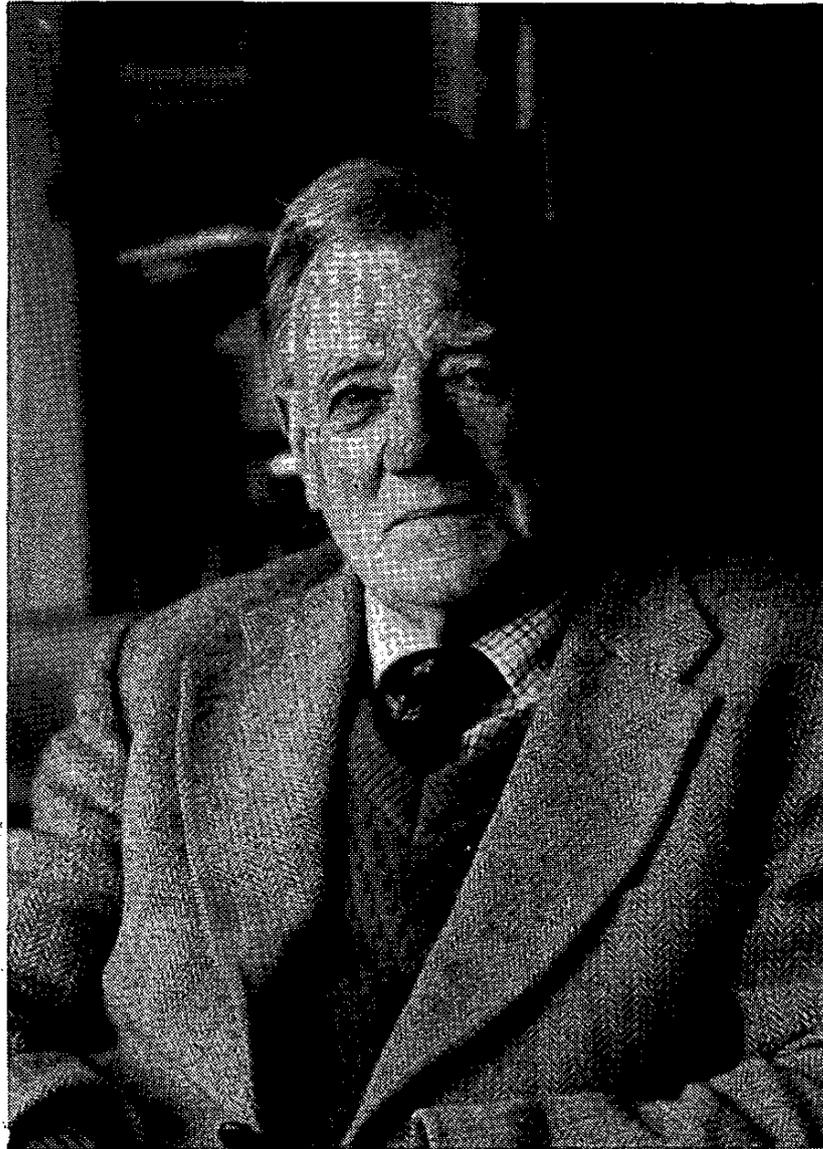


RICHARD BROADLEY SIBSON
(1911-1994)



Richard Sibson, scholar, teacher and ornithologist, died in Auckland on 13 July 1994 at the age of 83, and the Ornithological Society of New Zealand lost one of its most enthusiastic, productive and respected foundation members. The Society offers its sympathy to his wife Joan, his daughter Penny and his son Richard.

Dick, or Sib as he was affectionately known among many of his friends, was born in the parish at Cliffe-at-Hoo in south-eastern England. This rural area of farmland, broken chalk cliffs and extensive marshes helped to develop his early enthusiasm for birdwatching, further nurtured and expanded during his schooling in Oxford by well-known ornithologists of the day, such as W.B.Alexander, E.M.Nicholson and B.W.Tucker. After a successful academic career in classics at Oxford, he spent four years teaching at Sandbach School in Cheshire, from whence he explored the local countryside for birds and journeyed to such ornithological Meccas as the Camargue,

Greece and the Aegean Islands. He joined the staff of King's College in Auckland in 1939, just in time to join the new Ornithological Society of New Zealand.

Sib spent the rest of his working life at King's College, retiring in 1971. He taught Latin, Greek, and classical history to a high standard. He also established a very successful Bird Club which nurtured several eminent ornithologists.

