

## SHORT NOTE

# The Ornithological Society of New Zealand's iconic 1951 takahē drawing by Charles Tunnickliffe

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The Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ) was inaugurated in 1940 (Gill & Heather 1990). A decade later, its committee resolved to change the name of its journal from *New Zealand Bird Notes* to *Notornis*. The first issue with the new name was Volume 4, Part 1, published in July 1950. The journal was growing in size and importance and the new name was in line with the tradition of the world's ornithological societies to name their journals after high-profile birds. The South Island takahē or notornis (*Porphyrio* [*Notornis*] *hochstetteri*) had become well known, both locally and world-wide, following its dramatic rediscovery in Fiordland in 1948 by Dr Geoffrey Orbell.

Since 1952, the OSNZ has used as a design on the covers of *Notornis*, and a few of its other publications, an exquisite drawing of a takahē

(Fig. 1; Heather 1990). Its first use was on the cover of *Notornis* Volume 5, Part 1 (July 1952). The only published explanation of the drawing (same issue; p. 1) was: "The society is pleased to be able to present a new cover design of a notornis, executed by the eminent English artist C. F. Tunnickliffe". How the society obtained the drawing was not reported at the time.

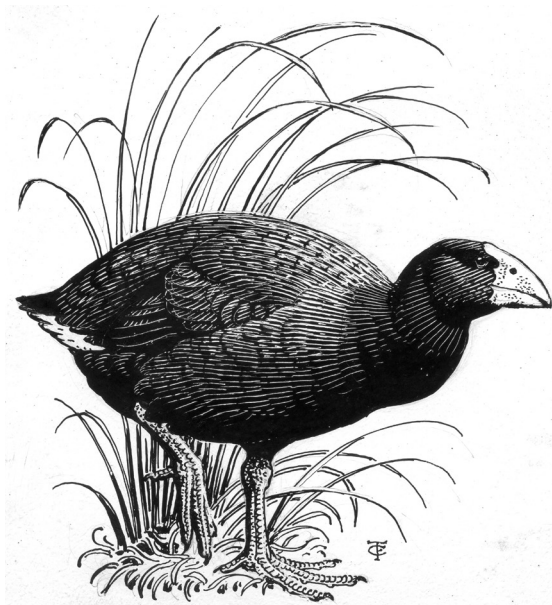
To research background details of the drawing I consulted the OSNZ archive (MS-2003-75), which is housed in the library of Auckland War Memorial Museum. The inventory of the archive (completed by Michael Taylor in 2011) indicates that Box 10, Folder 2 (correspondence 1950–1960), holds letters between Tunnickliffe (CFT) and John Cunningham (JC), the OSNZ Secretary. I examined this folder in 2023, finding two letters from CFT (September 1951 and August 1952) and four letters from JC to CFT (1951–1952). I came across another letter from JC to CFT (December 1950) in Box 10, Folder 1. Besides correspondence, I checked the AGM and Committee minutes for this period (Box 10).

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**Figure 1.** High-resolution scan of C.F. Tunnicliffe's original ink drawing of a South Island takahē (110 x 100 mm). Image: B. Gill.

### C.F. Tunnicliffe O.B.E., R.A. (1901–1979)

Charles Frederick Tunnicliffe was born in Cheshire, England, in December 1901 (Niall 1979). He studied at Manchester Academy of Fine Art, and at the Royal College of Art (London). He was elected R.A. in 1954 and received an O.B.E. in 1977. Tunnicliffe died in Anglesey, Wales, in February 1979.

Charles Tunnicliffe had a great affinity with the British countryside and became a notable wildlife artist (Niall 1980). Birds were his special focus. He made detailed portraits of birds in life and painted birds in their habitat. He made field sketches and also post-mortem paintings of limp birds with their wings and legs extended. His bird paintings were used on covers of British bird magazines. He illustrated many books, and there are several books devoted to selections of his art work (e.g. Niall 1979, 1980; Gillmor 1981).

### Obtaining the drawing

How Tunnicliffe and the OSNZ came to discuss a drawing remains uncertain, because I cannot find in the OSNZ archives the earliest letters between the parties, or the AGM or Committee minutes for 1949, 1950 or 1951.

