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J. W. Borcherdt

Born Nov. 22nd 1817. Died Dec. 25th 1909.

RICHARD BOWDLER SHARPE.

(PLATE XIII.)

THIS great ornithologist passed away on Christmas Day, 1909, at his home at Chiswick, after a brief illness. The news of his death must have come as a shock to his many friends, who were unaware of his condition. Dr. Sharpe was present at the meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club on the evening of the 16th of December. He then

continued ...

seemed to be in his usual health and cheerful mood. Next day he took to his bed, pneumonia and other complications supervened, and the end came early on the morning of the 25th.

By his death the Zoological Department of the British Museum has lost a remarkable personality and a distinguished member of its staff, whose kindness of heart and genial nature had endeared him to all his colleagues. Those of us who knew him intimately have lost a dear friend and cheerful companion, whom we shall long miss from our midst. His exuberance of spirits and inexhaustible fund of humour, which found vent even a few hours before his death, have enlivened many an hour passed in his company, for even the most melancholy of his friends could not feel dull in the cheering presence of the late Head of the Bird Room. But to a wider circle of working ornithologists, both at home and abroad, the death of Dr. Sharpe means the loss of a much respected and esteemed fellow-worker, who for well nigh forty years occupied a prominent position in their ranks, and who was ever most kind to those seeking his help, and in imparting information to his brother ornithologists less learned than himself.

Richard Bowdler Sharpe was born in London on the 22nd of November, 1847. He was the eldest son of Thomas Bowdler Sharpe, and grandson of the Revd. Lancelot Sharpe, Rector of All Hallows Staining in the City, and for many years Headmaster of St. Saviour's Grammar School in Southwark. Thomas Bowdler Sharpe, the father of the subject of this memoir, was a publisher in Skinner Street, Snow Hill, publishing among other things Sharpe's "London Magazine." But, fortunately, the boy was not brought up in London. At the age of six he was placed under the care of his aunt, Mrs. Magdalen Wallace, widow of the Revd. J. Wallace, Headmaster of the Grammar School at Sevenoaks. This lady, who was a good Latin and Greek scholar, kept a preparatory school at Brighton, where young Richard passed three

years. At nine years of age he was transferred to Peterborough, where his cousin, the Revd. James Wallace, was installed as Master of the Grammar School. Here the youngster gained a King's Scholarship, which not only guaranteed his education but carried with it a small amount of money, which he increased by his services as a choir-boy in the Cathedral. His cousin, the Headmaster, having accepted a similar post at Loughborough Grammar School, the boy followed thither, and was again successful in carrying off the chief prizes of the school.

At the age of sixteen young Sharpe came up to London, and obtained a clerkship in the establishment of Messrs. W. H. Smith & Son. But even at that early period he was devoting every moment of his spare time to the study of birds, with the determination to earn his living as an ornithologist, and, as a matter of fact, he commenced to write his "Monograph of the Kingfishers" at 186, Strand. After being with Messrs. Smith & Son for nearly two years, Sharpe, in 1865, entered the employment of Mr. B. Quaritch, the well-known bookseller, where he had good opportunities of seeing the finest books on birds. It was at this stage of his life that he worked hard at his first "Monograph," writing much of it in the small hours of the morning, and applying every penny that could be spared from his slender income to the purchase of specimens of Kingfishers.

In 1867, at the age of nineteen, Sharpe was appointed first Librarian to the Zoological Society of London, a post he held for more than five years. Commenced when he was seventeen years of age and finished when he was twenty-two, the "Monograph of the Kingfishers" was published during these years. It was issued in quarterly parts, and illustrated by a hundred and twenty-one coloured plates. The publishing price was eight guineas, but the book speedily ran out of print, and now commands a much higher figure in the market. Of this masterly work a well-known naturalist said that it was "destined

to inaugurate a new era in the history of ornithology." Now it can be affirmed that the prediction has been verified.

