

Sir William Wilkinson

1932-1996

1996. *Wader Study Group Bulletin* 81: 25-29.

Sir William Wilkinson was a conservationist of enormous influence. His death earlier this year has deprived both British conservation, and ornithology, of a highly respected figure.

During his tenure as Chairman of Britain's statutory nature conservation agency - the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) - he was involved with several high profile issues relating to wader conservation. Perhaps the most notable of these was the fight to preserve the globally important peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland in northern Scotland - the world's largest continuous extent of blanket bog and habitat for breeding Dunlin, Greenshank and Golden Plover (amongst other peatland birds: *WSG Bulletin* 49, Supplement: 95-101).

Other wader conservation issues with which he was directly involved included resolving conflicts on the Somerset Levels - extensive lowland wet grasslands in south-western England that had been threatened by agricultural intensification and drainage in the mid 1980s, as well as opposing (although ultimately unsuccessfully) plans for the wholesale destruction of the estuarine Cardiff Bay in south Wales through the construction of a barrage and lagoon.

One of his first tasks when appointed to lead NCC was to oversee the production of the organisation's first Strategic Plan: *Nature Conservation in Great Britain* (1984). This concluded with the words:

"Nature conservation has in the past sometimes conducted its business on too apologetic and timid a

note. Such a tendency to submissive posture is a recipe for retaining a low-peck-order position in the league of land and resource use interests. If nature conservation is to gain the acceptance it deserves as a relevant concern for the whole of society, its practitioners all have to behave as if it really matters. Conservationists must argue their interests and their cases with a firmness and conviction which stems from a visible belief in and commitment to the things they talk about. This is not to advocate aggressiveness and exaggeration, but the playing of a hard yet clean game for our side.

There are management and training aspects to be considered here, but these will count for little if the right messages do not come from the top. And for all of those who affirm the importance of nature conservation, the challenge will be to turn opportunity and intention into achievement.

Posterity will judge all of us by deeds and not words."

His inspirational leadership of NCC, and his championing of partnerships with voluntary societies, created organisational climates within which just such commitment could flourish.

In tribute to Sir William, and for those many who were unable to attend, we reprint here the address given at his Memorial Service at Eton College Chapel on 24 June by Martin Mays-Smith.

David Stroud & Mike Pienkowski

We are here today to say thank you for William Wilkinson - or Willie as he was known to so many of you. It is, I think, entirely right that this service should take place at Eton and we are grateful to the Provost and the Vice Provost for arranging for us to use College Chapel today.

William came to Eton when he was three after his father Denis was appointed an Assistant Master here. The family lived for many years in The Wall House looking over 'the Wall'

where Denis became one of the great exponents of that arcane game and where William, too, was to have his moments of success. Whenever I return to Eton to see old friends I am always impressed by the idealism and the feeling of high purpose that inspires those who work here and William was lucky enough to be part of this inner world for over 25 years. This sense of high purpose, and the example of both his parents, were a profound influence on him throughout his life.

After St. George's Chapel Choir School, William went to Mr. Peterson's house and then into College. He was popular, both as a new boy in his Oppidan House and in College and his retentive mind stored away the products of some inspired teaching, particularly in his years with Richard Martineau in the top classical division. William had by any standards a most successful Eton career ending as President of Pop, an unusual honour for a Scholar, and also winning a major scholarship to

Trinity College, Cambridge.

In the school holidays the family went to Pill House, a cottage on the marsh in the Gower Peninsula in South Wales. It was, and, is a place of outstanding natural beauty. Encouraged by his father, William came to know and love the birds and flowers and hills and bays of that beautiful corner of Wales. Life was spartan though. For all of William's childhood their cottage had no electricity, was lit by oil lamps and warmed by open fires. The son of another Eton housemaster recalls William's father feeding the boys at 5 a.m. (before they went wildfowling) on milk and rum both of which he says he has detested ever since. Many years later in a letter William looked back on starlit nights spent sleeping on the Worm's Head, in summer, by himself, and hearing the night sounds of the birds all around him, and recalled how much he was moved to marvel. From those years in Wales he learned much and received much - it was a debt that he was to repay many times in his life ahead.

Then he went to Cambridge. At Eton he had always perforce been circumscribed by the fact that his father was a housemaster. But no such inhibitions were now present and he launched himself into Cambridge life with an exuberance that those of us who were lucky enough to be there with him remember with enormous pleasure tinged with a sense of awe. At the end of the fifth week of his first term he gave a sumptuous dinner in Trinity to a group of friends and after the port he announced that he had now spent his entire year's allowance from his father.

