables passed through, including 'Mr. Monger and Mr. Forrest'. He talked birds with the former who 'told Mr. McGrath [his boss] that I must go down to the dance and enjoy myself.' This he did; the event took place at Hardey Junction on Saturday night, 15 August 1925, and lasted until the following morning, a pleasant affair, his first social outing since he went north over two years before. The diary ends on 6 November 1925. He left the station for home soon after and enjoyed his first holiday from the north during the summer of 1925–26.

His next appointment was as overseer and then manager of Ullawarra, also in the Ashburton, a 141,000-hectare station on a tableland in the centre of the Barlee Range, south of Mt Palgrave and just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. He had met the owner, A. E. Watts, when the latter passed through The Peake on occasions. Mr Watts offered him the post in May 1926 and suggested that he caught the steamer to Beadon (like other old-timers he continued to use the name Beadon after it had become the 'new' Onslow) and then travelled out by the mail; he would meet Angus at Hardey Junction: 'Plenty of work to do before we shear early in August. I am just getting back after the races which were very good. Had splendid music and every-

thing went off well. Some nice girls were there so you missed a treat. Wife did not go, not being too well. Hoping you are enjoying your holiday.' He sent Angus a cheque for £12 for his expenses 'on the understanding that it is deducted off your wages while you are working for me'.

It was while he was at Ullawarra, between 1926 and 1935, that his activities both as a grazier and a naturalist were most productive. In 1958 he and I visited his old station together and Angus prepared a comprehensive report, 'Ullawarra — impressions after 23 years absence', in which he summarized the changes and reviewed his own work. While he was employed there the owner was absent each year between October and May, returning to supervise the shearing. During Angus's regime numbers of sheep rose from 4,500 to 22,000, made possible mainly by fencing new country and increasing waters. In 1926 there had been only four paddocks watered by three wells; in 1934 there were ten paddocks with seven new wells. After he left, the new owners increased the number of waters to twenty-six and enclosed more country but the station failed to carry the number of sheep it did in the past. He commented: 'However they have increased the amount of wool per head considerably. This could adversely affect sheep living under rigorous conditions such as are found in a dry season in this area, and so limit the carrying capacity as they would need better feed. It was always a problem to get imported rams with a constitution to carry a big fleece under such conditions. We did buy some southern rams but decided they could not stand up to the harsh conditions as well as station bred rams.' In 1926 the station was run by Angus and one other white man and two native boys, one of whom was an exceptional boy and very reliable. As years went by, it became policy to bring up one or two boys from the south. 'These young fellows were always a bit of a problem, but as a rule, after a period of a year, could be relied on to find their way about the station. This was made easier by two native boys who had to find them when they got lost mustering.' The report gives a valuable account of the vegetation in relation to pastoral activity, ecology, the economics of running a station, manpower problems etc. A copy is held in the library of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club.

His ornithological work at Ullawarra followed at first the conventional pattern of average bird observers (records of occurrences, distribution and general nesting data) but they soon developed into serious studies. In matters of distribution he was the first ornithologist to report sympatry in the quail-thrushes (*Cinclosoma*) by finding two species occurring together in his area. He recorded this in his paper on the birds of the Barlee Range (1939) but was disbelieved. It was only years later (1962) that H. T. Condon of the South Australian Museum showed that a subspecies of the Chestnut Quail-thrush really did extend widely into the range of the Cinnamon Quail-thrush, the common species of the

inland arid areas. Like most resident naturalists in the North-West, from Tom Carter onwards, Angus became impressed by the influence of rainfall on breeding. He kept meticulous records of the nests he found and later analysed these and published the results in 1955, following a similar paper by Ivan Carnaby.

He finally left Ullawarra for the south in January 1935, when his father died, but he never lost interest in the area. The North-West always held a lure for him and it was a great pleasure in after years to re-visit the mulga country. In February 1960, as a member of the Fauna Protection Advisory Committee, he drew its attention to the possibilities of the Barlee Range as a nature reserve and was a member of the survey party that inspected it in the following year. The area (104,230 hectares) was gazetted a reserve in May 1963 and reclassified as a Class-A reserve and a prohibited area (of restricted access) in August 1969. It was vested in the WA Wildlife Authority as the Barlee Range Nature Reserve. Angus visited the area three times and prepared a long revision of his 1939 paper on the birds of the Barlee Range, with much additional ecological data. This has not yet been published.

In 1935 he leased for two years and then purchased a 233-hectare property at Coolup, south of Pinjarra — 'Yanjettee' (this name is derived from *Yanget*, the native name of the Bulrush *Typha angustifolia*, which is also the basis of other place-names near Perth, such as Yanchep and Yangebup). He developed this first as a dairy farm and then for beef cattle and it was here that his most significant bird studies were carried out. The diversified habitats on the property provided excellent opportunities for a resident naturalist: a series of swamps covering about twenty hectares and uncleared Marri and Jarrah forest, all close to the homestead. It was destined to become virtually a bird observatory and was visited by naturalists from all over Australia and abroad (including Ernst Mayr, A. J. Marshall, Donald S. Farner, L. E. Richdale, John Warham and Allen Keast). There were also distinguished visitors interested in birds who were better known in other fields (such as the British actress Joyce Grenfell, Helen Newton Turner of CSIRO and General Sir Gerald Lathbury). An Australian naturalist recalls past days at 'Yanjettee': 'During early morning walks with Angus he showed his territorial sites and was able to predict, with the kind of accuracy pioneered by Eliot Howard, what individual birds would actually do as we approached. Then back for a solid farm breakfast with masses of rich cream. Every day was full of bird incidents. We remember watching Musk Ducks displaying on the 'Yanjettee' lakes. Then at night after an equally memorable dinner began long and vigorous discussions, not only in the field of ornithology but in other aspects of life. For Angus and his wife Cynthia had broad interests, enriched not only by the life they led but by equally wide reading. It was a privilege to have known him.'

