

Obituary

THOMAS RONALD GARNETT MA (CANTAB), OAM
1915–2006

Scholar, teacher, naturalist, horticulturist

With the death of Tommy Garnett on 22 September 2006, a bright star has faded from the triple horizons of Australian ornithology, horticulture and teaching. An outstanding headmaster in England and then Australia, Tommy also made significant contributions to ornithology and horticulture. His interest in the natural world and his commitment to good management are why he is best remembered by the RAOU, now Birds Australia.

Thomas Garnett – ‘Tommy’ to his friends – was born on 1 January 1915 in Cheshire, England. After distinguished war service in the RAF, he came to Australia when he was 46 on his appointment as headmaster of the prestigious Geelong Grammar School in Victoria. A birdwatcher from a very young age, Tommy, on retirement, was talked into taking over the administration of the RAOU, setting up the foundations of our modern Birds Australia. And all the while he and wife Penny were creating the magical Garden of St Erth at their home in Blackwood, Victoria. But, says Penny, birding was his greatest pleasure and his abiding interest.

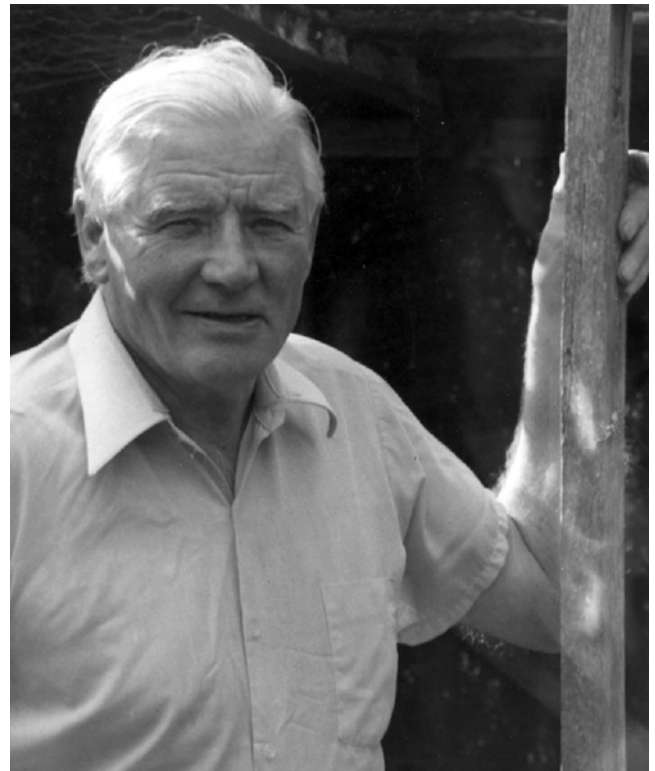
Throughout his life Tommy was fascinated by the natural world. A boy from rural England, Tommy attended historic Charterhouse School near London as a boarder on a scholarship, subsequently winning a scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he read classics. In his student years he was also a gifted athlete, particularly in cricket as a batsman.

Tommy launched his teaching career as an assistant master at London’s Westminster School, but in 1938 he returned to Charterhouse, making his mark as a classics teacher, just as England entered the war years.

Squadron leader

Few of us in Australia were aware that Tommy joined the RAF in 1941. His high tone deafness prevented him from flying duties, and he was commissioned into the RAF Regiment. Hoping to be posted to Iceland so he could indulge in his passion for birding, by 1943 he found himself on the other side of the world, in Bengal, India. Promoted to Squadron Leader the following year, Tommy took command of ground defence for the RAF’s forward airfields and radar stations. Often forward of the front line in Burma, he was mentioned in dispatches.

Tommy’s posting to Asia provided him with many birding opportunities – including occasions when he was too close to the Japanese lines for his own safety. But birding gave him some highlights, such as seeing 60 species of birds in a single fig tree in India. It also probably saved his life: after the end



of the war in the Pacific, he was watching flamingoes while waiting for the plane back to England and became so engrossed that the plane left without him. That plane disappeared without trace over the English Channel.

Teacher

On discharge from the RAF in 1946, Tommy married Penelope Frere and resumed his teaching career at Charterhouse. To encourage a love of the natural world, he involved the students in banding and checking nest boxes as part of David Lack’s work on tits. One of the boys was Chris Perrins, who succeeded Lack as Director of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford University.

Among other duties, Tommy ran the school’s 60 acre farm and even considered becoming a full-time farmer. But his destiny was to be an outstanding headmaster, and in 1952 he was appointed Master of the Marlborough School near Oxford.