William developed a reputation as a leading authority on climbing out of College. Many mornings, particularly in his first year, he was to be found at dawn with a small group of friends on the Wash counting and shooting wildfowl. With Julian Taylor he conducted one of the earliest major counts of geese in the United Kingdom, working very closely with George Atkinson-Willes of Slimbridge. The highly successful expedition that he made to Spitzbergen in the summer vacation was a further important development of this activity,

as was the census work that he subsequently carried out in Turkey for the IWRB when he identified a formerly unknown sub-species of White fronted Goose.

But to return to Cambridge. He was a natural actor and threw himself, heart and soul, into acting in the Trinity Pantomime 'Puss in Red Riding Boots' and in the Trinity Review. He was prone to sing excerpts from these performances all of his life such as the AA roadman's song and one of which virtually the only printable line was 'I'm a cavalry twill young man'. The obituaries quite rightly referred to William's fine, baritone voice. To those of us who heard it in the very early morning singing well-known Schubert songs, not always to the correct words, this did not seem an unmixed blessing but like so many of the things that William did, he took his singing seriously, took lessons and achieved a high standard of competence. Later he was to be very proud that all of his children in their different ways were makers of music.

During his time at Cambridge he also laid the foundations of a lifelong interest in opera and fell seriously but unrequitedly in love.

But the gift which William developed most successfully in his years at Cambridge was the gift of friendship. Good, serious, joyful friendships, which were to last for the rest of his life, as many of us here today can testify.

One of the more sought after jobs available to graduates at that time was a management traineeship with Borax Consolidated and it was there that William went. Very soon he started to be responsible for aspects of the operation in Turkey where there was one of the world's largest Boron deposits and in 1961 he went out to Istanbul as the head of Borax's operation there.

This was a period of great and varied achievement. First and most important, he had the outstanding good sense and good luck to marry Kate and together they entertained a steady stream of friends in Istanbul in their spectacularly sited flat which overlooked the confluence of the

Golden Horn and the Bosphorus.

He developed a strong affection for his Turkish staff and his relationship with the Turkish authorities and his workers were excellent.

As well as counting geese, he helped to found and was the first Chairman of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East. This was the first such regional organisation and was subsequently a model for other regional societies in Africa and Asia and in other parts of the world. At its inaugural conference, he read a paper which he had prepared with Richard Porter of the RSPB on 'Wetland conservation in Turkey' and he was often to say that his interest in conservation dates from the work that he did on this paper.

He also did useful work helping Professor Bean in his definitive study of archaeological sites in Turkey and indeed at one stage he thought seriously of becoming an archaeologist.

But, unfortunately, his time in Turkey was brought abruptly to a close because Borax policy towards their Turkish subsidiary developed in a way which William could not accept. He was so strongly opposed to what the parent company was doing that he felt bound to resign. And so he found himself with six weeks holiday but no job.

However, on his return he was lucky enough to find a job fairly quickly at Brandts, a rapidly expanding merchant bank. But after a time he felt drawn back to the world of mining and relying on what proved to be rather bad advice, he answered an advertisement to be the new finance director of Lonrho. As was to be the case on other occasions in William's life, his first task was to sort out the organisation's shaky finances and avert a cash crisis, and he soon found that he had taken on a fairly hair-raising appointment. It is hard to imagine any two people more totally different than William and Tiny Rowland. When the Board split William sided with the so-called 'straight eight' directors, battle was joined and after a well-publicised fight, William emerged defeated but with

great credit. So much so that Kleinwort Benson who had acted for the eight directors, immediately offered him a directorship in their corporate finance department.

This began a period of 12 years of great happiness and fulfilment for William. He found himself very much at home in the City of that period. He was popular with Kleinwort Benson's clients and was welcomed on to the board of several of them. I know from experience that he was a valued member of these boards. He became chairman of one of them, Thermal Syndicate, a job he really enjoyed because it was a small enough company for him to know the people and be known by them.

But at the same time that he was working at Kleinworts he was developing a second and even more important career. In 1970 on his return from Turkey, he was invited on to the Council of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the following year he became Treasurer. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s he became an increasingly central figure in the conservation world, first in the RSPB and then subsequently as the Chairman of the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC).

His twenty year career at the RSPB and the NCC coincided with probably the greatest advance in conservation in history. At the RSPB between 1972 and 1983, his two periods as Treasurer, the membership multiplied five times from 67 000 to 350 000 (it is now nearly a million), the income multiplied by twelve times, and the Society was able to increase the number of properties managed as reserves from 30 to 100.

