

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

SIR ROBERT FALLA, K.B.E.

The news that Dr R. A. Falla has been created a Knight of the British Empire is gratifying indeed. It is an honour, however, not simply for the man or even for Ornithology but rather for the whole field of Natural History in New Zealand. To those interested in nature and conservation matters, in effect a very great many New Zealanders, the name of Dr Falla has become a household word throughout the country. One can recall, from a long time ago, looking forward to each Thursday's edition of *The Press Junior*, the children's supplement to *The Press*, the Christchurch morning paper, for the "Museum Notes by R. A. Falla," started shortly after his arrival in Christchurch in 1937. The author has never lost his common touch of popular writing, and bibliographers may care to note that the first contribution to appear under Sir Robert's new title is apparently that on birds in North Auckland in the February/March 1973 issue of *The New Zealand Motor World*. His early radio talks from Christchurch delighted thousands and may well have had a significant part to play in conditioning the public to the importance of our environment even some 30-odd years ago when they were first broadcast; now his present work, which still keeps him a public figure, as Chairman of the Nature Conservation Council is literally shaping the future of New Zealand.

Let abler pens than mine write the detail of Sir Robert's achievements. But let me say, nonetheless, that those of us who have known him since our formative school days, as I have done, realise with increasing awareness and appreciation, as our own careers develop, how much we owe to Dr Falla (it is not easy to forget his familiar title) for his early encouragement and continued, though often indirect, guidance. I am often perplexed to know whether scientists, in this day of computers and mechanisation which threaten to remove us so rapidly from the old-time natural history, still have their own philosophy of life and work. To ask this about Sir Robert Falla would be rhetorical indeed. How close he is to nature and how much his life and work are intermingled can be amply seen in his delightful little book *The Holiday Naturalist*, described by its publishers as "a gentle introduction to natural history by a man whose whole life has been devoted to its study; a man who can make any walk, almost anywhere, into a source of pleasure and new knowledge." This, even more than any of his more profound scientific writings, typifies the way that he has, unlike many scientists, successfully closed the gap between the professional and the amateur. His Presidential Address to the New Zealand Ecological Society, delivered in August 1955 (see *Proc. N.Z. Ecol. Soc.* 3: 1-6; 1956), entitled "Some Reflections on the Training of an Ecologist" takes on a new significance today and deserves the closest attention from those anxious to see professionally-trained and field-experienced ecologists in positions of responsibility and judgement.



R. A. Falla with H. Guthrie-Smith and E. F. Stead
at "Ilam," Christchurch, 5 November 1937

Photo: Green & Hahn

Leo Fanning, the veteran journalist, once wrote a racy and enlightening account of Dr Falla (as he was then), tracing the development of his career and revealing, amongst other things, how he perhaps might have become a sailor instead of a distinguished naturalist. The reference to this profile is: "Many parts of New Zealand helped to shape Museum director" *The Evening Post* [Wellington], 13 December 1958, and it is well worth the trouble of asking for at the library.

Sir Robert's *curriculum vitae* reads:

Born 21 July 1901, Palmerston North; educated Invercargill Primary, Auckland Grammar, Auckland University College (M.A. in Education, 1926, thesis on "The place of Nature study in education"); Lecturer in Nature Study, Auckland Teacher's Training College, 1925-30; *Dana* oceanographic expedition, 1928-29; Assistant Zoologist, British Australian New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition led by Sir Douglas Mawson, 1929-31; Ornithologist and Education Officer, Auckland Museum, 1931-35; Assistant Director, 1936-37; Director, Canterbury Museum, 1937-47; D.Sc. awarded, 1939, for work on BANZARE birds; Carnegie Scholar, 1939; leader of coast-watching party (Cape Expedition), Auckland and Campbell Islands, 1941-44; Director, Dominion Museum, 1947-66; Chairman, Nature Conservation Council, 1962 to date; C.M.G., 1959; K.B.E., 1973; President of many scientific societies including OSNZ, RAOU, NZ Ecological Society, the Wellington Zoological Society, 7th Pacific Science Congress, and the Royal Society of New Zealand, of which he was elected a Fellow in 1941.

How much more there has been to his career than this mere framework! For here is a man who has been committed to research, administration and education in almost every field of natural history, let alone his diverse interests in Antarctic history and exploration, whaling and sealing, and ships and the lore of the sea. In the wider sphere of public service he is prominent in church and Rotary affairs. Sir Robert is also an eloquent and entertaining speaker, matching his words and sentiments with special skill to the appropriate occasion and revealing each time his particular concern for both subject and audience. Indeed, I enjoy recalling the experience of hearing him talk of his 1963 Auckland Islands expedition to five separate groups of people ranging from the AGM of the OSNZ, and a meeting of the NZ Ship and Marine Society on another occasion, to an audience of New Plymouth high school children. Each address was slanted to the particular interests and level of appreciation of that group and there resulted five very different yet equally informative and enjoyable approaches to the same subject.

One must not forget Lady Falla. She could hardly be likened to Mistress Ford of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (of whom it was said: "Well, she laments, Sir, . . . Her husband goes this morning a-birding . . .") for she has fully shared Sir Robert's interests and experiences, particularly in caring for the many and varied birds brought into their home. Her own talents as an artist and writer

are charmingly shown in *A Sketchbook of New Zealand Birds* (1966) and *A Pocketful of Penguins* (1970), both notable additions to the literature of natural history.

A particularly interesting feature of Sir Robert's early career was his friendship with members of the older generation of natural history such as A. T. Pycroft, Bernard Sladden, Guthrie-Smith, and Edgar Stead. He was privileged to know them and, doubtless, be influenced by their philosophy and ethic. It is appropriate, therefore, that this eulogy of Sir Robert Falla should be illustrated with a unique photograph of three of New Zealand's greatest bird men, each a true naturalist in the finest sense, taken on a memorable occasion in 1937 (see *The Press* [Christchurch], 6 Nov. 1937: 16).

To be Chairman of the Nature Conservation Council is demanding not only in the possession and use of the requisite background knowledge and experience but also of diplomacy, tact and understanding of the other possible points of view. New Zealand is fortunate in the present guiding hand of the NCC and it is fitting that Her Majesty the Queen should recognise Sir Robert Falla's role in watching over the national heritage of our country.



NOTICES

SHORT NOTES AND BOOK REVIEWS

The Editor especially welcomes contributions for the "Short Notes" section of *Notornis*. Please type your offering double-spaced and set out according to the pattern set in current issues. Book reviews of New Zealand interest or significance are also welcome but potential reviewers may like to write to the Editor first to avoid possible duplication of effort. References to recent ornithological literature in obscure or ephemeral publications which might be of interest to other members may also be sent in.

INDEX TO NOTORNIS

The index to Volume 19 (1972) will be sent out with the June 1973 issue.

FIJI FIELD TRIP

Any male members interested in a field trip to Fiji from 19 August to 2 September should communicate with Mrs. G. Eller, 12 Rochdale Avenue, Glendowie, Auckland.

DR R. C. MURPHY

We have just learned of the death at the age of 85 of Dr Robert Cushman Murphy. An obituary notice will appear in the next issue of *Notornis*.