

OBITUARY



ROBERT ALEXANDER FALLA KBE, CMG, MA, DSc, FRSNZ (1901-1979)

Sir Robert's high standing in world ornithology and his considerable influence on ornithology and conservation in New Zealand and on OSNZ affairs are well known to members and do not need to be spelt out here. Since his death was announced to members, many appreciations and biographies, some of them detailed, have appeared elsewhere (see especially C. A. Fleming, 1980, *Emu* 80 (1): 41-44). We are grateful to the staff of the Nature Conservation Council and to the *Evening Post* for photographs.

Bob Falla throughout his life characteristically instilled an interest in birds and New Zealand bird study in all with whom he came into contact — many will probably remember him first when as an established museum man he always dispensed a liberal measure of advice and information to any inquirer with the most random bird question. As a schoolboy in the late 1920s I was fortunate in living near the Falla family and it was as Mr R. A. Falla — still a primary school teacher — that I met him first. His study was typically crammed with bird books and photographs; there would be mounted birds, a

bird skin or two and a storm-killed petrel (not necessarily fresh!) about to be transmuted into a study skin. He was, of course, already a noted ornithologist. "Discovery of a Breeding Place of Buller's Shearwater, Poor Knights Islands, N.Z." *Emu* 24: 37-43 (1924) had already been published, and he was extending his field work to cover the full range of petrels of the northern region. He was an active supporter of the Auckland Museum and a lecturer and writer on bird life. I was one of many who listened fascinated while he lectured and showed slides of excursions with the late Bernard Sladden and others to the Poor Knights, Kawera and other petrel islands of the north and Bay of Plenty.

Others will record his distinguished career in successive museum posts and his further career in conservation after retirement. He left teaching to lecture in nature study at the Auckland Training College, simultaneously helping with the establishment of the displays and research collections for the new Auckland War Memorial Museum, to which on its opening in 1929 he was Honorary Ornithologist. Two seasons as ornithologist to Mawson's British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (B.A.N.Z.A.R.E. 1929-31) followed and during his second year away he was appointed to be the Museum's first Ornithologist.

My personal experience as one whose interests and life's work owed much to an early meeting with Bob Falla will be typical of many of today's ornithologists. His pleasure in looking at birds — linked always with the discipline of a highly critical scientific mind — was in the Gilbert White tradition: and was similarly contagious! His papers and popular contributions are to a high degree significant, but it was his personal contribution to meetings, and to day-to-day contact and discussion, that made him such a force in ornithology and conservation.

E. G. TURBOTT

When I first met R. A. Falla he was Director of the Canterbury Museum and an acknowledged authority on the birds of the southern oceans. His was a name to compare with, a name to be mentioned in the same breath as Alexander and Murphy. The invitation to join Sir Douglas Mawson's Antarctic Expedition had come at exactly the right moment to stimulate and strengthen his love of the sea, ships and seabirds. He passed on his enthusiasm to others and I cherish the memory of the welcome which he and Molly used to extend to me on my visits to Christchurch.

His zestful study of birds dated from his schooldays. When he could not be out at sea, how he loved to walk along the shore to see what the tide had brought in. He liked to tell how once he found what he was certain was a Buller's Shearwater on one of the Waitemata beaches. At that time this was a seabird of legendary rarity, and

