

CHAPTER 4

PROFILES – PERSONALITIES OF THE STEAD ERA

1927 – Members included:

Dr. J. J. C. Bradfield (of Sydney Harbour Bridge fame)
Neville Cayley (*What Bird is That?*)
George Robertson (of Angus and Robertson)
J. R. Kinghorn (Australian Museum)
J. W. Nelson (Taronga Zoo)
The Hon. H. E. Pratten (Minister for Trade and Customs)
Prof. Griffith Taylor (University of Sydney)
Dr. G. A. Waterhouse (Linnean Society, Sydney)

The first Council of the Wild Life Preservation Society was outstanding for its membership of prominent citizens. First was the inaugural President, Frederick Earle Winchcombe (1855-1917), head of the well-known firm of Winchcombe, Carson and Co., woolbrokers, skin and hide merchants. In Parliament (which he entered in 1900) he generally adopted a conservative stance on industrial and rural issues. But he agreed in principle with women's franchise, closer settlement, the eight-hour day and supported the wages board system for dealing with industrial disputes. David Stead paid him this tribute:

'Through Mr. Winchcombe's expert knowledge, coupled with a most rare interest in fauna preservation, we were soon apprised of the trade in marsupial skins and later, when we were instrumental in obtaining legal protection for certain animals, he was able to assist us in exposing the clandestine manner in which skins and furs of protected animals were smuggled through for export. We can never forget the great assistance given to us by this friend of our wildlife.'

Winchcombe was a sincere Christian and a parishioner of St Marks Church of England, Darling Point. In 1917 he went to England to visit his two sons on active service with the Australian Imperial Force. On his way back to Australia, his ship the *Mongolia* struck a mine and sank in the Indian Ocean. Winchcombe was among those rescued, but he died of pneumonia on 29 June 1917, in the military hospital at Bombay and was buried in Sewri cemetery.

Walter Wilson Froggatt (1858-1937) was one of four Vice-Presidents in the first Council. He was an entomologist in the Department of Mines and Agriculture, but also lectured on entomology in the Department of Agriculture at the University of Sydney. He was a founder in 1891 and later President for a record eleven years of the Naturalists' Society of New South Wales, which elected him a fellow in 1931, a founder of the Australian Wattle League and the Gould League of Bird Lovers of New South Wales. Froggatt became President of the Society in 1912.

Another Vice-President, Henry Charles Lennox Anderson (1853-1924), taught at Sydney Grammar School from 1873 to 1882, when he became an examiner in the Department of Public Instruction, helping to reorganise its curricula and examinations. In 1891 he established Hawkesbury Agricultural College on a sound scientific and practical foundation and next year the Wagga Wagga Experiment Farm. In 1893 he was appointed principal librarian of the Free Public Library, whose name

at his instigation was changed to the Public Library of New South Wales. Anderson was responsible for the basic design of the Mitchell wing on which work started in 1905. In January 1908 he was appointed Director of the new, independent Department of Agriculture. A fellow of the Senate of the University of Sydney from 1895 to 1919, he helped to establish the faculties of agriculture and veterinary science in 1910.

Mrs. Lucy Garvin (1851-1938) was Principal of Sydney Girls' High School from 1883 to 1919. In December 1919 she was appointed Principal of St Chad's Church of England Girls' School, Cremorne, later to be named Redlands.

Mrs. L. Harrison, Council member, was the writer Amy Mack, (1876-1939) married to Launcelot Harrison (1880-1928), lecturer in Zoology at the University of Sydney and the Society's first Hon. Secretary. In 1907-14 Amy Mack was editor of the 'Women's Page' of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She published *A Bush Calendar* in 1909 and *Bush Days* in 1911, which were collections of essays. She also published two very popular children's books, *Bushland Stories* (1910) and *Scribbling Sue and other stories* (1915). She would accompany her husband on scientific expeditions. Launcelot Harrison became Challis Professor of Zoology at the University of Sydney in 1922. A popular public lecturer and publicist on such topics as evolution and heredity, he was President of the Royal Zoological (1923-24) and the Linnean Society of New South Wales (1928) and a trustee of the Australian Museum, Sydney, from 1924.

