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OBITUARY.

BERNARD WILLIAM TUCKER (1901-1950).

It is not much over ten years since Harry Witherby called Bernard Tucker to assist him with the editing of this Magazine after the death of F. C. R. Jourdain, and it is little more than seven years since, on Harry Witherby's own death, the editorial responsibility passed to Tucker in the middle of the second world war. On that occasion Tucker wrote with justice that it would be idle to pretend that anyone could adequately fill Witherby's place yet Tucker himself was, by common consent, by far the most nearly qualified to do so. In his early forties, already possessing a broad and deep knowledge of ornithology in the field, the laboratory and the museum, and imbued with the traditions of his seniors, with whom he had successfully completed the new *Handbook*, Tucker seemed destined to continue and to develop their work. Yet only a few years after he took on the editorship, the first signs appeared of his grim and protracted battle against the illness which was to carry him off so prematurely and with so much suffering, to which he refused to give in. Even in hospital he could be found with his bed strewn with galley-proofs of *British Birds*, in which every misprint had been corrected, every missing comma inserted, and any departure from the standard practice of the Magazine made good. He remained almost to the end as eager as ever to hear of interesting occurrences, and as late as September 15th, 1950, he showed the greatest zest on a long field expedition to Staines to see a Sabine's Gull. It left him exhausted, but he said he would not have missed it for anything.

Slight in build and stature, gentle and unassuming in manner, mistrustful of unqualified statements and of snap judgments, Bernard Tucker by no means conveyed to a stranger an adequate impression of the vigour, the clear, firm judgment, the understanding of people and the all-round capacity which his achievements show him to have possessed. Many lesser men have attained greater public status and won more recognition. Outstanding in knowledge, and mature in discrimination, he never lost some traces of an attractive school-boyishness of manner and expression. Some carefully weighed judgment would be followed by an invitation to say whether it was "all rot", or an excursion yielding important new knowledge on some difficult point of bird behaviour or identification would be recorded as

having been curtailed because the weather had grown "too foul". It was perhaps this blend of being very wise and yet essentially young in outlook and enthusiasm which was the secret of his lasting influence on successive generations of students who have carried his methods and standards as far afield as New Zealand and Tristan da Cunha, Canada and East Africa. His width of sympathies and generosity of mind were remarkable, yet he applied in all scientific matters the strictest standards both to himself and to others, being satisfied only with the highest attainable degree of proof.

Bernard William Tucker, son of William and Constance Susan Tucker, was born at Nawthaw, Hertfordshire, on January 22nd, 1901. Not long afterwards the family moved to Chewton Mendip in Somerset, and it was here that Bernard Tucker grew up. At an early age he became interested in all branches of Natural History, and at one time botany claimed nearly as much of his interest as did zoology. He became a keen bird-watcher as a schoolboy. A Nightjar's nest and two eggs which he found on Tresco in June, 1914, seems to have been the only definite breeding record for Scilly until quite recently (*British Birds*, Vol. xxxix, p. 11) and by 1918 he began publishing an extensive and careful List of the Birds of Chewton Mendip and District in successive annual reports of the Wells Natural History and Archæological Society. His interest in the county where he spent these early years never waned, and he remained to the end an active member of the Ornithological Section of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society whose meetings at Taunton he attended regularly. He was on the Editorial Committee from 1931 and was Vice-President also from 1931. At the beginning of 1950 he was elected President in succession to the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt.

On leaving Harrow, he became a demy of Magdalen in 1919, taking his B.A. with first class Honours in Zoology in 1923. At this time his interest in reptiles matched his interest in birds, and, according to one who shared lodgings with him at this period, it was nothing extraordinary to find escaped snakes and lizards at large in them. Going out to Naples as Oxford Scholar in 1924 he worked for a time on marine biology, but without losing his ruling passion for birds, and after a brief spell as a Demonstrator in Zoology at Cambridge in 1925-26 he returned to Oxford permanently in 1926, becoming University Demonstrator and Lecturer in the Department of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy. He became one of the foremost authorities on vertebrate comparative anatomy, and, in addition to his work as demonstrator, lecturer and tutor, was a valued member of many University committees. In 1944-47 he held a Research

Fellowship at Queen's, and in 1946 he became Reader in Ornithology, the first in any British University.

While working at Naples he met his future wife, Gladys Allen, whose father had settled in Italy for health reasons. They were married on July 11th, 1925. Her husband's constant companion, Gladys Tucker accompanied him on many of his long ornithological expeditions and, though not herself expert in ornithology, shared to the full in all his interests and enthusiasms. In the last year or so of Tucker's life, their partnership became, if possible, even closer, when it was Mrs. Tucker's tragic duty to prevent her husband from over-working and at the same time to keep him in ignorance of the true nature of his illness, a secret which for many months she kept almost entirely to herself.

Although his personal contribution to Ornithology was so great, the bulk of it was made in such close collaboration with others that it is not easy to disentangle. His work as Editor of this Magazine, his share of *The Handbook*, his part in the establishment of the British Trust for Ornithology at Oxford, his researches on the nature of species and subspecies cannot be adequately measured by the relatively limited contributions which bear his name or initials. The effective leadership and editorship of records for the Oxford Ornithological Society rested with him for the greater part of 30 years; during those years the society under his inspiration carried out a great volume of pioneering work in the fields of bird distribution, bird census, ecology, bird-marking and trapping, and he led large organised expeditions to areas as remote as Islay, Texel and the Camargue. To give one more easily overlooked example, much of the success of the Eighth International Ornithological Congress at Oxford in 1934 was due to Tucker, its Treasurer and the only one of its officers resident on the spot, who also served as secretary of its Reception Committee.