Having successfully completed his work on Kingfishers, Sharpe began a comprehensive history of the "Birds of Europe," in collaboration with Mr. H. E. Dresser, to which he contributed a large amount of matter. He had, however, to abandon the project before it was finished, when, on the death of Mr. George R. Gray, in the year 1872, he was offered and accepted the post of a Senior Assistant in the Department of Zoology of the British Museum. Dr. J. E. Gray was then the Keeper of the Department, and it was on his strong recommendation of Sharpe as a rising ornithologist of considerable merit that he was specially appointed to a senior position in the Museum to take charge of the collection of birds. It is of interest to note that Sharpe's appointment bears the signatures of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Tait), the Lord Chancellor (Roundell Palmer, Lord Selborne), and Mr. Speaker Brand (afterwards Viscount Hampden), the three Principal Trustees of the British Museum.

The high reputation he already enjoyed as a working ornithologist was such that very soon after he had entered on his new duties Dr. Gray, on the suggestion of Dr. A. Günther, the distinguished zoologist, who succeeded Gray as Keeper, entrusted him with the preparation of the first volume of that monumental work, the "British Museum Catalogue of Birds," the most exhaustive undertaking of the kind in existence. The Catalogue embraces not only a list of the specimens contained in the Museum itself, but it gives a full description of every bird in the world known at the time of publication, whether in the Museum or in any other collection; its changes of plumage and the literature referring to its history and determination, together with a brief record of the geographical range of each species and an enumeration of the specimens in the British Museum. The stupendous

character of the task may thus be realised, and it says much for the extraordinary industry and power of work possessed by Sharpe that he was able to write no fewer than eleven of the twenty-seven volumes of which the "Catalogue of Birds" consists, while he was co-author with his colleague, Mr. Ogilvie-Grant, of two others. Some indication of Sharpe's share in the whole work may be gained by the statement that out of 11,548 species described in the Catalogue, 5,181 are contained in his portion, and 6,367 in those parts written by the ten other authors. Volume I. was published in 1874, only two years after Sharpe entered the Museum, and it would probably be difficult to find in the annals of the Department another instance of a book of this size and character having been commenced and completed within two years of the author's appointment to the staff.

Another official publication for which Dr. Sharpe is responsible is his "Hand-List of the Genera and Species of Birds," in five volumes, the last volume having been finished and issued within a few weeks of his death. Although some disagreement with Dr. Sharpe's system of classification and arrangement as given in the Hand-List has been expressed by some of his brother ornithologists, the great value of the Hand-List has been widely recognised, and its completion has been warmly welcomed by ornithologists in all parts of the world.

Prodigious as was the labour involved in the writing of these volumes, their preparation formed only a part of Sharpe's duties. It may here be said that much of his private time was devoted to Museum affairs, in fact a great portion of the Hand-List was written at his home after the day's toil at South Kensington.

From the day he entered the Museum in 1872 to the last hour (literally) that he spent in his beloved Bird Room in Cromwell Road, he never ceased to use every effort to increase and enrich the collection under his charge. No opportunity was missed, whether by persuasive supplication or seductive appeal to the generosity

and patriotism of some wealthy collector, which he could press with irresistible force, or by interesting some departing traveller or explorer in the birds of the regions he proposed to visit, or by impressing on his chiefs the absolute necessity of acquiring by purchase this or that collection, he generally managed to have his way, and thus gradually to absorb every bird that he considered was a desirable acquisition for the national collection. It was indeed a difficult thing for anyone to say no, whether he happened to be the owner of some magnificent collection which Sharpe coveted or some intrepid explorer fresh from a remote region of the globe with a series of specimens which he (the traveller) particularly wished to keep as a memento of his journey, or the chiefs of his Department from whom sanction to a purchase had to be obtained, one and all were utterly unable to resist the boundless enthusiasm, the fervour, the intensity with which the Head of the Bird Room urged his appeal for the enrichment of the national collection. How successful were his efforts may be known when it is stated that in 1872 the cabinets in the Department of Zoology contained not more than 35,000 ornithological specimens, whereas at the present time half-a-million specimens would probably be under the mark—and this increase has taken place notwithstanding the continual weeding out of absolute duplicates.

