

Fred Bodsworth circa mid-1980s. *Photo: Bodsworth family archives.*

## IN MEMORIAM

# Fred Bodsworth (1918 - 2012)

*Glenn Coady*

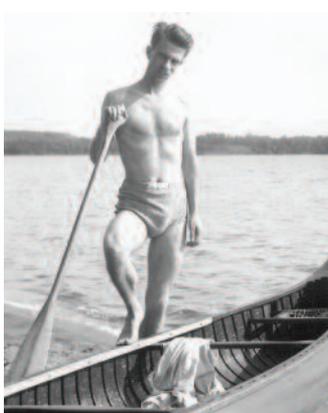
CHARLES FREDERICK “FRED” BODSWORTH was born on 11 October 1918 in Port Burwell, Ontario. His mother was Viola May Williams from Houghton Corners and his father, Arthur John Bodsworth, had emigrated from Watford, England to Port Burwell less than a decade earlier. He was named after an uncle who had been killed in the Great War.

Fred graduated from Port Burwell public and high schools and after working in the tobacco fields and on tug boats in Elgin County, he decided that there had to be an easier and more interesting way to make a living. He went on to pursue a career in journalism, working freelance for the *Port Burwell Enterprise*, *London Free Press* and *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* during the Great Depression, as a full-time reporter for the *St. Thomas Times-Journal* (1940-1943), a reporter and editor for the *Toronto Daily Star* and *Weekly Star* (1943-1946) and staff writer and editor at *Maclean's Magazine* (1947-1955). Since 1955, Fred had pursued a career as a freelance writer and editor, publishing four novels: *Last of the Curlews* (1955, Toronto and New York, Dodd Mead); *The Strange One* (1959, Toronto and New York, Dodd Mead); *The Atonement of Ashley Morden* (1964, Toronto and New York, Dodd Mead); and *The Sparrow's Fall* (1967, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart and New York, Doubleday). Fred also wrote and edited for several non-fiction titles including: *The People's Health: Canada and WHO* (with Brock Chisholm), Canadian Association for Adult Education, Toronto, 1949; *Maclean's Canada: Portrait of a Country* (one essay among many others by famous Canadians), McClelland and Stewart, 1960; *The Pacific Coast* volume of the *Illustrated Natural History of Canada*, a Natural Science of Canada series, 1970; and *Wilderness Canada* (with other authors), Clarke Irwin, Toronto, 1970. In his freelance writing assignments, he

often warned of the coming perils of global warming long before it had become a household term. In 2003, he was honoured by the Writers' Trust with the Matt Cohen Award for lifetime achievement in writing. On 11 June 2005, he was hosted at a ceremony in his hometown when the Elgin County Library Board re-named their Port Burwell library branch in his honour. Fred was a voracious life-long learner and self-taught naturalist whose keen observations and insights in the field, combined with an extensive array of natural history knowledge, earned him the respect of both his birding peers and scientific ornithologists around the world.

His love of nature started as a very young boy with an interest in butterflies, and later birds, in his hometown of Port Burwell. In what might almost be considered heresy for any Canadian boy of that era, Fred traded a pair of his skates and a bicycle pump for his first butterfly guide. Obviously it was clear pretty early on where his priorities lay. By his teens, Fred was scouring the woods, meadows, beaches and the shores of Otter Creek as he began to focus on a life-long interest in all aspects of the natural world. In the late 1930s, he and friends built a box trap to capture Bank Swallows for banding studies on the many high sand banks over Lake Erie.

On 6 June 1942, he organized a field hike for the St. Thomas Nature Club at Springwater Park which was attended by a large group of local teachers. Among those teachers was a lady named Margaret, who Fred described as the



Fred birding in the early 1950s. *Photo: Hugh Halliday*; 9 weeks old in Port Burwell, Ontario in December 1918. *Photo: C. Gamble*; Fred with his canoe in the mid-1940s. *Photo: Bodsworth family archives.*

most beautiful woman in the county. A quote from his diary that day reads: “Met Marg Banner and dated her up for a week from Sunday”. The two dated for a couple of years, often seeing free movies at the theatre courtesy of Fred’s press pass, and on 8 July 1944 they were married. They spent their honeymoon at Camp Billie Bear in Muskoka, a retreat that became their introduction to the Precambrian Shield, its towering white pines, deep, cool waters and the flora and fauna of Ontario’s north. It

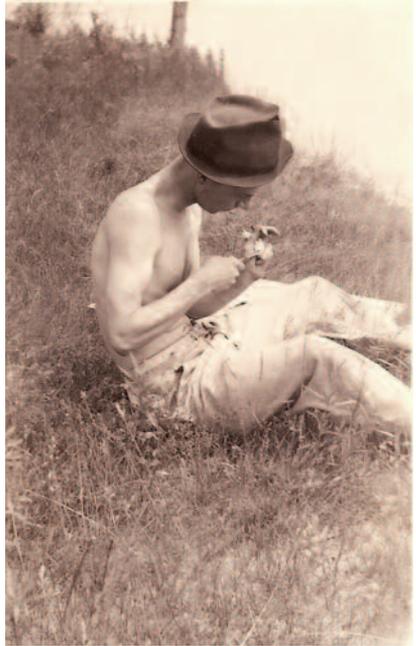
was here during his honeymoon that Fred first met Jim Baillie of the Division of Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum and began a close friendship of over a quarter century that helped in introducing him to the many naturalists in Toronto as well as opening many doors in furthering his ornithological pursuits. After moving to Toronto, Fred and Margaret bought a home in the Kew Beach area and started a family, having daughters Barbara and Nancy and son Neville in the ensuing years.

