

A LOST AMBITION

POLAR HERO WHO LOVED OUR BIRDS

WHEN the Anglo-Saxon liquidation of New Zealand's natural resources began about a hundred years ago, the unique wild life of the country stood in need of, first of all, protectors; and, secondly, in need of recorders, who might put on record, for all time, those birds and plants which the protectors could not save.

Recorders would include naturalists acting as writers, naturalists engaged in drawing from nature, artists working in colour; last—and in the writer's opinion, least—taxidermists and collectors, who would preserve stuffed birds and other museum material.

When Dr. Edward Adrian Wilson, of South Pole fame, returned from the Antarctic with Captain Scott's first Antarctic expedition (1900-04) he landed in New Zealand in April, 1904, and he travelled through the North Island by the old Waiouru-Tokaanu coach route, via the Rangi-po desert, there being in those days no North Island Main Trunk railway and no National Park road to Tokaanu. Those were the days when travellers coached from Peters' accommodation house at Waiouru over the Rangi-po plateau (east, not west of Ruapehu and Tongariro) to Tokaanu where they boarded the late Captain "Darby" Ryan's lake steamer (there was then no road bordering Lake Taupo) en route to Taupo township, from which point coaches ran to Rotorua either via Waiotapu or via Atiamuri. In this way Wilson, British-born naturalist and lover of Nature, travelled through the heart of the North Island thirty-five years ago, and from what he has left on record in his journals and diaries and letters, New Zealanders' crimes against nature may be aptly summed up on impartial and expert evidence.

First of all, the protectors had fallen down on their job up to 1904 (and, it may be added, ever since). Secondly, writing naturalists and drawing artists and artists in colour had not then (and have not now) nearly covered the available ground; and many of the objects they should have recorded have gone for ever. Thirdly, for one constructive recorder of the passing bird life and other life, there were twenty destructive recorders—egg collectors

and other collectors whose collections were built but to perish.

In those coach and buggy days Wilson (who as everyone knows lost his life with Scott in the memorable South Pole expedition some seven years later), came and saw and was convinced that a crime was being committed in New Zealand against nature before the eyes of civilisation, with civilisation powerless to prevent it. He recorded, on his New Zealand tour in 1904:

"Everything indigenous to New Zealand is dying out at such a rapid rate . . . that before long birds, etc., which are now fairly common will be totally extinct. Men who have been in the colony some forty years speak of birds like the New Zealand quail as a bird that used to be found and shot everywhere, and now it is as extinct as the ichthyosaurus. There are birds that are on the verge of extinction. Anything that is written or drawn of them now will be infinitely valuable in another fifty years when they will all be gone. They have not got the man to do it here, and on all hands I am told he is badly wanted. Think what a chance for a solid piece of work!"

The "consolation" provided by "stuffed remnants" of New Zealand's extinct avifauna is to Wilson no consolation at all. He writes to his father in England: "Every little private museum in New Zealand has already some extinct bird's bones, eggs, feathers, cropstones, and other relics, all so recent; the fresh-looking eggs of quail and other birds are shown you—they might have been found last summer; and the man who shows them to you tells you how many brace he shot when he first came out. That quail is now as extinct as the Dodo, and the number of quail eggs as limited as those of the great Auk." These relics in private collections, even in 1904, were "getting rarer day by day," but "people sit by and let moths get into their private collections, while cats, stoats, weasels, and blights of all kinds are killing them out as fast as the railways. All these things want drawing and painting, and drawing over and over again from every point of view, and in every light and season before they disappear for ever. Well now, my Dad, isn't there a work

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