

GEORGE MACKENZIE DUNNET  
CBE, OBE, BSc, PhD, DSc (Aberd), FIBiol, FRSA, Hon FRZSS

George Mackenzie Dunnet, Emeritus Regius Professor of Natural History in the University of Aberdeen was born on 19th April 1928 in Caithness and died in Copenhagen on 11th September 1995. In true Scots tradition, he was a man of parts - a distinguished ecologist, an accomplished taxonomist, a gifted teacher and respected chairman of government committees, where he applied his deep understanding of ecology to practical and policy issues. Few academics have been more influential in showing the relevance of academic ecology to nature conservation, the North Sea oil industry and fish farming. His most enduring achievement, however, is the establishment of the field station (Culterty) of Aberdeen University's Zoology Department, as a centre for postgraduate research and training in ecology. He will be remembered with affection and gratitude by many generations of students from Britain and abroad who studied there. The story of Culterty Field Station began in 1957 when the ownership of a fine granite house and its extensive grounds in the village of Newburgh passed to the University and Professor Vero Wynne-Edwards, head of the Zoology Department, appointed Dunnet to take charge of its development. Dunnet had gained first class honours in Aberdeen in 1949, followed by a doctorate on the breeding of starlings in relation to their food supply. He then worked briefly at the Bureau of Animal Populations in Oxford and married Margaret Thomson, also an Aberdeen graduate whose steadfast support was to be one of his great strengths, before taking up a five-year appointment in the Wildlife Survey Section of CSIRO in Australia where the Dunnedts made many life-long friends. On his return to a University lectureship, based at Culterty, Dunnet established research programmes on the birds breeding on the Ythan estuary, or using it as a migratory stopover, and on the fauna of the surrounding farmland. Residential field courses were established and a Master's course in Ecology which continues today. Additional laboratories were built, staff recruited and for the ensuing thirty years that George Dunnet was responsible for the field station, nearly one hundred postgraduates, half of them from overseas, gained their higher degrees there. These Culterty-trained researchers continue to play a major role in ecological science in the UK and abroad. As its reputation grew, staff from overseas institutions were attracted to Culterty as a place to spend sabbatical leave. George and 'Mom' Dunnet lived at Culterty House and provided the family atmosphere and sense of community which forms many of the happiest memories of the staff and students who worked there. A warm welcome and a sympathetic ear were always assured - particularly important for those from overseas suffering from culture shock, homesickness or sometimes simply from cold! The Culterty spirit was fostered by biennial workshops, organised by younger staff and attracting postgraduates from other institutions to discuss their work, and take time off for memorable social occasions, generally involving the roasting of a pig! The main purpose of the field station was never forgotten, and over five hundred scientific publications have resulted since its foundation. To celebrate George Dunnet's academic leadership of Culterty, a symposium was organised in 1993, attended by many of his former students who came from as far as New Zealand for the occasion.

While in Australia, Dunnet worked principally on the ecology of mammals, in Aberdeen principally on the ecology of birds. He continued work begun during his doctoral studies on fulmars on the Orkney Island of Eynhallow, showing that young birds leave the island for up to ten years before returning to breed annually throughout their adult lifespan which can extend beyond thirty years. This project still continues, and is one of the most important studies on life-time reproductive success of a bird anywhere in the world. At Culterty, the work of Dunnet and his colleagues on rooks resulted in a series of important publications on applied avian ecology. He was elected FRSE in 1970 and served on Council 1973-76. The ornithological community recognised his contribution to bird biology in 1990, when the British Ornithological Union presented him with the Godman Salvin Medal and, in the same year, he was awarded the Neill Prize of the RSE.

Although best known as an ornithologist, while still an undergraduate George Dunnet published his first paper on the fleas of British mammals. While in Australia he became aware that the fleas associated with the unique mammal fauna were poorly understood. He collected specimens himself and arranged for others from all over Australia to be sent to Aberdeen where he set about the task of cataloguing and describing them. David Mardon joined him as a research assistant in 1969 and in 1974 a monograph on Australian fleas appeared. By this time Dunnet was head of the Zoology Department and could spend little time at the microscope. Mardon went on to complete the task which culminated in the addition of over 40 species and subspecies to the flea fauna of Australia. The works of Dunnet and Mardon are a major contribution to our understanding of the zoogeography of fleas and their hosts in the southern hemisphere. The collections, now repatriated to the Australian National Insect Collection in Canberra, will be a lasting memorial to Dunnet's foresight in setting up this study and obtaining the resources to see it through to completion.

