

# Obituary

## Leslie Hilton Brown, OBE, BSc, PhD (1917-1980)

When I said goodbye to Leslie Brown on that late May afternoon in Aviemore, I had a premonition that I would not see him again. We had spent an unforgettable evening at Roy Dennis's house, listening to Leslie's yarns about Africa and its wildlife, his numerous adventures there, and poaching forays nearer home: he was a gifted raconteur, one of those rare men who can combine the keen intellect of an organised, scientific mind with a great sense of humour and an uproarious appreciation of the ridiculous. Next morning, there followed an equally memorable few hours watching Golden Eagles—memorable not only for the marvellous show that the birds put on for us, but also for the 'eagle talk' and the chance to listen to and learn from an expert on his favourite subject.

It was obvious, though, that he was a sick man during the summer of 1980—still brisk of mind and sharp of tongue, and seeming to fit twice as much into any day as everybody else, but clearly suffering physically, which was not surprising considering all the illness which had dogged him for several years. He died at his home at Karen, Kenya, in early August, leaving a widow and one son, Charles. Three months later, a second



135. Dr Leslie Brown (1917-1980) (*Peter Steyn*)

tragedy occurred when Charles was killed in an accident in Cape Town, where he was about to embark on the honours year of his zoology degree. Our deepest sympathy goes to Barbara Brown in her great loss.

Leslie Brown was a Highland Scot who, after a childhood in India, went on to graduate with an Honours BSc from the University of St Andrews—the same seat of learning which awarded him an honorary PhD for his published work in 1972. He went on to specialist courses in tropical agriculture at Cambridge (during which time he learned the noble art of Pheasant poaching on a well-known Norfolk estate, a pursuit he took up again more recently on one of his regular visits to the UK, just for fun) and the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad. His first post, in 1940, was with the Colonial Agricultural Service in Nigeria, where he also found time to write a paper for *The Ibis* on the birds which he had seen there. In 1946, he moved to Kenya, which was to remain his home for the rest of his life. By 1956 he was Deputy Director for Agriculture for Kenya and from 1960 was Chief Agriculturalist, engaged on agricultural development, schemes for irrigation and range management, and supervising all these things during the awkward transition from colony status to independence. He wrote a number of scientific papers on his work and was created an OBE after his retirement in 1963.

Somehow, during the busiest years of his professional life, he found time to carry out a truly prodigious amount of ornithological research, resulting in a mass of papers and several semi-popular books: a considerable amount of his spare time was also given to working on *Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World* while he was still an agriculturalist. His studies, and his prolific writing, continued after his retirement; in 1970 the British Ornithologists' Union recognised the value of his work by awarding him its Union Medal. He travelled widely, both as an ornithologist/conservationist and as an agricultural adviser, broadening his interests and finding more and more to occupy his enquiring mind and his busy pen. He had a fundamental belief in communicating the results of his work, both at scientific and popular levels, and, while a spare-time ornithologist, produced twice as much in writing during a busy and tragically shortened life as most professionals do in a lifetime. This in itself could be a doubtful claim to fame, but in Leslie Brown's case everything he wrote is immensely readable—even his scientific papers—and most of it is of considerable ornithological value. Our only cause for regret must be that he still had so much more to contribute when he died—most of all perhaps in endeavouring to see the new handbook on African birds through to a successful conclusion. He had always wanted to produce a monograph on the Golden Eagle (by a short head his favourite bird) and, working together as co-authors, we had made considerable progress on this when he died: the book will be completed, but doing it will not be the same without his wise counsel and enthusiastic participation.

To most of us, he was first and foremost a bird-of-prey man, and an eagle man in particular. His classic studies at 'Eagle Hill' in the Embu District of Kenya are detailed in several papers in *The Ibis*, where he also wrote on African Fish Eagles and Crowned Eagles and, with Adam Watson, produced what is still the definitive paper on the Scottish Golden Eagles in

relation to their food supply. A paper he wrote for *British Birds* (62: 345-363) on Golden Eagles in Sutherland, after a typically arduous slog around that difficult county, is also a major contribution to our knowledge of that species. Papers in *The Ostrich*, *The Journal of East African Wildlife*, *The Bulletin of the East African Natural History Society* (of which he was President for a while) and *The Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* tell of his work on other raptorial birds, often in co-authorship with other workers. In one form or another, many of his studies were described again in his various books on birds of prey: he wrote three on eagles alone, with a fourth, on his African Fish Eagle studies, appearing posthumously. His book on *British Birds of Prey* in the 'New Naturalist' series is one of his best-known (and best) recent books: he gained a certain wry amusement from having written it at all, as an expatriot whose field experience of some of the species was limited—but we should be grateful to him that he did so: it is an important contribution to the literature. Without doubt, he will be remembered mostly for *Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World*, written with Dean Amadon, a tour de force of close on half-a-million words which will stand as an all-time classic. Its revision was something else he was thinking about during that last summer of 1980 . . .

Leslie sometimes claimed that he was not very interested in 'other' birds, but, by browsing through the major British and African journals, one finds that he wrote papers on many species besides raptors—Redwinged Starlings, seabirds in Kenya, Blacksmith Plovers, Stuhlmann's Starling, Narina's Trogon, rollers, Pygmy Geese and East African gulls, to name a few. But without doubt his other major contribution to ornithology came from his studies of pelicans and, especially, flamingos on the great East African lakes. Here again, we find a series of important papers in the major journals and accounts in his books—especially *The Mystery of the Flamingos*; he also made a major contribution to the recent monograph on these birds edited by Janet Kear and Nicole Duplaix-Hall. With his friend Emil Urban, he produced a checklist of the birds of Ethiopia—where he also did important work on the Wahlia Ibex and other rare species and produced a conservation plan for the country's wildlife and its habitats.

I doubt if Leslie Brown would ever have found the time to write an autobiography, but his books tell us a great deal about his crowded and often adventurous life; best of all, perhaps, was his *Encounters with Nature*, largely written while he was an unwilling prisoner of the Somalis after straying over their border in a light aircraft. It shows the sort of man he was—very independent, sometimes aggressive and not one to suffer fools gladly, but also kindly and humorous. It sums up, too, his enviable life as a scientific naturalist and a tough outdoors man. It seems a hopelessly inadequate thing to say—but he will be sorely missed.      MIKE EVERETT