Among the private collections of birds and eggs which, owing to the munificence of their owners, were incorporated in the national collection during Dr. Sharpe's curatorship, were those of Mr. Allan Hume (Indian), Messrs. Salvin and Godman (General), Colonel Wardlaw Ramsay (Tweeddale collection, Asiatic), Mr. Henry Seebohm (General), Colonel Biddulph (Kashmir and Turkestan), Mr. C. B. Rickett (Chinese), and Mr. F. W. Styan (Chinese), while the acquisitions further included the Wallace collection (Malayan), the Sclater collection (American), the Shelley collection (African), Sharpe's own collection (African), the Gould collection

(General), and the Gould series of Humming-birds. Sharpe's personality and enthusiasm were, of course, an important element in inducing the generous owners to make their munificent donations—how largely responsible he was for some of these gifts may be seen in the following extract from a letter written by Mr. A. O. Hume in July, 1885, offering his splendid collection of Indian birds and eggs as a present to the nation: "Should this collection form as valuable an addition to the British Museum as I hope it may, I trust that it may not be forgotten that its acquisition by the Museum has been solely due to the fact that Mr. Sharpe was at the head of the Ornithological branch of that Institution." The Hume collection consisted of about 82,000 specimens, of which 75,577 skins and eggs, including 258 types, were placed in the Museum cabinets.

On the request of Mr. Hume, Dr. Sharpe was deputed by the Trustees to go to Simla to pack and bring home the collection. He left England on the 24th of April, reached Simla on the 19th of May, and was back in London on the 10th of August, having packed and despatched from India forty cases, weighing half-a-ton each, and bringing with him thirty-eight cases more. He accomplished his mission within four months of leaving England, and in a shorter space of time than had seemed possible to Mr. Hume.

Dr. Sharpe has himself recorded that he considered the gift of the Hume collection was one of the most splendid donations of the kind ever made to the nation.

We may also quote from a letter written in May, 1888, by Colonel Wardlaw Ramsay, in reference to his generous donation of the magnificent collection of Asiatic birds formed by the Marquess of Tweeddale. In writing to Sharpe he says: "I gave it [the collection] to the Museum solely because you were there, and therefore I felt I might have perfect confidence that it would be done justice to."

That at this period of his life, after years of unswerving labour, his services were meeting with some appreciation

in official quarters may be gathered from the following letter sent to him in 1887 by Sir Edward Bond, then the Principal Librarian of the British Museum : " I do indeed take an interest in your herculean task of forming and arranging the Ornithological Collection, and I think the public conscience ought to be awakened to the national indebtedness to you for what you have done and are doing."

In 1891 Dr. Sharpe attended, as President of Section A (Zoology and Comparative Anatomy), the Second International Ornithological Congress, which was held at Budapest, and delivered an address on the " Classification of Birds." He sent a copy to Professor Huxley, who acknowledged it as follows : " I am very much obliged for your ' Review,' which will be extremely valuable to present and future workers. I wish something like it had existed a quarter of a century ago when I was trying to find my way through the chaos of Ornithological Classification. It would have saved me a world of labour, which I am glad to find was not altogether in vain."

In recognition of his eminence and of the prominent part he had taken in the proceedings of the Budapest Congress, the Emperor of Austria conferred upon Dr. Sharpe the gold medal for Art and Science, a distinction reserved exclusively for those who have contributed to the advancement of science or art in Austria-Hungary. In the same year he received an honorary degree of LL.D from the University of Aberdeen, and an address from the leading American ornithologists congratulating him on the completion of the thirteenth volume of the " Catalogue of Birds," which practically concluded the description of the Passerine Birds of the world. They expressed the warmest appreciation of his labours as an ornithologist, especially of his work in connection with the classification and nomenclature of the Passeres.