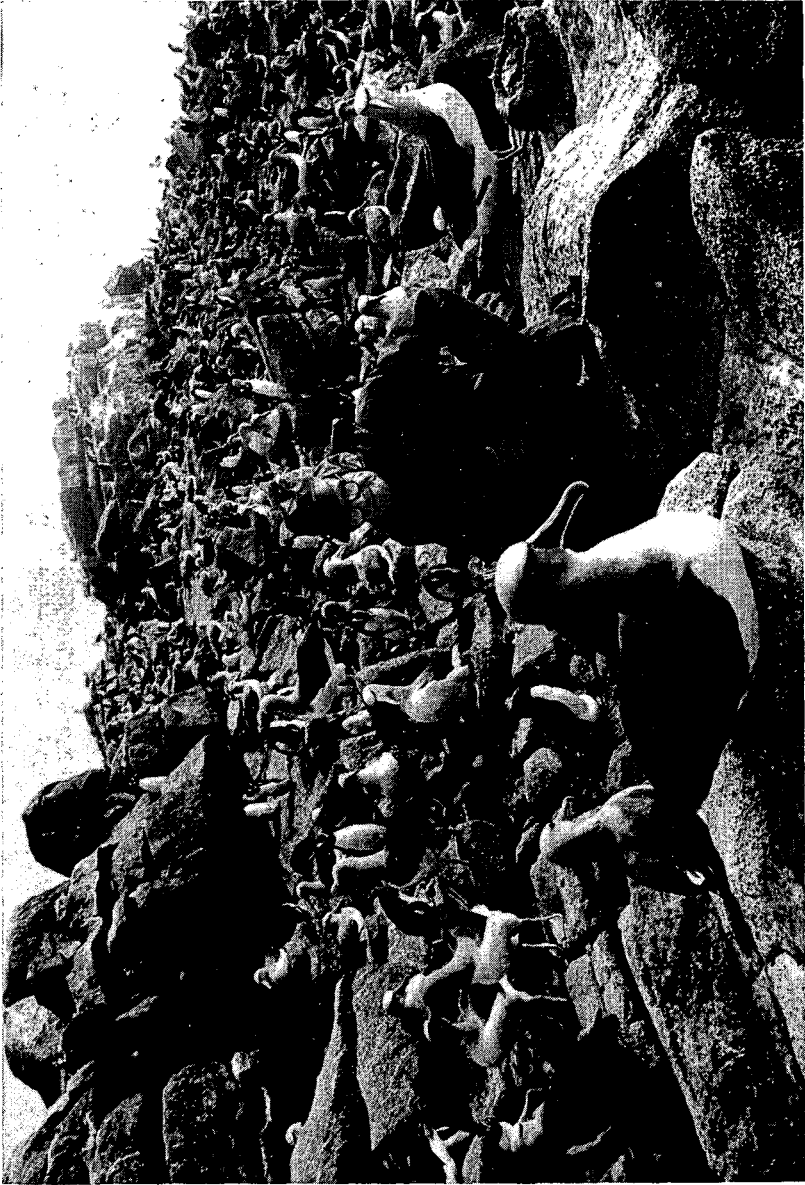
when he took the bedraggled specimen to the Auckland Museum for verification, the redoubtable Cheeseman, no mean ornithologist himself, looked at him and simply said, "Schoolboys don't find Buller's Shearwaters." Some years later, RAF was to have a hand in putting the mighty Poor Knights colony of Buller's Shearwaters on the map.

Fifty years ago, the road to Muriwai was rough and tortuous. RAF was the pioneer of beachcombing along that 30 mile strand which nets such a variety of storm-tossed seabirds. Perhaps I may here recount how one hot January day, RAF and I, confidently armed with a sack, took the tram to New Brighton and walked many miles picking up bits and pieces of penguins and prions. As we boarded the tram in the evening, we quietly deposited the loaded sack at the rear and with some amusement tried to pretend we knew nothing of the source of the strong scent which from time to time bore down upon the nostrils of our fellow-passengers. RAF was a wit, loving a good pun or play upon words. It is said of him that once at Muriwai, as he studied a far-gone tern, he remarked not "Alas! poor Yorick!" but "Even a tern will worm." Much more recently, after a wardroom dinner where Bacchus was duly honoured, he retired with the bon mot "Discretion is the better part of Falla."

