

IN MEMORIAM

IN MEMORIAM: RICHARD P. FFRENCH, 1929–2010

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The science of ornithology has been richly endowed by the contributions of amateurs who often lacked proper training in science, yet contributed more to our knowledge of birds than many professional ornithologists. One such amateur is Richard ffrench, a humble school teacher who lacked a university degree in biology, yet for more than a quarter of a century compiled most of the available data on the status, distribution, and breeding of birds in the twin-island country of Trinidad and Tobago.

Born on 15 September 1929 in Aldershot, Hampshire, in England, Richard was the son of a major in the Indian Army and spent his early years in India before attending Blundell's School at Tiverton, in Devon, England. Conscripted for National Service from 1947 to 1950, Richard served for a year in the Education Corps in Malaya during 1949. While attending Balliol College of Oxford University in England, he met Margaret Southern, whom he married in 1953. After obtaining a degree in Classics, History, and Philosophy (*Litterae Humaniores*) and a Post-graduate Diploma in Education in 1955, he began searching for a job.

Richard's long career as an educator in the Caribbean began as an Assistant Teacher in Barbados, where he taught at the Lodge School from 1955 to 1958. He formed an Arts Club at the school, directed the Cameo Club Choir in Bridgetown, and enjoyed studying the island's birdlife.

While visiting Trinidad and Tobago in 1956, Richard became enchanted with the country's avifauna, which was much more diverse than that of Barbados, so he sought a job there. In 1958 he was appointed as an Assistant Teacher at St. Peter's School, on the sprawling compound of a refinery owned by Texaco in Point-a-Pierre, Trinidad, where he taught English, Latin, history, and music. He eventually became the Deputy Headmaster of the school in 1976 and remained there until 1984, when the refinery was nationalized by the government of Trinidad and Tobago, and the school was closed.

While in Trinidad, Richard became a certified

Master Bander for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and banded many thousands of birds from 1959 to 1985. Richard spent many hours in the field, often accompanied by his wife Margaret. A keen and cautious observer, Richard traveled extensively throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including the offshore islets, and kept meticulous records of birds seen by himself and others. His expeditions to the various offshore islets provided a cornucopia of data on the abundance, breeding, moult, and morphometrics of the birds on each islet. Richard also studied the biology of individual species, including the Scarlet Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*), Pearl Kite



Richard ffrench at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, Arima Valley, Trinidad, 1996. Photo by Edward Rooks.

(*Gampsonyx swainsonii*), Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*), Yellow-bellied Seedeater (*Sporophila nigracollis*), and Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*). He initiated the first annual Christmas Bird Count in Trinidad in 1969 and coordinated it until 1985.

During the period of 1961–2001, Richard published 60 scientific articles on birds in various technical journals, mostly in the *Journal of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club*, but also in several international ornithological journals and in a few broader regional journals. Richard also authored numerous articles on birds in local newspapers and magazines.

Richard's *opus magnum*, which subsequently became his major claim to ornithological fame, was a book that he began writing in 1964. Published in 1973 by the Livingston Publishing Company, *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago* provided detailed information on the status, habitat, range, subspecies, appearance, measurements, vocalizations, diet, nesting, and behavior of each bird species known to occur in the country. Minor revisions were published by Harwood Books in 1976, 1980, and 1985, and an even more detailed second edition was published by Cornell University Press in 1991. A long-anticipated third edition, with a new set of color plates, is rumored to appear at any time, but unfortunately Richard did not live long enough to see it in print.

In addition to Richard's prolific studies on the avifauna of Trinidad and Tobago, he was deeply involved with other organizations. Richard presided at the helm of the Asa Wright Nature Centre's board during 1970–1971 and subsequently promoted it at every opportunity. He also served as president of the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club (later renamed the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' club) and edited several issues of its journal. He served for more than 20 years on the Wildlife Conservation committee of the Ministry of Agriculture, and became a founding member and Honorary Secretary of the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust.

In recognition of his contributions to natural history, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago honored Richard with the Chaconia Medal (Silver) in 1984. In the same year he also received the award of Member of the British Empire from Her Majesty The Queen for his cultural and educational accomplishments in Trinidad and Tobago.

After 27 years in Trinidad and Tobago, Richard and Margaret reluctantly returned to England in 1985 and later moved to Scotland. Nevertheless, Richard remained actively engaged in Trinidad and

Tobago ornithology, often leading bird tours on the islands up until 2007, and publishing articles on various aspects of the country's ornithology. At a meeting of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology (later renamed the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds) in Trinidad in 1995, Richard was bestowed with an Award of Distinction for his ornithological studies.

After arriving in Trinidad in 1993 for my own 9-year sojourn, I first met Richard at the Asa Wright Nature Centre in late 1994, when we formed the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee. Richard was actively engaged with the committee for more than a decade until forced to resign due to failing health. In 1998, while riding the inter-island ferry to Tobago where I would spend a few hours birding with Richard and Margaret, the thought occurred to me that the University of the West Indies should honor Richard with an Honorary Doctorate degree. The chair of my department was delighted with the idea, but unfortunately never did the paperwork required to present it to the administration.

On the same ferry trip I also decided to honor Richard with a book on the ornithology of Trinidad and Tobago, so I solicited technical contributions from various authors, culminating in a 209-page monograph titled *Studies in Trinidad and Tobago Ornithology Honouring Richard ffrench* (Hayes and Temple 2002). It included 26 articles and notes written by 32 authors, including eight nationals from Trinidad and Tobago. Two articles highlighted Richard's life and achievements: *A biography of Richard ffrench* (written by P. R. Bacon) and *The ffrench connection: contributions of Richard ffrench to Trinidad and Tobago ornithology* (written by F. E. Hayes, C. L. Ramjohn, and N. Jones). The latter included a bibliography of his ornithological publications. Fearing Richard had somehow learned about the secret project, I was relieved to receive an e-mail from him in which he cheerfully expressed his surprise and gratitude after receiving a copy.

After a gradual decline in health, Trinidad and Tobago lost its most prolific ornithologist when Richard passed away on 10 May 2010, at the ripe age of 80. Richard left behind his wife Margaret, two sons, and two daughters.

LITERATURE CITED

- HAYES, F. E., AND S. A. TEMPLE (eds.). 2002. *Studies in Trinidad and Tobago ornithology honouring Richard ffrench*. Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, Occasional Paper 11:1–209.