

OBITUARY

CHARLES ALEXANDER FLEMING

KBE, DSc, FRS, FRSNZ

1916-1987



Photo: Ken George

New Zealand lost one of its most distinguished scientists with the sudden death of Sir Charles Fleming at his home in Wellington on 11 September 1987 at the age of 71.

Sir Charles was born in Auckland and educated at Kings College and Auckland University where, after majoring in both geology and zoology, he gained his masterate with a thesis on prions. He joined the New Zealand Geological Survey in 1940 as an assistant geologist and remained in that organisation for the rest of his working life, except for a period of war service as a coastwatcher at the Auckland Islands. He returned to the Survey after the war and eventually became Chief Palaeontologist, a post that conveniently linked his geological and zoological interests. Declining further promotion, he concentrated his energies on research, the affairs of the Royal Society, and his varied cultural interests (music, art, languages and history).

His many outstanding research contributions in geology were matched by others in zoology – notably in ornithology, but also in biogeography, conservation, and the taxonomy and songs of cicadas. At the time of his death he had some 500 publications to his credit, including books, major research papers and numerous shorter articles. Apart from research, he took a very active part in the affairs of the Royal Society of New Zealand and was its president from 1962 to 1966. He also served a term (1968-69) as president of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science.

The quality of his work earned him many honours, both at home and abroad. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (one of the few New Zealanders to hold this distinction), a Foreign Member of the American Philosophical Society (the only New Zealand resident to be so honoured), a Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, a Fellow of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. In 1977 he was made a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (KBE) for services to science.

His ornithological contributions began with his classic study of the birds of the Chatham Islands (1939), closely followed by other major studies on the prions (1941) and New Zealand flycatchers (1950). In studying the life history of the Silvereye (1943), he was one of the first New Zealanders to use coloured leg bands (home-made in those days) to identify individual birds in the field. Another pioneering effort, undertaken jointly with the late Dr K. Wodzicki, was a census of the Gannet population of New Zealand (1952) by counting nests shown on aerial photographs and checking the results by ground visits to some of the ganneries. This resulted in the first full census of any New Zealand seabird. Sir Charles had less opportunity for sustained ornithological research in later life, but he nevertheless kept up with current advances by extensive reading, and he watched and photographed birds whenever opportunity offered. He enjoyed such activities immensely and his observations and experiences were often the subject of articles and lectures. Thus, in addition to his main ornithological papers, he has published several shorter ones plus many articles and short notes which together record a lifetime's observations and thoughts on a wide range of ornithological topics.

The Ornithological Society of New Zealand has particular reason to be grateful to Sir Charles. He was one of its founders, a very active regional organiser in its early days, its president in 1948-49, and a faithful attender and contributor at meetings of the Wellington Branch over a period of some 40 years.

As a palaeontologist, Sir Charles was naturally interested in the geographical affinities of elements of the New Zealand fauna and flora and in their appearances and disappearances throughout geological time, and he published extensively on these topics. He was particularly interested in the array of ancient forms (including several kinds of birds) preserved from extinction by New Zealand's long isolation, and he became very critical of the human mismanagement that had caused the recent extinction of some of these species and threatened the survival of others. Indeed, the proper conservation of New Zealand's native plants and animals, based on sound scientific principles, became a major concern for Sir Charles during the latter years of his life, and he fought long and hard to improve matters. Future generations will have much for which to thank him in this regard.

Those of us who were privileged to know Charles as a friend will remember him for his ready wit and agile mind, for his infectious enthusiasm in his appreciation and understanding of beautiful things both natural and man-made, and for his helpfulness and unobtrusive generosity. No less characteristic was his determination to use his intellectual abilities, possessions and reputation in the service of others, particularly in the promotion of good science and the conservation of natural resources for the physical and aesthetic enjoyment of future generations. The contributions of Sir Charles to the scientific and cultural life of New Zealand were indeed exceptional, but they were not his alone. Lady Fleming, a naturalist and historian in her own right, made these achievements possible through her dedication as Charles's adviser, secretary, field companion and competent manager of home and family. We extend our sympathy to Lady Fleming and her family, and also our grateful thanks for all she and Sir Charles have given us.

P. C. Bull

CHARLES FLEMING – The Mentor

People interested in natural history have always fallen back on older generations for their knowledge and encouragement. This has been particularly so in New Zealand where, until recently, the study of birds and of nature in general has found little place in our education system.

