

Joseph Bryan Nelson (1932–2015)

Tony Diamond

The fields of seabird biology, island conservation, and bird behaviour have lost an iconic figure with the death of Bryan Nelson on 29 June, at 83 years. Widely known as the expert on Northern *Morus bassanus* and Australasian Gannets *M. serrator*, and more broadly the family Sulidae as a whole, he was also one of our last personal links with the towering figures of ethology - Tinbergen and Lorenz - who pioneered the field in the last century.

Bryan's career did not follow a conventional trajectory. Born in Shipley, West Yorkshire, in 1932, he had to leave the local Saltaire Grammar School at the age of 16 to help support his family. I like to think that his place of work at that time - a sewage purification plant - helped encourage his burgeoning interest in birds, since such places in those days could be hotbeds of interesting birds as well as microbiological activity. While working, he finished his secondary education through night school and went on to a zoology degree at St Andrews University, which led in turn to a PhD at Oxford. There he began a project on Blackbirds *Turdus merula* under David Lack, but his interests were more behavioural than ecological and he switched to studying gannet behaviour under Niko Tinbergen and Mike Cullen. This topic owed much to his earlier experience ringing gannet chicks on Ailsa Craig; that it was Ailsa, not Bass Rock as one might suppose, that shaped his later career is clearly described in his brilliantly engaging memoir *On the Rocks* (2013).

Bryan recognised his good fortune in finding June (Davison) to share his wandering and eccentric life, which they began together on the Bass Rock where they lived precariously for three field



Figure 1. Bryan Nelson, Morecambe Bay, September 1997. © John Leedal.

seasons in the early 1960s. Somehow he completed his thesis in the last of these seasons (1963) and the very same year they began a year-long stint on two of the remotest desert islands of the Galapagos. There they studied a wide variety of seabirds in conditions so primitive, and with methods so basic, as to be barely comprehensible to those who have experienced only modern standards of health-and-safety regimes and digital field equipment. Throughout his career, his field work was carried out 'on a shoestring', unburdened by the bureaucratic nightmares of modern research grants. Working in the Galapagos in the early

years of the Darwin Research Station, Bryan was one of a small group of biologists including Mike Harris and the late David Snow who set the scene for future generations of seabird researchers and island biologists. The Nelsons' experiences are described vividly in *Galapagos: Islands of Birds* (1968), a classic of field natural history; my copy with Bryan's inscription is one of the best-loved books on my shelves. It remains my only natural history book that includes a nude photograph of the author's wife.

In 1967 Bryan taught animal behaviour to the MSc in Ecology class I was taking at the University of Aberdeen. I had been fascinated by his Nature paper (1967) on "Etho-ecological adaptations in the Great Frigate-bird" and we talked about a possible PhD project to pursue some of the questions raised there. Then one day over morning coffee he mentioned that he had agreed to go to Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) to study its endemic Abbott's Booby *Sula abbotti* and Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi*, but now the Royal Society wanted him to study seabirds on their expedition to Aldabra Atoll at the same time - would I be interested in going? A millisecond later I said yes; in such impromptu and impulsive moments can whole careers take wing (early-career folks, take note!). Three years later Bryan stepped in when my PhD supervisor was unable to review my thesis; the comment I remember best went something like "anybody might have written this - I want to see words that only you could have written". Advice to let yourself be revealed, even in scientific writing (contrary to what we were taught back then); scientists deceive when they hide their personality too deeply behind their prose.

Bryan and June also spent a year trying to establish a Research Station at Azraq in Jordan (described in *Azraq: Desert Oasis* (1973)), and many months on Christmas

Island, where his work led directly to saving the forest-nesting seabirds by the creation of an Australian National Park, and in New Zealand where he studied Australasian Gannets at Cape Kidnappers. Bryan continued teaching at Aberdeen until retiring in 1985, inspiring generations of students with his engaging descriptions and graphic imitations of bird behaviour. He published papers on many seabirds, not only the sulids for which he was acknowledged as the world's expert. A second edition of his classic *The Gannet*, first published in 1978, appeared in 2002, and the monumental *The Sulidae: Gannets and Boobies* in 1978. *Pelicans, Cormorants, and Their Relatives: The Pelecaniformes* followed in 2006. During his retirement he was also instrumental in the establishment of the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick, overlooking his beloved Bass Rock.

Bryan's books were beautifully illustrated by his long-time friend John Busby, who predeceased him by a few months. Some of John's prints from Aldabra, and Cousin Island (Seychelles) where they visited me on their way home from Aldabra, have pride of place in my living room, as Bryan's books do on my shelves. Bryan was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1982), and was awarded an MBE for his work on seabirds in 2006.

The passing of such an accomplished adventurer, biologist, conversationalist and writer, must be accompanied by gratitude that he enriched our lives with his engaging writing and personal wit. As representative of an almost-bygone era, he has left a solid legacy of seabird behaviour, conservation and meticulous observational research. We are fortunate that he was able to provide us with such a thoughtful overview of his remarkable life in *On the Rocks*. Our deepest sympathy goes to his wife June and their children Simon and Becky. I thank Angela Rust, Mike Harris and Sarah Wanless for contributions to this tribute.