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IN MEMORIAM: JAMES HENRY FLEMING

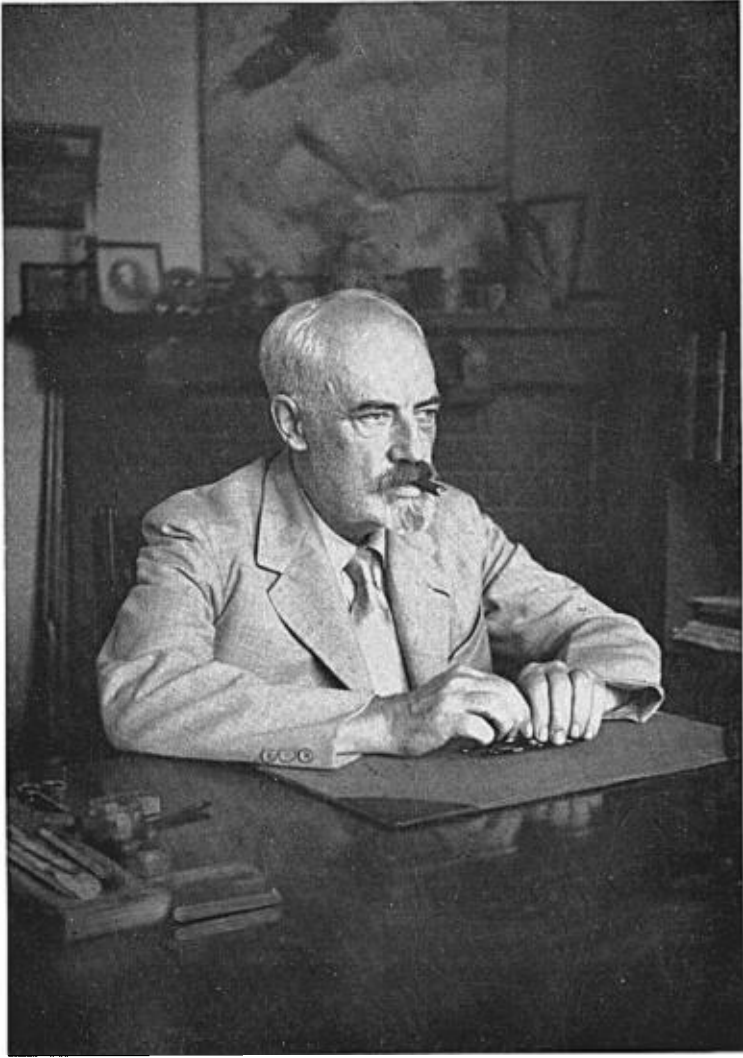
BY L. L. SNYDER

Plate 1

JAMES HENRY FLEMING died at his home in Toronto on June 27, 1940. An illness which became manifest during the previous winter had seemed to forebode the end. Although the shock was thus somewhat tempered for us near him, we all feel the untimeliness of his passing at the age of sixty-seven. Throughout his life, Mr. Fleming, though seldom ill, was never vigorously rugged. He was ever careful of his health and strength and it is my belief that we owe to this habit, the extension of so useful a life into its sixty-eighth year.

Those of us in the Toronto region have lost our dean, our adviser and good friend; but the passing of James Henry Fleming is not of mere local concern. He had intimates in far places and good friends and acquaintances the world over. He had travelled much and the personal contacts made were continued by assiduous correspondence. He will be missed for a long time throughout the ornithological world. Though the person now be gone, the personality will live on in the memories of his friends, in the manifold influences which he brought to bear on the rest of us, and in the well-organized harvest of his life work.

The name J. H. Fleming, as he always signed it, had come to mean far more than the appellation of an individual. It denoted an institution,—a personality plus ornithological archives. In this combination, each was infused with the other. The vast collection of scientific specimens, the extensive library and the store of ornithological miscellany were major features of his environment and most certainly shaped the life and thoughts of the man. On the other hand, the man virtually created much of his environment; he had chosen and assembled the things which surrounded him and imparted to



your son J. H. Fleming

them much of his personality. Evidence of his manner and his thoughts are permanently inscribed on the countless labels, in the letters and notes, on the fly-leaf and margins of books, and in the very nature of his scientific treasure left with us.

