

## Obituary

### James Maxwell McConnell Fisher, MA (1912-1970)

James Fisher lost his life in a motor accident at Hendon on 25th September 1970. Born on 3rd September 1912, he had just passed his 58th birthday and, if a man can reasonably look forward to the traditional three score and ten, he was denied at least a dozen active years and the world at least a dozen good books. Only a year earlier, as if in premonition, he had confided that his one fear of dying was that certain books would not be written, books that he felt he was better qualified to write than anyone else. This was not egotism, but accurate assessment.

The news of James's death had an extraordinary impact on both sides of the Atlantic. He had been a driving force not only in his own country, but also in North America where many people wrote or telephoned me to express their sympathy, as though I had lost a brother. As recently as 1968 he was only the second recipient of the Arthur A. Allen Medal of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University for his outstanding contributions to the popularisation of ornithology. James took the view that scholarship is barren unless the fruits of its labours are communicated to the public. This he accomplished through many books with a total distribution of more than two million. In addition, over a period of 25 years, he made over 1,000 broadcasts (800 radio and 200 television). In Britain his influence in bringing authoritative natural history to the millions over the air was second only to that of Peter Scott.

This loss of one of my dearest friends has left me with a feeling of desolation. I had known James for just 20 years, having first met him in 1950 on a field excursion to the Swedish island of Gotland. At that time he was natural history editor of Collins, so I seized the opportunity to persuade him that they should publish *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, on which Guy Mountfort and I were working. He thought well of the idea, but suggested that we include P. A. D. Hollom as a co-author because of his extensive knowledge of the distribution of European birds which he was then mapping. The resulting collaboration proved to be a happy one and, as editor, James became final arbiter when differences of opinion arose. So much did he show me of the English countryside during the many months we worked together that I proposed that I should guide him around my own continent. Our 30,000-mile journey in 1953, from Newfoundland to the Bering Sea via Mexico, resulted in our writing a book, *Wild America* (1956), that became a best-seller in the United States. In succeeding years we travelled together in at least 15 other countries gathering material for *The World of Birds* (1964).

James's father, Kenneth Fisher, was a devoted bird-watcher and, as headmaster of Oundle, had encouraged Leslie Brown, Peter Scott, Keith Shackleton and other boys who later became ornithological luminaries. Nevertheless, James revealed that it was his uncle, the late Arnold W. Boyd, a former editor of *British Birds*, who really sparked his interest. Instead of attending his father's school, James was educated at Eton, where he was a King's Scholar. From there he went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, to read medicine, but after being ornithologist on an expedition to Spitsbergen, which resulted in his first major paper, with C. H. Hartley, on marine foods of birds (*J. Anim. Ecol.*, 5: 370-389), he changed to zoology.

Having graduated, he became a schoolmaster, but this was not his true niche. Sir Julian Huxley, then secretary of the Zoological Society of London, took an interest in the dynamic young Fisher and they soon became collaborators and lifelong friends. James was appointed assistant curator at London Zoo from 1936 to 1939 and it was during this time that he started to play a major part in the newly-formed British Trust for Ornithology. From 1937 to 1944 he held a series of honorary posts from assistant secretary and treasurer to secretary, and from 1951 to 1956 he served on council. In 1939 he and Huxley devised the Hatching and Fledging Enquiry (later to become the Nest Record Scheme and to provide a pattern for many similar schemes in other countries) and James also enrolled countless members for the Trust by including subscription forms in his successful paperbacks, *Watching Birds* (1941) and *Bird Recognition* (1947, 1951 and 1955).

Versatile and prolific, his writings had a profound influence on popular ornithology and he bridged the gap between the academic and the layman more effectively than any of his contemporaries. He also did much to establish the modern standards of field ornithology and to elevate it to a respectable zoological discipline. He knew how to employ the techniques of literature research more effectively than anyone I have ever known, absorbing ideas and details like a sponge, largely from his own library, the finest private ornithological reference collection in England. His card file was voluminous and meticulous. His paper on the spread of the Collared Dove in Europe (*Brit. Birds*, 46: 153-181) was a classic example of this thoroughness: it concluded with 8½ pages of references selected from the 448 titles that he had indexed.

During the 1939-45 war, James worked on the food of the Rook and organised a national survey of rookeries. This was for the Ministry of Agriculture, but he was based initially at the Bureau of Animal Population in Oxford and afterwards at the Edward Grey Institute. When W. B. Alexander retired from the directorship of the E.G.I., there was talk of James taking over, but the post went instead to Dr David Lack. This turn of events was the publishing world's gain: he affiliated himself with Collins and later with Aldus and Rathbone,

achieving a brilliant record as both author and editor. He helped to launch the 'New Naturalist' series—a shelf of books covering many aspects of British natural history and with no comparable counterpart in any other country. *The Shell Bird Book* (1966) bears a title that gives us no hint that it is actually the best concise history of British birds and bird-watching ever written. As one reviewer commented, it was remarkable that Fisher could still say so many things that were new and fresh about the most thoroughly documented avifauna in the world.