Sib's many services to the Ornithological Society began in 1941 when he replaced Charles Fleming as organiser for the Auckland region. In 1946, he became a member of the newly formed ringing sub-committee. He was the Society's president between 1952-1954, and 1980-1983, editor of *Notornis* from 1955 to 1972 (except for a year's break overseas in 1964/65). He served on all three committees which supervised the different editions of the Checklist of New Zealand Birds and was a member of the Rare Birds Committee. In 1983, he received the Falla Memorial Award in recognition of his contributions to ornithology in New Zealand, and in 1986 he was elected an Honorary Life Member of the Society.

It was, however, as a field observer during his many travels throughout the country that he made his greatest contributions. Within days of his arrival to New Zealand, he began exploring bird haunts within cycling distance of King's College. School holidays provided opportunities to visit more distant regions and, by mid-1941, he had been to Spirits Bay in the far north and Stewart Island in the south, and had also made forays to East Cape, Kapiti Island and elsewhere, often travelling on push bike or on foot. In later years, free from wartime restrictions, even more ambitious trips took him to Little Barrier, Hen Island, Poor Knights and the Chathams.

Brought up near the marshes of North Kent, Sib had a special enthusiasm for waders and experience in their identification, even when in their rather nondescript winter plumages. One of his greatest triumphs was his discovery in the winter of 1941 that the Firth of Thames, then relatively unknown to local ornithologists, held one of the largest concentrations of waders in New Zealand. Nearby, he also 'discovered' Ross McKenzie, a local botanist whom Sib quickly converted to birdwatching and who later became the Society's president and first recipient of the Falla Memorial Award. Following the pioneer visits of Sib and Ross, the Firth, particularly the Miranda area, gradually gained recognition as a locality of prime national importance for the conservation and study of shorebirds. This led to the establishment of the Miranda Naturalist Trust, of which Sib was chairman from 1976 to 1980. The success of the Trust owes much to Sib's energy in securing funds which were generously supplemented by donations from himself and his wife Joan.

Sib was both meticulous and prolific in recording his field observations and thoughts. The 50-year index to *Notornis* lists 170 contributions from him, alone or with co-authors, almost twice the number by the next most prolific author, Ross McKenzie. Of special value are the long series of 'Classified Summarized Notes' and the 'Annual Locality Reports' on shorebirds in the Firth of Thames and Manukau Harbour (this latter in co-operation with Ross McKenzie). Sib published in *Emu* as early as 1943 and

1946, and many writings, on topics ranging from ornithological discovery to classical references to cicadas, appeared in *Tara*, *Prudentia*, *Forest and Bird*, *New Zealand Nature Heritage* and various newspapers. His classical knowledge allowed him to contribute to the glossary of the meanings of the scientific names of New Zealand birds (H. Oliver: *Annotated Index to some early New Zealand Bird Literature*, Dept. of Internal Affairs, Wildlife Publ. No. 106, 1968). He was co-author with R. A. Falla and E. G. Turbott in the several editions of the *Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand*; his other books are *Birds of Fiji in Colour* (1972), *Birds at Risk* (1982); reminiscences of his first two years in New Zealand are published under the title 'From Penguins to Parakeets' (1990), beautifully illustrated with Geoff Arnold's scraperboard drawings.

His contributions were not confined to the Ornithological Society. He served on the Council of the Auckland Institute and Museum (1960-1987), was a member of the Council's Museum and Conservation Committees, serving a term as chairman of the Museum Committee. As a member of the Fauna Protection Advisory Committee, which advised the Minister of Internal Affairs on conservation issues, he made sure the views and the contributions of members of the Ornithological Society were understood by administrators.

To those who knew him, Sib's greatest contribution was probably his infectious enthusiasm, be it for heroes and philosophers of antiquity, bird paintings, or some unusual plant, insect or bird he has just come across. His diary entry after seeing the second Hudsonian Godwit ever to be recorded in the North Island was typical: '...riches beyond the dreams of ornithological avarice.' Doubtless it was this enthusiasm that made the King's College Bird Club so successful and led to some of its former members later becoming leading ornithologists. In summarising the Club's purpose, he wrote: 'The important things are to get out in the field; observe with a critical eye; make notes; draw if you can; and above all, get some fun out of your bird-watching' and this is exactly what Sib did himself all his life. Even during the last weeks of his life when dogged by ill health, he was still able to say: 'all life is for rejoicing'.