The important services rendered by Dr. Sharpe to the Museum and his distinguished career as an ornithologist received well-merited recognition at the hands of the

Museum Trustees in 1895, when, on the recommendation of the late Sir William Flower, then Director of the Museum, he was promoted to the newly-created post of Assistant-Keeper of the Vertebrate Section of the Department of Zoology, a position which greatly extended the sphere of his duties, since the section of which he thus became the Head embraced the Mammals, Reptiles, and Fishes, as well as the Birds, and he was thus brought into closer official relations with those of his colleagues who were in immediate charge of these groups.

His astonishing powers of work were never more in evidence than about the period when, in addition to his multifarious duties in the Bird Room, involving among other things constant personal attention to the many inquiries addressed to him and to the numerous visitors to the Department who daily go there seeking information, he undertook the preparation of his "Hand-List of Birds," giving the name of every known bird, while in his own time he managed to edit Allen's "Naturalists' Library," and to write and publish a number of books, including his "Monograph of the Swallows," a "Monograph of the Birds of Paradise," and a work on the Birds of the Yarkand Mission; based upon the collection and notes of the late Ferdinand Stoliczka. He was also responsible for the "Aves" portion of the "Zoological Record"—a task which was entrusted to him to the end. Further, he delivered a course of lectures at the Royal Institution on the "Geographical Distribution of Birds," and later in the same year (1893) one on "Ancient and Modern Birds."

The International Congress of Zoology met at Leyden in the year 1895. Sharpe went to this gathering, and he was honoured by receiving an invitation to give his lecture on the "Curiosities of Bird-Life" before the Queen of Holland and her mother, the Queen-Regent.

One of the most useful pieces of work which he accomplished as a Museum official is his "History of the Bird-Collection in the British Museum," which was published

in 1906. It is marked with that thoroughness and mastery of detail which distinguishes all his work in which he was keenly interested. While he was writing the "History" he threw himself into the subject to the exclusion of almost all his other literary work, and at the close of his days he was as fond of this production as of anything he had done. The "History" is full of interesting matter, and the biographies of ornithologists are based on a knowledge derived in many cases from personal acquaintance, which he alone possessed.

Another of his achievements, which he used to recall with satisfaction, was his founding of the British Ornithologists' Club in 1892. He was proud, and legitimately so, of the fact that the Club, which owes its origin to his advocacy and effort, has developed into one of the most important centres of ornithological activity in the world, while at the same time the scheme of the Club and the amenities surrounding it, which are largely the creation of Sharpe, have made the meetings of the Club among the most sociable and enjoyable scientific réunions in London.

At the Paris Ornithological Congress of 1900, at which he was present, he was nominated President of the ensuing Congress, which was held with great success in London in 1905. Sharpe, of course, presided over the gathering, which was largely attended by ornithologists from the Colonies and foreign countries, and in his presidential address he gave an interesting account of the origin and progress of the Bird Collection in the British Museum. The Congress is to meet this year in Berlin, under the presidency of Professor Reichenow, and it is sad to think that the familiar figure of our friend, always one of the most popular figures at these international assemblies, will not be there to initiate his successor into the Presidential Chair.

The world-wide distinction which Bowdler Sharpe enjoyed as an ornithologist must, in the fitness of things, always entitle him to a prominent place in the Temple of

Fame among the devotees of his own special science, and his name will ever be honoured by his brother ornithologists, but no memoir of him would be complete without mention being made, however briefly, of the extraordinarily wide range of his knowledge.

