

JOHN MORTON BOYD

CBE, BSc, PhD, DSc, DLitt, FIBiol, FRSA, HonFRSGS, HonFRZSS

John Morton Boyd was born on 31 January 1925 in Darvel, and died on 25 August 1998 in Edinburgh. With his passing, the world of conservation lost one of its most charismatic pioneers and Scotland one of her greatest conservationists.

Morton Boyd was educated at Kilmarnock Academy where, as in later life, he was a notable success. In the War years, between 1942 and 1943, he was School Captain, House Captain, Rugby Captain, Sports Champion and Flight Sergeant in the ATC. On leaving school in 1943, he started his National Service in the St Andrews University Air Squadron, joining the Royal Air Force in 1944 as an Aircrew Cadet and leaving in 1947 as a Flight Lieutenant. During this time (1945) he trained in Canada as an Air Navigator.

His father was a Master Builder and Morton had always had an interest in engineering. After the War, he went to the University of Glasgow with the intention of obtaining a degree in that subject. However, after his first year there and his reading of Fraser Darling's *A Naturalist on Rona* (1939), he changed his mind and enrolled in the Department of Zoology where the late Sir Maurice Yonge was Professor. He took full advantage of the traditional four-year Scottish Honours degree, taking courses in Zoology, Botany, Genetics, Geology, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Mathematics and Statistics, before graduating with an Honours BSc in 1953. He then carried out innovative research on earthworms (much of his fieldwork on Tiree, an island which he and his family grew to cherish) for a PhD which was awarded in 1957 for a thesis entitled *The Lumbricidae in the Hebrides*. Later, in 1964, he was awarded a DSc by the University of Glasgow for another thesis: *Animal Ecology in the Hebrides with Reference to the Measurement and Conservation of Populations*.

During his period at the University of Glasgow, Morton Boyd was employed as an Assistant Lecturer and taught courses in "Wild Life and Agriculture". He also demonstrated in the undergraduate laboratories where, in 1954, the writer and Morton, as student and teacher, started a lifelong friendship. Morton's work on earthworms had been grant-aided by the Nature Conservancy and in 1957 he joined that organisation in Edinburgh as Regional Officer, West Scotland, based at 12 Hope Terrace - where he was to spend the rest of his working life, eventually as Director of the Nature Conservancy Council in Scotland, retiring in 1985. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1968 and awarded the Society's Neill Medal in 1983.

Morton had a tireless enthusiasm for wildlife, which he was able to pass on to many others during his career. In the early days of the Nature Conservancy, its scientists were largely free of bureaucracy and paperwork and much of Morton's time was spent in the Hebrides studying its wildlife and developing his ideas for conservation. In this, he was influenced by Frank Fraser Darling, with whom he co-authored the second edition of *The Natural History of the Highlands and Islands* in 1964. His personal research concentrated particularly on birds and mammals and, as well as 8 papers covering his work on earthworms, from 1953 to 1963 he published 20 scientific papers on Manx Shearwaters, Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Gannets and other birds of the Western Isles and on Soay Sheep, the St Kilda Field Mouse and Grey Seals.

Thanks to his persistence and ability to get on with people, Morton had many notable achievements during his period with the Nature Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy Council. He managed to persuade landowners around Beinn Eighe to manage Red Deer over wider areas than individual estates and this led to the establishment of deer management groups all over Scotland. He was responsible for the establishment of several important National Nature Reserves, notable among which is Creag Meagaidh - following a hard battle against afforestation proposals. His work on the Gannets of St. Kilda was a classic study in which he persuaded the RAF to photograph the entire gannetry from the air; thereafter Morton counted every Gannet on the photographs - concluding there were 44,500 pairs in all! His innovative work on Soay Sheep and Grey Seals developed similar rigorous monitoring techniques, which provided a firm scientific basis for long-term studies. Promotion of the re-introduction of the Sea Eagle to Scotland is another of his legacies. Though the early freedom to develop research and initiate ideas was made more difficult in later years by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and by bureaucracy imposed from Peterborough and Westminster, Morton continued to ensure that the conservation of wildlife in Scotland was able to move forward.

As well as his many scientific papers, Morton also wrote several books. His first two, *St. Kilda Summer* (1960) and *A Mosaic of Islands* (1963), were written jointly with Kenneth Williamson. The New Naturalist volume with Frank Fraser Darling was followed several years later by another in the series - *The Hebrides* (1990) - written with his son, Ian. This work was subsequently amplified and republished in three volumes in 1996. *The Hebrides: Habitable Land, The Hebrides: Natural Tapestry and The Hebrides: Mosaic of Islands*. When Fraser Darling died, Morton Boyd wrote a fascinating biography, intertwining the experiences of himself and his former mentor. He also edited and published Fraser Darling's journals: *Fraser Darling in Africa: a Rhino in the Whistling Thorn* (1992). His final work is his autobiography *The Paean of the Sandpiper*, due to be published in 1999.

His innovative conservation work in Scotland was soon recognised abroad and he became involved in international issues. He was awarded a Nuffield Travelling Fellowship and in 1964, spent time in Jordan, followed by visits to Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in 1965. A valuable and extensive report *Travels in the Middle East and East Africa* followed. This led to other conservation based trips, to Aldabra in 1967 (information from which was eventually to prevent the development of an RAF station post there), to Zaire in 1975 and to many other parts of the world. A born communicator, these trips and his experiences as a lecturer on the National Trust for Scotland cruises around St Kilda, paved the way for his subsequent popular international lecturing for Swan Hellenic and Serenissima Travel after his retirement. As one of his colleagues put

it, Morton, combining head and heart, “was able to articulate his vision with passion from an incomparable base of knowledge and understanding”.

After his retirement, when his contributions were acknowledged by the award of a CBE, Morton Boyd was as active and influential as ever, acting as a consultant to the Forestry Commission and Scottish Hydro-Electric, as well as taking part in the affairs of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, the Scottish Conservation Projects Trust, the Saltire Society and many other organisations. He also kept up his many friendships and it was always a pleasure at scientific meetings and elsewhere to see Morton approaching, a twinkle in his eye, and to hear the characteristic deep voice with his familiar greeting: “Well, my friend...”.

Morton had a very happy home life and much of his success was due to the constant support given to him by his wife, Winifred - whom he married in 1954, and who was always able to keep his feet on the ground when Morton might be carried away by one of his enthusiasms! They had four fine sons, one of whom is following in his father’s footsteps as an outstanding ecologist. Morton was active in his local community and for many years was an Elder of Colinton Parish Church. He was a very fine painter (some of those on his walls illustrating his travels) and was also interested in photography, hill walking and gardening.

Morton’s loss will be felt for many years by his family and friends but his contribution to nature conservation, which has been enormous, will remain well into the next Millennium as a memorial to his vision and integrity.

PETER S MAITLAND