

## C. J. ALEXANDER.

CHRISTOPHER JAMES ALEXANDER was born at Croydon on March 24th, 1887. He was seriously wounded near Passchendaele on October 4th, 1917, and it seems almost certain that he was killed, or died after being put on the ambulance, though the only information of his death yet received is unofficial and lacking in detail.

Several members of the family in older generations, notably his great-grandfather, James Backhouse of York, had been distinguished by their interest in natural history; and the love of birds, which was destined to become one of the ruling motives of my brother's life, was obtained very early, largely through the influence of our uncle, Mr. J. B. Crosfield, of Reigate. He won entrance and leaving scholarships at Bootham School, York, and was a distinguished member of its Natural History Society, which is the oldest in any school. During his schooldays he collected butterflies and moths, and gave much of his time both then and later to the study of botany and geology. His interest in science and natural history was, in fact, never narrowly departmental: he could always collate his observations on the avifauna of a district with a full knowledge of the geological and botanical environment and minute observations of meteorological phenomena; nor were his studies of these subjects merely subsidiary to the interest in birds: his careful notes on plant distribution both in England and Italy are of special value, and some of them he sent to Professor Seward at Cambridge.

After leaving school in 1904 my brother gained a scholarship at the South-Eastern Agricultural College at Wye, Kent, and remained there, first as a student and then, after he had taken his B.Sc. in Agriculture, on the staff, until the end of 1909. From Wye he frequently visited Romney Marsh and other parts of Kent. In this way he added much to the knowledge of Kentish ornithology and natural history already obtained from living at Tunbridge Wells. Soon after he left school I made the joyful discovery that his ornithological bent was almost exactly like my own; we had always spent a lot of time watching birds together, often also with my brother, W. B. Alexander, now in Australia; but somehow the discovery of our identity of ornithological outlook came quite suddenly. We began by making careful observations on the departure of autumn migrants in September, 1905 (though we had a number of records of arrivals and departures since 1897); and when I returned to school we began a regular interchange of bird letters

that has lasted twelve years without a break, except when we were together.

Amongst the thousand joyful memories of this close comradeship that crowd through my mind it is impossible to choose those things most worthy of record, for many things that mean a great deal to me might seem trivial to others.

Some characteristics of our methods may be noted. We always found our chief interest in observing the habits of birds during those seasons when domestic duties are not uppermost in their minds. The month of June, which to the egger is, I suppose, the most exciting month of the year, was to us the dullest. True, after a time, we found a satisfactory way of occupying that month, by "mapping" the summer migrants in their nesting-areas, but as an important part of this was comprised in the effort to discover just when each pair arrived, the really effective mapping was generally finished by the end of May. Still, we were not slow to appreciate the close relationship between bird distribution and migration; so that in order to obtain a thorough understanding of migration it was necessary to study carefully the breeding distribution of all the birds of our districts.

We made daily observations on bird song; and from the beginning of 1906 we kept daily lists of birds seen, in the order in which we saw them, noting those heard singing. The making of lists was always an immense delight; apart from the daily list there were lists for the month, for the year, for the various countries, counties, districts, and sometimes even parishes, in which we spent our time. Much of this labour was, of course, of no scientific value, but it all tended towards accuracy and fulness of observation, and thus led to a number of interesting discoveries of the movements and partial distribution of birds. The complicated migrations and daily movements in winter of Finches and Buntings; the formation, wanderings and dispersal of the flocks of Tits and other small birds; the autumn congregation of Swallows and other species; the passage in spring and autumn of Chats; the time of arrival and departure of the individual Warblers and Flycatchers; the comparative abundance of allied species—all these and other features of bird-life in Kent underwent a far closer scrutiny than would have been the case with less complete note-making. We gained much more pleasure from these species than from birds of prey and other large creatures. Small birds are much easier to watch; they are far more abundant than large

birds in this country ; and there seems to be much more variety in their habits. And in spite of what has sometimes been said, they are usually easy to identify, for both my brother and I seemed to find that even species most notorious for "skulking" would, if given the chance, soon appear and show themselves. When first he was in Flanders, even without binoculars, he had no difficulty in identifying all the Long-tailed Tits he saw as *Æ. c. roseus*.

This is not to say that we were cold to the excitement of seeing large birds. One April day, after a long and uneventful walk over Romney Marsh, from Appledore to Dungeness, we sat down on the point, tired out, while our tea was being got ready, glad to have no more walking to do. Suddenly twelve big birds came flying right towards us, and passed within a hundred yards—Brent Geese—the first we had ever seen. A couple of minutes later we were consulting as to the possibility of walking the five miles (half of it shingle) to catch the train at Littlestone : such is the magical effect of an exciting bird on the tired ornithologist ! But this I compare in my mind with the far greater rapture of coming upon a party of Alpine Accentors and a Wall-Creeper on a great slab of rock above Torre Pellice, in the Cottian Alps, in December, 1915, one of our last bird adventures together. And better still was the sight and sound of half-a-dozen Snowfinches singing and soaring, their white wings flashing in the sunlight, near the top of M. Viglio in the Roman Apennines, two and a half years before.

Whilst my brother was at Wye we found great pleasure in contributing information to Dr. N. F. Ticehurst's *History of the Birds of Kent* and the B.O.C. Migration investigation ; these important works and *British Birds*, which was just then launched, seemed to provide the help we needed in our work.

At the end of 1909 my brother left Wye, and for a year he was at Reading, adviser on plant diseases under the University College and Berkshire County Council. During this year he got a very fair knowledge of the ornithology of the county, and mapped a considerable proportion of all the Corn- and Cirl Buntings that were breeding in Berkshire that year. Then he spent a few months at home, where he began to map Thrushes and Robins on a scale of 25 in. to the mile ; the next three months he was combating plant diseases at Suckley, Worcestershire. After that, in June, 1911, he obtained a post as *rédacteur* in the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome.

