

Obituary

Elsie Pemberton Leach, MBE (1888-1968)

Miss Elsie P. Leach, whose name was for many years almost synonymous with bird-ringing, died on 9th May 1968.

The younger daughter of General Sir Edward Pemberton Leach, VC, KCB, KCVO, she was born in Plymouth on 30th June 1888 and her early life was that of any well-connected military family, with periods of residence in Ireland, Nova Scotia and Scotland. In those years she was a very keen sportswoman, fishing and riding to hounds. Her serious interest in birds began in the 1920's and was fostered by the friendship she formed with Miss E. L. Turner of Norfolk fame. It was through Miss Turner that she first met the late H. F. Witherby, the founding editor of *British Birds*—a meeting which was to affect the course of her life.

Some time before 1930 she began to help Harry Witherby with the administration of what was then known as 'The "British Birds" Marking Scheme' and, with her quick grasp of details, soon rendered herself indispensable. From 1931 onwards Witherby and she were joint authors of the published reports on 'Movements of ringed birds abroad to the British Islands and from the British Islands abroad'. Thus it was most fortunate for the British Trust for Ornithology that when, at Witherby's request, it assumed responsibility for the Ringing Scheme in 1937, Elsie Leach agreed to serve as Honorary Secretary of the specially formed Bird-Ringing Committee. In this capacity she took complete charge of the day-to-day administration, a burden which increased steadily in magnitude as the scale of activities increased, and from 1938 onwards became sole author of the list of 'Recovery of marked birds' until in 1951 this was joined with the annual progress report into the 'Report on bird-ringing' with Dr. (now Sir) A. Landsborough Thomson and her as co-authors.

When she formally retired at the end of 1953, her years of dedicated service were recognised officially by Membership of the Order of the British Empire, ornithologically by the award of the Tucker Medal, and more intimately by presentations from members of the British Trust for Ornithology and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. Her retirement was somewhat nominal because for a further nine years (until she was nearly 75) she continued to be entirely responsible for dealing with and publishing recoveries of foreign-ringed birds in Great Britain and Ireland, relinquishing this task only when the removal of the Ringing Office from the British Museum (Natural History) to Tring in 1963 made a break inevitable.

In her personal qualities Elsie Leach was admirably fitted for the work which occupied her energies for over 30 years. She was a meticulously accurate person, willing to take endless pains over each recovery. Nothing gave her greater satisfaction than to trace, sometimes from the most tenuous of clues, the precise locality where a ringed bird had ended its days. Once, on successfully ending a search which had lasted over several weeks, she confessed with a twinkle in her eye that Harry Witherby had coined for her the motto 'Relentless in pursuit'. It was indeed an appropriate epithet and one suspects that she would have made a redoubtable amateur detective in the best 'whodunit' tradition.

One of her greatest assets was a remarkable memory for detail. Time and again she could proffer such help as 'I think you will find that there was a similar recovery in 1933' or 'He used to live in Kent before the war and was especially interested in Wood Warblers'. With a memory of this quality she was able to manage the scheme effectively without the elaborate indices and cross-references of modern office practice and, incidentally, on a budget so tiny as to appear absurd.

It was impossible to know her for long without becoming aware of her integrity and loyalty. She believed whole-heartedly in the value of ringing as a technique, and was ever vigilant to see that neither its methods nor its results were jeopardised by carelessness. She gave unstintingly of her best and could be surprisingly firm with any ringer who, she felt, had lowered the standards.

Unassuming, sympathetic, and with a gentle sense of humour, she made many friends in her life and had a wide circle of acquaintances. Her last years were marred by increasing disability which obliged her first to remain at home and later to give up letter writing. Never one to make a fuss or to obtrude herself, it was in a sense in keeping with this spirit that her death should, for several months, have gone unnoticed in ornithological circles. She will be missed by many, but especially by the countless ringers whom she served so steadfastly over the years. The traditions she established in that work are perhaps her most fitting memorial.

ROBERT SPENCER