

Obituary

David Armitage Bannerman OBE, MA, ScD, Hon.LLD, FRSE (1886-1979)

David Bannerman, who died on 6th April in his 93rd year, was one of the most distinguished ornithologists of his time. His interest in natural history was already strong at the age of eight and, as a small boy, he declared his ambition to make ornithology his lifework. In this he richly succeeded.

After Wellington College and Cambridge University, where he had graduated BA (Hons.), he became a trainee, under Ogilvie Grant, at the British Museum (Natural History) in 1910. He was, however, determined to work in the field—and abroad as much as possible—and between 1908 and 1913 he carried out an extensive zoological survey of the Canary Islands, making six visits in that period. His first wife, whom he married in 1911, was a daughter of T. P. Morgan of Las Palmas. Before the 1914-18 war, he had also made expeditions to Africa, South America and the West Indies. During that war, he was at first an ambulance driver, having failed the medical for combat duties on account of partial deafness following childhood measles; later, he was on the staff at the HQ of the British Red Cross Society. In 1919, he turned down the chance of taking charge of the Bird Room at South Kensington, preferring to become a supernumerary member of the museum staff at 2/6d an hour. He said that he had tasted too much freedom to be tied down to the conventional life of a London civil servant.

Between the wars, he travelled extensively, mainly on British Museum expeditions, collecting and reporting on the birds of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, the Ivory Coast and other African countries. He also took a prominent part in BOU affairs and was assistant editor of *The Ibis* for ten years. By the age of 40 he had published about 100 scientific papers.

His first magnum opus was *The Birds of Tropical West Africa* (1930-51). In this, he was able to indulge his love of coloured plates, recruiting some of the leading bird artists of the time. He had a special liking for pictures of colourful, or 'shiny', birds, to use his own word. For many of these, he chose the work of George Lodge, with whom he had been friendly for many years. It was during the 1939-45 war, in February 1942, that he and Lodge discussed and planned the book which was to become *The Birds of the British Isles* (1953-63). Its 12 volumes were a marvellous feat of sustained application: erudite, expansive but thoroughly enjoyable to read. He was a peerless compiler, greatly enhancing the text with contributions from specialists, many of whom were his personal friends. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke was one who took a great interest in the progress of the book and wrote the foreword to the first volume. A number of Lodge's plates were in fact painted years before and were selected by David Bannerman from folios in the artist's studio.



3. David Armitage Bannerman, OBE, MA, ScD, Hon. LLD, FRSE (1886-1979), with his wife Jane (*Portsmouth and Sunderland Newspapers Ltd*)

In 1952, he retired from the museum. With his second wife, Jane (W. Mary Bannerman), he settled in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright. For some years, the Bannermans farmed Boreland of Southwick, overlooking the Solway Firth. They regularly travelled abroad for part of the winter, setting the scene and gathering material for further sumptuous books. Well before the marathon on British birds had been celebrated by the publishers (Oliver & Boyd), with a great gathering at a dinner in Edinburgh, *The Birds of Cyprus* had appeared, in 1958. When at home, the Bannermans were often out birdwatching in the Galloway countryside, and I recall converging with them on a pair of Dotterels, which had alighted one April day on the fairway of Southerness Golf-course.

Four handsome volumes, *The Birds of the Atlantic Islands*, were published between 1963 and 1968, the last two with his wife as joint author. In Volume 4, on the Cape Verde Islands, her vivid and racy contribution is a pleasing feature. On a field trip to the Cape Verde Islands, David Bannerman reassured himself—at the age of 80—that his sight was not too bad by ‘a right and left’ at the ‘enormous red cockroaches shaped like torpedoes’ in his bedroom. In Volume 1, there is a photograph of him in 1909, on horseback with collecting gun across his knees, looking like a character from a Western film. As a young man, he had been a notable horseman, once riding for Cambridge against the Army at Olympia. In 1959, he was delighted to find the Grand Canary form of the Blue Chaffinch in the same pine forest where he had collected the second known specimen nearly 50 years earlier.

Few people nowadays can see original paintings by the late David Reid Henry (D. M. Henry) and we must be grateful to David Bannerman (and Oliver & Boyd) for the opportunity to admire his work in high-quality reproduction in books such as *The Birds of the Atlantic Islands*. Some of the plates were painted at the Bannermans' home in Scotland, where the artist arrived with his ferocious Crowned Hawk-eagle, 'Tiara', which had travelled from London in the guard's-van.

The smaller format of *The Handbook of the Birds of Cyprus* (1971) and *The Birds of the Maltese Archipelago* (1976) gave less scope for the author's narrative, anecdotal writing. His last ventures were to Mallorca in 1977, whence he wrote characteristically, enjoying the island but cursing the hassle at Heathrow. In spite of recurrent illness, he courageously continued writing in his last years, greatly encouraged by his wife. He had almost finished *The Birds of the Balearic Islands* at the time of his death.

David Bannerman was warm in friendship, forthright, even blunt, in opinion, with an impish sense of fun, retained into old age. As an ornithologist, he was deeply rooted in the older traditions, not concealing his dislike of much modern scientific writing. He generously acknowledged the work of others, but was justly proud of his own achievements. For these, he received many honours, among them the OBE, LLD (Glasgow) and the Gold Medal of the BOU. As an Hon. President of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, he often travelled from his home on the Solway to take an active part in council meetings.

He was an assiduous letter writer, replying to correspondents with alacrity, always in long-hand and usually at length. Often, in my own experience, important sentences were added in the margins or, sometimes, on the flap of the envelope. When we were discussing illustrations for his Balearic book, his teasing comment on my suggestion that a good variety of waders be shown was that he had always regarded them more as sporting than pictorial birds. In his younger days, he was a keen game shot, as is often apparent in his writings.

Many of the leading ornithologists of today will recall with gratitude his helpfulness at the museum in their younger days. His contributions to knowledge, especially on distribution and taxonomy of birds, were massive, but he will be remembered most of all for his monumental books, the like of which will not be seen again.

DONALD WATSON