Although heavily involved with the field station, George Dunnet played a full and influential role in the wider University community. He succeeded Wynne-Edwards as Regius Professor of Natural History in 1974 and later served as Dean of Science, providing a steady guiding hand at a time when the University was undergoing major changes. At the time of his death, although retired, his advice on environmental issues was still highly valued by his University colleagues.

Throughout his career, Dunnet took every opportunity to apply his knowledge and understanding of ecology to practical problems. He was one of the first to advise MPs in the seventies that fish farming had the potential for causing environmental problems, and was quick to appreciate the need for dialogue between environmentalists and the oil industry. He established and chaired the Aberdeen University Environmental Liaison Group which, in 1977, evolved into the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG) which Dunnet was still chairing at the time of his death. Although his approachable non-confrontational style gained the confidence of the oil industry, he would not shy away from difficult issues, but his strength was in finding a way forward which left those concerned with protecting the environment and those whose business it was to create wealth by extracting oil from it, feeling that they could work together. Few environmentalists have been held in higher esteem by the oil companies and his work for SOTEAG was specifically mentioned in his OBE citation in 1986.

His flair for providing synthesis and balanced judgement led to chairmanship of the Review Team on Badgers and Bovine Tuberculosis, and the 1986 Dunnet Report which recommended that badgers should be trapped in situations where cattle were believed to have become infected, rather than at their setts. This became known as the interim strategy and is still in use today (although not without controversy). A parallel recommendation was that a live test should be developed so that healthy badgers could be released once test results were known. The Ministry of Agriculture also followed this recommendation and live test is now available.

Recognition of his talents resulted in one of his greatest challenges - the Salmon Advisory Committee, which he chaired from 1986 until his death. Composed of people of widely different views, under his leadership it melded together to produce reports distinguished by their factual accuracy, readability and prescription for positive action. This was recognised by the award of a CBE in 1994.

Dunnet worked extensively on committees concerned with nature conservation, including many years of service on the Advisory Committee on Science of The Nature Conservancy Council, which he chaired shortly before NCC was replaced by three country agencies. This was a two stage process in Scotland with the Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland (NCCS) acting as an interim body before merging with The Countryside Commission for Scotland to become Scottish Natural Heritage. This coincided with Dunnet's partial retirement from his University appointment, and he worked energetically to play his part in the establishment of these new bodies, as a member of NCCS, chairman of its Science, Research and Development Board, and subsequently as a member of the main board of SNH and Chairman of its Research Board. Throughout his career, Dunnet had been successful in ensuring that scientific objectivity informed debate about nature conservation issues. He felt that he had a special role as the only scientist on the Main Board of SNH but after becoming increasingly concerned that the voice of science was not heard, he resigned in 1995. This was a great disappointment to him, particularly as his scientific input elsewhere continued to be highly valued. At the time of his death he was in Denmark chairing an international panel of experts examining the environmental impact of the proposed bridge between Denmark and Sweden. He was also enthusiastically committed to an ODA Project advising the Azerbaijan Government on how to protect the Caspian Sea during the planned oil developments.

His many friends will remember George Dunnet for his sense of fun. He was always in the thick of any party and the sight of him in his kilt enthusiastically swinging his partner across the dance floor on Scottish winter evenings will remain an abiding memory. One of his favourite diversions was croquet, a game he played with real passion and considerable skill.

It is a measure of George Dunnet's influence that news of his death, from a stroke, was met with shock and sadness by his many friends and colleagues throughout the world. Although retired, he was as active as ever, advising overseas visitors, attending conferences and chairing meetings. His friendship and support is missed by many, as well as the humanity he brought to a life dedicated to his academic institution and public service.

P A RACEY

(This obituary notice is based upon one which appeared in *The Independent* on 25 September 1995.)