

Evan Graham Turbott, M.Sc., Q.S.O. 1914–2014

With the death of Graham Turbott on 12 December 2014, aged 100, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (O.S.N.Z.) lost the last of its founding members and its longest-serving member (74 years). In 1938 Graham was one of the small band of 15 ornithologists around the country to whom R.A. Falla sent a circular commending the Society's formation. Graham maintained a continuous association with the Society, which included service as President (1949–52), North Island Vice-president (1947–49, 1957–58) and Councillor (1953–55). Although increasingly frail in his last years, he retained his memory, mental agility and sense of humour and was an inspiration to those around him.

Graham Turbott was born at Stanley Bay, Auckland, on 27 May 1914, the eldest of 3 brothers. He attended Takapuna Grammar School. His father (Thomas Turbott) was a primary school headmaster and holidays were spent at the farm of Graham's grandparents (Samuel and Hester Graham) at Mangapai, c. 17 km south of Whangarei. With its patches of bush and scrub, the farm gave plenty of opportunity to develop an interest in natural history. Graham attended Auckland Teachers' Training College and studied zoology at Auckland University College, despite a comment from his father, a strict Presbyterian: "You're not going to university to learn about evolution, I hope". In 1937 Graham submitted his M.Sc. thesis on the distribution and anatomy of the native Hochstetter's frog.

Also in 1937, Graham began his long museum career with an appointment as Assistant Zoologist (later Ornithologist/Entomologist) at Auckland Museum, succeeding Robert Falla as the museum's expert on birds. He married Olwyn Rutherford, who was the museum's assistant ethnologist, in 1940. In their life-time together the Turbotts shared wide-ranging interests in nature, art and ethnology.

In 1943 Graham volunteered for the R.N.Z.A.F. and after early training at Linton Camp was posted to the meteorological section. He was released from air force duties in December 1943 to spend a year on the Cape Expedition to the subantarctic Auckland Islands, which involved military coast-watching duties. There was also abundant spare time to pursue natural history in an unspoiled environment. Many years later Graham wrote of these experiences in a book published by the Department of Conservation in 2002. Lake Turbott on Auckland Island is named after him, as are nearly 20 New Zealand animal species, mostly invertebrates from various offshore islands.



Fig. 1. Graham Turbott. Passport photograph, 1975.

Graham returned to Auckland Museum in 1945. In 1954 he went overseas for 8 months sponsored by the British Council, during which he visited British bird observatories and the Edward Grey Institute (University of Oxford). In 1957 he moved to Christchurch to take up the position of Assistant Director and Keeper of Zoology at Canterbury Museum. Graham returned to Auckland Museum as Director in 1964, a position he held for 15 years until retirement in 1979. Auckland Museum's bird collection, after Graham's departure in 1957, came under the care of Lois Wagener (née Bishop) who was Recorder (Zoology) from 1960 to 1968 (Gill 2000). During Graham's second period at Auckland Museum, he was *de facto* the museum's ornithologist, but could devote little time to birds. He therefore established the part-time role of Associate Ornithologist, which was held by local O.S.N.Z. members: Ross McKenzie (see Brown 1990) from 1968 to 1972 and Sylvia Reed (see Sibson 1982) from 1972 until she died in 1981.

Field work, especially on islands, was a major element in Graham's ornithological career. While still a university student, he was invited by Falla, then ornithologist at Auckland Museum, to join the museum's 1934 *Will Watch* expedition to northern offshore islands, including the Three Kings. Through field-work Graham was soon associated with the country's leading ornithologists in those early years, who included Falla, Charles Fleming,



Fig. 2. Graham Turbott (left) and the author in May 2012 during the last visit Graham made to the bird collection at Auckland Museum. Photo: K. Pfeiffer.

Peter Bull, Geoffrey Buddle, Robert Wilson and, later, Dick Sibson. Fleming visited the Chatham Islands in the summer of 1937–1938 (Fleming, 1939a, b) and Graham accompanied him on part of this important trip. Graham made several research trips to the Three Kings Islands (1946, 1948, 1951, 1953), undertook field-work in Fiordland (1949) following rediscovery of the takahe, and joined an expedition to the Antipodes and Bounty Islands (1950). He was a guest of the Danish deep-sea *Galathea* expedition during trawling in the Kermadec Deep (1952), and a member of the Lake Monk (Cameron Mountains) Expedition to southern Fiordland (1957).

In developing the bird collection during his first period at Auckland Museum, Graham was fortunate to have the support of a staff taxidermist (Charles Dover until May 1953, and Patrick O'Brien from July 1953). The bird department had a .410-bore shotgun that Falla and Dover had used in the 1930s to shoot birds for the collection (including many mounted specimens that are still exhibited). However, Graham was not inspired to shoot birds himself despite the experience of his father shooting pheasants on "the farm". This, for Auckland Museum, reinforced the practice—now standard for New Zealand museums—of passive reliance on the salvage of birds that die from other causes.

