

John Berry

John Berry, the longest serving Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, died in February 2002 at the age of 94. He was the son of a Fife landed family, and his father, William, an Edinburgh advocate, was deeply involved in the early stages of bird protection and nature conservation in Scotland, to which John Berry came ultimately to devote his life. He was born into a very different world from ours. In 1907, there was no electricity in the family home at Tayfield, and there was to be none for several decades. There were no pine trees on Tentsmuir, where he roamed as a boy and accompanied his father on shooting and natural history trips. There were no votes for women, but Miss Baxter and Miss Rintoul, friends of the family, were laying the foundations of the modern knowledge of birds in Scotland, and persuaded the Berrys to shoot any bird for them on Tentsmuir that they could not otherwise identify. There was no such thing as Town and Country Planning, but that extraordinary polymath Patrick Geddes, father of town planning, came over from University College, Dundee, for tea and taught little John botany on Tayfield lawn.

John Berry's mother died shortly after John was born, and he was brought up by devoted aunts. He did not enjoy good health as a child — indeed, throughout his long life he was dogged by illnesses. But his immense zest for life and his great love of natural history were evident even when he was young. After his father found him carrying horse droppings up to his bedroom to feed his pet dung beetles, he built him a little “bug house” in the garden at Tayfield, and in due course he graduated from keeping insects to keeping wildfowl. Hampered by brittle bones and dyslexia, he nevertheless prospered at Eton and later at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he shared digs with Peter Scott, and, of course, shared a famous enthusiasm for geese, correcting the paintings of his artist friend from his own greater knowledge of the anatomy of wildfowl. “Gooseberry” they called him in those days. It was at Cambridge that he met the sister of a school friend who was also another young birdwatcher, Bride Freemantle, at Girton; Bride knew all about the small brown birds of Buckinghamshire, John about the shore birds of the Tay. Together they went off to study the waders on Fulbourne Fen, fell in love, and in due course married.

When John left Cambridge, his career began to prosper as a researcher into fish biology, first at University College, Dundee, then at the University of Southampton. He attracted the attention of Professor D'arcy Thompson at St. Andrews, who persuaded him to enrol for a Ph.D. there, and in 1936 he was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, at the age of 29. He was a Fellow for 66 years: elected the youngest, he died the oldest, a tenure of Scotland's premier learned society of extraordinary length. From this period, too, comes his authorship of his only book. In collaboration with Misses Baxter and Rintoul, he amassed the data for the *Wild Geese and Wild Duck of Scotland* (1939), which for the first time for any region of the world, described not only the distribution of wildfowl but also gave a scientifically-based estimate of their numbers. It was a Doomsday book, a classical and standard account on which all further work of the group in Scotland came to be based.

Wild Geese and Wild Duck was published a month before the outbreak of the Second World War. If John's fragile health precluded him from service on the front, he certainly served his country in other and remarkable ways. He was appointed press censor but that was really cover for important work in counter intelligence. He was not a complete novice on this side of things, evidently having become involved with the secret service in the 1930s, and combining a scientific trip to Germany and later to Hungary with intelligence gathering in the national interest. He had nearly died of typhus on a trip down the Danube in 1935, and was be rescued by gypsies after he had already written farewell messages to his family.

We shall probably never know all of what went on in those days of the 1940s, and John himself, for all his love of a good tale, would never speak even to his nearest and dearest of most of it. But there is the well authenticated story of the visit to Tayfield of a Spanish gentleman known by the authorities to be a German spy, who was entertained with lavish butter, cream and eggs to show there was no shortage of food in Britain; who found warships offshore and endless Spitfires screaming overhead (actually the same small number flying round) to show how well defended Scotland was; who wanted to see Leuchars but could not see past the lines of army trucks drawn up outside, and who was persuaded by his genial host and by his German-speaking relations that the landed classes did not think too badly of Hitler after all. When, some weeks later, Hess parachuted into Scotland in an attempt to meet up with the Duke of Hamilton, the only man who did not seem entirely surprised was John Berry.

By this time, he had gained the confidence and respect of Tom Johnston, wartime Secretary of State for Scotland and later head of the fledgling Hydro Board, and when the war came to an end John was appointed both as fish scientist and head of public relations to the Board, posts he neatly combined by designing the fish ladder at the new and highly controversial dam at Pitlochry so that people could enjoy the sight of salmon moving up river: a demonstration of his long-held belief that development, if well planned, did not have to harm wildlife or spoil the pleasures of nature for people. There are also stories that at this time his counter-intelligence days were not entirely behind him, and even rumours that the early Hydro Board was secretly involved in the production of heavy water for atomic weapons. We cannot know the whole truth of

this, nor of his post-war visits to Eastern Europe and the Caribbean as a government scientist after the war, when he may once again have been sent to observe rather more than ducks and geese.

