

Phillip Alexander Clancey (1917–2001)

Phillip Clancey, noted as both an ornithologist and an artist, died in Durban in 2001. He was born in Glasgow in 1917. As a young man he was a field assistant to the famous ornithologist Colonel Meinertzhagen, an eccentric Englishman of German ancestry who had fought in the World War I East African campaign, and had at one time been a spy. They once nearly shot each other in a heated disagreement over bustards in Namibia. Guns were drawn before the hired skinner stepped between the protagonists. Sanity prevailed and tempers cooled. On another occasion Clancey fell ill in a remote spot and was abandoned to his fate by Meinertzhagen.



Phillip Clancey

Clancey himself saw service in World War II, where his pursuit of birds was probably a greater passion than the pursuit of Germans. He is on record as skinning a wryneck by torchlight in a trench during the battle of Crete. The specimen was of particular taxonomic importance.

Clancey had no formal tertiary education when he emigrated to South Africa in 1950. Nonetheless he was appointed curator of the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg. In the short time that he was in charge, he changed the appearance of the first two galleries downstairs completely. He moved the West African ethnological material out of gallery on the left, repainted, and restyled the entire gallery and turned it into a bird gallery. He taught himself to paint, most successfully, and did most of the artwork himself. Some of the murals are vast, and must have required immense dedication.

At the beginning of 1952 Clancey took up the position of director of the Durban Museum and Art Gallery where he remained until his retirement thirty years later.

He was a confirmed bachelor and the most ruthlessly dedicated and hardworking of ornithologists. He once said that there was no time for marriage. His professional life was everything to him. He produced over 700 scientific papers, mostly on taxonomy and biogeography. He was very well read in every sense, and enjoyed exercising his vocabulary when describing colour. He also wrote a number of books of which *The Birds of Natal and Zululand* (1964), the first comprehensive account of the birds of the province, *The Game Birds of South Africa* (1967) and *The Rare Birds of Southern Africa* (1985) are now valuable Africana. These he illustrated himself in his characteristic style, much admired.

His contributions to science were recognised by a number of awards and fellowships. In 1972 he was awarded the prestigious Gill Memorial Medal for services to ornithology, an award made irregularly, and only when an outstanding candidate is available. He received the honorary degree of Doctor of Science from the University of Natal in 1981.

Clancey had a famous professional rivalry with Colonel John Vincent, one time head of the Natal Parks Board and himself an ornithologist of note. On one occasion Vincent had him arrested for collecting without a permit. His shotgun was confiscated but, not deterred, Clancey bought it back at a subsequent auction.

Clancey never had much regard for unnecessary luxury, and retired to a small room in a residential hotel. He continued to write papers, but increasingly devoted himself to his painting. The style was unmistakable, rich colours, attention to detail, and always the correct ecological background. No more murals, by now there was great demand for his bird portraits. He was ever ready to paint pictures for his friends, charging on a sliding scale depending on his (always generous) assessment of the recipient's need, worthiness and finances. Admirers' opinions of his paintings mattered to him. One thought that the eye colour in a commissioned painting was wrong: Clancey corrected his 'error' on the spot with a single stroke of his paintbrush.

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To many, Clancey seemed a formidable figure. Imposing in stature as well as achievement, never one to waste words, he did not appear to seek friendships. Indeed, they might have interfered with work. Serious and polite, he was also shy; brusqueness was merely a defence. Once this barrier was overcome he enjoyed company. Now out came his subtle humour. He was a great story-teller, of detailed memory, who never ran out of something worth hearing. He was also modest, one reason why none of his stories have been recorded, except in the memories of those fortunate to hear them first hand.

At Clancey's memorial service tributes were paid. But the most impressive tribute, and the only one that would have embarrassed him, was the large number of his friends who came to wish him farewell.

DAVID JOHNSON