Graham's main ornithological research concerned surveys of the bird faunas of offshore islands (Hen, Little Barrier) with sustained work on the Three Kings and the impact of goat-removal on the islands' ecology. He published a 1956 paper on plumages and breeding cycles of the spotted shag and after moving to Christchurch he contributed

to a census of that species around Banks Peninsula (results published in 1995). Graham's move into museum administration presumably robbed him of time for any further major research projects, but he continued to write short notes for *Notornis* reporting the sort of rare finds and important bird records that come to the attention of ornithologists in museums. His comments on distribution and decline of bellbirds in the north, contained in 7 papers, were cited in the important review by Bartle & Sagar (1987). Graham had considerable flare for written expression and this found an outlet in a multitude of general summary articles (e.g., "Birds of Auckland", 1949, 1965, 1979), forewords for books, book reviews and the like. In retirement Graham chaired the committee with the major task of compiling the Society's third checklist of the birds of New Zealand (1990). He had been a member of 2 earlier Checklist Committees.

As a natural history curator, Graham understood the importance of popularising biology for lay people. One expression of this was his involvement in exhibition development. At Canterbury Museum he helped to develop the successful Edgar Stead Hall of New Zealand Birds with its stunning dioramas, a gallery that remains today a drawcard for visitors to that museum. During his early years at Auckland Museum, Graham made improvements to the original bird hall. On returning to the museum as director, Graham led the development of a new bird hall which opened in 1972 in the building extension memorialising the Second World War. This gallery remained open until 1996; its educational value can be guessed from the fact that for the hundreds

of thousands of museum visitors annually the giant moa reconstruction in the bird hall was the museum's second most popular attraction after the Maori gallery.

Graham also reached out to the wider public through his general publications on birds. In the 1930s he wrote a nature column for "Enzed Junior", the children's supplement of the *Auckland Star*. These articles he updated and expanded as the basis for a popular book (*New Zealand Bird Life*, 1947). For illustrations in this book he mostly used the pioneering black-and-white photographs of his friend and colleague Geoffrey Buddle (see Sibson 1975, 1990). Graham was co-author (with Falla and Sibson) of the influential Collins field-guide to New Zealand's birds. When this was first published in 1966 it was the country's first modern Peterson-style ornithological field-guide, replacing an earlier less detailed guide by Moncrieff (1925). "Falla, Sibson & Turbott" went through several editions and re-designs. The project had been conceived by the O.S.N.Z. Council in 1959 and the royalties from sales of field-guides have funded the Society's Projects Assistance Fund over many years. Graham was editor of a lavish edition of Buller's *History of the Birds of New Zealand* first published by Whitcombe and Tombs in 1967 with printing in Japan. Graham wrote a contemporary account of each bird to complement edited excerpts that greatly shortened Buller's text. Tipped-in pages in 6-colour offset reproduced J.G. Keulemans' plates from Buller's second edition of 1888.

Throughout his museum career Graham gave talks to foster awareness of nature, natural history museums and ornithology. During some of the war years he gave tours of the museum's bird hall to American servicemen on rest and recreation leave in Auckland. Between 1937 and 1957 he took 16-mm ciné film footage during field-trips to offshore islands. This was edited into short films that Graham screened to small audiences including O.S.N.Z. meetings. Many of these films, along with Graham's papers, are now held by the Auckland Museum Library.

At various times Graham served on important committees concerned with wildlife and conservation, including the Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park Board (1975–1990), the Animal Ecology Research Committee, the Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Council and the Fauna Protection Advisory Council. In 1977, shortly before retirement, Graham was awarded a Queen's Service Order for public service. He received the Falla Memorial Award of the O.S.N.Z. in 1988 and fellowship of the Society was conferred in 1997. He was also a life member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union.

In the years I knew him from 1982, Graham seemed a gentlemanly figure with a quiet and polite demeanour. He also had a forcefulness and determination that came from his long experience and his years of leadership. He read widely, thought deeply and gave his opinions and interpretations confidently, fluently and without haste. In conversations he tended to be a talker rather than a listener, and what he had to say was worth hearing. He had a dry sense of humour. When I rang him in 2013 and asked how he was, the reply was "Getting older day by day—if that's possible".

Graham was always helpful to those who sought out his opinions, experience and knowledge of the past. Through his published writing, his influence on museum natural history displays and collections and through his committee work for the Society and other organisations, Graham Turbott, in a long and productive life, served New Zealand ornithology well.

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**APPENDIX
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SCIENCE-RELATED PUBLICATIONS BY E.G. TURBOTT**

Turbott's publications dealing predominantly with museum administration are excluded. He was the sole author of the following publications unless other authors are given. This listing does not include every minor item, such as book reviews, forewords to books and presidential addresses.

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Some stray tropical and sub-tropical sea birds in New Zealand. *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum* 4: 187–192.
- 1953**
Distribution and speciation of land birds on offshore islands, northern New Zealand. *Proceedings of the Seventh Pacific Science Congress* 4: 53–58.
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