

Ronald Lockley, at 81, still dreams of far-off, remote worlds.

Photo: G. Hutching

waters breeding on the island to Venice, Boston and elsewhere. They returned at amazing speeds to their mates and burrows on Skokholm.

One such occasion took him to Ireland, 60 miles across the sea from Skokholm. He took the train west to Shannon, where he planned to release a shearwater.

"When you release a sea bird, it's best to drop it into the water from a height so as to give it space to gather its wings. I planned to release it from Shannon Bridge, which is a tremendous high bridge above the sea like the one across the Waitemata.

"I had this shearwater beside me in the train compartment. It was very restless, making squawking noises, so I opened the top of its box to give it air. Presently a guard came along and said 'Phwat have you got there, sir?' Ah, I said, just a shearwater. 'And phwat would you be doin' with him?' Just a homing experiment, I said, explaining that when I got to Limerick I was going to walk back to the Shannon Bridge and drop it. 'Begorra, there'll be no need for the trouble to be walking so far, sir. Begorra, I shall stop the train in the middle of the bridge for thee.'

"To my amazement and joy he stopped this train in the middle of the bridge, with people staring out of the windows. I had to warn him I couldn't throw the bird direct from the train, it might hit the steel of the bridge. He said not to worry, I could get down from the train and do the job properly. How wonderful and typically Irish," Lockley recounts the tale with pleasure.

## Fighting for wildlife

His encounters with New Zealand officials haven't run as smoothly, however, especially over the battle to save his beloved Tahuna Torea Reserve from becoming a rubbish tip. Situated just below his Tamaki Estuary home, where he has lived since settling in New Zealand in 1972, this open space was threatened ten years ago. Becoming honorary secretary of the local protection society, Lockley mobilised resistance to fight the tip, enlisting the help of the Forest and Bird Society, the university and other conservation bodies.

Today the reserve is a peaceful area much visited by those who wish to contemplate the rich wildlife — the godwits, knots, torea, stilts, terns, herons and kingfishers. By an ironic twist, in 1974 the Tamaki Estuary Protection Society was unexpectedly awarded a \$1500 prize for the best example in New Zealand that year of environmental improvement — recognition that the city council, once eager to turn the reserve into a dump, are now proud of, boasting of "this fine asset, a wilderness within a city."

Lockley's first visit to New Zealand was in 1962, when he had an immediate introduction into the unfortunate fate of

some of this country's endangered birds — he was taken to camp in Fiordland's Notornis Valley and shown what the Wildlife Service was doing for the takahe. The general state of environmental awareness was not high at the time, he recalls.

"The Government seemed totally uninterested in wildlife, despite pioneers like Sir Robert Falla, Sir Charles Fleming and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, which had a smaller membership then.

*The fact that Forest and Bird has 40,000 members is a triumph when you consider there are only three million people in New Zealand.*

"I hadn't any plan to live in New Zealand then until our children began to produce some grandchildren here. I was delighted with the pristine beauty of New Zealand, and the wonderful welcome when you come here — one is accepted as part of a big happy family. The country people are splendid, with no nonsense about a stratified society as in Britain. You are taken on your merits, and it's 'shake hands and get on with the job,' which suits me very much," he says.

The Wildlife Service comes in for his praise because of the willingness of its staff to get stuck into its task.

"For the miserable amount of finance allotted by our Government, the Service does absolute wonders. Its dedicated field officers and scientists have got tremendous determination and flair to go places and do things — they're not office bound. Write a letter to the Wildlife and you will be lucky to get a reply in a month — they are all working outdoors," he says.

## Remarkable achievement

Pressure groups such as Forest and Bird also have an enormous role to play in making politicians and officials aware of the need for conservation, he emphasises. Lockley has been an active member of the Society, becoming chairman of the Auckland branch in 1977. He notes with satisfaction that nationwide membership has doubled over the past decade.

"I think it's one of the most remarkable achievements of any conservation organisation in the world. I used to be a council member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Britain, which now has about half a million

members. The fact that Forest and Bird has more than 40,000 members is a triumph when you consider there are only three million people in New Zealand."

His life habit of keeping a daily diary of nature observations has helped Lockley to produce more than 50 books on outdoor subjects. One of these, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, was the pioneering study acknowledged by Richard Adams as the major source for *Watership Down*.

His first New Zealand book, *Man Against Nature*, was a *cri du coeur* for conservation. At all times a despair for the future informs his writing — in his eyes humankind deserves less sympathy than the animals.

*The House Above the Sea* contains the following passage: "There is a deep, underlying dread today that the fear-ridden warlords of the Kremlin, Pentagon and Peking, stockpiling more and more highly sophisticated long range weaponry, will one day soon (purposely or by accident) pull the trigger on a chain atomic blast that will wipe out our decadent urban civilisation, and most other human life on the land."

Lockley sees examples for man in the "wise cetaceans" — whales and dolphins — which do not pollute or over-populate their environment. He believes they are wiser than humans, with their larger brains and capacities for the "higher emotions" supposedly only present in humans.

The naturalist continues to lead a busy and productive life. Rising at between four and five each day, he writes, then depending on the weather and state of the tide might nature watch in the Tahuna Torea Reserve. High water is the best time for waders, here provided with special mud islands on which they can rest and sleep, safe from humans.

Reading has always been his special relaxation. Like many dreamers — he says he is an escapist — Lockley did not enjoy the routine of school, failing matriculation and early abandoning high school as a result. His late discovery of good books was an exciting revelation: "I seemed to sit on a stage with an audience of a hundred authors of genius shouting at me, demanding to be read. Read my philosophy first! Read my theory! Read my economy! Read my Utopia! Read my poetry! Read my idealism! Read my realism!" (*Myself When Young*).

At present he is reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, "probably for the twelfth time."

Like his beloved shearwaters, in the autumn of his years Lockley has migrated to warmer climes. After living in beautiful, wet, windy Wales for 60 years, he says he enjoys the constant sunshine and warm climate of New Zealand, and the equally warm welcome of New Zealanders. "I can't think of a better environment for retirement at my age," he says.



Lockley in the Tahuna Torea Reserve, just below his Tamaki Estuary home.

Photo: G. Hutching