The 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act gave the NCC great powers and responsibilities, and in the seven years under William's leadership it was able to make enormous progress in preserving our wildlife heritage. During his time there no less than 4 000 sites

were designated as of Special Scientific Interest which has meant that in almost all cases these SSSIs have been preserved for posterity - except of course when a politically sensitive bypass has to be built.

Initially William's contribution was usually financial. In the RSPB he introduced greater order and control to the finances and created the framework within which the Society's rapid growth could be managed and encouraged.

Similarly, when he arrived at the NCC his first major contribution was to present to Government an analysis of the Council's finances, demonstrating that it had insufficient resources for the work that it had been given to do. This persuaded Government to provide the extra money which was needed.

In 1987 he became involved with the most important work of British bird scholarship of his era *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, a comprehensive and definitive nine volume study of the birds found in the area bounded by the Canaries, the Arctic, the Urals and the Sahara Desert. Again, William's main task was to restore the finances of the project. But when Stanley Cramp died, William in spite

of his blindness accepted a wider responsibility. As Max Nicholson says in the Foreword "But for Wilkinson it is highly questionable whether the difficulties could have been surmounted". It was a source of great pride to William that he was, as he put it, in a small way associated with this major work of scholarship.

Again, after his blindness, he performed a very similar function as Chairman of Plantlife, the rapidly expanding plant equivalent of the RSPB, and it was thanks to him that its affairs were put on a sound footing. But very soon his contribution began to spread far further than simply the financial and business areas. As someone who worked closely with William put it, his knowledge matched that of the professionals over whom he presided in many fields, but his understanding of how to get things done far outstripped theirs which is why they admired him so much. He also had the outstanding quality of total integrity which meant that even those who disagreed with him never doubted that his opinions were based on honest and dispassionate thought.

He had an enormous range of friends and he often said that his most important contribution to the RSPB was in the choice of his successor after his first spell as Treasurer in



Sir William on a visit to the high tops of the Cairngorms in search of Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*.
Photo by Des Thompson.

1976. He also played a key role in persuading Ian Prestt in 1975 to leave academic life and take over as Chief Executive of the RSPB which was a milestone in the development of the professionalism of that organisation.

Because William was so widely respected and had such a panoply of friends, he was a powerful influence in achieving co-operation and, where necessary, reconciliation between the various conservation bodies and the people with whom they had to deal.

When he came to the NCC its relationships with other bodies could scarcely have been worse and there was even in one case talk of litigation. However, in William Waldegrave, his Minister, Lord Barber the head of the Countryside Commission, Angus Stirling at the National Trust, and Ian Prestt at the RSPB, William had truly kindred spirits and their close friendship and community of purpose were an important factor in the achievements of his years of office at the NCC.

All his life William passionately enjoyed shooting and as a shooter (which is what I believe those who shoot are called in the conservation world) he acquired an extra credibility in his dealings with those outside the conservation movement. He was a member of the Council of the Game Conservancy and when he joined the NCC he invited the Chairman of the Conservancy, on to the NCC and this obvious co-operation endorsed the growing acceptance that shooting and shooters have a vital role to play in the development of conservation.

As William put it, "We must ensure that the concern of the few becomes the commitment of the many." and this drawing together of organisations and people was one of William's greatest contributions to conservation.

He was also a true leader. When he arrived at the NCC, staff morale was at an extremely low ebb and they viewed with some surprise the appointment of a merchant banker to head this vital conservation body. Of course it helped when he obtained the substantial extra funding from the Government. Merchant bankers do have their uses.

But they were soon to discover that there was a great deal more to William. In the RSPB he had always done his best to get to know all levels of staff and to go on field visits with them and with members of Council; and, as you would expect with William, they were usually very festive occasions.

In the same way at the NCC, he made it his business to visit every outpost and very soon throughout the organisation the realisation grew as to what manner of man their Chairman was.

William was a peaceable man and preferred quiet negotiation and persuasion. But when the Forestry Commission supported by the Scottish Office planned to plant extensive areas of Sitka Spruce which would have threatened the fragile ecology of the Caithness and Sutherland flows, "the last genuine wilderness area in the United Kingdom", he knew he had no choice but to fight and the subsequent victory gave enormous satisfaction to everybody at the NCC.

Looking back, people speak of the warmth - and indeed they use the word 'love' - which William inspired at all levels in the NCC. One Council member told me that he had never seen the like of it in any comparable organisation in his life.

The emotional attachment between William and the staff was a potent factor in making him fight so hard to avoid the break-up of the NCC. (His main argument was, of course, that as a scientifically based organisation, the NCC needed the critical mass, and the clout, which a Scottish or a Welsh or an English organisation on its own could not command).