John Le Gay Brereton (1871-1933), scholar and writer, was appointed assistant librarian at the University of Sydney in 1902 and in 1921 became Professor of English Literature. His first book *The Song of Brotherhood. and Other Verses* was published in 1896. Much of his writing in the 1890s conformed to the prevailing attitudes of egalitarianism and nationalism. At its best, it was distinguished by the mystic pantheism which was the basis of his personal religious faith. He loved to spend holidays tramping through the bush and regarded himself as a 'brother of birds and trees'.

Undoubtedly one of the most colourful personalities of the Stead era was David Stead's third wife, Thistle Stead. Born Thistle Yolette Harris in 1902, she was introduced to her life-long passion for the Australian flora by a dedicated teacher at her school, Redlands, in Cremorne. This teacher, Constance Le Plastrier, was a member of the Naturalists' Society of New South Wales and one evening in 1918 she took her young pupil Thistle Harris to one of their meetings. Thistle met David Stead and life would never be the same for either of them. She was sixteen years old and he was 41. In later life Thistle would remember with pleasure the comradeship and bush lore she experienced in those early days with the Naturalists' Society. It was a personal kind of thing, she would say, not just fun-loving, but serious too, with lectures, exhibits, discussions, and regular weekend excursions. It was inevitable that she would also join the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, as a student member in 1918.

After a science degree at the University of Sydney, Thistle taught in secondary schools at Murwillumbah, Broken Hill and St George Girls' High School, Kogarah. Her friendship with David Stead continued. In 1938 she was appointed Lecturer in

Biology at Sydney Teachers' College, a position she retained until her retirement at the end of 1961. In 1939 Thistle moved in with David Stead, separated from his second wife, but it was not until June of 1951 that Thistle became Mrs. David Stead after the death of David's second wife in May of that year.

In 1938 Thistle, prompted by David Stead, produced a book which was a milestone in the history of interest in Australian flora, *Wild Flowers of Australia*, still being reprinted today. The paintings in colour by Adam Forster contributed to the unique value of this publication.

Throughout her life, at least up until 1976, Thistle held many official positions in the Wild Life Preservation Society, as President, Vice-President, Honorary Secretary and Editor. In those years as an office-bearer for the Society she wrote, spoke and acted as an advocate on many issues touching wildlife and its habitats. Her aggressive attitude on many occasions did not endear her to either colleagues or adversaries, but her sincerity and tenacity were never in doubt. 'Obsessive, dogmatic and somewhat eccentric' said someone who knew her well.

Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), architect and designer of Canberra, was listed as a member of the Wild Life Preservation Society in 1927, becoming a member of the Council in 1934 and Honorary Treasurer in 1935. Griffin was born in the United States of America, but won the competition for the design of Canberra in May 1912, although his winning design generated prolonged and bitter controversies. After living in Melbourne for a time he moved to Castlecrag in 1924 where he had plans of a residential estate designed to retain the character of the natural landscape. By 1937 only 19 houses, 16 of them designed by Griffin, had been built.

In January 1937, *Australian Wild Life* reported that 'Mr. Walter B. Griffin had hardly got into harness before he received a sudden call to India'. Griffin was invited to design a library for the University of Lucknow and left for India in October 1935. Nothing came of this project but he was engaged as the designer of the United Provinces Exhibition of Industry and Agriculture in Lucknow and ran into troubles similar to those he had encountered with Canberra. He died of peritonitis on 11 February 1937 in Lucknow five days after an operation, and was buried there.

