

In Memoriam

Peter Whelan (1934–1999)

Mary Ellen Hebb

This summer, on 14 August 1999, Peter Whelan, *Globe and Mail* columnist, and to many, the conscience of the birding community, died at his home in Toronto. His death did not come as a surprise to the very few people who knew he was ill, although for the first year after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he seemed surprisingly untouched by the disease. But it made up for lost time in 1999, swiftly and steadily depriving Peter of his mobility, and bringing at times crushing pain, which Peter bore with astonishing grace, the one tell-tale sign being the fierceness with which he rejected any overtures of pity or despair. And although by the time he made his annual trip to Point Pelee in May, it was clear to onlookers that he was seriously ill, he insisted on maintaining a near-normal routine, and on continuing to wear the appallingly heavy 10x50 binoculars around a neck that by then could hardly bear the weight of a shirt-collar. I hope that among the many other things that Peter learned about himself in those last months was that he had real courage.

Peter was born in Welland, Ontario, on 22 May 1934. His family lived on the same street as his

father's four siblings and their families, and was thus an extended family in the fullest sense! It was his father who encouraged his interest in the natural things still so abundantly around them in the Welland of the 30s and 40s, although, as Peter was later to recount in one of the few very personal columns that he wrote for the *Globe*, "Dad's identifications weren't always correct!" Perhaps that was his first lesson in scepticism. One of the things I remember him telling me during our first telephone conversation was that there was no species of bird anywhere that someone somewhere couldn't mistake for another species!

By the age of 18-19, he had become a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. That job lasted only a year (although in many ways, he remained a teacher all his life). By 1954, he had begun to work on what was to be his true calling: writing. He began with the *Welland Tribune* as both editor and reporter, then went on in 1958 to the *Brantford Expositor*. In 1965, he left the *Expositor*, took a six-month birding vacation to Florida, and then returned to take up his craft again.

Passionate about justice all his life, he had delayed moving to

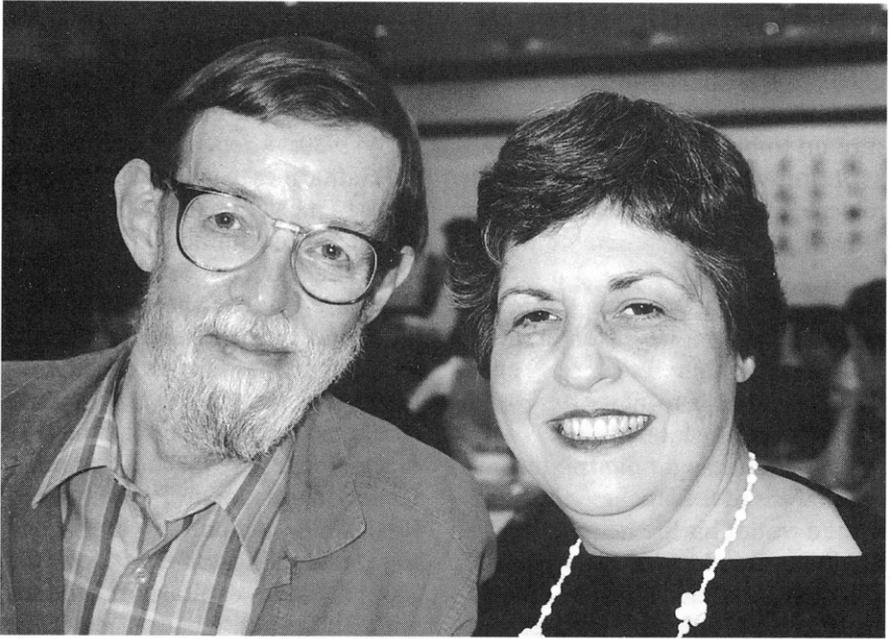


Figure 1: Peter and Elizabeth Whelan. Photo by Cathy Lu.

Toronto for many years, because he would not cross the picket line set up by striking typesetters. After a brief stint at the *Toronto Star*, he began to work for the *Globe and Mail* as an editor. By 1968, the frustration of reading other people's writing without doing any himself, got to him, and he arranged to be "demoted" in order to become a reporter and writer again. In this capacity he wrote on a wide variety of subjects (balking, however, when the *Globe* wanted him to do the City Hall beat, and duly punished with an assignment to the police beat!).

It was also around this time that he met his wife-to-be,

Elizabeth, in Montreal, on the very last day of Expo 67. She was a hostess in the American pavilion, but Peter actually found her in a Montreal restaurant. He hung around and stared at her for so long that she finally said something to him, whereupon he was able to claim for the rest of his life that she had picked him up! In fact, he knew within hours of meeting her that she was the woman he would marry (she didn't, but he did, and indeed they lived happily ever after).

In the early 1970s, Peter sold the *Globe* on the idea of having an environmental beat, and he became the first environmental reporter in English Canada. He remained at

this desk until 1977, when he left the *Globe* with the intention of becoming a short-story writer. In this, unfortunately, he did not measure up to his own standards; as far as I know, his work was never rejected by a publisher, only by himself. He didn't like anything he wrote!