In the post-war years, however, he was moving closer and closer towards the world of professional nature conservation, where, both nationally and internationally, there were exciting initiatives. In 1948 he was sent by the Secretary of State to Fontainebleau for the founding meeting of what was to become the International Union for the Preservation (later Conservation) of Nature, and helped to draft the subsequent agreement. He was to have much involvement with IUCN in subsequent years and made many friends in India, America and Eastern Europe through its conservation committees. At much the same time he was approached to become the first Director of the Nature Conservancy in Scotland. The Nature Conservancy was established by the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, but the new Scottish Director was actually in post before the NC itself came into being. The Secretary of State was determined not to be outflanked by London and made a pre-emptive strike to get Dr. Berry, a man he could trust, in place first. John's tenure as Head of Nature Conservancy in Scotland lasted until 1967, eighteen momentous years in which the character of the organisation was formed and its operations became part of the fabric of Scottish government and life. It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of his contribution, though he was again dogged by debilitating periods of ill-health.

Perhaps his greatest and most personal achievement of these years with the Conservancy, however, was to get established the great series of Scottish National Nature Reserves, beginning with Beinn Eighe in 1951. The story of how he was sent to negotiate the purchase of a pine wood for £4,000 and returned with the whole mountain has often been told. His superior in London, Captain Diver, was furious at his presumption, and John told him that if he did not like it, he, John Berry would buy it as a private individual and resign from the conservancy and perhaps sell Beinn Eighe to them later at a higher price, once they had come to their senses. Captain Diver did not last long, but was replaced by the much more sympathetic Max Nicholson. John and Max lasted a very long time, and John added to Beinn Eighe a whole stream of other nature reserves — Tentsmuir itself and Morton Lochs, of course: Loch Leven, the Cairngorms, by agreement with a range of touchy and sensitive landowners who lived in dread of a National Park appearing there instead, Rum, purchased from its wealthy lady owner over the horses at Newmarket, and many more. Whether you go to Unst in Shetland, to St. Kilda, or to Caerlaverock on the Solway, you see the fruits of his vision. John's charm, his persuasive powers, his love of a good story, his passion for nature conservation combined with his understanding of the world of landowning, shooting and farming, enabled him to move with great skill and considerable speed to secure the best places as nature reserves. Critics will say that not all the agreements were watertight, that not all the management was good, that chances were lost: and they will be right. But it is easy to be a critic, difficult to be a man of action, and John worked with the opportunities he had, with the knowledge that was available and in a political climate that was often downright hostile. I would say he achieved wonders, and the award of a CBE at the conclusion of his labours was some recognition of this. 'I am not a Scottish Nationalist', he was wont to say, 'I am a Scottish Naturalist', and Scottish people owe him a debt for his stewardship of Scottish nature that is hard to calculate.

When he retired from the Nature Conservancy, he threw himself into the activities of nature conservation world-wide, following the contacts he had long forged with the IUCN, busy in India, in New Zealand, in Australia, repeatedly making the point in his consultancies that development could be made friendly to wildlife and that even failed development could sometimes be simultaneously a boon to nature and the tourist trade. He retained his links as adviser to the Hydro Board at home and to the South of Scotland Electricity Board until he was over 80; he furthered marine research on the Tay; he was a member of Court of Dundee University for ten years, and a delegate to the Commonwealth Universities Congress for eight years; he helped to found Dundee Botanic Gardens; he received Honorary Degrees both from Dundee and St. Andrews; he was busy everywhere with societies that were involved in wildlife, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and the Scottish Wildlife Trust especially. He was also a deputy Lord Lieutenant of Fife.

When the time came for him to leave Tayfield for a home in the grounds with fewer stairs, he built himself a new bug house and bred tropical butterflies. There I remember him in his last years, so friendly, so talkative, so amusing, surrounded by books, so rightly proud of what he had done yet so unassuming in other ways, always willing to help a student or pass the time of day with a naturalist of any description. Scotland and nature conservation have much to be grateful for in the life of John Berry.

He is survived by his wife, Bride, and their two sons and one daughter.

Thomas Christopher Smout

John Berry CBE, DL, MA, PhD, HonDSc, Hon LLD: born 5 August 1907; elected FRSE 2 March 1936; died 19 February 2002