May Gibbs (1877-1969) was a member of the Society from the 1920s and first became a member of Council in 1929 when David Stead was President. She remained on Council throughout the 1930s, and served again in 1946-47. May Gibbs, author of *Gumnut Babies* (1916) and *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* (1918) is still well known for her gumnuts, blossom babies and bad 'banksia men' who have delighted generations of children. She was born in Kent, England, and arrived in Australia with her mother and brothers on 31 October 1881, her father having settled in Perth a few months earlier. In 1919 she married Bertram Kelly and they settled at *Nutcote* on the shores of Neutral Bay, Sydney, a house now set aside as her memorial. The Society has contributed to its upkeep. A small verse attributed to May Gibbs reveals her concern for wildlife:

Men to prison go
When they are bad
But why my lad
Do birds to cages go

What have they done?
Said Cocky, 'Men just
Shut them up for fun'

Minard Crommelin (1881-1972) was an ardent conservationist from her youth, long before it was fashionable to be interested in the natural environment. She was the first postmistress at Woy Woy on the Central Coast of New South Wales, taking up her post in late 1905 and this marked the birth of her absorption with the natural environment of that area. After some years in other country appointments, Minard settled in Mosman, Sydney and soon turned her attention to the serious business of becoming involved in the conservation movement. On 14 April 1932, a public meeting was held in Mosman to form the Mosman Tree Lovers' Civic League and Minard was appointed the Honorary Secretary. Of particular importance was her appointment to the Wild Life Preservation Society in 1932 as a representative of the Associated Tree Lovers Civic Leagues. Roy Bennett was President of the Society at that time (he held that office from 1930 to 1936) and was also founding President of the Mosman Tree Lovers' Civic League. Throughout the 1930s Minard remained a Councillor of the Society and its representative for the Associated Tree Lovers' Civic Leagues.

Minard Crommelin had a dream: it was to establish a centre for research and study, a library on the Australian environment for scholars and students to use, a focus for preservation of native flora and fauna. In 1938, at the age of 57, she set about to make the dream a reality. She had three possibilities for the site of this centre - Galston, Newport and Pearl Beach (Central Coast). She consulted David Stead, telling him of her plans to have part of the Patonga Reserve, a stretch of bushland between Pearl Beach and Patonga Creek, Broken Bay (already gazetted in 1936 as a special Reserve) 'for the promotion of the study and preservation of native flora and fauna'. Despite warnings from David Stead about encroachments on an established Reserve and outcry from Myles Dunphy, Honorary Secretary of the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council, she succeeded in having the Patonga Reserve reduced to half to create Warrah Sanctuary, gazetted 10 January 1941.

Minard's original plan in 1938 to build her residence and cabins in the Sanctuary met with such opposition that she acquiesced and built her establishment on freehold land close by in Pearl Beach. In 1947 the property was handed over to the University of Sydney to become the Crommelin Biological Research Station, Minard to retain occupancy in part of the property for her lifetime.

In June 1943, Minard was already a Life Member of the Society, but her involvement with Warrah had curtailed her activities on Council. However, she did appeal to the Society in 1943 when Woy Woy Shire Council revealed plans to establish a Sanitary Depot within the Warrah Sanctuary. The Council of the Society and some other organisations made the strongest protests to the Lands Department, the Chief Secretary's Department and to the Shire Council itself. The Lands Department proved to be sympathetic and asked the Shire Council to suggest another site and ultimately another site was chosen.

It is difficult to find any information on most of the people who served as the Society's President in the Stead years. David Stead himself was President for almost

all the 1920s; Roy F. Bennett (1930-1936) was succeeded by Wm. Geo. Kett who served for ten years. Thistle Stead was President for two years in the early 1950s before the position was taken by W. H. Childs.

Walter Henry Childs, M.V.O. (1872-1964) was President from 1953 to 1960. His obituary in *Australian Wild Life*, June 1964, reported:

'During those years as President Mr. Childs guided us through many difficulties. Always courteous, understanding and knowledgeable, Mr Childs rendered great service to the Society. Until his death at the age of 91 years, he remained actively interested in Society affairs and attended regularly until some months before his death'.