Tommy believed that a headmaster should move every decade or so, and his move to Geelong Grammar in 1961 was in keeping with this philosophy, and also his desire to expand his knowledge of natural history, especially birds and plants. It took a little while for Geelong Grammar to come to terms with this liberal ‘new man’, so different from his predecessor the legendary Sir James Darling. However, Tommy’s undoubted scholarship and his gift for choosing and managing staff and students were soon recognised. One of his great

skills, both in England and Australia, was his ability to select teachers who could inspire students to learn for themselves rather than just be taught in classrooms.

Although a liberal thinker and a very considerate person, Tommy also had a strong belief that things should be done properly. In 1965 Sir Robert Menzies, then Prime Minister, asked whether Prince Charles could attend Geelong Grammar. Tommy replied that he thought Prince Charles should attend the school's Timbertop Campus, for security reasons and to get a better feel for Australia, but that first he would need 'to see the boy and interview the parents'. Accordingly Tommy, who was in London at the time, went to Balmoral and discovered that the young prince had not enjoyed the spartan life at Gordonstoun, showed little interest in science and that his parents were seeking a new educational environment for him. It is recognised that, under Tommy's watchful eye, Prince Charles enjoyed his two terms at Timbertop, and returned to the UK with a new vision.

Birdwatcher

Soon after his arrival in Australia, Tommy and his family began making birding trips around Victoria and further afield. On Sundays they would visit the You Yangs, the Werribee Sewerage Farm, or the Avalon saltworks. But in association with Graham Brown, Graham Pizzey and Norman Wettenhall, they were soon using the holiday breaks to search the Victorian mallee for western whipbirds, or birding in Tasmania, Western Australia or north Queensland. By this time Tommy and Penny had five children, and so their extended camping trips involved a Land-Rover towing a caravan and a separate car for the family – veritable expeditions.

RAOU administrator

By 1973, Tommy was contemplating retirement from Geelong Grammar. Pauline Reilly, then President of the RAOU, took the opportunity to ask Tommy to consider becoming RAOU Secretary. He agreed to take up this voluntary role on his retirement, even though it meant a considerable amount of travelling – for by this time he and Penny had moved to Blackwood, two hours' north-west of Melbourne, to a stone miner's cottage on four hectares of bushland.

At Blackwood, the Garnett family indulged in horticulture, another of Tommy's loves, and developed the Garden of St Erth, now one of Victoria's best-known gardens. Tommy focussed much of his horticultural work on Australian native plants, the cultivation of which he thought was much neglected at the time. He planted a host of native plants, and he was always noting the use of the different plants by birds. Tommy encouraged the rehabilitation of many of Victoria's neglected country botanic gardens and, from 1980 to 1997, he wrote a newspaper column, 'From the Country', in the *Melbourne Age*, chatting about horticulture, birds and other

rural topics. In 1996 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his contributions to horticulture.

Tommy became Secretary of the RAOU in 1974 – not many years after the revision of the constitution and structure of the RAOU. Stephen Davies succeeded Pauline Reilly as President in 1975, and welcomed Tommy's suggestion that Council needed quarterly two-day weekend meetings to deal properly with all the issues before it. Tommy hosted the first of these at Blackwood, and they became a regular feature into the 1980s. Because the RAOU President was in Perth, and there was no Director or CEO to handle the day-to-day decisions, Tommy initiated the Melbourne-based Executive Committee meetings, chaired by the Vice-President and held between Council meetings to deal with pressing matters. One colleague from that era has said that Tommy 'was a very steadying influence', ensuring that the ship stayed on course and the log recorded all the details. So his contribution was a key to the success of how the RAOU coped with the developing administrative load at the time.

As headmaster of prestigious schools in the turbulent 1950s, 60s and 70s, Tommy lived by values and attitudes which were of huge benefit to the RAOU. A man of liberal views (for instance he was very tolerant of students having long hair and he supported co-education at the secondary level), he was also disciplined, rigorous and non-confrontational. He could accept people and respect their values and opinions, while still arguing very eruditely for change; and he had the gift of being able to get people to work together harmoniously to achieve practical results. His meticulous record-keeping was legendary.

Tommy's personal ornithological skills are often overlooked because he devoted so much skill and energy to the RAOU, and later Birds Australia, and to his horticultural pursuits. But since his partial deafness made it difficult for him to identify birds by their calls, he developed acute observational skills, such as identifying different cormorants by timing with a stopwatch the number of wingbeats per minute.

Tommy Garnett left an enviable legacy – a strong and healthy RAOU with a functional headquarters (first North Melbourne and then Moonee Ponds) and some exciting projects – including the first Atlas of Australian Birds and the genesis of the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB). Much loved and respected by all who came into contact with him, Tommy cared for human beings, birds and plants alike, helping them to grow. He is survived by his wife Penny and their five children, one of whom, Stephen, continues the family tradition of birding.

A charming and gentle man, Tommy was a delight to know and to serve with, both on committees and in the field. It has been an inspiration and a privilege to have known him and worked with him on our birds.

Sid Cowling