

OBITUARY.

MICHAEL JOHN NICOLL.

WITH the death of Michael John Nicoll at the age of 45, on October 31st last, there passed prematurely away one of the best known of the younger school of British ornithologists. The third son of the Rev. C. A. Nicoll, he was born at Bepton Rectory, Sussex, in 1880, and spent the whole of his boyhood at St. Leonard's-on-Sea, whither his parents had moved a few years later. Being delicate as a child he was educated locally, and after leaving school passed several years on a farm at Brightling. At a very early age his innate love of natural history began to show itself, and it was during these early years that he began the study of British birds and to form a collection of skins. This was constantly added to in later years, in the intervals of other work, whenever he was at home. In the course of time this collection grew to a considerable size, all the birds being shot and skinned by himself and nearly all obtained in Sussex. When, later on, fate decreed that so much of his life should be spent abroad he disposed of it to the Dyke Road Museum at Brighton, where it could be permanently cared for and form the nucleus of a working collection for the use of students.

His early work obtained constant encouragement from Mr. Thomas Parkin, with whom he was always on terms of cordial friendship, and from the late P. L. Sclater, on whose recommendation he was elected to membership of the British Ornithologists' Union in 1902. At the instigation of the latter he put in several years of good work in the prosectorium of the Zoological Society, and it was also on Sclater's recommendation that he obtained his first opportunity of doing pioneer work outside the British Isles, being invited by the late Lord Crawford to accompany him as naturalist in his yacht "Valhalla."

In the three voyages undertaken between 1902 and 1906 72,000 miles were covered, and as a result the Natural History Museum was enriched by the addition of 732 birds, besides many other natural history specimens, all collected and prepared by Nicoll or under his direction. The birds collected and observed were duly described by him in three long papers that were published in the *Ibis* in 1904 and 1906. An account of his voyage round the world in 1902-3 formed the subject of a short paper in the *Zoologist* for 1904, while a general

account of all three voyages was published by him in 1908 under the title *Three Voyages of a Naturalist*, a most fascinating book of travel and natural history observations, that was very well received and ran to a second edition.

In 1906 Nicoll obtained an appointment under the Egyptian Government as second in charge of the Zoological Gardens at Giza, of which Capt. S. S. Flower was Director. Here, with the exception of the usual intervals of leave, he spent practically the rest of his life in a congenial occupation with abundant opportunities for the advancement of the science which he had made his life's work. In the intervals of the routine work he devoted his energies to the formation of a representative collection of the birds of Egypt, which, when he left, amounted to some 4,000 skins, arranged by him in the museum attached to the gardens. So long as it remains it will form a monument to Nicoll's industry, skill and devotion. He proposed to make it the foundation of an exhaustive work on the birds of Egypt and as a stepping stone he brought out in 1919, under the auspices of the Government Zoological Service, a small handbook, designed for the guidance of such visitors to Egypt as are interested in the birds of the country. The more scientific side of his work on Egypt's birds is embodied in his "Contributions to the Ornithology of Egypt" that appeared in the *Ibis*; in 1908 on the "Birds of Lake Menzaleh"; in 1909 on the "Birds of the Province of Giza" (3 parts), and in 1912 on the "Birds of the Wady Natron." He was also the author or joint author of several special reports in the publications of the Egyptian Zoological Service, notably the "Wild Birds of the Giza Gardens" (publication 23), as well as in the *Cairo Scientific Journal*, the *Avicultural Magazine* and numerous notes in the *Bulletin of the B.O.C.* He left much material in a forward state towards his more ambitious work on the birds of Egypt and it is to be hoped that it may be possible for this to be continued by other hands.

On the retirement of Major Flower in 1923, Nicoll succeeded to the senior post, but only a few months later he was forced to return home on sick leave and early in the present year definitely retired. On returning to England he acquired a home at Wittersham in Kent, where he could devote himself to sport, the working up of his Egyptian material, and the study of the native birds that were his first love. It is tragic to think that his life there should have been so short; but marred as it was by frequent attacks of ill-health, borne with an heroic and cheerful courage that was the admiration of all his friends, he enjoyed every hour of it, and near by he was

laid to rest, on the slope of a hill overlooking the marsh he loved so well.

Gifted with a keen eyesight and a musical ear, both of which he trained from early life and kept in constant practice, Nicoll was a quite unusually good observer and in consequence had a wonderful, and at times almost uncanny, facility for the recognition of unusual birds in the field. Possessed of a keen sense of humour, he was always a delightful companion, his keenness, knowledge and skill both as field naturalist and museum worker ensured him a high place amongst ornithologists of the day, while his kindly unselfishness, straightness of character and staunchness were the outstanding qualities that will be sorely missed by the numerous friends he has left behind him.

N. F. TICEHURST.