An instance of this may be noted in connection with the editing of his "Gilbert White's Selborne," which led him to make literary researches in the records of churches in White's country. He became interested in the architecture and history of the churches, and in a few months he became so devoted to archæology as to make some of his friends seriously wonder whether the ornithologist was not going to develop into an antiquarian of no less renown. He occupied much of his annual vacation in his later years in carrying out investigations into the history of Basing Castle, and with the permission and co-operation of Lord Bolton he spent many weeks in conducting excavations on the site. He thus acquired a store of knowledge on the subject, and collected considerable fresh data connected with the great siege of Basing Castle by the Parliamentarians with a view to the publication of a book embodying many new facts relating to the matter, a work on the writing of which he was engaged at the time of his death.

Sharpe was a man of remarkably wide and varied sympathies and interests. He was above all intensely human, and enjoyed life to the full. His keen sense of humour, his overflowing good nature, his love of pure fun, almost boyish to the last, his buoyant spirits, all combined to give him an irrepressible optimism that must have often stood him in good stead in the stern battle of life in which he had to take his full share, fighting against heavy odds the greater part of his life. He was a delightful companion for a holiday, prone to practical joking, though always of a harmless and inoffensive sort. I remember on one occasion we were driving in a hansom in the neighbourhood of Knightsbridge, when he suddenly stopped the cab and asked the driver whether he knew

where the desert was. "Desert?" exclaimed the driver. "Yes," said Sharpe. "The place where I can retire to for prayer and meditation." "Oh," replied cabby, "I can't say as I knows where the desert is, but the Oratory is close by and handy, sir."

I could mention many other anecdotes of his love of fun, but the space at my disposal will not allow. He was blessed with a wonderfully retentive memory. His ability to recite at length verses and quotations suitable to the occasion, and his store of anecdotes and reminiscences were truly amazing. He was a good sportsman, very fond of a day's fishing or shooting, played cricket up to an age beyond that at which most men give up the game, and for a man of his build possessed wonderful agility, whether playing tennis or other games. In his early days he used to be very fond of watching and collecting birds—one of his favourite haunts being Pagham Harbour.

For many years Sharpe was a familiar figure at the Savage Club, of which he was a very old and most popular member, occasionally presiding at the Saturday house entertainments, when the fact of his being in the chair always attracted a large audience. He was also a member of another well-known literary coterie—the Whitefriars Club, which elected him to an honorary fellowship a few years before his death.

It is, perhaps, not inappropriate to suggest here that the many friends and co-workers of Dr. Sharpe may wish to put on record in some simple yet permanent form the high regard and affection they entertained for him. A memorial bronze tablet, with suitable inscription, might be placed, with the permission of the Trustees of the British Museum in the Bird Room of the Natural History Museum, where he spent so many hours of his life in unremitting labour for the good of the Institution. But, after all, the wonderful collection which he loved so well and did so much to build up will remain for all posterity the best monument to his life's work, and his successors may be trusted to see to it that nothing is done either

to impair its present pre-eminence among the collections of the world, or to diminish the great reputation it enjoys among scientists of every nationality. That such is the case is largely owing to the unstinted labours, boundless enthusiasm and love of his science of our deceased friend, and assuredly no one deserves to be held in more grateful remembrance by all those who are proud of, and interested in the welfare, of our national Museum of Natural History than does Richard Bowdler Sharpe.

Dr. Sharpe married, in 1867, Emily, youngest daughter of the late James Walter Burrows, of Cookham, who survives him, and he leaves a family of ten daughters.

A list of his numerous works and a summary of his published papers, including his many contributions to the journals and proceedings of scientific societies is appended. This list is taken from the "Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club," by the kind permission of Mr. W. R. Ogilvie-Grant, the editor of the Bulletin.

C. E. FAGAN.

LIST OF WORKS BY R. BOWDLER SHARPE.

