

It had all come as something of a surprise. Despite the fact that rather few British Christians seemed to be taking the known crisis in the world's eco-systems to heart, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship had decided to sponsor our ornithological trip to southern Sweden, their first environmental initiative. It was 1982, and in the face of a certain amount of evangelical muttering we thought it prudent to recruit some irreproachable theological support. I had only met John once before, two years earlier, when he had come to bless the outgoing year of ordinands and other students from Trinity College, but his passion for birding was well known. Given his increasingly direct appeals for contemporary application of biblical Christian thinking, we could hope that he would give us a sympathetic hearing for our ideas. I was however completely unprepared for him to be so immediately interested. John's letters are the kind you keep and so I still have this letter with the others:

*"I am so glad the Falsterbo expedition to watch the raptor migration was such a success - I wish could have joined you!"*

He never made it on that trip, but did agree immediately to join the Council of Reference of the A Rocha Trust to which it gave birth. Once again, it was on conditions we had not expected, but which we came to know as characteristic. He wrote *"I made a decision some years ago that, as a matter of integrity, I would not be on any Council of Reference unless I was personally involved in the work concerned, and thus able to speak from personal knowledge about it. Indeed, only these last two or three weeks I have declined a couple of invitations on this ground.... Perhaps I should insist on your inviting me to visit the field study centre and bird observatory in Portugal at the earliest possible moment!! Will you be coming to London during the early months of the New Year? Then perhaps we could meet and talk and my conscience would permit me to accept your invitation."*

We did meet, he did come to Portugal, and it proved to be the start of a friendship and a collaboration that lasted over a quarter of a century, even though it came at a time of his life when he was already deeply committed to many innumerable other organisations around the world.

At first we saw our role as perhaps providing the way for him to lay down some of the more major demands of his life. In going birding in the spare moments of his travels he was able to keep that legendary mental grip in gear, but to apply it to problems such as how to determine the length of the Bee-eaters' nest hole, rather than the more intractable challenges of whether the Anglican church was thinking straight about ordaining women bishops, or how evangelical Christian leaders around the world could reconcile their newly recovered social conscience with their convictions about the vital work of preaching and evangelism.

Even our own somewhat spontaneous family life seemed to be a welcome distraction on his first stay with us in rented accommodation in Portugal. He arrived late one evening when our youngest daughter Bethan was just three weeks old and Miranda's *feijoadas* was about to burn on the stove as he came over the doorstep. "Could you hold her a moment?" didn't prove a challenge to this particular bachelor, as he apparently merely called on years of baptismal experience. He showed equal abilities with small children in striking up rapid friendships with all of ours and developing a series of competitions with Jeremy who at the ripe age of four had just broken his arm simply tripping over on the rough track by our house. They culminated in John secretly signing Jem's plaster cast while he slept on the morning he left at his

accustomed early hour. I would have come close to burn-out if I had ever attempted to keep up with the rhythms of life that were simple routine for John.

However John's ease with pre-dawn hours equipped him to be the perfect companion on a series of birding trips over successive years. The trick was to find a place at the end of one of his speaking tours and to manage to convene there for a week or so, usually with a couple of other friends, but with only one guiding principle – the birding came first in all the decisions. So the accommodation was frequently lamentable, the food infrequent and occasionally high risk, but John's delight in what he saw, and his stamina in getting to the places where some of the more remote species were to be found, made everything worth while. We were fortunate that experts such as Rick and Barbara Mearns could come with us to Turkey and Spain, and in the US Rob and Helen Kelsh were able to join us. Colin Jackson of A Rocha Kenya also had a spectacular week in Ethiopia with John continuing the tradition, and Ginny Vroblesky of A Rocha USA went down to Belize for another trip, but on most of them Miranda and I had the joy of planning an itinerary that would take John out of the stress of his normal travels and into the close study of what he taught us to understand as "God's book of works."

