

OBITUARY

HERBERT THOMAS CONDON

On 12 January 1978 Herbert Thomas Condon, one of Australia's most famous and, perhaps, most controversial ornithologists, died at the age of 65.

How does one write about a man who was part-genius, part-ornithologist and, it must be admitted, not always *simpatico*?

His ornithological publications speak for themselves. His private battles with people were resolute, foolish and relentless: either you were a Condon-ophile or not; there was no third way.

Herb Condon was born in Melbourne on 27 February 1912. His family moved to South Australia and he was educated at the Unley High School and later at the University of Adelaide, where he gained high marks in zoology and genetics but failed to get a degree. In 1929 he joined the South Australian Museum as a cadet, becoming assistant to the Honorary Ornithologists in 1933.

It was in the following year that I first met Herb. An advertisement appeared in the *Adelaide Advertiser* about an excursion for people interested in birds. This was organized by J. Neil McGilp, a pastoralist and oologist of renown. (His collection of Australian birds' eggs is second only to that of the H. L. White collection in the National Museum of Victoria.) The object of the exercise was to attract youngsters to bird study. This, in fact, was a master-stroke of ornithological public relations; it resulted in an extraordinary upsurge of interest in birds in South Australia and, incidentally, gained quite a few new members for the South Australian Ornithological Association.

Herb was present on that excursion and we schoolboys were vastly impressed with his knowledge. After that meeting Bob Brown and I used to take eggs and skins along to the Museum and Herb would help us with their identification. We had no legal collecting permits in those days but I cannot remember Herb ever castigating us for that omission. Bob and I eventually salved our joint-conscience by donating our tiny collections to the Museum.

In 1935 Condon became Assistant in Zoology at the South Australian Museum and in 1938 was promoted to Curator of Birds, a position he held until his retirement in 1976.

In the same year that he became Curator I was appointed to the South Australian Museum with the doubtful title of Scientific Cadet, apprenticed to the current entomologist, Herbert Womersley, a

specialist in primitive wingless insects and, later, to become renowned as an acarologist.

I used to see Herb almost every day in the Museum and I spent my lunch hours upstairs in the bird room with him, either looking through the collections or talking about our latest observations. It was a most stimulating time for me and I must have learnt something about birds nearly every day from Herb. In my mind's eye I still see him, peering at me through a haze of smoke; he used to roll his own cigarettes and invariably had one drooping from the side of his mouth.

Until Herb Condon was appointed, there was no full-time ornithologist on the staff of the South Australian Museum. However, the collection of skins and eggs, plus some osteological material, had long been lovingly cared for by John Sutton, a retired bank manager, and Dr A. M. Morgan, a retired eye-specialist. Condon kept up the work of those two dedicated gentlemen by adding to their meticulously documented collections with clear and precise specimen labels and catalogue cards.

Most of Condon's activities were firmly connected with the Museum, except for a series of lectures he delivered to senior undergraduates at the University, by invitation from the Professor of Zoology. He also gave weekly talks to school-children at the Museum; these were delivered with verve and humour and the children loved him.

Condon, if I remember correctly, did most of his collecting in the environs of Adelaide — he was limited to this by the scarcity of money in the 1930s. He did, however, make one memorable trip from Quorn to the western fringe of the Simpson Desert, by camel. On that expedition he discovered a new subspecies of the Red-rumped Parrot *Psephotus haematonotus caeruleus*. His watercolour portrait forms the frontispiece of his particularly good paper 'The Australian Broad-tailed Parrots (subfamily Platycercinae)' published in *Records of the South Australian Museum*, 1941, 7(1): 117–144. This was a perceptive, well-prepared paper illustrating, with diagrams, a number of the genetic differences between the ringnecks *Barnardius*, the rosellas *Platycercus* and the *Psephotus haematonotus* superspecies.