In submitting a brief appreciation of the life and work of James Henry Fleming, certain matters of fact are included, which though coldly statistical, are essential. Fleming's father, James Fleming, came to Canada (Montreal) from Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1834, at the age of twenty-four. In 1836, he established a pioneer seed-growing business on a three-acre plot now marked by Yonge and Elm Streets, Toronto. After the death of his first wife, he married Mary Elizabeth Wade, daughter of a family of English descent living near Port Hope, Ontario. James Henry, the only child of this union who survived, was born at Toronto on July 5, 1872. There was a half-sister in the home, from his father's previous marriage, but no brothers. The father was a man sixty years of age when James Henry was born.

Such is the background of the man whom we knew to be social at heart but reserved among strangers and very capable of working contentedly alone.

James Henry Fleming's education was obtained in Toronto. As a child he attended the Model School in St. James Square, a school still maintained in conjunction with the adjacent teachers' training institution. Often I have listened to Fleming remark on the happenings of those days,—happenings which ranged from notable historical events to pranks of "the boys," and I am inclined to believe that in all these, the boy Fleming was an interested on-looker.

After passing through the grades of the Model School, Fleming entered Upper Canada College. This institution, not a part of the public school system, is patterned after the English schools. It and similar schools in Canada impart to their students something of the manner of the Old World; they contribute toward keeping Canadian culture an intergrade between the "English" and the "American." Undoubtedly Fleming's manner and viewpoint were kindred to both. Although Fleming's formal education ended with the secondary school his intellectual pursuits ceased only with his death. He read a great deal, not only in the field of ornithology, but in other affairs. He kept in touch with current political and business events, and as a matter of taste, read travel, historical and biographical works extensively.

It is not possible to account fully for the origin of Fleming's inter-

est in birds. His father, aside from being a business man and community leader (alderman, St. John's Ward, 1877-79 inclusive), was a scientific gardener and contributed to the literature on horticulture. This may account for James Henry's subsequent interest in plant culture—in his greenhouse and garden—but I am inclined to believe that the study of birds was a spontaneous and self-cultivated hobby of the boy which developed without particular influence of others and continued without interruption as the life work of the man.

We know that Fleming's interest in birds had become fixed when he was twelve years old. The nest and eggs of the Vesper Sparrow in his collection were collected and prepared by him in 1884. Also, there is a small lot of mounted native songbirds collected in the Elm Street gardens during his youth. The idea of building a study collection occurred to him in 1886, at the age of fourteen, according to Fleming's own recorded recollection.

On the authority of a boyhood friend, E. J. Deacon, Fleming was a serious and studious youth. Mr. Deacon tells me that he and "Harry" and other boys went together on bird-specimen hunts during their 'teens. It was not long before most of the boys' collections of purloined eggs and stuffed birds fell into disarray and final extinction but the Fleming collection kept on growing and growing. This collection was, from the first, not merely a local one; bird skins, numbers 1 and 2, are specimens of the King-of-the-Paradise-Birds, *Cincinnurus regius*, from New Guinea. Further, it is recorded in Fleming's register that a certain South American hummingbird specimen was bought by him when he was a boy attending Model School. Another entry records the fact that six other hummingbirds were purchased in 1884 or 1885 at a bankrupt millinery-stock sale on King Street opposite St. Andrew's Church. For these he paid ten cents each, the money having been saved out of his school-lunch allowance.

In March 1889, at the age of sixteen, Fleming had become an associate member of the Canadian Institute (now, the Royal Canadian Institute) and four years later he was a member of the Council of its Biological Section. Possibly this introduced him to the advantages of such associations and induced him to join the American Ornithologists' Union. At any rate he was elected an Associate of the Union in 1893. There is no record concerning his first attendance at an annual session of the Union but we know he was absent on only four occasions from 1906 to 1938 inclusive. Few members have been more faithful or of greater service to the American Ornithologists' Union.

On December 8, 1897, James Henry Fleming married Christine MacKay Keefer at The Manor House, Rockcliffe Park, Ottawa. Their residence was established at 267 Rusholme Road, Toronto, Fleming's parental home since 1892. This is the address which was to become so familiar to ornithologists. In this home, two children were born to them: Annie Elizabeth in 1899 and Thomas Keefer in 1901. Here also lived his widowed mother. Though personally unfamiliar with the home in those days, I can imagine the punctual orderliness and substantial living which prevailed. But this family circle was soon to be broken,—his wife, Christine MacKay, died in 1903.