- Catalogue of the Accipitres, or Diurnal Birds of Prey, in the Collection of the British Museum. Vol. I., 1874, 8vo, pp. i.-viii., 1-479; pls. i.-xiv.
- Catalogue of the Striges, or Nocturnal Birds of Prey, in the Collection of the British Museum. Vol. II., 1875, 8vo, pp. i.-xi., 1-325; pls. i.-xiv.
- Catalogue of the Passeriformes, or Perching Birds, in the Collection of the British Museum.—Coliormorphæ, containing the Families *Corvidæ*, *Paradisæidæ*, *Oriolidæ*, *Dicruridæ*, and *Prionopidæ*. Vol. III., 1877, 8vo, pp. i.-xiii., 1-343; pls. i.-xiv.
- Catalogue of the Passeriformes, or Perching Birds, in the Collection of the British Museum.—Cichlomorphæ. Part I. Containing the Families *Campophagidæ* and *Muscicapidæ*. Vol. IV., 1879, 8vo pp. i.-xvi., 1-494; pls. i.-xiv.
- Catalogue of the Passeriformes, or Perching Birds, in the Collection of the British Museum.—Cichlomorphæ. Part III. Containing the first portion of the Family *Timeliidæ* (Babbling-Thrushes). Vol. VI., 1881, 8vo, pp. i.-xiii., 1-420; pls. i.-xviii.
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- Catalogue of the Subfamily *Zosteropinæ* in the Collection of the British Museum. Vol. IX., 1884, 8vo, pp. 146-203.

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- Catalogue of the Passeriformes, or Perching Birds, in the Collection of the British Museum.—Sturniformes. Containing the Families *Artamidæ*, *Sturnidæ*, *Ploceidæ*, *Alaudidæ*, *Trichidæ*, and *Menuridæ*. Vol. XIII., 1890, 8vo, pp. i.-xvi., 1-701; pls. i.-xv.
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- Catalogue of the Platalæ (Ibises and Spoonbills) and Herodiones (Hérons and Storks) in the Collection of the British Museum. Vol. XXVI., 1898, 8vo, pp. 1-328; pls. i.-v.
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- Monograph of the *Alcedinidæ*, or Family of Kingfishers. 1868-1871, 4to, pp. i.-lxxi., 1-316; pls. 1-121.
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- A History of the Birds of Europe, including all the Species inhabiting the Western Palearctic Region. [With H. E. DRESSER.] London: 1871-1872, 4to. Parts I. XV.
- A History of the Birds of South Africa. By E. L. LAYARD. New Edition, thoroughly revised and augmented by R. BOWDLER SHARPE. London: 1875-84, 8vo, pp. i.-xvii., 1-890; pls. i.-xii.
- Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S. "Erebus" and "Terror" under the Command of Captain Sir James Clark Ross, R.N., F.R.S. Birds: Appendix, by R. BOWDLER SHARPE. 1875, 4to, pp. 1-39; pls. 1-37.
- Guide to the Gould Collection of Humming-Birds in the British Museum. London: 1881, 8vo.
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- Natural History Appendix to the late J. S. Jameson's "Story of the Rear Column of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition." London: 1890, 8vo, pp. 392-422.
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- Scientific Results of the 2nd Yarkand Mission: based upon the Collections and Notes of the late Ferdinand Stoliczka. Aves, pp. xix., 154; pls. i.-xxiv. (1891).
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- Royal Natural History. The Picarians. Vol. IV., pp. 1-90 (1896).
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FOLIO WORKS OF THE LATE JOHN GOULD, F.R.S.

Completed after Gould's death by R. BOWDLER SHARPE.

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- The Birds of New Guinea and the Adjacent Papuan Islands, including any new Species that may be discovered in Australia. Parts 13-35. 1875-1888.

A Monograph of the *Trogonidæ*, or Family of Trogons. Concluding Parts. 1875.

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WORKS OF THE LATE HENRY SEEBOHM.

Completed after Seebohm's death by R. BOWDLER SHARPE.

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* We regret that want of space prevents us from giving the full titles and references of these papers, which will be found in the list in the Bulletin B.O.C. The figure after each title in the following list refers to the number of papers contributed to each publication during the year.