Peter Bull

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Dick Sibson ('Sib'), a much loved friend and mentor of many ornithologists, arrived in New Zealand in 1939, to take up the position of classics master at King's College, Auckland, where he taught until 1971. Soon after arrival he was introduced to the fledgling Ornithological Society by Charles Fleming and Graham Turbott, and he quickly applied his perceptive eye and ear, honed to the north Kent marshes, to the natural riches of Auckland's puzzling isthmus.

For the ornithologist, King's is strategically situated: close to the narrowest part of the Auckland isthmus, right beneath the flight path of the godwits and knots working the three hour difference between Tasman

and Pacific tides. Since the commuting flocks were clearly visible through our large classroom window, we took advantage of this during Latin or history, when the teaching would wander from ancient Rome or Napoleon to godwits and wrybills, the Firth of Thames, reminiscences of the beauty of the English countryside - and numerous other fascinating topics!

Sib soon formed a Bird Club, and not only the wader-rich mudflats of the nearby Manukau came under close scrutiny, but exploration further afield was quickly started, either on bikes or by car. The Auckland sewage treatment plant, which Sib euphemistically called 'The Ponds', was a regular and highly productive haunt - both for the odiferous ooze and the birds. There we saw our first Wrybills, White Herons and Royal Spoonbills, and learned to separate some of those difficult small sandpipers, which Sib claimed were 'sent to test slow-plodding man'. It was a Bird Club bicycle expedition in 1941 which placed the Firth of Thames firmly on the ornithological map. A trip to an offshore island soon became an annual tradition, and few northern islands were not visited between 1946 and 1972. On such trips Sib's prime motto was above all to have fun, but also record carefully what was found. The results of many of these trips were published in *Notoavis*.

On some of the island trips the Bird Club was invited to assist the former Wildlife Service with its conservation work. In 1959, there was a joint Wildlife Service - Bird Club trip led by Brian Bell to survey the Alderman Islands, and it was a Bird Club team which assisted Don Merton in the first successful transfer of saddlebacks from Hen Island to Middle Chicken (Whatapuke). Many successful releases followed, and the North Island subspecies now flourishes on nine islands. Dick Veitch often reminds me of a famous Sibsonian dictum coined on one of these island trips - as Sib loaded his toast with generous quantities of fresh marmalade provided by a kind Club mum, he said profoundly: 'Toast is a means of conveying marmalade to the mouth!'

We also explored Port Waikato, Kariotahi, Kaipara, Miranda and Rangitoto - memories of hot ironsand between the toes, blinding shellbanks in the midsummer heat, Nellies following the Rangitoto-bound Blue Boat, and flowering clematis in the lava fields. As well as watching birds we botanized. Sib had no mean knowledge of New Zealand plants, as well as the many aliens from the British Isles and the Middle East - his knowledge of and enthusiasm for nature were infectious. Spring-flowering two-bob on the hills round Kawakawa Bay; bugloss, teasels, Hamilton's kumarahou and morning glory along the roadside of the Firth, and the mistletoe at Miranda: we greeted them every trip, or every season when they bloomed like old friends.

Most bird clubbers kept close contact with Sib long after leaving school. He was always keen to hear the latest news. His missives were packed with anecdotes about the isthmus, perceptive comments and suggestions of things to look out for, and invariably contained one or two Greek or Latin teasers to tax the memory. We continued the tradition of keeping a close eye on the surrounding countryside, and after Sib stopped driving, there were always plenty of willing local helpers among the old bird club team and the local

Ornithological Society. Field trips often culminated in a sumptuous afternoon tea at the Sibson's when the impressive bird library would be consulted and the day's findings carefully recorded.

As Sib became increasingly less mobile, he wrote prodigiously, continuing his love for words not only writing articles about birds but also writing succinct and beautiful poetry. Among the poems, those about birds and the countryside were foremost. He also derived great satisfaction helping David Medway to translate hitherto unpublished letters in Latin which the naturalists on Cook's voyages of discovery sent back to Europe.

My enduring memory of Sib is of a kind scholar and mentor with an infectious enthusiasm for sharing the beauty of the natural world with others. The Bird Club became something of a legend, and for all who participated, a love of birds and nature has become a life-long interest. Vale amice, floreat semper aves atque spectatores.

Tim Lovegrove

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