

OBITUARY



HECTOR ROSS McKENZIE, JP
1897 - 1981

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How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use.

— Tennyson.

Ross McKenzie, a familiar figure beloved by naturalists the length and breadth of New Zealand, died peacefully at Hamilton on 8 June 1981, when he was two days short of his 84th birthday.

In 1897 his mother travelled north from the King Country so that Ross could be born at Clevedon. Two years later the family settled there and Ross received his elementary education at the Wairoa South school. Then in 1910 the family moved north to Wayby. After another year's schooling, Ross was busy clearing logs, helping to enlarge the family dairy farm and to knock it into shape. Brown Teal were plentiful in the swamps. It never crossed his mind that within his lifetime they would become an endangered species.

From the Senior Cadets the farm boy passed naturally into the Territorials. In 1915 he enlisted in the Rifle Brigade and in February 1916 he sailed for the Middle East. When the Gallipoli campaign collapsed, his draft was redirected to France. On the eve of the battle of the Somme he was hit by a stray shell, lost a leg and suffered other wounds. By March 1918 he was back in New Zealand. He was still under 21. A fully active life in the physical sense being ruled out by his severe injuries, Ross took a Hemmingway course in accountancy. In 1921 he married Hetty Goertz (*v. Notornis* 22: 353-354). Then began a partnership that was rich and fruitful in every way. How many people, both local residents and visiting ornithologists, have reason to remember with affection and gratitude the hospitality so freely offered at their homes up the Ness Valley and in Clevedon!

With his burning energy and sense of duty Ross was soon throwing himself into the varied activities of village life — R.S.A., Boy Scouts, School Committee, Church, etc. He was, in fact, the obvious choice to be the unpaid treasurer or auditor for any local association. At the same time, love of the bush and the richness of the local flora led Ross to botany. Cheeseman's Manual became his Bible. His organising mind and a retentive memory stood him in good stead, so that Latin names presented few real difficulties and he collaborated with two notable lady botanists, Lucy Cranwell and Lucy Moore. He amassed a well-documented specimen collection which was housed in a huge cabinet. Such was his mastery that he could rattle off Maori and scientific names in one breath, but he drew the line at ferns! The successes of Clevedon School in the Cheeseman Memorial Native Flower Shows owe much to his guidance and inspiration.

Hungry for exercise in the open air, Ross turned to fishing and acquired a solid 12' 6" clinker-built dinghy. His growing family, three

girls and two boys, were enlisted as rowers. Needless to say, he knew exactly where and when to drop his lines out from Kawakawa Bay and many local people benefited from his piscatorial skill. To spend a day out with him in his dinghy when the snapper were being hauled on board with uncanny frequency was an event to be remembered.

But he was still prone to feelings of ineffectiveness. His mind and body needed new challenges, the stimulus of a subject with wide horizons. In the winter of 1941, Charles Fleming, who was the Auckland regional organiser — as they were then called — of the fledgling OSNZ, received an enquiry from "someone at Clevedon named McKenzie," and since geology was about to take CAF elsewhere, he passed the letter to his successor who had already become interested in the ornithological possibilities of the Firth of Thames. Consequently Ross was enrolled and, with two witnesses, made his first bird-watching trip to the Miranda coast on 3 August 1941. For him the day was a turning point. In modern parlance, he was hooked. As surprise followed surprise, the Firth became his Brave New World. On that first trip two outstanding discoveries were a substantial flock of Black-billed Gulls far to the north of their known range; and the largest gathering of Wrybills recorded since the 19th century. In the next 40 years few months passed without Ross's patrolling the west coast of the Firth in one of a series of heroic cars, accompanied by Hetty or a team of devoted friends or a group of eager youngsters. His long brass telescope was always at the ready. Little that moved escaped the notice of "Old Hawkeye," as he came to be known.

Within a few years of joining the OSNZ he had made his mark and was established both as a character and as an authority. In September 1944 he appeared as co-author of a paper on Pied Stilts. His first solo contribution to NZBN was *A Blackbird Nesting Story*, published in July 1945.