Surviving correspondence comes later in the chain of events. JC wrote to CFT on 14 December 1950 acknowledging a letter from CFT dated 4 October (not seen). JC undertook to obtain one or

more photographs of the takahē, and drawings of topographical details of the bird, to send to CFT as reference material for a drawing. He would also send a copy of the society's special publication on the takahē which would include photographs. (A collection of articles from *Notornis* Vol. 4, Part 5, July 1951, was reissued and repaginated as a booklet entitled "The Takahē".) JC asked if CFT could send a rough sketch that could be shown to members who know the bird well, rather than going "right ahead with the scraper board drawing".

JC sent the society's special takahē publication with a letter dated 21 July 1951. He also referred CFT to Plate 28 of Buller (1882) for "a splendid drawing [of the takahē], in which all the scutellations on the legs and feet are correct, and in addition the bird is in quite a good stance". JC added: "Dr [Robert] Falla says if you bear in mind that the bird reminds him of a moorhen [*Gallinula chloropus*] you will get the drawing right".

CFT replied from his home in Anglesey on 21 September 1951. "I enclose two finished drawings as I think the time saved by doing finished work as against rough sketches makes the gamble worth while. There is no extra charge for the second drawing, I merely wanted you to have at least one alternative." Instead of "a money payment", he requested to "have copies of 'Notornis' as they are issued until you consider the debt discharged". This letter establishes 1951 as the year that Tunnicliffe drew the takahē.

JC acknowledged receipt of the "fine drawings" (letter, 4 February 1952). "I am very impressed with the drawings, and so are the one or two members so far privileged to see them. As they are rather valuable, I have not sent them round to each of our committee, but have made rough photographic copies to show the committee. I rather think that the bird in the stooping attitude will meet with general approval from those who know the bird in life."

On 28 June 1952, JC wrote to advise CFT that *Notornis* Volume 5, Part 1, had just been printed with the Tunnicliffe takahē on the cover. The committee had resolved to make CFT a life member of the OSNZ in lieu of payment for the drawing. JC wrote again on 23 July 1952, asking if the takahē drawing could be used on the cover of the checklist of New Zealand birds that the OSNZ was shortly to publish (Fleming 1953). In reply (letter, 6 August 1952) CFT stated: "You may use the drawing, or drawings, of *Notornis* as you wish ...".

### The takahē drawing

The original drawing is currently in an acid-free envelope in Box 22, Folder 1, of the OSNZ archive. It is a pen and ink drawing, with black ink, measuring about 110 mm tall by 100 mm wide (Fig. 1).

The drawing is on a rectangle of white card measuring 140 x 120 mm. The card is mounted, as required for its initial printing, on a larger piece of rough, yellow-brown cardboard. This is annotated "Masterton Printing Co." and "1 line block 3½ wide" (3.5 inches = 89 mm).

The drawing comprises an elegant and accurate depiction of a takahē with its head held low and the right leg raised. There is a background of tussock grass. Close examination shows faint pencil marks, in among the inked areas, from the artist's preparatory sketch. Tunnicliffe's cipher (CFT) is drawn in at lower right. The drawing makes a nice composition, well suited as a cover design. As such it was presumably intended to be printed at full size or with slight reduction. Because the drawing is highly detailed it looks poor when greatly reduced in an attempt to make a logo.

### Discussion

Until the early correspondence (or the OSNZ meeting minutes for the relevant years) are found, we have to wonder why Tunnicliffe, in Britain, drew a takahē for a New Zealand ornithological group. He may have had a connection to someone in New Zealand, on account of which he offered to make the drawing or somebody in the OSNZ requested it. Certainly he would have been known to New Zealand ornithologists from his art work in British nature books and magazines. But why did the OSNZ not ask a local artist? People like E. Mervyn Taylor (1906–1964) could have done the job. Taylor was an accomplished nature artist (James 2006) and he had drawn birds for Falla's school journal on the subject (Falla & Taylor 1949).

Whatever the circumstances, acquiring an exquisite drawing of a South Island takahē by such an internationally acclaimed bird artist as Charles Tunnicliffe is a significant event in the OSNZ's history. The society has used the drawing regularly as cover art on its publications for 70 years. This is the legacy of Tunnicliffe's artistry and the effort of OSNZ office-holders to obtain the drawing.

The fate of Tunnicliffe's second takahē drawing is not known to me and I have seen no representation of it. It is presumably a black ink drawing of similar size to the surviving drawing but showing a takahē in a different attitude. It was probably signed "CFT". It may be lost, or it may turn up in the OSNZ archive. It may even have found its way, erroneously, into another archive.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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