There are stories of course – the time when Sunday worship conflicted gravely with raptor migration across the Straits of Gibraltar, the wind having swung to the west shortly after dawn bringing low flying Black Kites distractingly close as we went into the church. "Don't I recognise you?" said the minister musingly and hospitably as we tried to do a rapid exit after the early service. "Just visiting birdwatchers.." muttered John evasively, pulling down his cap and looking shiftily. Then on the northern edges of the Sahara in Morocco (Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Hoopoe Lark, Houbara Bustard, but we never did find Dupont's Lark) it was still oppressively hot one evening and John was in determined mood as we searched for a cool place to eat. Others of his travelling companions will know what that steely will could mean, even if its intentions were invariably expressed in the most courteous of terms. So the owner of the only place worth patronising in the village, but who had set up his café in a stuffy downstairs room, found himself part of an unstoppable mission to find some ropes from a neighbour and then hauling his table and chairs up onto the flat roof so we could eat under the stars and in the breeze. By the end of the meal John and his collaborator had assumed the demeanour of co-conspirators against the feeble ambitions of the rest of us, and a new business idea had been launched. I wonder if people still eat up there?

The need for John to get his horizontal half hour after lunch was never too much of a problem either. He could sleep anywhere and did. He definitely needed to as he was usually up by 4.30 am and we couldn't always honour the day's planned endings around 10.00 pm if the travelling got away from us. Apparently the crucial component of success, should the appointed hour arrive when he was outside on some hillside, was that he should be able to dig a hole for his hip. Cold or heat weren't considerations, and neither was the hardness of the ground, and nothing would prevented him either from dropping off or from waking exactly thirty minutes later.

Even on his holidays, his self-discipline and determination were astonishing. During a visit to northern Turkey in 1993 he was working on his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. It was causing him some genuine intellectual anguish because he had

resolved to take to heart the many approaches found in other commentaries, and had been assimilating the diverse views of over thirty other authors, several of whom seemed to him to be undermining the very foundations of the gospel to which he had resolutely committed his life. In order to cope with the work-load he had given himself the challenge of working for at least an hour on his script every day of the year except Sundays. Once again we had ended up late the previous evening in a fairly basic hostel – this time on a lakeshore where we hoped the following morning to find Red-breasted Flycatchers and Rosefinches among many other migrants (we did, together with an awesome migration of Lesser-Spotted Eagles and great flocks of White Pelicans.) It was cold, and the rather public latrines gave the whole place a pervasively unhealthy smell. When Miranda and I stumbled out of bed around 6.00 a.m it was to find John emerging glowing from his unheated room, wrapped head to foot in a blanket, deeply satisfied by the logic of the apostle Paul and content that his morning's writing had done it justice.

However he never saw any part of his life as without purpose and on every trip we saw time and again the way that a straightforward concern for everyone was a consistent part of his thinking, feeling and decision making. On one occasion he was beginning a speaking tour round the US as we were finishing some teaching in Vancouver and so we agreed to meet in Oregon to make the ornithological most of this happy overlap. Despite his jet-lag from arriving from Europe, and having planned the usual 6.00 am departure for the next day's search for Lewis' Woodpecker, he stayed up until well after midnight talking over the questions about Christian believing that were bothering one of our hosts. On a later trip to Romania, another reasonably arduous proposition for someone in their mid seventies in the biting cold of December (his speaking itinerary didn't always give us the most congenial of venues for birding – but yes, we did find the Red-breasted Geese which were the whole point as far as John was concerned), he gave a lot of time to preparing some teaching for the pastor and his wife with whom we were staying. We noticed for the first time on that occasion how he had the ability to “go turbo” mentally when he needed to, and yet with his advancing years, to husband his energy when required. It was on that trip too that we were witnesses to his extraordinarily moving meeting with Mircea Cioată, now president of his denomination, who had risked imprisonment during the Communist years in order to smuggle John's books around the country.

Over the years his involvement with A Rocha became steadily greater. He helped us formulate a solid theological basis for the work we were doing, and joined us in several countries to plead the cause of caring for creation with Christian leaders. He wrote articles and forwards, and advised us on the wisdom of different alliances and potential distractions. I believe his own thinking was able to take shape through the challenge of seeing several of the practical conservation projects that A Rocha people were undertaking in places as diverse as Lebanon, Kenya and Southall in the UK. He helped us identify some wonderful leaders from the non-western non-white world, and he made it his business to turn them into what he called “ornitheologists..”.

We will miss him greatly – his gift for close friendship with both of us and the genuine interest in the family, the welcomes to the tiny London flat to plan the next trip over sandwiches provided by the equally indefatigable Frances, the knowledgeable delight in all he saw that was familiar, and the endless penetrating questions about all that was new to him. The simplicity of his lifestyle was a constant

reminder of his many friends around the world who lived with many difficulties, and who he always kept in his mind and his (meticulously organised) praying. He was a great field companion, and a true Christian, probably more profoundly converted than anyone else I have known.