This was not his first journey abroad. We spent a winter at Arcachon when he and I were respectively 11 and 9 years

old ; and we kept notes of birds seen and heard even then. In August, 1905, he spent some weeks at Champéry, Switzerland, whence he brought roots of Alpine plants, several of which, carefully tended by him from time to time, still flourish. He had a remarkable facility for understanding languages, and, apart from the value of this to him in his work at the International Institute, it helped him to become intimate with Italians, so that by the time the war came he felt himself almost more Italian than English.

During his years in Italy—first at Rome and then at Albano—my brother spent nearly all his spare time observing the distribution and migrations of the birds of Rome province. The Institute is situated in the magnificent Villa Umberto Primo (Borghese gardens), where all sorts of birds appeared on migration and many species nested. One year he watched a Goldfinch on its nest from his window in the intervals of *rédaction*. When he lived at Albano he bathed daily in summer in the lake after his work, and mapped quantities of Nightingales and Icterine Warblers on the wooded slopes. His week-ends were often spent at Fiumicino, where he explored the shore, the Isola Sacra, the ancient Porto, and the Tiber mouth. For over two years he added something new to his Fiumicino list on every visit. The rarities seen there included Siberian Chiffchaff and Gannet.

By reason of the vast differences in altitude in the province, from sea-level to the heights of the Apennines, his task of making a complete study of its ornithology was of special interest. He gave particular attention to the effect of such a natural feature as the Alban Hills, standing over 3,000 feet high in the middle of the low Campagna, on migration, and to the comparison between bird-distribution in the Alban Hills and at similar altitudes in the Apennines. A summary of his observations on bird-distribution and on song in winter-quarters was contributed to *British Birds* this autumn ; but much valuable material is still unpublished. His observations on Flanders ornithology, contained in his letters, also include much of value.

After Italy joined in the War my brother wished to join the Italian army, but was found medically unfit. In view of much that is said of the conflict of Italian and Slav ambitions on the Adriatic coast it may be worth noting that he felt especially keenly that we had "let down" Serbia badly, and later he had the same feeling about Roumania. Happily he did not live to hear of the Italian disaster.

It was no easy matter for him to set aside the Quaker principles of many generations of ancestors ; but at an earlier

time he had, with courageous honesty, felt bound to reject much of the orthodox religious dogma, that had at first meant a great deal to him, when he found it was no longer true for himself. Again he strongly disliked all forms of authoritative and imperialist politics, and counted himself a Socialist in the Continental sense, utterly opposed to the policy of the Italian Catholic party. He was impatient of the voluntary system of recruiting, thinking it better in time of war that the Government should decide who were required for fighting and who ought to stick to their work; and so, when the British representative on the committee of the Agricultural Institute said that the British Government wanted all the single men, he was ready to come. He preferred to enlist as a private, and joined the Buffs on February 29th, 1916. Most of his training was at Dover, where he had chased Dark Green Fritillaries and watched Shrikes in his first school-days, eighteen and twenty years before.

In June he went to France, and was in the fighting on the Somme, in Belgium, and near Albert before Christmas, always able to banish something of the gruesome surroundings by looking and listening for the birds—and often rewarded by the sight of good things, such as a Green Sandpiper put up from a flooded trench, a Great Grey Shrike on the cheerless downs at Christmas-time, and a Bustard that flew over the camp one day in February, 1917. Then one night when he was on sentry duty he broke his leg; it was supposed only to be sprained, and was not properly treated for a fortnight; so in March he was in England again, and spent his convalescence at a military hospital in Monmouthshire, where he was able to see the coming migrants in April. Then to Shoreham for further training, until his leg was really well; there we had a fine walk by the Adur and over the Downs; and on July 14th, when he had his draft leave from Sittingbourne, we spent a beautiful evening out in the Forest at Tunbridge Wells, watching half-a-dozen Nightjars dancing in the air, and listening to them, and to a Cornrake, and the gurgling and drumming of a Snipe—peaceful sounds of summer. The next morning we watched a family of Wood-Wrens being fed, at a place where a pair appeared this year after eight years' absence, only a few yards from where we had watched a family at the end of July, 1905, the day on which we "discovered" each other.

Several letters followed from France, ending with one on September 30th, in which he wrote of a Quail they had put up, which, with Pied Flycatcher, Woodchat and Melodious Warbler seen passing a few days before, made 107 species

for the year—a wonderful total under such conditions. “The sun is just sinking into the mists,” he concluded: “it really looks quite wintry, in spite of the heat.” And then they went up the line again.

His devotion to natural history had made him shy and reserved, so that social intercourse with any but very simple, unassuming, frank people, or those who shared his interests, was a torment to him, but he found a new life when he joined the Army, and made friends with many men in the Buffs and afterwards in the Queen’s, to which he was transferred after the battle of the Somme. All his natural sympathy and affection, which had been reserved for the very few, seemed at last to be expended on many; and it was not thrown away. As son, nephew and brother he had forged bonds that death cannot break; he had devoted himself without measure to the interest of a few chosen intimates about Rome; and now he had become the faithful comrade of all in need.

His work seems hardly to have begun; and he himself, glad as he was to get the two articles on Roman ornithology completed for *British Birds* while he was in England this year, did not consider that he had nearly completed his observations even in that region. But, such as it is, all his work is methodical, scientific, accurate, full of insight and judgment, and, above all, the true expression of a life devoted to the study of Nature.

H. G. A.