Next year, at the invitation of the King's College Bird Club, he spent a bracing week on Little Barrier Island. Theoretically he was botanical advisor, and he certainly answered many questions on the identity of plants. But from dawn to dusk he was also watching birds and shrewdly filling notebooks with pertinent observations. So thrilled was he by the experience that he returned some months later just to find out what was happening on Little Barrier in winter. Following yet another stay on that magic island, one of his nest-record cards with the familiar writing was reproduced in Fisher and Peterson's *World of Birds* (1964).

At this time, with the aid of a walking-stick in one hand and a long lancewood pole in the other, he was amazingly mobile.

In 1947 one of America's most famous ornithologists, Dr R. C. Murphy, visited New Zealand and was accorded VIP treatment. Ross was asked to escort the visitor to the Firth of Thames and in due course a huge, black, chauffeur-driven car arrived at Clevedon. When RCM saw Ross's high-built Chev., which was expected to perform

all the functions of a jeep, he transferred with alacrity. The sleek Government car followed respectfully behind. Birds in abundance were well seen and a good time was had by all.

In 1949, a Pacific Science Congress brought several American ornithologists to New Zealand. Among them was Olaus J. Murie, who in 1923 was the first to find the nest and eggs of the Wandering Tattler. A quarter of a century later, led by Ross who now had one locally on tap, Murie was able to view *Tringa incana* at Kawakawa Bay, near the extreme south-west limit of its range. As the years passed, Ross's American connection became stronger and stronger, till in 1969 he was sponsored by Principia College, Elmhurst, Illinois, to visit the USA to lead field trips and to give talks on watching birds. His notebooks show how he revelled in bringing his telescope to bear on the migratory nearctic waders about which he had read so much and which he was always hoping, and indeed expecting, to find as stragglers to New Zealand.

Ross became a frequent contributor to *Notornis* and he always had something significant to say. Rare migrants and stragglers fell almost literally into his lap. His mastery of detail is shown right from his early reports on Wandering Tattlers (1949), Hudsonian Curlew (1950), and breeding of Kokako (1951). He was justly proud of having added the Terek Sandpiper, the Gull-billed Tern and other unusual visitors to the New Zealand list.

The OSNZ benefited richly from his enthusiasm. Elected president 1954-56, he made the theme of his address, as was to be expected, "Work and Service." During the expanding years 1957-1966, he was a wise and thrifty treasurer. When a South Auckland region was established, inevitably he became its first RR. Having two such important areas for the study of migratory waders within his zone, he played a leading role in establishing and planning winter and summer censuses of shore-birds in Manukau Harbour and the Firth of Thames. The experience gained has been invaluable elsewhere.

Wonderfully supported by Hetty, he travelled widely seeking birds and bird-watching enthusiasts. Ornithology had become his *raison d'être*, or, as Hetty put it, his salvation, and their travels, whether to Spirits Bay or Stewart Island, became, as it were, missionary journeys. There can be few likely side-roads on the main islands which they did not follow hopefully to their ends, either at the sea's edge or high in the hills.

As if he was not involved enough already, he accepted from 1968 to 1972 under Graham Turbott the position of Associate Ornithologist at the Auckland Museum. Meanwhile for many years he had been collecting data and photographs because he had set his heart on writing a book. When it was published in 1972 it was a *tour de force*. The full title is *In search of Birds in New Zealand: How and Where to Find Them*. It is not without significance that the second part of the title was suggested by Hetty. Thousands have used it and found it

highly informative and thoroughly reliable. It remains in demand and those who are lucky enough to own a copy treasure it.

In May 1981, when a first recipient had to be named for the newly instituted Falla Memorial Award, the Council unanimously chose Ross McKenzie. What may have been the last letter he wrote acknowledges his delight at being so recognised. He was still contributing to *Notornis* in 1980, and he was still speculating on the problems of the mixed bag of moas which his uncle, H. S. Munro, had unearthed from a swamp near Clevedon in 1912.