This affection was only heightened when William was struck down by his blindness and as far as I know there was never any pressure in the organisation for William to stand down. Very much the opposite. The standing ovation he received when he presented the Council's Final Report in 1990 was a demonstration of the depth of the affection in which he was held in the NCC - and indeed throughout the conservation world.

There was, I believe, some anxiety at his choice of a pair of binoculars as the leaving present from the NCC for a man who was virtually blind but I can assure those of you who are here today that William brought these binoculars on the last holiday we had together in Turkey and he was not simply deeply attached to them but had the skill to put them to good use.

William was a distinguished man and, in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, he certainly gained the respect of intelligent men. But many of his oldest and closest friends were neither as intelligent nor as distinguished in the world as he himself was to become.

He was assiduous in keeping up with these friends and came to their help loyally whenever it was needed. For example, a gamekeeper in Scotland whom William had known for 25 years was prosecuted by the police for poisoning a Golden Eagle and asked William for help. William wrote him a character reference and engagingly made it clear that he was writing as a private individual and not as a Council Member of the RSPB or a former Chairman of the NCC. The gamekeeper was acquitted and the lovely thing is that I understand that he has come the whole way down from Scotland and is with us here today.

And then, of course, there was the cruel blow of his blindness. For someone like William with his passion for outdoor life and birds and butterflies and flowers to have suffered such a serious loss of sight was cruel enough but to have lost, at the same time, all sense of direction made the handicap of blindness doubly difficult to cope with.

Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* contains a well-known passage on marriage which talks about the desirability of "spaces in your togetherness". In a moment all William and Kate's "spaces" in their marriage were destroyed as William could do very little without assistance. And yet, in the last eight years, in spite of the deep sadness that often weighed down on him, he retained his commitment to the work he believed



Sir William on one of his frequent field trips to visit NCC staff. Photo by Martin Tither.

still had to be done and his lively concern for the interests and the problems of the people he worked with, battles were fought, much was achieved and we, his friends, continued to delight in his company.

For this we have to thank, firstly, his own character and his courage. But even more, we have to thank Kate. I know I will be speaking for everybody here when I say how much we have admired the way she kept William in good heart most of the time, for the patience and the gentleness and the cheerfulness and the love she gave him which made so much possible in these last eight years which could so easily have been lost.

Finally, I will try to draw together for you some of the many things for which we valued and loved William so well.

First and foremost, it was his enormous sense of fun. He was a joy to be with; the entertainer in him made him naturally the centre of any group and the source of inspiration for it. One remembers the endless store of apposite quotations, enunciated with particular relish as any well-trained singer should and somehow the ones one remembers best have to do with Opera and the pleasures of alcohol. He had a generosity of mind in sharing his enjoyments and his

recollections and his learning. And he was generous financially too, all his life in the almost reckless way he gave to the causes he believed in and in entertaining his friends.

The word "gentleman" appears again and again in Kate's letters; his good manners, his respect and consideration for other people and their problems and points of view and interests. "The best mannered old Etonian I've ever met" said the 23-year old son of one of his greatest friends after having spent two hours with him waiting for his father to return.

He also had a deliciously dirty mind and a smile that lit up his whole face. Whenever William was there, it was a time for chuckling and laughter and enjoyment. Even in his times of great sorrow, this gift persisted and for it we all give thanks today.

But as well as this there was a deep seriousness to him. His endless pacings to and fro which gave his friends 'Wimbledon neck' and so surprised his future mother-in-law when he came, very properly, to ask for Kate's hand, were a manifestation of the intensity of the feelings contained inside him.

This was partly an intellectual intensity. He had a very good mind.

He weighed things carefully and fairly, and then he made up his mind and did something about it - fearlessly, obstinately and, on a number of important occasions, to the serious detriment of his own personal interest.

But this inner seriousness was not just intellectual. It was also what, for want of a better word, I would call religious. It was not just that he was a committed Christian, quietly but nonetheless seriously for that. He believed in certain things with a deep intensity; the truth, standards of behaviour, his family and friends and, of course, conservation of birds and plants and wild places.

He was an idealist and he had the gift of gently transmitting this idealism to others and in the words of the prayer "taking our hearts and setting them on fire." While in a tactical sense his tenure at the NCC may have ended in defeat, in the wider perspective, the whole cause in which he believed so strongly has been immeasurably advanced by his life and example.

And so we give thanks for William today; for all he has meant to each one of us and for all he has achieved to make this world a better place.

Martin Mays-Smith