

# Obituaries

## Cuthbert Anthony (Tony) Norris (1917-2005)

Tony was the last of my pre-war birdwatching friends. I well remember him arriving in the London Natural History Society as a keen and vigorous young birdwatcher. And it was he who, in March 1939, introduced me to a very muddy farmyard at Slimbridge, on the Severn estuary in Gloucestershire, which adjoined a marsh with a fine flock of White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons*. After the war, these marshes became famous for Peter Scott's identification of the rare Lesser White-fronted Goose *A. erythropus*, while the muddy farmyard became the headquarters of the infant Severn Wildfowl Trust (now the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust). Tony was one of those who helped in the Trust's foundation.

His major pre-war effort was to organise the first national survey, in 1938-39, of the Corn Crake *Crex crex*, which was by then virtually extinct in Britain away from western Scotland. Because of the war, the results could not be published until 1945-47, in *British Birds* (*Brit. Birds* 38: 142-148, 162-168; 40: 226-244). Tony's war service was in West Africa, India and Burma (now Myanmar); he ended it as a major with a mention in despatches.

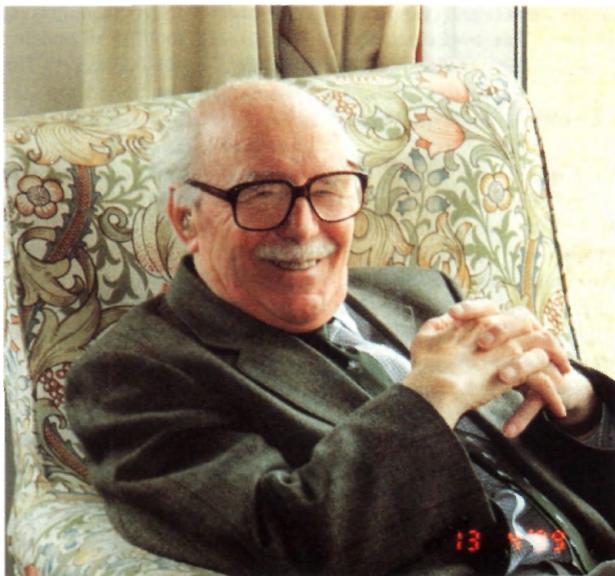
After the war, Tony became very active in the affairs of the Birmingham Bird Club, now the West Midland Bird Club, and the largest bird

society outside London. He served successively as Secretary, Chairman and finally as President from 1977 to 1999. He published *Notes on the Birds of Warwickshire* in 1947, and *A West Midlands Bird Distribution Survey* in 1950. He also, among many other activities, organised a census of the Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* roosting in trees and on buildings in the centre of Birmingham.

From then on, he became much involved with the major national bird societies. He was, for instance, largely responsible, along with Malcolm Stewart, for the RSPB's removal from its historic office in Ecclestone Square to the present one at Sandy, in Bedfordshire. He did indeed actually own the estate of The Lodge for one day, which enabled the Society to become the largest voluntary wildlife conservation body in Europe. He served for four years as Chairman of its finance and general purposes committee, and was awarded its Gold Medal in 1964.

Tony was also for several years Honorary Secretary of the BTO and its President from 1961 to 1964, earning a Bernard Tucker Medal in 1959 and a Jubilee Medal in 1994. Later on, he also helped to persuade the Trust to move from Tring, Hertfordshire, to roomier offices at Thetford, Norfolk, which have fine, bird-rich grounds. In 1953, he was a leading figure in founding the Bardsey Bird and Field Observatory, off the North Wales coast, and wrote an account of *The Birds of Bardsey* in 1952. In addition, he was both a founder and the first Chairman of the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, and Chairman of the county branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England.

Tony Norris was born at Cradley, Worcestershire, where his father was the vicar, on 9th January 1917. He attended first Monkton Combe School near Bath, and then the London School of Printing, before joining his grandfather's printing firm, Hudson & Son, in Birmingham. Here he stayed for many years, until his retirement as



John Bush

222. Tony Norris in 1999.

head of the firm. This, incidentally, enabled him to pioneer the small pocket lists of British birds which are now standard equipment for many birdwatchers.

In 1940, he married Cicely Hurcomb, and had two daughters, who both survive him. His father-in-law, Lord Hurcomb, later became Chairman of the RSPB's council. Living at first at Clent, he later moved to Welland (both in Worcestershire), and also served for eight years on Hereford & Worcester County Council. Cicely died in 1976 and he later married

Barbara Dean, who also predeceased him, in 1998.

As a keen gardener, he created fine gardens at his two Worcestershire homes and ran a local nursery that specialised in his favourite *Nerine* lilies, for which he became a recognised authority and won several awards. He also joined the council of the Royal Horticultural Society, which later awarded him a gold medal.

He died at Worcester on 25th February 2005.

*Richard Fitter*

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### *Miriam Louisa Rothschild (1908-2005)*

With the death, at her lifetime home at Ashton Wold, Northamptonshire, of Dame Miriam Rothschild on 20th January 2005, the UK has lost a fine scientific naturalist and a stalwart nature conservationist. Although primarily an entomologist, she was deeply interested in all wildlife, including birds.

I cannot claim to have known her well, but my memories extend back to 1948 when, at the age of 17, I attended my first meeting of the Royal Entomological Society (RES), in South Kensington, London. My attention was soon arrested by this lively, flamboyantly dressed lady, who took a very active part in the proceedings, asking thoughtful and searching questions of the speaker. Although I cannot recall the precise details of the flowery dress she wore that evening, I do remember that it was set off by a colourful silk neckerchief on which butterflies and other insects were depicted. In later years, she often wore white wellington boots in summer (even when meeting the Queen and attending Prince Charles's 40th-birthday ball at Buckingham Palace) and moon boots in winter.