About the close of the last century organized local natural-history interest had fallen into a decline. The Biological Society of Ontario collapsed, apparently in 1894, the year during which its last publication was printed, No. 4, of the 'Biological Review of Ontario.' In that number there appeared a short article by Fleming describing a male Cory's Bittern which he states "was shot on August 17, 1894, on Ashbridges Bay, Toronto, by Mr. Harry Day and *is now in my possession.*" The words which I have italicized were to be used by Fleming a good many times subsequently. He certainly was an alert and diligent collector, and fortunately for natural history he assumed the responsibility which a public institution might have been expected to assume. A rather starved and dusty Provincial Museum, housed in the Normal School at Toronto, represented the official response to an apparently weak public demand for such an institution. Fleming was by nature not the person to promote and organize support for a public museum, and we must remember that there was no large annual crop of new bird-watchers in those days and consequently there were few kindred spirits which mean so much in the study of natural history.

So, Fleming created a one-man museum. He not only had the interest, the knowledge and foresight, but also the means. What had been a seed-growing acreage on Elm Street became valuable property in the center of a large and growing city. This circumstance together with other good fortune, rendered him independent; he could travel, buy collections and books, study and keep up the ornithological contacts made in many parts of the world, with only occasional attention to other matters.

For a time Fleming supported a local taxidermy business managed by the late Oliver Spanner. His motive was strictly non-commercial; he wanted facilities for the preparation of cabinet specimens and a

means of keeping in touch with natural-history events. The plan was practical and successful. Sportsmen over a wide area furnished him with information on the annual abundance of animals, on unusual flights of birds, and on the occurrence of rarities. In fact, the Yonge Street 'shop' became a kind of ornithological clearing-house. Here the local naturalists gathered. Among them was Fleming's lifelong friend, P. A. Taverner, who has since distinguished himself as an ornithologist. Taverner credits the establishment with being a 'school' where the foundations of scientific ornithology of fifty and forty years ago were taught, and states that "matters of heaven and earth were discussed there, but largely ornithological."

The taxidermy shop in days gone by was an important concern in a community. To borrow the words of a friend, "it served natural-history interests in much the same way as the country store served politics." These old associations never dropped from Fleming's most cherished memories although he discontinued his support of the concern when, with changing conditions, it ceased to serve his purpose. Fleming never quite reconciled himself to the modern museum studio and laboratory and he retained a fondness for a 'stuffed' animal which was not dispelled by a splendidly sculptured one.

Fleming was neither a practised preparator nor what we call a field man,—partly for constitutional reasons and also because of the pressure of other things to do. But he did enjoy direct observation of living birds in the field. He collected and studied in Parry Sound and Muskoka districts and made occasional trips to other areas in southern Ontario such as the Bruce Peninsula, Kettleby in King Township, Niagara Glen, and Point Pelee. A. O. U. meetings were the occasion for glimpses of the field in more distant places, and in 1907 a special trip was made to Tennessee. Between 1889 and 1893, he travelled extensively in Europe and also to British Guiana and the West Indies. These trips were not strictly ornithological field expeditions but they served to widen his acquaintance with living birds and afforded opportunities to gather impressions of regions from which his specimens came or were to come.

In 1908, Fleming married Caroline Toovey of Towersey, Oxfordshire, England. This partnership was a delight to him, to his children and to his friends. Mr. Fleming managed the Museum, an annex to their house which demanded the addition of three rooms completed in 1925, and his wife managed the home. Altogether, the atmosphere of 267 Rusholme Road was most pleasant and comfortable, as will be vouched for by dozens of visiting ornithologists.

