

Calvert Noble-Rollin (1906-2004)



Calvert Noble-Rollin, who died on 9 April 2004 at the age of ninety-eight had been a member of the Natural History Society since 1953 and had a lifelong passion for trying to understand birds and their behaviour. This began as a small child at Greystones, in Glanton, when the family moved there in 1910 and continued with astonishing single mindedness throughout his life. He also wished to share his interest with others and began in 1930 by setting up the Research and Educational Centre at Glanton. It was at this time he began to correspond with amateur naturalists around the world, organising dawn chorus studies. In 1935 he took his ex-lifeboat *Watchers' Link* to Nova Scotia to spend a year travelling around the coast, bird watching and recording his observations on daily bird behaviour. As the arctic winter set in his boat became stuck in the

ice and he lived off potatoes and some fish that one of the locals dropped outside the boat. The following paragraph from his unpublished book seems to sum up his unending interest in everything that occurs in the natural world and his total lack of problems about heat or cold. When getting out of an aeroplane in the Sahara Desert the air hostess remarked that he still had his rain coat on (and probably his tweed jacket underneath).

THE BED ON ICE

Here and there round the edge of the harbour were cracks in the ice. The harbour was just one big chunk of frozen sea and the cracks were caused by the mass pulling away from the sides. Down these cracks could be seen some cold green water. I tried to wash a pan in this salty concoction but the first swish round turned it all into a mushy soup of crystals. When the soup was poured onto a rock it turned to ice on the spot.

By the middle of February the Nova Scotian winter had everything in such an iron cold grip that it fulfilled the Petit de Gratians' direct prophesies. Oxen and horses pulled their loads across the wide harbour at any point: Isle Madame and Petit de Grat ceased to be separate islands. 'Warm' houses became cool houses and I could not produce any warmth at all in *Watchers' Link*. In fact, I came to the conclusion that it was no warmer in the cabin than it was outside. One night to test this idea I loaded up the sledge with the bedclothes from the boat and made up a bed out on the frozen harbour. Here I retired for the night.

It was lovely watching the whole uninterrupted sky of bright stars glistening in the cold air; later in the night the moon came up. Several Petit de Gratiens came close to peek at the icy couch. I slept soundly and awakened just as the dawn light began to creep in from the east. One or two people were up early and came across the ice to collect what they thought would be a corpse. The crows were very inquisitive too, at this bundle out on the harbour ice, flying round and sweeping low, trying to get the hang of it. I rose, dressed and went for a sharp walk. On returning I found a crowd of people on the frozen harbour examining the place where I had slept. Apparently nobody had ever bedded out on the harbour ice before, they had thought it would be impossible. In result it turned out to be just as comfortable, or uncomfortable, out there as it was in *Watchers' Link* and there was no noticeable difference in the temperature. This the inhabitants found hard to believe. The episode caused a sensation. Two people made a four mile journey across the snows of Isle Madame just to look at the spot where the bed had been. At Samson's Cove, which I visited in the afternoon, they said they had been talking of nothing else. Eventually the news reached the Halifax press where the incident was reported in detail.

In the extremes of cold I was finding it very difficult to keep the boat clean. With the floor permanently frozen, any moisture, anything damp or water spilled, turned to ice and became part of the floor. A boiled over kettle on the stove sent a trickle of water and ashes down the cabin floor which became a ridge of icy stone in the latter part of its journey. A knocked over bucket of water became a minor skating rink at the door. The moisture ran down the upper part of the walls when I thawed the boat out in the daytime, and further accumulated along the edges of the mattresses, already long frozen to the wall. The edges of the blankets now began to freeze against the wall. In a way this was an advantage as it prevented the covers from slipping off in the night, but it also produced rending, tearing noises in the darkness when I turned over and ripped them from the wall. The wall now began to accumulate feathery fringes of frozen blanket edge along the bed level. The local people were surprised how well I stood the cold. They had their noses and ears frozen. I never suffered from these disabilities and my hands, unlike theirs, were never chapped, frostbitten or had chilblains. They attributed the difference mainly to this being my first Canadian winter. Probably the extremes of cold which I lived in, day and night, conditions much more rigorous than they were enduring, helped to harden me.

Having survived a night outside myself, it seemed an idea to go out in a subsequent morning and see how the birds greeted the icy dawn. I left *Watchers' Link* at 6.30am and went down in the semi-darkness to the shed where the House Sparrows roosted, but there was complete silence. At 6.53 a Redpoll began flying round repeatedly calling. It was the first bird to herald the coming day. Two minutes later the sky became appreciably lighter. There was a slight breeze from the North-west and the air was intensely cold. At 6.56 a Raven called, announcing that he too was awake. Ten minutes later the Crows joined in and began streaming past. The first rooster did not crow until 7.12, losing his place as the official opener of the chorus. Seven minutes later House Sparrows began to murmur and the first gull, probably a Herring Gull, flew

over silently at 7.39. It was not much of a beginning to a February morning but then there is little encouragement in a dawn of ice and snow.

From Chapter 10 of Calvert's book *Watchers' Link* (the story of his year alone on a boat in Canada in the 1930s).

After surviving the winter on *Watchers' Link*, Calvert sailed the now severely leaking vessel to Halifax harbour where he beached it before it sank. In 1937 Lillian Edgar travelled out from England, and they were married in Churchill. Throughout their long marriage she supported and encouraged Calvert in his ornithological studies and looked after Glanton on the many occasions when Calvert was travelling to various parts of the world.

During the 1950s he became involved with the Society through the use of the research facilities at the Farne Islands Study Centre. At this time the Society organised the parties staying in the tower on Inner Farne. He booked a number of weeks over the years and took groups out there to study the daily behaviour of the seabirds. Two of these enthusiastic students were Hugh and Stella Chambers, who went out in 1957 with Calvert to stay in the tower and who are now better known to our members as our librarians. The research they did into the daily behaviour of the seabirds was published in the *Transactions*. During this time he was in correspondence with Grace Hickling concerning the running of the tower and this and other original material and diaries will eventually be donated to the Society for the archives via his son David. He also went out during the winter and stayed on the islands. He communicated with the mainland by homing pigeon, which carried rather brief messages to Glanton. On one occasion he was stranded by storms and had run out of food except for a number of tins of green peas. The boatman, Billy Shiel's father, was so concerned that he was about to call out the lifeboat when at dawn the wind dropped and they got him off.

Calvert Noble-Rollin was well known to a many members of the Society through his work for the Extra-Mural Department of Newcastle University, teaching ornithology from 1952 to the 1980s. During this time large numbers of people came to his classes with perhaps only a mild interest, and were inspired by his enthusiasm for his subject and his ability to make the most mundane looking bird sound exciting and interesting, from the flock behaviour of tits to the 'horizontal fluff' of the song thrush. After retiring from lecturing at the university, he continued up until the age of eighty-eight to give regular lectures to a small group of his long-standing students who came from as far afield as Cumberland and Newcastle to listen to his talks. He also continued well into his eighties to lead occasional field meetings. After the death of his wife Lillian he continued to live at Greystones until he was ninety-one, maintaining a very Spartan way of life and still cutting all his own firewood for the solitary open fire in the house.

A truly amazing individual, he will be fondly remembered by all his friends and students.

David C Noble Rollin & June Holmes
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NOTES

Date of Birth 23 January 1906 at Monkton Village near Hebburn, South Tyneside.

Photo taken Aug 1973 on the Farne Islands by D C Noble Rollin.

