

Obituary—

Will Rolland 30/01/1915–02/04/2007



Will Rolland checking a reference

Plate 27

Photo: Tess Kloot

Will Rolland, a wildlife artist, publication production manager and an inspirational friend to many, died on 2 April this year, aged 92.

The Bird Observers Club was indeed very fortunate when, in 1981, it was seeking assistance with the production of the *Australian Bird Watcher* (*ABW*), and member Will Rolland offered his help. Will already had a background in printing, art and book production so his offer was readily accepted.

This led to a twelve-year involvement with *ABW*—a very rewarding association both for the Club and for Will. He was responsible for the layout

and covers for the journal and co-ordinated the collection of articles and material. As always, his contribution far exceeded the requirements of the work. The editor of *ABW* (now *Australian Field Ornithology*), Stephen Debus, wrote on Will's resignation from the *ABW* production team ('Thank you, Will Rolland', *ABW* March 1993): '[Will] often experimented in a continual effort to improve its presentation. He had to make difficult decisions about the content and plates for each issue, often went beyond the call of duty by obtaining plates and occasionally soliciting and typing articles, and he corrected jargon, errors etc.'

In addition to the *ABW* work, Will handled the art and design of the covers for the *Field Guide to Australian Birdsong* cassette series, the initial issues of the *Victorian Bird Report* and many of the Club's leaflets. He often came to the rescue by readily producing a much-needed illustration for an article or a pamphlet. In his own words, 'The Bird Observers Club piled brochures, publicity flyers, articles to illustrate, maps and diagrams, on to my drawing board...' Somehow he always found the time. Will was an active member of the Bird Observers Club of Australia in other ways, enjoying monthly meetings, outings and some memorable extended tours to the Kimberley, Cape York and Cameron Corner.

Will's passion for natural history began in Canberra where he was born. One

of his favourite childhood photos was of him as a baby in flowing robes in a pram, keenly observing a flower which he held. He attributed his early interest in birds to his mother and her copy of Leach's *An Australian Bird Book* which they used to identify the many birds seen in Canberra. He also had fond memories of wandering the bush at weekends with his uncle, studying plants and animals. His uncle gave him a small folding magnifying glass which he valued all his life.

The story of Will's early life is tied to that of early Canberra, told so delightfully in his book *Growing Up in Early Canberra*. In 1912 his father accepted enthusiastically the position of Resident Architect in Canberra within the Commonwealth Works Department. While his father was preoccupied with the plans for the City of Canberra, Will explored the surrounding countryside, developing keen powers of observation and record-keeping.

Will's formal education began when he was enrolled in school in Acton and later at Telopea Park in Canberra. When his father was transferred to South Australia in 1927, Will continued his education in Adelaide. He decided on a career in the ministry of the Presbyterian Church, following in the footsteps of his grandfather and uncle. First obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree at Adelaide University in 1936, he then graduated with a Bachelor of Theology at the University of Melbourne in 1940. He served parishes in Nyah West and Torquay, Victoria, each for two years, and entered fully into these communities with his wife Vi. However, continuing bouts of dermatitis forced him to leave the ministry, and he had to look to other occupations. Despite this setback, he always retained his work in pastoral care, particularly for the needy or underprivileged.

During his university years, Will also trained as an artist which proved valuable in his later life. When he moved from Torquay to Melbourne he took on a variety of jobs to support his young and growing family. These included different artwork commissions, such as medical illustration, but Will found his niche when he was offered the position of artist and production manager in the Joint Board of Christian Education, which he held for 27 years.

With intelligent foresight Will always planned ahead and before he retired from the Joint Board, he had already involved himself with the Bird Observers Club, producing *ABW*. At the same time he took on other creative challenges. Owing to his skills in line drawing, he was invited to provide vignettes for the first *Atlas of Australian Birds*. The original assignment was for 12 vignettes but, as suitable drawings for others could not be obtained, he eventually produced an astonishing 76!

One of the editors of the Atlas was ornithologist Pauline Reilly, and there arose another chapter in Will's life. Pauline invited Will to illustrate a children's book on the Fairy Penguin. This was followed by a successful series of small soft-covered books telling the life stories of 19 Australian and New Zealand birds and animals produced over a time-span of 14 years. Several were revised and reprinted in different format, even in a different language (*The Penguin that Walks at Night* was also produced in Japanese). The books won awards from the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales (Whitley Award) in 1987 and 1992 and the Wilderness Society (Environment Award for Children's Literature) in 1994.

Will poured an immense amount of energy into each of these books, researching and checking the accuracy of material he was depicting. As he said in an interview on this series: 'the author can say that this animal makes a burrow and lives in a burrow, but the artist must know what form that burrow takes, how far into the

earth it goes and whether it goes downhill or uphill'. Each book led him on an exciting journey of discovery, observing the creature in fine detail and in its natural habitat. He always sought out the scientific experts to ensure accuracy and correct taxonomy. Each book led to another circle of lifelong friends and colleagues.

Will also wrote and illustrated two books of his own, *Growing Up in Early Canberra*, published in 1988, and *The Tasmanian Tiger: The Elusive Thylacine* in 1997. He enjoyed the challenges of preparing these books with extensive research, meticulous proof-reading and a love of language that best expressed his thoughts and material. He never lost his enjoyment of reading and research.

During his long association with the printing world, Will saw the transition from manual compositing to electronic page-setting, a change he took in his stride. In later years, his computer literacy enabled him to keep in touch by email with family and friends far and wide. His productivity and creative skills were amazing. He built the family holiday home at Mount Martha largely on his own, and at the family home in Camberwell he maintained a charming garden that he and his wife Vi had created over the years. He was a talented watercolour artist, but he also used other techniques such as pen and ink and aquarelle for his book illustrations. He regularly contributed to the annual exhibitions of the Wildlife Art Society of Australasia. Being a perpetual scholar, he even enrolled in Chinese painting classes at the Council of Adult Education in his 80s.

Walking was a much loved pastime enjoyed for as long as he could manage. Legendary in the family was the walk he undertook during the vacation at the end of his first year at Ormond College. He walked alone for three weeks from Geelong to Adelaide via the Great Ocean Road, Mount Gambier and the Coorong. He inspired his own family with a love of walking and nature, especially on their holidays. In his later years he joined the Melbourne Bushwalkers Club, tackled the overland track in Tasmania with family and friends, and did walking trips in Europe and Alaska. For his 80th birthday treat, he was thrilled to go walking and camping on Mt Nelse with daughter Jenny and Euan Moore, and continued this annual adventure to different mountains around the state for several more years.

Will was devoted to his family and had a wide circle of treasured friends. He had a strong and happy marriage to Vi for 45 years and was a wonderful father and mentor to his children John, Betsy, Jenny and Heather. He followed each through their personal journeys with interest, love and care, and delighted in his growing family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Will was also an educator and knew the power of learning through teaching. Through his professional and outside activities, he loved to share his knowledge and experiences, especially with children. He enjoyed their often simple but pertinent questions. Through his research for his publications and keen eye, he saw the glaring need for greater knowledge about different species of birds, mammals and reptiles and the importance of preserving their habitats. He leaves a wealth of enduring legacies through his artwork, his books and his inspiration.

The Bird Observers Club of Australia is privileged to have benefitted from the talents of this remarkable man.

Tess Kloot and Jenny Rolland