It was here that I first met Mr. Fleming. As a rather callow ornithologist and fellow museum worker, I made an appointment and called on him. I had no particular business objective, merely a desire to meet a well-known figure in my field of interest, but one who was then inexplicably outside the Museum organization with which I had become connected. It was not Fleming's nature to radiate an effusive welcome to strangers but at least I felt at ease. So far as the impressions gathered at that meeting are concerned, I can only speak of my own. This dignified and bearded man seated before me at his desk seemed kindly, yet stern. His questions were casual and conversational, so much so that I do not remember them, but I know now that they were purposeful and searching. From that day to within a few days of his death, a period of nearly twenty years, it became my habit to visit Mr. Fleming with increasing regularity. I cannot say just when the slight barrier between us, due to his natural reserve and to the disparity in our ages and experiences evaporated, but I feel that it did and much to my profit. I shall always be thankful for his warm, sincere friendship, appreciative of his wisdom, and mindful of the associations in his study and bird rooms. One's nose is a most valuable instrument. Whenever I sense that pleasant perfume, for such it is to me, compounded of old books, tobacco smoke, naphtha and seabirds, memories of Fleming and his museum will be recalled.

I have already mentioned that Fleming was, at the time I met him, a well-known figure in ornithological circles. As early as 1905, he had attended the International Ornithological Congress in London. Subsequently he served on its committees and attended their meetings as official representative of Canada,—at Copenhagen in 1926; Amsterdam in 1930; Oxford in 1934; and Rouen in 1938.

Fleming was made a Member of the American Ornithologists' Union when that class was established in 1901. He was elected a Fellow in 1916. From 1923 to 1926, Fleming was a member of its Council where his wide ornithological knowledge and his sound judgment in matters of finance were no doubt very valuable. From 1926 to 1932, he was a Vice-President of the Union. He was elected to the Presidency at the second Canadian meeting of the Union, at the city of Quebec in 1932. He held this office until 1935. Fleming regarded the honor as a mark of recognition to Canadian ornithologists in general. Although the Union has had more dominating leaders, it has never had a President more sincerely interested in its welfare. He presided at the business session without the liking for, or

particular skill in conducting formal procedure but his brief and quiet manner commanded respect. I know that the demands of the office, its prominent and public rôle, created conflict within him and taxed his physical and nervous strength.

Fleming's standing as an ornithologist was recognized in many ways. The National Museum of Canada made him Honorary Curator of ornithology in 1913. He was elected British Empire Member of the British Ornithological Union; Corresponding Member of the Zoological Society of London; and Member d'Honneur Étranger Société Ornithologique et Mammalogique de France.

Local recognition, as is so often the case, came to him later in life. He was an Honorary (but active) Member of the Brodie Club; an Honorary Member of the Toronto Ornithological Club; Honorary Vice-President of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club; and in 1927, he was made Honorary Curator, Division of Birds of the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology.

The enumeration of these honors, though incomplete, serves as a measure of Fleming's attainments. More evidence of accomplishment can be gained through reference to the bibliography of his writings which is appended. These titles suggest his interests to a considerable extent, but do not cover their scope or adequately convey the extent of his contributions, or picture the rôle of usefulness which he played in the study of birds. Fleming was a helpful accessory to a good deal of ornithological work as has been acknowledged by authors during the past forty years.

Fleming as a collector represented an era in ornithology when individuals devoted their lives and fortunes to the accumulation and preservation of specimens and facts,—the primary function of a museum. I have already mentioned that he possessed the means, the knowledge, and the foresight to make a major contribution to science in this work. In addition, his enthusiasm, his memory, and his constant, patient persistence served him well. Let me tell one amusing story which illustrates this point:

The only Toronto record of the Curlew Sandpiper (*Erolia testacea*) was based on a specimen shot about 1886, by ——, and there our story begins. This bird, a mount, was displayed in a case in a local gun club. Fleming knew it well. Each of two hunters claimed to have shot it. This led to a rather heated dispute between them which, one day, culminated in a scuffle during which the case was broken into. The bird disappeared. One of the contestants had rather ruthlessly extracted it and when the smoke cleared, part of

one leg was discovered attached to the artificial rock-work of the case and the head was found on the floor. The head was taken by someone to Samuel Herring, the local taxidermist, who had mounted the bird. Fleming, who had learned the details of the bird's dismemberment, eventually acquired the head for preservation about 1894. On February 2, 1911, Fleming recognized the body of the Curlew Sandpiper in a case of mounted waders in the possession of George Pearce (!). Pearce revealed that he had obtained it from the shooter who had escaped with it from the gun club. In the meantime the body had acquired a new head and a new leg, apparently from a Red-backed Sandpiper. All trace of this case of birds was lost until October 4, 1932, when it was discovered in a local school-room. The specimen (mostly Curlew Sandpiper) was still in it. Through proper channels it was removed and transferred to the Fleming collection. Thus were body and head of the only Ontario specimen of the Curlew Sandpiper reunited after more than forty years, in that haven of rarities, the Fleming collection. The above story, aside from illustrating Fleming's perception and persistence, suggests with what pleasure and satisfaction he sometimes collected.