Grateful for 40 years' dedicated work in the interests of New Zealand ornithology and for his inspiring example, the Society offers sincere sympathy to his daughters Mary, Ada and Catherine and their children and to the families of his sons, John and Roderick, who died before him.

— R. B. Sibson

I first saw Ross McKenzie in action soon after we moved to Clevedon. There, on the road by our mailbox stood a well-built man in ear-muffs and waistcoat. With a stout wooden stick he was directing a boy who was scrambling through the thick fern on top of the bank. They were searching out, successfully, of course, a Yellowhammer's nest. The cock bird had been seen singing on the telephone wires.

It was typical of Ross that, having heard of a new arrival interested in birds, he lost no time in calling, and soon we were joining in those famous expeditions to the Firth.

There was a special excitement in setting off early in an orderly and well-planned manner in the old Chev. The trip down the coast was enlivened with anecdotes. We scanned likely places such as the stony spit at Kawakawa Bay, which had once been occupied for several months by a Wandering Tattler — at least, those in the front did, as the view from the back was rather obscured by the side curtains in cold weather. Excitement mounted as we passed 'Bull Field' keeping a sharp eye out for Redpoll in the short scrub just north of the 'Guy C. Goss.'

As we neared 'The Pools,' the car was more or less given its head while we searched the marshy edges for small waders. Out came the old brass telescope. We learnt the value of patience, meticulous attention to detail, and sheer persistence in getting results. It was always seen as a team effort, and the most junior member of the party was made to feel they had contributed something to the day.

With Ross everything had to be shared. His pleasure in giving pleasure was very real indeed. A new bird meant that everybody had an opportunity to see it. An interesting visitor meant an evening at Kiltarlity with Hetty's kindly welcome. People were her love. With their own family fledged, there were often visitors at Clevedon — overseas visitors, people convalescing, just people in need of friendship.

Often these were young, and in due course 'ornithological' grandchildren were added to the circle.

When Ross retired, he and Hetty embarked on lengthy tours of both islands, visiting members and encouraging new ones. In time they covered most of the roads in the country and these experiences were invaluable when he came to write *In search of birds in New Zealand*. While they were away their back door was never locked. "Someone might want to come in and make a cup of tea," Hetty used to say.

Theirs was a life of love and service to others, their influence going far beyond the sphere of birding.

In his latter years, after Hetty's death, and with his own increasing disability, Ross never lost his dry sense of humour. He could still joke over the fact that since his slight stroke he could not remember which way round to put his hat. His sharp eye could still put us to shame and his interest was as keen as ever.

— A. J. Goodwin

I knew him best in the 50s — long Miranda days, Karaka mornings, sorties around the sewage ponds, and some exhausting forays into Northland on waterfowl surveys or New Zealand Dotterel banding expeditions. All birds were grist to his mill of a mind, but in those years the waders took precedence. He was in their thrall. He could say with Huxley that they were the very breath of his nostrils, and others in his company either caught his disease or passed him off as eccentric — pleasant, harmless, but definitely eccentric. He certainly looked the part, with or without that old brass telescope.

Those were the days of the square-backed Chev with the hand-throttle that choked like a kookaburra. To climb up beside Ross at the wheel took some courage. His acute observation extended far beyond the road ahead of him. The sudden halt, the sharp turn without warning, or a cross-country diversion up a sloping bank were usually by choice, and always something to do with birds. Other drivers unfortunate enough to be caught in his wake used strong words. But "the road is mine, as it is theirs, and I shall use it as I choose. Do 'em good to have to slow down a bit, anyway. Look about them. See the country."

He taught me bird-watching; how to look and record, to listen and record, to count and record. Like Lord Halifax looking from a train at newly-shorn sheep ("Well, they're shorn on this side, anyway") he took nothing for granted. Mentor and loving friend, he shared bird-lore, Maori-lore, botanical information and apt biblical quotations.

