

OBITUARY**JOHN MELVILLE CUNNINGHAM
1919-1992**

John Cunningham (kneeling on right) self-photographed in the Wairarapa, 13 February 1949, with Mr R.H.D. Stidolph (second from left) and a party of delegates from the Seventh Pacific Science Congress. Others in the photograph include Dr Robert Cushman Murphy (sitting on left), Dr Dom Serventy (standing between Murphy and Cunningham) and Dr Clarence Cottam (far left).

Photo: J.M. Cunningham

With the death of John Cunningham on 22 July 1992, while on holiday in South Africa, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand has lost a very colourful, competent and devoted servant. He was a key figure in its early development.

He served as Secretary-Treasurer from 1946 to 1953. During this time he not only ran the Society's business affairs single-handedly, but also served for a spell as Regional Organiser for Wairarapa, set up the Nest Record, Beach Patrol and Banding Schemes, and published numerous ornithological papers and notes. He did all this as a sideline to full-time employment in the commercial world.

The position of Secretary/Treasurer was an especially arduous one in those early years of the Society's history because, to save money, nearly all the Council business was conducted by correspondence. Only someone with John's enthusiasm, initiative, tact and efficiency could have made such a system work, and work it did.

But John was not just a good business manager. He also initiated cooperative schemes for bird study and devoted much time, himself, to studying birds and to publishing the results. Having organised the Nest Record Scheme (based on the British one) and the Beach Patrol Scheme, he persuaded other people to undertake their routine management, but he retained a longer personal involvement with the Banding Scheme. He arranged the necessary stationery and band supplies (no easy task in the immediate post-war years of scarcity of materials), and also produced the first two annual reports on the Society's banding activities (1951 and 1952). In later years John became increasingly involved in the interests of his family, particularly gardening, family history and overseas travel and there was less time for ornithology.

John's contributions to the OSNZ involved far more than being an efficient secretary, organiser of group activities, and conscientious publisher of ornithological observations. Those of us who had the privilege of working with him will remember him perhaps even more for his friendly enthusiasm, helpfulness and cheerfulness despite his long-continuing health problems.

Peter Bull

Longer-standing members of the Ornithological Society than I am could write more intimately of John Cunningham's early work in establishing many of the Society's schemes that we probably all now take for granted. I am pleased, therefore, that Peter Bull (who, also, was one of my early mentors in ornithology) is able to tell today's members about John's work for the Society.

For my part, although I was introduced to OSNZ schemes by him 45 years ago, I have known John Cunningham over some 30 years as friend and neighbour – and this is what I want to recall. In my first years of OSNZ interests, as a youthful enthusiast needing some direction, I appreciated the efficient support with John gave me in my ringing studies of Black-billed Gulls on the Ashley River in the early 1950s. Later, in my editorial tribulations with *Notornis*, John was a valued provider of a shoulder. As Peter Bull relates, in later years John's interests turned away from organised ornithology (he continued, however, for some time as an authoritative debater of constitutional matters at AGMs) to family concerns following marriage to Pearl and establishment of their family home and impressive garden at Days Bay (which was proudly featured as the striking dust jacket of Ronald Fama's book "Pioneering Your Section", Blackwood & Janet Paul Ltd, Auckland, 1966). Days Bay, in fact, became its own little enclave of the OSNZ. Falla, Cunningham and Dawson had, between them, I am certain, the most comprehensive natural history library in any one street in New Zealand. Falla and Cunningham used to socialise in ornithology every Saturday and I, five doors away, was a party to their talking whenever I could be, exchanging ornithological gossip, swapping new books and articles, with friendly rivalry about who had heard the first cuckoo of the season or had a whitehead or rifleman in his garden (each of which differed in the species it attracted), meeting with famous visitors to the Falla home – many memories of this sort will linger with me.

But John Cunningham was far wider in his interests and knowledge of natural history and in his enjoyment of what the world offered a receptive

mind. He was truly the proverbial Man Of Many Parts. As I gave a eulogy at his funeral, I posed the question – how would John like us to remember him? As a polymath of natural history, I decided, and as a friend eager to share these interests. First, however, I think of John as a family man, husband, father and grandfather, happy and proud in these roles. As a genial host at “Illawarra”, he shared his family’s anniversaries and special events with friends, inviting new residents into the fold. Many good relationships were forged at those gatherings. He was meticulous with his Visitors’ Book, enabling the reconstruction of happy times. John the gardener, botanist and horticulturalist, not merely the winning of so many prizes, with Pearl, at each Horticultural Society show, but sharing his wide knowledge of plants and showing his skill at their identification and cultivation, we will recall. He was a keen keeper of rainfall records and daily bird song in the garden over many years. John the lover of books – the true bibliophile – was always an enthusiastic exhibitor of his latest acquisition. His position as a manager at Whitcoulls (and subsequently at Whitehall Books) gave him a decided advantage but Falla and I sometimes won a round with something he had not seen. John the collector, a human magpie in the nicest sense, so much interested him, early cameras, garden implements, cut-throat razors to matchbox toys, but, whatever it was, he was thoroughly knowledgeable and accurate in its documentation. As a photographer John had served his apprenticeship from a Thornton Pickard plate camera to today’s pocket compact zooms with voluminous and first-rate results. The detailed labelling of his negatives and slides was an embarrassingly-shining example to the rest of us. In his library he could retrieve references or illustrations with a speed and ease that was my envy.

