

Obituaries

David Morrison Reid-Henry (1919-1977)

When David Reid-Henry died on 26th September in Salisbury, Rhodesia, the world lost, to my mind, its finest modern bird artist. He was only 58 and at the peak of his profession; scores of half-finished paintings will now never be completed by this man of such outstanding talent.

David was born in Colombo, Ceylon, in 1919, the second son of the famous artist, George M. Henry, illustrator of *Indian Hill Birds* by Dr Sálím Ali (1949) and author of *A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon* (1955), who, incidentally, is still painting most beautifully at the age of 86. David came to England in 1929, with his elder brother, Bruce, and stayed with the late Rev. George Hicks. He was educated at Colchester Royal Grammar School and at Mount Radford School, Exeter. On leaving school, he took a clerical job in London; but, soon after the outbreak of war in 1939, joined the Tank Corps and rose to the rank of captain, serving in Egypt and elsewhere in North Africa. After a severe illness, he was seconded into the Military Police and drafted first to Calcutta, then to Singapore and, finally, to Ceylon; he was demobbed in 1946.

As a child, he had no time for bedtime fairy stories, but loved to watch his father draw and paint birds; when aged only four, he started to portray them himself. During the war, he began to produce in his own field sketch-books some of the lovely paintings for which he later became so famous. At this time, too, he began to take an interest in falconry, a passion that remained with him to the end. Many of us remember his striking Crowned Hawk-eagle, 'Tiara', which used to accompany him and was almost the star turn at the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Wildlife Artists in 1964, when it sat on the back of a chair displaying aggressively at anyone who came near. David was an enthusiastic founder member of the SWLA.

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151. David Morrison Reid-Henry (1919-1977) with 'Tiara' in 1964 (*Jeffrey Taylor*)

But, like so many young and unknown artists, he had a real struggle for existence when he turned professional in 1946; he was frequently let down by people who commissioned work but never paid for it. On the other hand, it is only fair to say that he had a typical artist's temperament, and if he was not in the mood for painting nothing would make him do so: books were sometimes delayed because plates had not been finished. Some of his best work is to be found in the many books by Dr D. A. Bannerman. David was a perfectionist and unless he felt his paintings were beyond criticism he would never submit them. I remember looking through a large folio with him at his home in Woodford Green, Essex, in about 1949: it contained a most magnificent painting of a Martial Eagle, which I begged him to let me buy, but, although he was hard up and in real need of some ready cash, he refused, because he felt that the tarsi were out of proportion to the rest of the body.

George E. Lodge was David's mentor, and one day in 1951 I drove him to have tea with the great artist at his home in Camberley. It was about the only occasion that I can ever remember David being subdued—as they discussed the various merits of water-colour, oil and gouache. Apart from guidance given to him by Lodge, and particularly by his father, David received no art training at all. In his turn, however, he freely gave his help to young artists who approached him and who showed a willingness and ability to profit from his advice. It is interesting to note, in passing, that in later years father and son occasionally worked together on the same picture, his father painting the birds and David adding the detailed landscape. One such picture, of an Indian Peregrine stooping at a Pompadour Green Pigeon, appears in *A Falcon in the Field* by J. G. Mavrogordato (1966). I always thought that David was much better at painting a bird in its natural habitat than doing multiple plates of ten or more species for a field guide, although those that he did for *The*

Popular Handbook of Rarer British Birds by P. A. D. Hollom (1960) were lovely, since he was able to confine himself to single species, showing the sex and age differences. It was, however, no surprise to me when, some five years ago, he gave up book illustration. He was so good at painting landscapes, even including microscopic detail of moss and lichen on the rocks, that I have even heard the opinion expressed that they were better than his bird paintings.