In the bush or on a shellbank, while the lithe and mobile sauntered off or strode away, he established himself in one spot and

at the end of the day guess who had the best information? Old Hawk-eye himself.

I would look at herons, or a curlew. "Never mind those big things. Look for the small stuff. They're the puzzles. The little brown jobs." I say something about plumage colour. "Colour? Forget about it — a trick of the light — put there to confuse you. What about the bill? What's the thing *doing*? Does it bob? The rump's important. You must know the pattern of the rump. But for God's sake don't put the thing up till you're ready for it. Colour? Well, useful sometimes, I suppose. And the legs — well of course you've *got* to get the colour of the legs."

He had an endearing habit of describing a bird by reference to his own somewhat portly form. He "became" a wrybill, a greenfinch, a grey plover. Doubly earthbound by his humanity and his artificial leg, he could nevertheless draw himself up into an egret or a greenshank as one's imagination flew with his in specific forms, patterns, and stances.

To think of Ross is to think of Hetty. Theirs was almost a symbiotic relationship. Anyone fortunate enough to be their guests at Clevedon will remember the nightly bird-log: Ross stumping to his desk in that life-centre of a room, calling to Hetty in the kitchen, "What have you heard today, dear? — Yes — yes — got'm — got'm — what about the chaffinch? No yellowhammer on the wire?" Hetty is making pies, or preparing tomorrow's bread. "Just a simple little picnic." She stands at the doorway with floury hands, feet bare in the summer night, hydrangea-blue eyes far away while she wonders. "The yellowhammer. I didn't hear him, but I saw him. Was it today? The children from the school came up with a fish, and he shot past the window. I saw that rufous rump you say I have to look for. Was it today? Yes, there's the fish, still fresh." Her eyes sparkle at the proof. "It was this morning." When did she sleep? Last thing at night she was "just rinsing out the stump-socks"; first thing in the morning, there she was, glowing, with a tray, a flower, fresh fruit. She arranged their lives so that for him "the bird-work" took priority. "If I am to be content he must be happy. The bird-work keeps him happy. And look at the rich friendships it has brought us both."

For all Ross's rugged exterior — peg-leg, "luggies," and that indomitable nose — he was a softie at heart. He needed nurturing, and Hetty was a peerless nurturer. When he was testy she knew how to divert him with an anecdote, or apples to be peeled, or a strategic suggestion. When he tended to pontificate she could take just enough wind out of his sails to leave him afloat but not adrift: "And what will my Old Testament prophet *do* about it??"

All his life Ross maintained a wide correspondence. In the last 20 years it was he rather than I who kept our friendship alive

through letters, usually long, sometimes crisp, never boring. I was only one of his many correspondents.

He was a goldmine of a man, who shared his gold.

— Maida Barlow

It was on Manukau Census day, mid-winter 1963, that I met Ross McKenzie and the pattern for years of field trips was laid down for me. A splendid Black-tailed Godwit in breeding plumage marked that occasion. Thereafter, until the last outing shared 3 weeks before his death, his friendship, knowledge, kindness and encouragement were given unstintingly. This latter occasion brought two firsts for him, the only Grey Duck he ever saw on Hamilton Lake and the unexpected sight of a family trio of Coots grazing like sheep on the green shore. Between these days many events come to mind, but more than these, the simple sincerity and sheer worth of this man stand out. Knowing him changed the course of my life. I am sure that I am not alone in this.

Like many others, Ross "caught" his great interest in birds almost as one catches measles. Aided and abetted by R. B. Sibson, it developed into a consuming passion that lasted for the rest of his life. He recognised this condition in others and knew their overwhelming need to observe, to learn, to know and to write. His whole attention would be focused on filling the need of those who came to him to learn. He took infinite pains to supply full answers, making his correspondence an extensive task. His help was unailing. Scouts came to be examined for their badges, students to glean from his long experience, overseas visitors to be advised on itineraries. All were made welcome, for the home of Hetty and Ross McKenzie was a place of hospitality and understanding.