W. H. Childs was a Member of the Royal Victorian Order. This award was instituted on 21 April 1896, as an Order entirely in the gift of Her Majesty Queen Victoria to acknowledge and reward outstanding service. Admittance to the Order was held in high regard. Childs had been a member of the police force since he was twenty years old and served as Police Commissioner in New South Wales from 1930 to his retirement in 1935. A parade of 2,000 men in March 1935 marked a tribute to his retirement. He was made a life member of the New South Wales Police Force and in August 1935 he received a presentation from citizens and the police. The Society instituted the W. H. Childs Memorial Prize to be presented to a student of the University of New South Wales for Biochemistry.

Allen Strom was an important figure in the conservation movement of the twentieth century and for part of his time he was involved with the Wild Life Preservation Society. Allen joined the teaching service in 1934, later appointed to Enmore Activity School in 1937, an experimental progressive school. Here with Sid Lenehan, the Principal, he became involved in school camping. Together with Gordon Young, the new Director of Physical Education, they launched the National Fitness Camping Movement with the venue at what became the Broken Bay National Fitness Camp.

To guide the natural history activities at the camp, Strom produced four naturecraft handbooks. Thistle Harris, then lecturer at Sydney Teachers' College, learned of these booklets and appreciated their great educational value. In the late 1940s, Thistle persuaded Strom to become Secretary of the Wild Life Preservation Society and in the period 1949-50 and 1951-52, Thistle was President and Strom was Secretary. The Fauna Protection Act was passed in 1948 and thirteen Fauna Protection Panel members had to be found. The Society nominated Strom as its representative on the Panel and he remained a member for nine years when in 1958 he was appointed Chief Guardian of Fauna and the Chairman of the Panel until it became the wildlife section of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1967.

Meanwhile, there were clashes between Thistle and Strom. 'It was no great hassle being Secretary and there were plenty of opportunities to do what I liked doing, but the big problem was Thistle who kept on pushing people around ... this could have included me, except that I wouldn't be pushed around, and finally in the fifties told her she better be Secretary and push herself around.' Thus concluded Strom's direct involvement with the Society's Council. However, it was the result of an address given at the Society's Annual Meeting in February 1968 that Strom's term of office with the Fauna Protection Panel came to an end. The next day the *Daily Telegraph*

published all of the politically 'juiciest' pieces of Strom's paper, including such comments as 'I do not see the service (ie the newly formed National Parks and Wildlife Service) becoming much more than a public service agency for handing down agreeable picnic-type usage of parks and law-interpreted protection for wildlife'. Strom was promptly called to the Public Service Board and told to take leave immediately. He moved into another sphere of activity, that of environmental educator, where he was active until his death on 23 March 1997.

From the early 1940s, a representative on Council for the European region was Dr. Jan H. Westermann of Holland. In 1928 the International Union for the Protection of Nature was founded. In 1947, at an international conference attended by eighteen countries, with many non-governmental organisations, it was decided to reform the organisation. Dr. Westermann represented the Society at that meeting. In June 1974, *Australian Wild Life* thanked Dr. Westermann for his continued assistance and congratulated him on being one of thirteen leading world conservationists to become a Ridder (Knight) of the Order of the Golden Ark (the list now includes President of Honour, Vincent Serventy), a Netherlands Order of Chivalry, in recognition of special services rendered to the conservation of flora and fauna. Vin Serventy met Dr. Westermann at his inauguration in 1985 and assured him the Society was alive and well.

During the Stead era a number of well-known naturalists, academics and public figures served on the Council. Neville Cayley (1886-1950) the ornithologist served for a number of years; his popular book *What Bird is That?* was published in 1931. Alexander Hugh Chisholm (1890-1977) was a writer and naturalist, best known for his editing of the ten-volume *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1958) for which he received the OBE. Miss Agnes Brewster, headmistress and botanist, author of botany books for students, was on Council for several years.