During the five years I spent on the staff of the Natural History Museum's Department of Entomology, in South Kensington, I saw her there occasionally when she visited her friend Dr Theresa Clay, a world authority on bird lice, and with whom she wrote the outstanding *Fleas, Flukes and Cuckoos* (New Naturalist, 1952). This fascinating book on bird parasites was actually written by Miriam, in her lucid style, with Theresa providing advice and information. A delightful account by Miriam of how, in 1947, in the midst of war-devastated Calais, she wrote the first few chapters while holed up for a week in an isolated inn, owing to a raging storm in the English Channel, surviving only on

boiled potatoes, was reprinted in *The New Naturalists* (Marren, 1995). *Fleas Flukes and Cuckoos* received rave reviews, not only as a work of science, but of literature too, and became required reading for many students of biology.

Miriam Rothschild was born on 5th August 1908 at Ashton Wold, into a renowned and wealthy family, the daughter of the naturalist and pioneer nature conservationist the Hon. N. Charles Rothschild, who had a great influence on her life in spite of his early death. He campaigned, in the early part of the twentieth century, for the establishment of national nature reserves, and founded the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (the forerunner of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts). By the time of his death, in 1923, aged 46, he had compiled a shortlist of 182 especially important wildlife sites. The first of these, parts of Wicken Fen, in Cambridgeshire, he and George H. Verrall purchased out of their own pockets, and donated to the National Trust.

In 1997, Miriam collaborated with Peter Marren to write *Rothschild's Reserves: time and fragile nature*, a book documenting all of these proposed sites; a largely sad story. Characteristically, it stimulated Miriam to propose restoration of some of the most degraded sites, by employing the latest techniques of habitat restoration (the development of which she had been much involved in). Such dramatic projects as the reconversion of arable land and conifer plantations to heathland, and the creation of a huge area of fenland in Cambridgeshire are already meeting with success, and gave her much satisfaction in her last years. These projects depended to a considerable extent upon her influence with politicians

and other influential people.

Miriam was educated at home and although she subsequently studied zoology at Chelsea Polytechnic, she did not go on to take a degree. It was from her father that inevitably she developed her enthusiasm for nature conservation and fleas (he had the largest collection in the world), as well as for the wildlife in and around Ashton Wold and her grandfather's estate, Tring Park. After her father died, her eccentric Uncle Walter, the second Lord Rothschild, continued to encourage her fascination with natural history. He had established a large private museum at Tring, and here the Rothschild flea collection was housed. In 1913, the collection was transferred to the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, and there Miriam, with G. H. E. Hopkins, took on the immense task of cataloguing it (the results were published in six weighty volumes between 1953 and 1983).

The majority of Dame Rothschild's 300+ scientific papers were concerned with her entomological and chemical ecology researches. The latter included the take-up by aposematic (warningly coloured) Lepidoptera of toxic compounds from plants and the reactions of birds to them. I recall that one of her earlier experiments with the red-and-black-coloured burnet moths (*Zygaenidae*) involved injecting herself in the arm with toxins from the crushed tissues of these insects; not surprisingly, the consequences were most unpleasant. Among her early publications were papers on the ectoparasites of captive birds and notes on the distribution and host preferences of fleas collected from British birds. She also played a key role in the study into how fleas spread the myxomatosis virus among Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. Myxomatosis reached epidemic proportions in 1954 and had serious effects on Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* and other predators of rabbits. Miriam's discovery that the reproductive lifecycle of the rabbit flea is dependent upon that of its host was a highly important one. One of her last publications was *Insect and Bird Interactions* (2004), which she edited with Professor Helmut van Emden.

Miriam took much interest in the variety and populations of birds and other fauna inhabiting her extensive estate at Ashton Wold. In 1998, for instance, she reported that dramatic declines in various species had taken place, including the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, which used to nest in profusion,

while the great Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* roost of around 75,000 birds had gone. Nonetheless, it was insects and wild plants that absorbed most of Miriam's time. Her books *The Butterfly Gardener* (with Clive Farrell, 1985) and *Butterfly Cooing like a Dove* (1991) reveal her passion for them and the joy that they gave her. She was one of those who pioneered the sowing of wildflower meadows in Britain, rebelling against the modern conversion of flowery fields into a 'countryside reminiscent of a snooker table'. She sowed her first wildflower meadow at Ashton Wold in 1970, and began the commercial production on her estate of wildflower seed-mixes, dubbed 'Farmer's Nightmare'. She also promoted the planting of roadside verges with primroses, cowslips and other attractive wild plants.

Miriam Rothschild accumulated many honours in spite of her lack of a formal education. These included at least eight Honorary Doctorates from various universities (Cambridge and Oxford among them); an Honorary Fellowship of the RES (she was the Society's only woman president so far); an Honorary Fellowship of St Hugh's College Oxford; the Victoria Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society; and a Trusteeship of London's Natural History Museum. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1985, appointed a CBE in 1982 and a DBE in 2000.

Dame Rothschild was a strong and confident personality who enjoyed lively discussions, and she had an impish sense of humour. She was also extremely generous, as those of us who attended her large lunch parties at Ashton Wold will readily attest. Miriam married Captain George Lane in 1943, although they divorced in 1957; the couple had a son and three daughters. Unfortunately, as a result of a car accident, Miriam spent much of the last decade or so of her life in a wheelchair but, as I saw for myself at one of her luncheons in 2002, she could propel herself around with remarkable speed and dexterity. She was indeed a marvellous woman, with a brilliant intellect. Her passing is not only a great loss for Britain but also for international biological science.

The above tribute was compiled with the assistance of various published obituaries of Miriam Rothschild, and I am also indebted to Mrs Tina Adams at the RES library.

*John F. Burton*