So, whether they have liked it or not, our older naturalists have become the mentors for ascending generations of naturalists.

This was one of Sir Charles Fleming's roles in New Zealand ornithology, but for those who benefited from his knowledge and encouragement it was probably his most important role. Indeed, much of the mail that arrived at the Fleming house after his death expressed gratitude for help given over the years.

Those who knew him but were not associated with natural history probably did not see this side of him. They probably saw him as a unique and different personality inclined to serious conversation tempered with a ready wit. With his usual bow tie and often bordering on the dramatic, he may have seemed endearingly eccentric.

But his group of disciples saw him differently. He was a source of strength whose approach was subtle in that he respected the limited knowledge of others. This respect showed, for example, in the constant use Charles made, in his many and varied papers, of the limited knowledge of others, acknowledging it meticulously.

As a result, Charles and his helpers grew together, both sides seeming to benefit from the association. How flattering to get an acknowledgement or, as a school child, to receive a mention for catching a cicada or providing a valuable sighting of some new Australian immigrant.

The mentor-disciple relationship often started with an approach from Charles. A hurried scribbled note would arrive, either on his best deckled-edged 'Balivean'-addressed paper or just on a page from his field notebook. After a few moments' struggle with his handwriting, you would make out a request. Flattered by receiving word from the eminent Charles, you would soon be out trying to establish whether the Little Egret had found the Miranda coastline of whether *Amphipsalta cingulata* did in fact clap its wings when it sang. And a Charles Fleming request required an exact scientific reply. There was no use saying "I think so". This just resulted in a further scribbled letter asking you to look again.

In return for detailed replies, though, Charles was prepared to lead his band of helpers on. Large numbers of birds, trees and insects were added to amateur lists, along with knowledge of habitat, habits, and insect and bird song. Charles could reproduce the calls of bush birds and cicadas well enough to prepare the novice for what to listen for in the wild.

Charles led me to my first encounters with all the rarer bush birds, several seabirds and several shorebirds. He also introduced me to some 40 varieties of New Zealand cicadas, a tally which kept growing through the 1960s and 70s as new varieties were discovered and papers came from the tireless Fleming pen.

Charles was one of the first to become aware that New Zealand's old culture, tied to Europe, was disappearing and that a new culture, based on New Zealand's natural history, was emerging. He made us realise that we have around us much that is unique and memorable and not shared with anywhere else in the world. 'Podocarp Gothic', for example, his term for our wooden ecclesiastical architecture, gave a new meaning and importance to our English Gothic in rimu rather than stone. The same could be said for 'classical kauri', his term for the simple architecture of early Northland farmhouses.

It is not surprising, then, that this man who revelled in the emergence of the New Zealand culture also enjoyed the work of New Zealand writers – Mason, Glover, Fairburn, Baxter, Holcroft. He used their lines in papers and often quoted them to reinforce a point. He could quote too the

unpublished haiku poems of his old friend A. H. Hooper, and I can well remember him at a summer wedding in late January, when the jollity was over but the heat and the cicada noise remained, saying for no apparent reason:

Cicadas crackling –
No longer does the blackbird
Sing at my window.

Few have the depth of feeling for nature and the moment to realise that cicadas crackle only after the blackbirds have ceased to sing, in association with season.

Those to whom Charles gave interest and encouragement over the years saw him, I believe, as one does the clematis. The clematis climbs through the rank dark undergrowth of anonymity, eventually to flower gloriously at the top, where everyone can see it. Then, when its petals fall away and it blends back into the forest, one can still 'see' the flowers at the top just by glancing at the vine at the bottom. The Charles Flemings of this world are never lost; they go on recurring, chiding and helping, often coming to mind at unexpected moments: but this Charles Fleming seems to bring a smile to your face at the same time.

Stuart Chambers

No longer will he walk the salty sand
Or cast an eager and discerning eye
Upon the birds that haunt the tidal strand
Of that loved rivermouth at Waikanae.

No longer will he brave the wind and wet
When vernal whitebait run in Waimeha,
Plying with practised skill his treasured net
Keen, as a carefree boy, to fill his jar.

No longer will he watch on sand-dune pool
Teal, shovelers, dabchicks and the passing tern,
Or use his tape recorder to befool
The shy rails in the raupo and the fern.

No need to grieve. His questing spirit soars
To realms where nought of lasting value dies.
His mind and pen threw open unknown doors
Illuminating Earth's old mysteries.

R. B. Sibson