John was proud of what he had been able to do for the OSNZ in its early days. Like the rest of us as we get older, he was concerned that today’s members should appreciate the work of the pioneers – so he welcomed the opportunity for writing his reminiscences in the commemorative History of the Society in 1990. There was much more he could have said; he had given me an analysis of each time his name had been mentioned in the book, and would have liked to have filled out the detail. He was proud, also, that in the listing of the numbers of articles contributed to *Notornis* over the years he was runner up (at 38 articles) to Dick Sibson (at 170; who, of course, like me, as editor had an advantage). John, perhaps anticipating my present contribution, recently gave me a list of his articles in places other than *Notornis*; these are appended below. Additionally, John was an avid writer to newspaper editors, mayors and councillors whenever he had a cause to champion. He produced his own illustrated broadsheet showing environmental deterioration along the shores of Wellington Harbour. This led to his founding of the East Harbour Environmental Association, which developed into a well-informed, result-attaining organisation. Characteristically, having held the inaugural meeting at “Illawarra”, John left it to others to follow up the detailed administration from his initial stimulation.

Lastly, I could talk much of John the traveller. In recent years he and Pearl had a happy arrangement where they travelled overseas each year with a group of enthusiasts keen to sample unusual or out of the way destination.

We enjoyed sharing experiences through eastern Europe with them in 1989 [although we saw few birds along the way!] not long before events took their rapid and tragic turns there. John, I believe, would have been pleased that he accomplished part of his wish to see the game parks of southern Africa. I've lost a good friend and neighbour, and my early tutor in bird study; the Society has lost one of its pioneers and solid workers. No matter how he touched our lives, John Cunningham joins those of whom it was said in *Ecclesiasticus*, "There be of them that have left a name behind them that their praises might be reported." The Society's two 1990 anniversary year books bear witness.

Elliott Dawson

Publications by J.M. Cunningham

Other than his 38 contributions to *Notornis*
[Incomplete list compiled by JMC 15/1/981]

- 1944: Duck hybrids. The record of an interesting experiment. *New Zealand Outdoors*.
 1945: A winter's day with the birds. *Forest & Bird* No. 76: 11-12 [author's initials incorrectly printed as "J.W."]
 1945 - 1950: Numerous articles in *The Weekly News*, *N.Z. Free Lance*, *Wairarapa Times-Age*, *N.Z. Listener*, etc.
 1946a: The flocking of the Silvereye: with special reference to 1944. *Emu* 45(3):212-223.
 1946b: Methods of Silvereye trapping in New Zealand. *Emu* 46 (3): 209-214, pls 25-26.
 1948: (with K.A. Wodzicki) Notes on the bird life of the Porangahau district, N.Z. *Emu* 47 (3): 176-198, pls 12-15.
 1948: Migration of New Zealand cuckoos. [Review: H.B. Fell, 1947 - "The migration of the New Zealand Bronze Cuckoo . . . *Trans. Roy. Soc. N.Z.* 76 (4) *Emu* 47 (5):399.
 1950: Willie Wagtail in Tasmania. *Emu* 49(3):221.
 1950: (with K.A. Hindwood) Notes on the birds of Lord Howe Island. *Emu* 50(1):23-35, pls 4-5.
 1951: British birds in New Zealand. *Countryside, Journal of the British Empire Naturalists' Association* n.s. XV (12): 371-365.
 1951: Bird ringing in New Zealand. *Emu* 50(3):189-196.
 1955: Diagrammatic expression of the seasonal intensity of bird song. *Acta XI Congressus Internationalis Ornithologici, Basel 1954*: 555-560, figs 1-6.
 1955: (with E.O. Welch) The grey teal in New Zealand: some nesting and plumage notes. *Emu* 55 (4): 303-309, pls 21-23.
 1956: Bird ringing in New Zealand. *The Ring* 7:133-134.
 1956: [under pen name of "Tauhou"] *New Zealand Birds*. Letter to the Editor [re. Fleming's review in 4 May issue of *Oliver's* 2nd edition]. *N.Z. Listener* 15 June 1956.
 1957: Porangahau revisited - further notes on its water birds. *Emu* 57(4):255-263.
 1968a: Review: "A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand". *Emu* 67(3):235-236.
 1968b: Review: "Buller's Birds of New Zealand". *Emu* 68:(1):85.
 1968c: Review: "Know your New Zealand Birds," by K.E. Westerskov, 1967. *Emu* 68 (3):224.
 1974: Cuckoos. *New Zealand's Nature Heritage* 3 (35): 982-984, 5 figs.
 1985: Family Cuculidae. Pages 252-255 in: "Reader's Digest Complete Book of New Zealand Birds". Sydney. 320pp.
 1990: "Reminiscences". Pages 49-52 in: Gill B.J. & Heather, B.D. (Eds). "A Flying Start. Commemorating fifty years of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand 1940-1990". Random Century NZ Ltd., Auckland. 217 pp.