Another schoolteacher and naturalist who served as a Vice-President for at least fourteen years and was on the first Council in 1909, was Alexander Greenlaw Hamilton (1852-1941). An ardent microscopist, he published frequently on the processes of pollination and fertilisation, the morphology of xerophytic and insectivorous plants and botanical and ornithological check-lists. He was a Council member of the Linnean Society of New South Wales from 1906 to 1939 and its President in 1915-16; President of the Naturalists' Society of New South Wales in 1913-14 and 1920-21 and a member of the Royal Microscopical and Royal Zoological Societies of New South Wales, as well as the Wild Life Preservation Society and the Gould League of Bird Lovers. In 1903-1904 he successfully pleaded for greater emphasis on nature study in schools. His influence on its teaching long before the 'environment movement' would be impossible to assess.

Another long-serving Council member who also had the position of Vice-President for a number of years was Richard Hind Cambage (1859-1928), surveyor and botanist. He was also President during 1913-14. He published extensively in the journals of the local Royal and Linnean Societies, often with his friend J. H. Maiden, Director of the Botanic Garden in Sydney and Government Botanist. A fellow of the Linnean Society of London from 1904, Cambage was very active in many local learned societies and, like his colleague David Stead, was a renowned peacemaker. While President of the Australian Forest League in the 1920s he advocated the

planning of a great avenue - to be called Australia Avenue - leading from Sydney to Canberra. This avenue was to be planted with Australian trees, as far as possible representing the most typical of every district through which the avenue passed.

During the dark years referred to by Thistle Stead in a later report, an occasional glimmer of support helped the Council to continue its commitment. One such piece of encouragement came from Rose Scott, feminist, cousin to the bibliophile David Scott Mitchell. She was foundation secretary of the Womanhood Suffrage League of New South Wales (formed in 1891) and concentrated her considerable energies on the struggle for franchise. She was a prolific correspondent who made a specialty of letters to newspapers, an activity indulged in by David Stead, especially in his later life. However, it is the reply to Rose Scott from the Society's Hon. Secretary which reveals most about the state of mind of the Council at this time:

‘Dear Miss Scott,

Many thanks for liberal donation. We are working away but are not receiving such support as our aims deserve. I think that few people really know what we do and our resources (pecuniary) do not permit of much trumpet blowing or so many such things as I would wish.

Yours faithfully,

Arthur Atkinson (Hon. Secretary)

13 Nov. 1923’

In the early days of the Society's existence its members were practically playing a lone hand. But by the 1930s it had the assistance and cooperation of several other organisations, some of which were right at the forefront of the Society's conservation and rehabilitation work or its educational propaganda. Among the groups concerned were the Australian Forest League, the Parks and Playgrounds Movement (with its able and energetic Honorary Secretary, Dr. C. E. W. Bean), the Federation of Bush Walkers, the Town Planning Association, the Associated Tree Lovers Civic Leagues, the Royal Zoological Society, the Gould League of Bird Lovers and the army of Junior Tree Wardens, which by the mid-thirties had an enrolment of more than 30,000 children in the public schools.

No less illustrious than its Council members were the public figures who served as Patrons of the Society and often there were several persons in this role at the one time. As one example only, here are the Patrons for the period 1929/30:

His Excellency Sir Philip Game, Governor of New South Wales and Lady Game

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Novar and Viscountess Novar

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Chelmsford

The Rt. Hon. The Countess of Stradbroke

Sir Gerald Strickland

Sir Wm. Cullen and Lady Cullen

Editor's note:

Today "Australia Avenue" is called The Remembrance Driveway, honouring Australia's War Heroes with a Living Memorial of all those who served in the Australian Defence Forces in World War II and subsequent wars or conflicts. It is located along the Hume and Federal Highways between Sydney and Canberra. It was launched in 1954, with Her Majesty the Queen and Prince

Philip each planting a plane tree in Macquarie Place, Sydney, marking the beginning of the Driveway.