Deciding at this point that he had to earn money (somehow I can't imagine that Peter would ever have allowed Liz to support him; he was quite old-fashioned about some things), Peter taught himself technical analysis of the stock market, and for the rest of his life he remained a fascinated student of its mysteries and machinations. (Elizabeth says Peter was a "lifelong learner" of many things, and the stock market was one of those.)

That same year, on 16 November 1977, Peter began to write the bird column as a regular feature of the *Globe and Mail*. And although, for a brief time, it was taken over by another writer, and although every now and then the *Globe* either dumped the column or tried to bury it in what can only be called the bowels of the paper, Peter remained, and prevailed. And it strikes me as some kind of fair return that, at the end, when Peter could no longer sit up at the computer long enough to complete a column, yet remained ever hopeful that the cancer would go into remission, he kept the paper dangling for weeks ("Of course I'll be back",

he'd say), and they'd dutifully report "Peter Whelan Will Return" in each Saturday edition.

I first met Peter in the very early 1980s when my back yard in St. Catharines was swarming with House Finches. I had gone from two to at least ten sunflower seed feeders to help out a poor little Tufted Titmouse that had showed up in my yard and was trying to compete with the finches for food. Each new feeder I'd put out for the titmouse would be swiftly overwhelmed by more finches. So I'd add another feeder...and so on. Right around then, Peter announced in his column that Kingston was now the House Finch capital of Canada, with 31 finches. I had at least 250, and I called Clive Goodwin to say so! Soon after that, Richard Knapton, recently appointed professor at Brock University, showed up at my door to see if I was just a nutty little old lady with serious ID problems, or not! Although it was nearly a disaster for my reputation (only one female eventually showed up that day), I was ultimately deemed to be reasonably sane, and in due time I received a call from Peter to discuss my plethora of House Finches. We had many chats after that, but always on the telephone.

Many months later, I was standing with other local birders at the marina in Niagara-on-the-Lake watching the 4 p.m. flypast of gulls, when a voice behind me said, "Of

course, these Niagara birders can't even tell a Purple Finch from a House Finch!" Rising recklessly to the challenge, I snarled: "Oh yeah?????" and turned to do battle with whatever idiot had said the nasty words. The "idiot" was grinning, and I should have got the hint, but in fact quite a few words were exchanged (as I dug myself deeper and deeper into the hole), before I began to register that the voice was awfully familiar. Peter (because of course, that's who it was) had had me pointed out to him, and then to the huge enjoyment of all around had tossed out the bait and got this foolish fish to rise to it! That was the cementing of our friendship.

Peter's bird column did many different things for different people. At first it was simply local, hot-line-rarity oriented. But then the *Globe* demanded that he make it a truly national column, and Peter responded with what I believe was ultimately a much better product. Relying on a huge network of informants in every part of Canada, he continued to report on rarities, but also painted a new and fuller picture of bird life in the country: interesting trends, curious avian behaviour, anomalies, and quite often, unusual human encounters with birds. The column drew in people with only a passing interest in birds, partly because by never reverting to birding jargon (at least not without explaining it), it maintained its connection with non-bird-

ing readers, and because it was so exquisitely written that it was irresistible. He explained birds, bird life and bird chasing to outsiders, and made it all interesting.

For us birders, he added a rich dimension to our understanding of our own hobby. There was a very special way in which Peter could write about a bird or an event and make it more alive, more lovely or more comical than you'd ever realized. But once you'd read his words, why yes, he was right! It was like that! I will never forget, for example, the opening lines of the column he wrote after being taken by Jon McCracken of Bird Studies Canada to see the nesting Prothonotary Warbler site: "In a secret place, we wade through tea-brown water under ancient trees. A golden bird sings out its triumph in owning this place, where the lighting is more magnificent than a cathedral's." Did the *Globe*, or the many editors that Peter dealt with over the years, ever really realize what an astonishing writer they had on their hands?

Peter had high writing standards, and high ethical standards as well, not only for himself, but for the birders he was reporting on. He occasionally used his column to scare birders into behaving honorably in the field. Ultimately, there were people he found it very hard to like, especially those that cheated, lied, or felt they were above the rules. In his application to one of the cancer support groups (yes, you

have to apply!), Peter was asked how well he was succeeding in making friends with those he had never liked. Peter just had to be honest. He wrote: "Working on it...working on it...!"

Let me leave it to another great writer, Fred Bodsworth, to make some closing comments: "I had a huge regard and admiration for Peter as a writer, birder and friend.

He was someone as rare and special as the birds he wrote about. I used to tell him some of his columns should go in a textbook for journalism schools as examples of writing that could be spare and tight, a minimum of words, but still have maximum impact and imagery. ... My Saturday mornings have an aching hole in them that will not easily be filled." Indeed. Rest in peace, Peter.

Mary Ellen Hebb, Bird Studies Canada, Box 160, Port Rowan, Ontario
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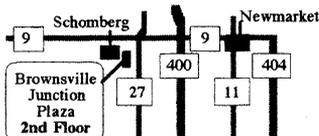
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