At 'Yanjettee' Angus became engrossed in the prob-

lem of territory and the biological significance of bird-song, his main subjects being the Magpie Lark and the Western Magpie, both of which nested near the homestead and whose behaviour he was able to observe continuously during farm work. As he explained in a lecture to the WA Bird Group at the Museum on 20 April 1945, his 'duties on the farm compel his rising early. Thus he is able to watch birds at the most significant part of the day — from daybreak for the first few hours of light.' He became closely associated with professional biologists in Perth (at the Museum, University and CSIRO) and his earlier papers caught the attention of A. J. Marshall, then of the Department of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy of St Bartholomew's Medical College, London, as well as specialists in the USA and Europe. In *Emu* during 1945-46, after a challenging paper on the purpose of bird-song, which drew him into controversy with Mr A. H. Chisholm, he maintained his view 'that despite some views in Australia to the contrary, bird-song chiefly serves a utilitarian purpose.' Local debate on the subject was reported in No. 3 of *Western Australian Bird Notes*, 3 June 1946, where Angus summarized his findings on several local species. These were expanded in a more comprehensive paper on the significance of bird-song at a meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science in Perth in 1947 and again before the annual interstate congress of the RAOU in Perth in 1948. His studies on the breeding behaviour and annual cycle of the Magpie Lark appeared in a series of papers in *Emu* in 1947.

However it was his detailed investigation on the breeding of the Magpie, which brought him widest fame. This work stemmed from original observations by the late Hugh Wilson in King's Park that Magpies there nested in groups and Wilson had interpreted this as evidence against the existence of territory in the species. But Angus showed that the reality was an interesting modification of the territorial system. 'Instead of *pairs* of Magpies defending territory, as is normally the case, *groups* of Magpies form the territorial units.' Dr Marshall, in London, became fascinated by the findings and offered the facilities of his laboratory in working out the histology of gonads collected by Angus in the course of his observational work. This added enormously to the value of the general studies. The field work naturally snow-balled and Angus was helped in 1950 by a grant from the Science and Industry Endowment Fund administered by CSIRO. The report was eventually published in one issue of *Emu* (1956). When Robert Carrick, from Aberdeen, joined the scientific staff of the wildlife research section of CSIRO in 1952 he visited 'Yanjettee' on 31 August and was so impressed with the possibilities of research into Magpies that he subsequently carried out in Canberra his major investigations on the Black-backed Magpie. Several other interesting projects were worked on at 'Yanjettee', including the importance of Marri as a source of food for

birds in the South-West (1960) and the feeding of the White-tailed Black Cockatoo (1965).

Angus Robinson's status in local natural history circles led inevitably to his being offered official and non-official appointments. In connexion with the former he was made deputy to his old grazier-ornithologist friend J. B. Higham, as a member of the old Fauna Protection Advisory Committee (1955) and in 1968 he took the place of Higham when he retired, as a full member of its successor, the Western Australian Wildlife Authority. He remained a member until his death. He served as deputy for the representative of the Pastoralists' and Graziers' Association on the Agriculture Protection Board (1971-73). He held several unofficial posts, including membership of the Conservation and Landscape Committee of the National Trust.

He was a member of the Pinjarra Roads Board for three years and a member of its noxious weeds committee for six years. He was the first chairman of the South West Coastal Committee. He was a member of the wool committee of the Farmers' Union and a member of the executive of the Pastoralists' and Graziers' Association. He was on the committee of the Scotch College Old Boys' Association and a member of the Weld Club.

He was elected an Honorary Life Member of the WA Naturalists' Club in 1968 and a Fellow of the RAOU in 1970. He was one of the Australian representatives at the International Ornithological Congress at The Hague in 1970 and attended a congress of the German

Ornithological Society. Conservation became an overriding interest in his later years. Though he allowed limited duck-shooting at 'Yanjettee' when he first acquired the property, it soon became a close reserve. For very many years he had ceased collecting eggs himself. He became increasingly critical of indiscriminate collecting, even for scientific purposes, and urged that when a specimen was taken as much scientific use of it as possible had to be made. He had followed this principle in his research on Magpies and each bird killed for studies of the gonads was examined for moult, ectoparasites, stomach contents etc. Finally he made the specimen into a study skin (he was a fair taxidermist) and the series was later donated to the Western Australian Museum.

In 1937 Angus married Cynthia Crofts, of Worthing, Sussex, England, and their family of six children were raised at 'Yanjettee'. Cynthia had studied languages in Paris and Madrid and finally at the Dolmetscher Institute in Mannheim, Germany. She was secretary to the Commercial Councillor to the Turkish Embassy in London for a while. A brief biography of Angus appeared in *The Literature of Australian Birds* by H. M. Whittell (1954), with a list of his papers to 1950, and in *Emu* 71 (1971), with a recent portrait. Angus, the naturalist, will always be remembered through his writings. Those who had the privilege of knowing him personally will remember him also as a courtly and upright gentleman in the best meaning of the words.

D. L. S.