As time went by, David became more and more disenchanted with this country, and was vitriolic in his comments about the Government's attitude towards Rhodesia, a country he knew well and whose people he loved. So, in 1973, he packed his bags, emigrated there and, in the following year, took out citizenship. He tried hard to persuade his wife to go with him, but she naturally did not wish to be parted from their two daughters and their grandchildren. Eventually, they were divorced, and only last December he married Dr Louise Westwater, who was with him when he died. In a letter received last June, David told me that the last few months had been among the happiest in his life, and that he was painting harder than ever before. It seems so tragic that he could not have been spared a little longer.

ERIC HOSKING

Richard Alan Richardson (1922-1977)

I remember my first meeting with Richard Richardson, on a field excursion of the London Natural History Society to Tring Reservoirs on 27th August 1939, only a week before the outbreak of war. I remember him particularly because he borrowed my binoculars to watch a Black Tern, a species he had never seen before. He was then only 17 and already a very keen birdwatcher. I did not meet him again until after the war (during which he served with the Royal Norfolk Regiment in southeast Asia), when he came to hear a talk I gave to the Norfolk and Norwich Natural History Society in January 1947. On that occasion, he showed me his sketchbook, and I was so struck by the quality of his drawings and paintings that I suggested him to Billy Collins and James Fisher as the illustrator for the bird identification book I was planning to write for Collins.

Richard was at that time quite unknown to the general bird world. I was then assistant editor of *The Countryman*, and we published what must have been the first of his work in any national journal, in the summer 1947 issue: four line-drawings of British tits, under the heading 'A new bird artist, drawings by R. A. Richardson'. He had comparatively little experience of the less common species, so, during the summers of 1947 and 1948, he visited the Camargue and Norway, and in August 1948 we both paid our first visit to Fair Isle, in the new observatory's first year. I have never been back, but he returned many times, and became one of the observatory's regulars and a member of the council of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust.

Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds, which I wrote and he illustrated, appeared in 1952, followed by *Collins Pocket Guide to Nests and Eggs* two years later. In the first it was quite a tour de force for him to illustrate all British birds one after another—and I had some anxious moments while he was doing it. In the second, he made the best illustrations I know of birds' nests, a notoriously tricky subject. The books were not popular with the ornithological establishment, because of their unorthodox and unsystematic arrangement, but, luckily for both Richard and me, they have remained standard works ever since so far as the bird-loving public is concerned. Richard indeed did comparatively little book illustration after this, confining himself largely to private commissions and drawings for the societies he was interested in. But he did do the wader drawings for *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1976)—waders were always his favourites and his best.



152. R. A. Richardson
(1922-1977) on the
East Bank at Cley,
July 1962 (*J. T. R.
Sharrock*)

Some time in the late 1940s, he determined to leave Norwich, where he had been living since the end of the war, and make his home at Cley. I remember taking him over there with his rather meagre personal belongings on the day that he moved. He remained in Cley for the rest of his life, well satisfied to spend his life in his adopted county (he was born at Blackheath in south London). He was most fortunate to find lodgings almost immediately with Mrs Davison, and he stayed with her, even when she moved house, until his last illness. He became in effect her adopted son, and she has miraculously outlived him at the age of 91. Richard had no close living relatives at the time of his death. He lost his mother at an early age and as a result was sent to boarding school, which gave him what he always regarded as an inadequate education. His only brother was killed in a climbing accident on Ben Nevis in the early 1950s.

Richard had two great skills: the field identification of birds and the ability to convey what he saw quickly on to paper as a remarkably life-like vignette, without taking a single note in the field. He was an entirely self-taught artist, and was able to work in the most cramped conditions, no doubt a legacy of his army life: all he needed were pencil, paper and a chair. He was a most cheerful person, often whistling as he worked. Over the years he spent at Cley, he became the local naturalist to whom everybody turned and was especially helpful to young birdwatchers. At least one leading British bird painter says that he taught him all he knows. Richard founded and for a short period ran the Cley Bird Observatory; even after this formally closed, he continued to be a one-man bird observatory himself. No visit to the East Bank was complete without meeting Richard—leather-jacketed, woolly cap or beret on head and dog at heel. The Bank will not be quite the same again without its guardian spirit.

R. S. R. FITTER

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