Ross often joked about preaching the gospel of ornithology, but in fact he did just this. As a result he signed up new members for the Society everywhere he went. He reached out to people and they warmed to him. He was above all a teacher (though this was not his profession), with a good teacher's gift of triggering enthusiasm. Progress was always rewarded. A paper of particular interest, or a letter commending special effort, would go out to the deserving as a spur to further progress.

He initiated counts of waders which grew into regular censuses on both sides of the Auckland isthmus. These go back for many years, providing a store of uniquely valuable information. Such censuses and the surveys of the Pouto Peninsula and Kaipara Harbour and of the Hunuas for Kokako were planned with meticulous care and almost military precision. Teamwork and timing were stressed. With a task completed, sociable and usually very late lunches (work must come

first!) were memorable for good talk and the fellowship of shared interest. While Ross collected the day's records Hetty McKenzie, kindness personified, would quietly see to it that all had food and drink or would draw a shy newcomer into the circle.

A peerless field observer, Ross had an uncanny ability for nest finding. He would calculate to a nicety the chosen site of a dotterel's nest. Many found it almost magical but it was, like all his fieldwork, based on years of solid experience. When old war injuries brought increased infirmity he turned this into an asset. Unable to walk far, he would sit on his folding stool and, by using his telescope, find birds that his more mobile companions often missed. One learned the value of staying put and combing through a resting flock several times over, for persistence certainly brought him results. He delighted in a find, a well-earned reward for the patient work necessary in the regular checking of thousands of shorebirds.

He was a fighter who spoke out fearlessly when he thought the situation warranted it. Sometimes it would put him offside, but this would not perturb him. He could disagree in the most courteous manner, entirely without rancour, which often proved disarming to the opposing view.

There were many demonstrations of the affection that people had for Hetty and Ross. Three very special occasions revealed this particularly. The first was the gift of a trip to the United States. It was made possible by an endowment to an Illinois University's Biology Department. Their first use of it was to choose Ross to be a guest speaker. He had helped members of their staff, as he had helped many other visitors to New Zealand. It was a wonderful trip for the McKenzies, something they had never expected. Later there came a time when their faithful Chevrolet, carrier of so many birders, came to an end of its days. Numerous friends felt privileged to help with a replacement. The response was immediate and overwhelming. Within just a week, the plan became a reality, and the shared excursions continued in a Holden, whose automatic transmission made driving easier, extending the time that Ross was able to enjoy driving. The third occasion arose when Ross retired as Regional Representative for South Auckland in 1973. Friends gathered in Clevedon, some coming from great distances. A history of birding days shown in slides, some copied from very old photographs, was a joyful surprise to Hetty and Ross. A specially commissioned painting of a Kokako, always a special bird to Ross, and an album of photographs sent from all over the country were received with delight and a few tears.

After Hetty's death, although Ross' health declined he continued to write, as was his habit of many years. He never lost his dry sense of humour. Toward the end of his life he moved to Hamilton but still enjoyed the visits of a steady stream of friends. He will be

remembered with great affection by the many whose lives were enriched by his gifts of friendship and dauntless example.

Fall, winter, fall; for he,
Prompt hand and headpiece clever,
Has woven a winter robe,
And made of earth and sea
His overcoat for ever,
And wears the turning globe.

— A. E. Housman

— Beth Brown

For indomitable courage in the face of recurring surgery and never really free from pain resulting from his wartime injuries, I regarded Ross as a man without peer. Along with so many others, I was privileged to count him as a close friend, a friendship which was cemented by our close association throughout the 1960s in the affairs of OSNZ, to the welfare of which Ross was wholly dedicated, and in which he was aided and abetted by our well-beloved Hetty. Ross always acknowledged that it was largely due to Hetty's encouragement that he first took up the study of botany, to become an expert in that field, and then to turn to ornithology.

Incidentally, a project dear to Ross's heart over a number of years prior to the end of a richly rewarding life was the establishment of Kokako on Little Barrier Island, and he would have been gratified to have seen this now coming to fruition.

— A. Blackburn