As Editor of this Magazine Tucker was troubled by unusual production and other difficulties during and after the war which were all the more tiresome to cope with owing to his ill-health and to the fact that, unlike his predecessor, he was working at a distance from the office. Nevertheless, while strictly maintaining the general standard and character of *British Birds* he introduced a number of improvements, particularly an index corresponding with the calendar year, and a series of photographs of the highest standard illustrating the appearance of birds rarely observed in the British Isles, and such subjects as display, which are better recorded in pictures than in words. To the very end, he retained full responsibility for these plates which

have become such a valued feature of the Magazine. Only a week after a serious operation at the beginning of November, 1950, he was eagerly discussing plans for further additions to the series, and the last of his many contributions appeared a few days after his death. He encouraged observers to supply the fullest supporting evidence for sight records of rare species, and in January, 1949, he discontinued the use of trinomials except for geographical races clearly distinguishable in the field—a decision which he justified and explained in his last important publication, the article on Species and Subspecies (*Brit. Birds*, Vol. xlii, pp. 129-134, 161-174 and 193-205.)

It was however, in preparing the sections on Habitat, Field-Characters and General Habits and Voice in the *Handbook of British Birds*, and in his contributions on Display and Posturing and other matters that his greatest and most enduring work was done. The main burden of dealing with the behaviour and appearance of every species of British bird in the field fell upon him, and excellent as the entire *Handbook* is, it can be safely be said that it is in the sections for which he was responsible, that the improvement on the previous *Practical Handbook*, and in fact, on all previous ornithological books produced in this country, is most marked. To work on the proofs of *The Handbook* with Harry Witherby and Bernard Tucker was to experience a standard of care and thoroughness rarely surpassed in any human undertaking. In pursuit of material for the field sections of *The Handbook* Tucker added greatly to an already wide range of ornithological journeys, reading and correspondence.

Much of his other published work is far less widely known. His papers on the Herons and the Rookeries of Somerset, and on the Great Crested Grebe in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire appeared in local journals; a paper on the head plumage of the Willow-Tit was published in *Proc. Zool. Soc.*; even less well known to British ornithologists are his contributions to Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds*, dealing with European species which have occurred in America as vagrants. His accounts of Redwing, Fieldfare and Blackbird are probably the best ever written on those species.

In 1923 Tucker assisted F. C. R. Jourdain in editing a Report on the Birds of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire 1915-22, and after Jourdain left the district in 1925 Tucker took over and greatly developed the work, being largely responsible for the initiation of the Oxford Bird Census in 1927, for its evolution during 1930-31 into the Oxford University Research in

Economic Ornithology, and subsequently for the important Oxford share in the launching of the British Trust for Ornithology in 1932-33 and the foundation of what is now the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. A fuller account of his part in these affairs will be appearing in the next Annual Report of the British Trust for Ornithology. Among his most important contributions were his devoted work as Treasurer in the most difficult early days, his unremitting interest in the work of the scientific advisory committee, and his peculiarly personal influence in bridging the gulfs between those most at home in the museum, laboratory or library and those who find themselves in their element only in the field. During and immediately after the war he set himself to safeguard and consolidate the post-war position of the Edward Grey Institute in the University, and it was mainly due to his tireless exertions that advantage was taken of the increased post-war level of University Grant from the Exchequer to place the University status and finances of the Institute on a much firmer footing, and to bring it within the newly created Oxford University Department of Zoological Field Studies.

He took a most active part in developing teamwork in research, although during the past few years he tended to lay more stress on the dangers of careless use of the method and on the dearth of experienced and competent organisers available since 1939 for inquiries of this type. He was three times a member of the Council of the British Trust for Ornithology and was its senior Vice-Chairman at the time of his death. He was also a member of the Committee of The British Ornithologists' Union 1933-1936 and Vice-President 1947-49.

He became in 1921 the first Honorary Secretary of the newly-founded Oxford Ornithological Society, the model and pioneer of local ornithological societies, and served as its Vice-President from 1926-34, and its President from 1934-50. Whatever his office, he was always the moving spirit. He was also a founding member of the Cambridge Bird Club, and an active member of the ornithological section of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society, being President in 1950. In 1922 he accompanied F. C. R. Jourdain as an ornithologist on the memorable Oxford University Expedition to Spitsbergen, and he studied birds in many other parts of Europe, working in Italy in 1924, 1925, 1927, 1928 and 1932, and making visits to the Camargue in 1932 and 1938, Heligoland in 1933, Spain and Holland in 1935, Sweden in 1947 and elsewhere, besides investigating Shetland, Islay, the Cairngorms, Lundy, Donegal and other ornithologically interesting outlying areas of the British Isles.

From this record there emerges some reflection of the achievement of one of the most talented and devoted ornithologists of his time, whose constructive and many-sided influence will long outlast him. Always ready for hard tough pioneering, and open to new ideas and experiences, he possessed the judgment, the caution and the practical sense to avoid rash leaps and to consolidate thoroughly and methodically as he went along. He was the least dramatic of men, but he did much to bring about a revolution in ornithology and to guard it against the reaction which awaits a revolution if it goes too far and too fast.

E.M.N. & J.D.W.



BERNARD WILLIAM TUCKER.