During his years at the Auckland and Canterbury Museums, RAF profitably used beach-cast specimens as he gathered material for papers on penguins, shags, albatrosses and tubenoses of all kinds. At the same time he made enlightening studies of our puzzling oyster-catchers and of the migratory arctic waders. But his interest was not confined to the birds of sea and coast. Under the auspices of Captain E. V. Sanderson and the Forest and Bird Protection Society, he was one of the contributors to the text which accompanied Lily Daff's paintings of forest-haunting birds; and the paintings for the second volume which dealt with birds of sea and shore were made under his guidance at the Auckland Museum. By now his thoughts were very much directed towards conservation, and his voice was heard in the councils of those who framed the legislation which protected such mindlessly persecuted species as Pied and Spotted Shags. A few years later he was a strong advocate of the legislation which prohibited the shooting of godwits and other shorebirds. Now, forty years on, the value of this legislation is manifest, not only, for example, in the great inlets of the Auckland isthmus, but also in estuaries throughout the country.

In 1939 he was one of that small band of visionaries who founded the OSNZ; and with Professor B. J. Marples, he was an early editor of *N.Z. Bird Notes*; before in Volume 4 they were dignified with the title of *Notornis*, by way of celebrating the rediscovery of that resplendent but heavy-footed gallinule.

During a long and active life, birds were his first and lasting love. From his travels and experiences both in New Zealand and across the world, he acquired an enviable wealth of knowledge. But administrative duties and service on numerous national councils left



Sir Robert among friends, Salvin's Mollymawks and Erect-crested Penguins. Bounty Islands, January 1979.
Photo: Ross Giblin, courtesy of Evening Post

him regrettably little inclination for writing. Yet for the first field guide he found time to make a most valuable contribution, based on his unrivalled knowledge of our many oceanic birds. Examining the plates for the new guide gave him much pleasure. His eye was quick to notice errors in plumage or colour, and his suggestions for improvements were most helpful.

In partial retirement, it was fitting that he should become Chairman of the Nature Conservation Council, even if his views on measures to be taken to ensure the survival of rare and endangered species of offshore islands were not always palatable. In the filming of native birds for education and television, his advice was eagerly sought. He was happiest when out in the field or bobbing about in boats. Who can blame him? We "shall not look upon his like again."

R. B. SIBSON

It is not easy to single out the attributes of one who was so closely involved in so many aspects of the natural sciences in New Zealand during the past 50 years. In the history of New Zealand science, at least in natural history, there have been a number of dominant practitioners whose names and works are known to the merest student — of such are the Four Great H's, Hochstetter, Haast, Hutton and Hector, later Cotton, Oliver, Archey, and so on. Of equal rank is the name Falla.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to exaggerate the place that Sir Robert Falla has occupied in the pursuit and development of New Zealand science, particularly in diverse fields of natural history. Behind almost every endeavour has been some direct or indirect influence brought about by Falla's example, advice or well-considered criticism.

As Assistant Zoologist with Sir Douglas Mawson's expedition of 1928/29 he provided a continuing link between New Zealand science and the traditional Northern Hemisphere input into Antarctic exploration. His advice and experience were consequently sought when New Zealand became involved in the new phase of Antarctic exploration in the International Geophysical year and beyond. Indeed, the long history of VUWAE expeditions to the Antarctic owes its inception to Falla's early lead.

The wartime "Cape Expedition," the secret coastwatching parties at the Auckland and Campbell Islands, was organised and led by Falla. This expedition laid the foundation of renewed and vigorous subantarctic research programmes of world interest.

His lead in the field of museum education is also notable and all the more remarkable because he never had the good fortune to have a well-funded institution to develop.

As foundation Chairman of the Nature Conservation Council, he helped to lay a round baseline of policy and investigational technique which guided New Zealand or New Zealanders through the formative years of environmental concern and appreciation. His well-founded opinions and judgments have mellowed the public's initial emotionalism to a more solidly based understanding of the problems of environmental management.

He was also more recently closely involved in public education through the television medium by way of films conceived and guided by him in conjunction with the natural history unit of the National Film Unit. These films have won world acclaim and have the stamp of informed science, contrasting with more sensational conservation campaigns on film.

In essence, Falla's role over the past 50 years has been as an unofficial scientific adviser to the Government in the field of natural history research and education and especially in conservation and environmental appreciation.

Falla's stimulus, friendship and guidance of many young scientists has, on an individual basis, helped greatly with the personal education and achievement of at least two generations of New Zealand investigators.

