ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY — A TRIBUTE

Robert Cushman Murphy, curator emeritus of birds of the American Museum of Natural History, died at his home, Stony Brook, Long Island, New York, on 19 March 1973, at the age of 85. He was best known in scientific circles as a pioneer in the systematic and ecological study of oceanic birds. In any evaluation of the many outstanding achievements of his professional life priority must be accorded to the period in which adventurous field work and dedicated research culminated in the publication of *The Oceanic Birds of South America* in 1936. This by any standard is a masterpiece. It is notable first for its fine writing and lucid style. The relevant data is clearly presented — almost a mini-monograph of each species described. The accompanying essays on the geography and physical environment are equally masterly. The whole work has become the foundation on which marine ornithology has found its place in the framework of oceanographic studies, and the debt of modern workers in all parts of the world to Robert Cushman Murphy is acknowledged by all.

The man behind this and other notable achievements started his career with no advantage other than his natural endowment of ability and a strong constitution, coupled apparently with a passion for nature study which manifested itself at a very early age. There were no ready openings when he graduated from high school in Port Jefferson and his first job in commercial work was so unsatisfying that he wrote in some desperation to the American Museum of Natural History about his ambitions. The director, Dr Bumpus, and bird curator, Dr F. M. Chapman, must have been impressed for they created an assistant post at forty dollars a month, and later secured a scholarship for him at Brown University where he graduated B.Sc. in 1911. His first responsible job was in the Brooklyn Museum, from which in 1912 he set out, under joint sponsorship of the American Museum of National History, to carry out a year's biological survey of South Georgia in the far South Atlantic. Initially he had declined the assignment because of his approaching marriage, but his wife-to-be. Grace Barstow, refused to let him miss the opportunity and agreed to be wed and left. It was an epic voyage, made in one of the last of the old sailing whalers, the brig *Daisy*. The young naturalist took full part in ship work and in the hazards of the chase of sperm whales in open boats. He came back full of whaling lore, of unrivalled knowledge of subantarctic birds, and with the Southern Ocean in his blood. He had commenced also the meticulous daily recording, not only of his field data, but also journal entries of events, in polished style, full of wit and perception. There must now be an unbroken sequence of these, spanning more than sixty-five years of a colourful life. All that was relevant, of course, went into his scientific reports, but in later life he did publish several books in more personal vein, such as *Log Book for Grace* 1947, *A Dead Whale or a Stove Boat* 1967 and *Fish-shaped Paumanok* 1964, a nostalgic and evocative essay on his own beloved Long Island.

In 1915 he carried out pioneering field studies in the Mexican portion of the Colorado Desert, and his report on this shows his competence in the analysis of a total ecosystem, building constructively on the study of association of plants and animals which Grinnell had begun in that area only a year earlier. The accompanying narrative is

again characteristic in style. "Next morning I awoke before dawn, when the golden moon was just sinking behind the western crest of mountains. A very heavy dew had fallen, and the lagoon had risen several inches during the night. Killdeers were piping, nighthawks and bats were darting about, and railbirds skulked stealthily across the wet flats. While I was broiling a cottontail rabbit over Pancho's early fire, a great file of cormorants passed against the dawn, and many blue herons lumbered up from their roosts in the brakes."

In 1919 he made the first of several visits to the west coast of South America, and it was here that his work on the seabirds of the Humboldt Current provided the insights which so illuminated the content of *The Oceanic Birds of South America* of which his earlier *Bird Islands of Peru* was a forerunner. Other aspects of his work there established him as a geographer and oceanographer in his own right. Back at the American Museum of Natural History administrative responsibility, for which he was well fitted, competed with the demands of his research. For years he shouldered both with distinction, becoming in turn curator of birds in 1926, chairman of the department in

Dr Robert Cushman Murphy with Mrs Grace E. Barstow Murphy at Caswell Sound during the N.Z.-American Fiordland Expedition, 1949.

Photo: K. V. Bigwood, National Publicity Studios

1942, and Lamont Curator in 1948. During this time he initiated field work, research and display. The Whitney Memorial Hall of Pacific Bird Life was his special achievement. In international contacts his influence was significant, and there is no doubt that he could easily have been a distinguished diplomat. The delicate negotiations involved in the transfer of the great Rothschild collection from Tring in England to New York, when its financier-owner in the depression year 1932 was obliged to dispose of it to the highest bidder, was entrusted to him. His social adaptability and charm of personality seemed equally effective in his many visits to South America, where he acquired an easy command of Spanish. He had a remarkable and diverse fund of erudition and a good memory which enabled him to conjure up appropriate reference for all occasions, or to entertain friends and family with word-perfect renderings of prose passages, or of verse grave or gay. Not surprisingly he was in great demand as a prestige lecturer, and he could hold any audience with his exceptional gifts of oratory. The Annual Report of the American Museum of Natural History for 1972 carries a photograph of his tall figure in characteristic pose on the occasion of one of his last public lectures.

Dr and Mrs Murphy made the first of several visits to New Zealand in 1947. It was primarily a study trip to gather material for the two habitat groups from this region which now adorn the Whitney Hall. The location for the seabird material was the Snares Islands (see *N.Z. Bird Notes* 2 (8), 1948: or Grace Murphy's book *There's Always Adventure* 1951), and for the land birds a camp in the bush at Lake Brunner. The reconstruction included extinct species, and envisaged the addition of a model of a moa of medium size. So the next venture was participation in the Canterbury Museum excavations at Pyramid Valley. In 1949 the Murphys were back for a second season of moa digging, and his summary of the work was communicated to the Tenth International Ornithological Congress at Uppsala in 1950. Other activities in New Zealand were attendance at the 7th Pacific Science Congress, and journeys to every part of the country and several offshore islands. The husband and wife team made many friends, and Dr Murphy was generous with his professional advice to colleagues on museum matters, and to government agencies on Conservation. The link was never severed, for many of their New Zealand friends have reason to remember the ready and warm hospitality of their Long Island home, first "Briarlea" and then "Ninth Innings." Moreover they came back, Bob briefly in 1961 on his way to the Antarctic, and both of them on a nostalgic visit in 1971 to see old friends and a few familiar places. Professionally he was still at work, checking data for a projected monograph of the petrels (which is now in other expert hands at his old museum). Privately he was his usual stimulating self, missing little of the life around him. It is hard to realise that it is less than two years since I watched him train his telephoto lens in Wellington on one of his favourite "Kelp Gulls" with the same enthusiasm that must have marked his first meeting with the same species at South Georgia sixty years ago, and less than one year since he drove me in his own car along a crowded freeway out of New York. His physical vigour and mental alertness seemed little impaired, and at the end he died in his sleep — as one friend put it "as gracefully as he had lived."

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