Condon is also known for his work on seabirds. It must have been about 1935 when terrible winter storms lashed The Coorong. I can still visualize the rather dumpy figure of Herb tearing up and down the Younghusband Peninsula—the seabeach of The

Coorong — on his motorbike, gathering up the many carcasses of albatrosses and petrels washed up on the beach. He did that in his own time, for his own interest, not by instruction from the Museum.

Several publications stemmed from that lone sortie, including 'Notes on the Albatrosses Occurring in South Australian Waters' published in *South Australian Ornithologist*, 1936, 13(5): 141–161; and 'The Cranial Osteology of certain *Tubinares*' in *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*, 1939, 63 (2): 311–330. He illustrated both of these papers with his clear line-drawings.

Herbert Condon was also responsible for 'A Field Guide to the Hawks of Australia', published by the Bird Observers' Club in 1949, with a second edition in 1957 and a third in 1968. His 'A Field Guide to the Waders', written with Arnold McGill, also sponsored by the Bird Observers' Club, was first published in 1952. This, thanks to the BOC and to the authors, was the first Australian attempt to help wader-watchers identify a quite difficult group of birds in the field. Condon illustrated both of these field guides.

As well as being a competent bird illustrator, Herb was a good cartoonist. His caricatures of both friends and enemies in the Museum and at Adelaide University were perceptive and clever. He was also a capable photographer.

During the war years Herb served briefly in the RAAF, in communications. In 1942 I was stationed at Advance Headquarters, NT Force, about 90 km south of Darwin. There, out of the blue, I one day received a letter from Herb telling me he was up at Adelaide River. On one of my days off I hitch-hiked to his base and we spent several hours together — munching a sandwich, sipping two precious bottles of warm beer and observing a male bowerbird *Chlamydera nuchalis* displaying to a female; and reminiscing about the South Australian Museum and the varied characters involved. Always an independent bloke, Herb did not take kindly to service discipline; so it was not surprising that he won no medals.

From 1938 to 1943 Herb Condon was the Honorary Secretary of the South Australian Ornithological Association; he was the Honorary Editor of the *South Australian Ornithologist* from 1953 to 1964 — a remarkable feat.

Herb joined the RAOU in 1937 and submitted his first contribution to *The Emu* in 1939. He was Branch Secretary for South Australia from 1940 to 1958, in 1961 he was elected President, then in 1973 a Fellow of the RAOU — a well-deserved honour.

In 1941 Condon was appointed a member of the RAOU Checklist Committee and became its Convener in the mid '50s. He published a number of supplements updating the 1926 Checklist until, in the 1960s, he was appointed as sole taxonomist to compile a new Australian Checklist. From that time, until the Non-Passerine section was published in 1975, Herb wrote almost nothing else. After completion of that half of the Checklist he was, unfortunately, forced to retire because of ill health.

Herb kept his private life quite separate from his museum work. I was invited to his house once or twice, possibly because he regarded me as one of his more successful protégés. He was interested in music and I recall vividly a Beethoven evening. I think he was shy about his *alter ego*. One never discerned an inkling of such at the Museum.

Strangely, after many years of professional and personal friendship, I fell out with Herb. It had to do with the generic name of certain cockatoos, specifically *Cacatua v. Kakatoë*. I set out the nomenclatural case for *Cacatua* and circulated this thesis to all members of the RAOU Checklist Committee, including, of course, Condon, who was for *Kakatoë*. I received by return post a rather strongly worded missive which began '*Et tu Brute*'.

I never saw Herb again after that; in retrospect, a trivial matter. We could have settled it over a beer.

This rather soft-spoken man was full of strong personal likes and dislikes. For those people he liked he was a very good friend and most generous in sharing his knowledge. I personally owe him an unpaid debt of gratitude.

He made his mark as an ornithologist in his museum work; in his papers, especially in the discipline of taxonomy; and by the help he gave to younger people over many years. He was also a keen and perceptive conservationist in the Aldo Leopold style.

My sympathy, as well as that of many members of the RAOU, is extended to Herb's widow, Mrs Rene Condon, and to David Condon.

W. B. Hitchcock