E. W. DAWSON

On 23 February 1979 Sir Robert Falla collapsed and died at his home in Eastbourne. He was 77. His sudden death came as a great shock to his multitude of friends and colleagues, many of whom were still sharing with Sir Robert a deep sense of loss at the death on 31 May 1978, shortly after the couple's golden wedding anniversary, of his charming wife Molly.

To have known Robert and Molly Falla for 23 years has been for me both an intellectual joy and a profound privilege. To have lost them both, so suddenly, and within a few months of each other, leaves a sense of emptiness that I find difficult to put into words.

Robert Falla was an extraordinary man in every way. He had the rare combination of scholastic brilliance, keen perception, and profound knowledge coupled with a dedication, wit, and great personal charm that endeared him to generations of New Zealanders. He was, undoubtedly, one of New Zealand's greatest sons of science: a scholarly and gifted naturalist. To him everything about nature was deeply interesting and beautiful; every lone feather or shell on the tide-line was a book on its owner. He knew, and he cared.

In 1956, as a teenager with a budding interest in seabirds, I first met Dr Falla across the Director's desk in the Dominion Museum. I had filled an ancient brown bag with the carcasses of storm-wrecked seabirds, whose gentle odour undoubtedly presaged my entry into the



room. I wondered whether this slim, grey-suited man could identify them for me. He could indeed. As the sand-encrusted corpses were spread over the carpet, each one's name and biological background were explained to me in a simple, lively, and thoroughly entertaining way. I was entranced, and was converted at once to the cause I have followed since.

Robert Falla had a talent for explanation of knowledge that I have never seen equalled. On ships and seabirds he knew it all. In Washington, D.C., in 1969 Robert Cushman Murphy said to me of Robert Falla: "He knows more about seabirds than anybody, including me." The two were great friends and longstanding companions in ornithology. I dare not make any distinctions between them; both were superb ornithologists, and both true gentlemen. They were the best.

Robert Falla's capacity for knowledge was as amazing as his memory. He spoke to young and old on many subjects with clarity, wit, and accuracy. His memory for dates, facts, and the whereabouts of articles and papers written 50 years previously was nothing short

of baffling. An elegant, succinct, and commanding knowledge of fact and words is reflected in most of what he wrote, whether a handwritten note or a cerebral discourse on taxonomy. He wrote a Christmas card to me on the Poor Knights Islands as 'from one poor knight to another' — he had just received his knighthood (1973). In addition to sharing with me his delightfully sharp sense of humour, he taught me most of what I know about seabirds. For this he received large numbers of my mother's 'peanut brownies' and the rapt attention of his willing pupil.

Many have written of Robert Falla's contributions to natural science, and particularly to ornithology. They are so numerous and substantial I will not attempt it here. To me Robert Falla became over 23 years more than just a friend: more of a father figure. He was a great scientist; and a great human being.

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PETER C. HARPER

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Compiled by C. A. FLEMING

The late Sir Robert Falla wrote numerous scientific papers, lectures, reviews, and articles on ornithology and other branches of natural history, on ships, the Antarctic and the Subantarctic Islands, on wildlife management, conservation and the environment, on history and on the lives of former colleagues and friends. He was a conscientious publicist for science, writing many popular articles for periodicals that were never circulated to his scientific correspondents as reprints. To compile a complete bibliography is therefore a difficult task, unlikely to be successful on the first attempt. For example, some journalists' interviews have been included but probably not all. Additions to the list will be welcomed by the editor.

The draft bibliography that follows was compiled by adding to an initial list drawn up by C. A. Fleming a considerable number of titles supplied first by Dr R. H. Balham (Zoology Department, Victoria University of Wellington) and by Mr J. M. Cunningham (Kotari Road, Days Bay). Mr J. A. Bartle (National Museum, Wellington) and Mr E. G. Turbott (Auckland Institute and Museum) then each added a number of titles.

Mrs E. McGregor (NZ Geological Survey, Lower Hutt) kindly typed the bibliography from rough handwritten cards.

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