James's main difficulty when writing was to keep his verbiage within practical limits. Facts and ideas poured out. He admitted that his monograph on *The Fulmar* (1952) could have been compressed into a book half the size. When preparing the section on falconry for *The World of Birds*, his space allowance was 1,000 words, but he wrote 12,000. So unable was he to face the task of cutting that it fell to me to perform the major surgery; the result he accepted with the utmost grace. He was not always as tolerant of editorial butchering, however, particularly when it distorted his meaning. Nor did he take criticism readily when he felt the reviewer knew less about the subject than he did. Instead of ignoring an unfair or unfavourable review, he would fire off a hot reply. To tangle with him in a verbal exchange was near hopeless, for not only did he have the facts, but he was also a master of one-upmanship. Even his friend, the late Stephen Potter who made the rules of this devastating game, was no match for James when they got together, as they often did, in London's Savile Club.

If asked to suggest the common denominator of all his diverse ornithological investigations, I would say that it was his historical sense. This inevitably led him to fossil birds and in recent years it became a crusade of his that no avifaunal list should omit those species known only from fossils. It was fascinating to hear him discuss his views with Drs Alexander Wetmore, Pierce Brodkorb and Hildegard Howard (the three most distinguished avian paleontologists in the United States). Although he was not himself a working paleontologist, these authorities respected him for his knowledge of their highly specialised and almost totally neglected field. Skilfully he sifted the evidence of the fossil past, fitting it together like a jigsaw puzzle and relating it to the flow of pre-history. Among the books that will not now be written is the one which he proposed to call *Early Birds*, a survey of the fossil record interpreted in layman's terms.

Like so many other obsessed naturalists, James Fisher became an ardent conservationist, aware that birds were far more than song-birds to admire and study or waterfowl and grouse to shoot (not that he did any shooting). They were, he pointed out, sensitive indicators of the environment, a sort of 'ecological litmus paper'. His contribution to conservation began at the interpretative level through his many

books and broadcasts. Later he put his talents as a writer and a publicist at the service of various conservation organisations, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Except for short breaks, he served on the council of the latter from 1943 to 1970 and was chairman of its Education Committee for eleven years. The R.S.P.B. awarded him its Gold Medal in 1961; then in 1966 he received the Tucker Medal of the B.T.O. and in 1968 the Union Medal of the British Ornithologists' Union, a unique triple achievement.

In 1966 he was appointed to the National Parks (later Countryside) Commission and after two years was made deputy chairman, a post that he was eminently qualified to fill because of his encyclopaedic knowledge of virtually every county in England and its natural history. As for the islands that ring Britain, he had at least seen every one and had landed on many. Although he never got round to a book on his beloved St Kilda, only James could have amassed 200 pages on the 70-odd feet of *Rockall* (1956). Seabirds fascinated him. In collaboration with R. M. Lockley he published an important book entitled, simply, *Sea-Birds* (1954) and he joined enthusiastically in the activities of the Seabird Group from its inception in 1966, becoming chairman of the census sub-committee which conceived and organised 'Operation Seafarer'. It was, however, the Fulmar and the Gannet which were the principal targets of his enquiry; indeed, he had hoped some day to follow his monograph on the Fulmar with one about the Gannet.

As was so aptly expressed in the obituary in *The Times*, he had 'a natural ability and a proper regard for the old English amateurs, the squire and the parson'. He was a devout admirer of Gilbert White—indeed he edited and annotated a special edition of *The Natural History of Selborne* in 1947—and his strong passion for the British countryside also drew him to Richard Jefferies and John Clare. But for some reason hard to fathom he was against W. H. Hudson: although he acknowledged Hudson's contribution to bird protection and his clear use of the English language, he could not forgive him for his faulty facts (as when he stated that the St Kilda Wren was extinct).

James's intimacy with the British Isles, far from being provincial, was almost matched by his knowledge of the geography and natural history of the rest of the world; he had a far better memory for places than any other person of my acquaintance. On our *Wild America* trip, as we travelled from state to state, he could name and locate without hesitation the capitals and other important cities, whether in Mississippi, New Mexico or Oregon; few Americans can attempt that without being tripped up. It was therefore a pity that he himself had not been able to travel more frequently. He planned to remedy that and we talked of an antarctic adventure as soon as his health would permit: because of long hours of sedentary desk work in

recent years he had developed a painful arthritic hip condition. This trouble was corrected a few weeks before the accident by an operation and he was told that he could soon dispense with his walking stick.

Weekends at his pleasant manor house in Ashton, Northamptonshire, gave him the rejuvenation he needed to face the high pressure of his week in London. On Monday morning, after a respite in the country, he would look ten years younger than on Friday at the end of an exhausting stint in the city. As one would expect, his was an unusual family. His own scholarship and creative ability was matched by that of his wife Margery (better known as 'Angus'), with whom he collaborated on several non-ornithological books. With his six children—three boys, three girls—there was delightful rapport. They regarded 'Pop' as one of them: there was no 'generation gap'.

During his last year, as a culmination of his work on the Survival Service Commission of the I.U.C.N., he collaborated with H.R.H. Prince Philip on their best-selling book, *Wildlife Crisis* (1970). When I last saw him, at the International Ornithological Congress in the Netherlands early in September 1970, less than three weeks before he died, we confirmed plans for a television series—four shows based on our book *Wild America*. We would repeat some of our travels and a producer in California would work out the details. We had many such plans, including two books which had been shelved temporarily because of other commitments.

The photograph of him at the International Congress on plate 36 was probably the last one ever taken. James was a vivid personality, a dynamo of energy and purpose. Although his career was brought to a close abruptly and prematurely, no other ornithologist of his generation was more productive. There has never been anyone quite like James Fisher, nor is there likely to be. ROGER TORY PETERSON