Fleming was an ornithological historian. What he knew about collectors, collections, expeditions, ornithologists and their work, was tremendous. He knew the peculiarity of a collector's 'make' of skin, his labels, handwriting, where and when he had collected, and particularly, what had become of his collection. He could tell many interesting anecdotes concerning the history of individual specimens or of whole collections. Perhaps, as is so often the case, Fleming thought these details too insignificant to be worthy of permanent record, or perhaps by the time he had acquired this store of information he then lacked the energy necessary to sift and compile it and see it into print. A volume of facts and lore died with him, but all men leave work unfinished.

Fleming was an ornithological adviser and stabilizer. His opinions were usually conservative and firmly held. Often he would introduce unusual points into a discussion born of his wide knowledge and interest in birds of the world. He knew well when points were unproven and candidly cautioned against overstatement. He consistently used his influence to moderate and avoid controversy. After a dignified and quiet interjection he would retreat from any issue resembling a quarrel. He was, above all, a gentleman.

Fleming was most thoughtful toward others. No letter was left unanswered; a paper received was acknowledged (and a high per

cent of this literature was read); a piece of work well done was rewarded by his comment. A news clipping, a cartoon, or perhaps a trinket, which he thought appropriate to an occasion was duly forwarded to the proper person, usually accompanied by a brief but sparkling comment; and Fleming had an extraordinary sense of the appropriate, a natural wit and a mellow humor.

It has not been possible here to attempt more than a sketch of the personality and life work of the one we have lost. It is not from lack of data; his letters, his diaries (started in 1888) and scrapbook would all add something to the story of his habits, his work and his philosophy. Many times I have noticed a portfolio which rested for years within arm's reach of his desk. It is labelled "Notes, of no value except to myself." The news clippings, announcements, poetry, jokes, personal notes, etc., in that volume, would certainly yield a chapter for a more extended review. His notes on birds and bird observations were kept up to date until near the end. On his desk at the moment I am writing,—the desk which for years faced the big window overlooking the lovely garden,—there is a slip of paper on which is written in pencil: "June 3, 1940. Connecticut Warbler in greenhouse." Except for reading letters from his friends which he regretfully could not answer, this memo marked the close of his work with birds and students of birds.

The big harvest of Fleming's life work is yet to be emphasized. The Fleming collection of bird specimens stands as a major contribution to ornithological research and eloquently attests to the discerning and informed curatorship which built it. To the best of my knowledge it is the most representative private collection of the birds of the world. A few details will reveal its importance. All families of modern birds are represented except Pedionomidae, Raphidae and Atrichornithidae. An estimate of its generic representation totals 2,073. All told, it comprises 32,267 specimens. It includes several types and a surprising number of paratypes, topotypes and so on. Vanished and vanishing birds are particularly well represented, some in series. The ornate, the grotesque, the specialized and the primitive all appealed to Fleming's interest and each is adequately represented. Altogether, the Fleming collection is a rich store of facts which have served, and which will continue to serve ornithological research.

The Fleming library is outstanding. It includes most of the modern reference books on birds in the English language. Complete sets, or nearly complete sets, of ornithological periodicals constitute

an invaluable file. And then there are numerous rarities, obscure publications and editions which are of great historical value and constitute the delight of the bibliophile. In addition, the Fleming library includes one of the most valuable collections of bound ornithological separates to be found in any library.

Although we are now to be deprived of the rich and varied store of information which James Henry Fleming's mind possessed, his contributions to our literature, his specimens and books, and the countless interesting ornithological odds and ends, remain to enrich our science. His collections, though privately possessed, had been thoughtfully and generously held in trust for the eventual enrichment of a Canadian institution (The Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology, Toronto), indeed for the benefit of all mankind. They represent a life-long labor of love, and in our analysis, a monument to the man.

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