Fred Bodsworth banding Bank Swallows  
just east of Port Burwell circa 1939.

*Photo: Frank Stephenson*

In the early 1950s, Fred was formally diagnosed with dystonia musculorum deformans, a hereditary neurological movement disorder, that he suffered with from childhood, and to varying degrees, for the rest of his life. In late 1946, the condition had become so problematic that he was eventually fired from his job with the *Toronto Star*. With a natural “glass is half-full” aplomb, Fred came to see this as the best thing that ever happened to him, as it led to his signing on as a writer and editor with *Macleans* magazine, gaining national exposure and a life-long friendship with fellow editor Pierre Berton.

In the spring of 1954, Fred wrote a short novelette for the 15 May issue of *Macleans* magazine entitled “Last of the Curlews”, accompanied by illustrations by well-known editorial cartoonist Duncan Macpherson. In that era, *Macleans* magazine was a far more literary publication than it is today, more akin to the *New Yorker* than to a news magazine like *Time*, as in its current incarnation. Many of Canada's most famous and successful writers often published short pieces of fiction in its pages. When *Last of the Curlews* was published in *Macleans*, the overwhelming positive reader response far eclipsed that of any other work the magazine had ever published and Fred was encouraged to expand the work into a larger novel format. The completed



Fred and Margaret Bodsworth on their honeymoon  
at Camp Billie Bear in Muskoka in 1944.

*Photo: Bodsworth family archives.*



Fred Bodsworth employing his home-made box trap for capturing and banding Bank Swallows from the sandy banks high above Lake Erie. *Photo: Frank Stephenson*

novel version of *Last of the Curlews*, accompanied by over 40 peerless scratch-board illustrations by artist/naturalist Terry Shortt, provided a fictionalized account of the last pair of Eskimo Curlews and was published by Dodd Mead in February 1955.

The book was immediately received enthusiastically by the public. It has since been widely cited as one of the finest pieces of natural history-based fiction ever written. The novel's genius is that it transforms the reader's appreciation for the extraordinary life experiences that migratory birds encounter and the challenges they must overcome on a daily basis. It uses the tragic story of the Eskimo Curlew as a parable to impart a sense of both the gravity of extinction and the sinister role played by the often wanton hand of mankind on the natural world. The book was chosen for inclusion as a *Readers' Digest* novel selection and eventually went on

to sell in excess of three million copies — an improbable result for a love story with no human characters, nor any dialogue. His use of the 'Gantlet' sections as a literary device, in order to explain what was known of Eskimo Curlew life history to the unfamiliar reader, was blended masterfully with the fictional story. In all the years since it was first published it has never been out of print. The book has been translated into twelve foreign languages and was adapted into an animated film by Hanna-Barbera Productions that first aired on the American Broadcasting Corporation's After School Special on 4 October 1972. It won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Children's Programming in 1973.

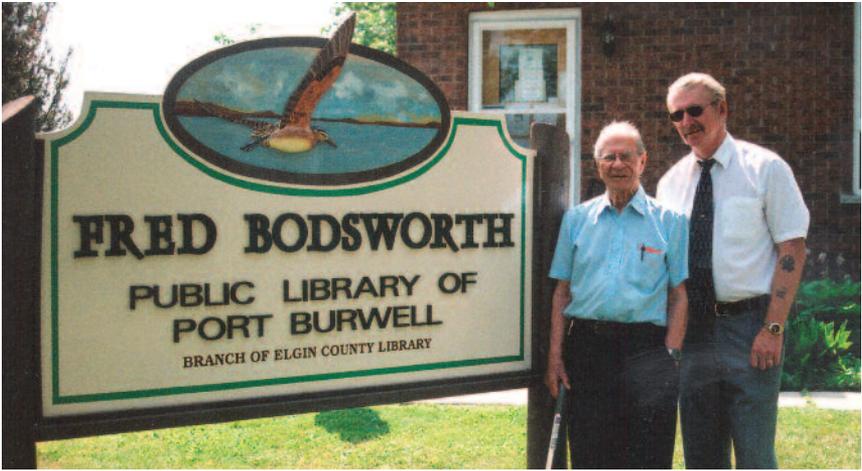
Fred made incalculable contributions to natural history in Ontario. His correspondence on natural history matters stretches back even to a personal relationship with W.E. Saunders, the

legendary London-area naturalist of the late-19th and early-20th centuries and one of Fred's early heroes. On 27 July 1949, Fred discovered the first Hooded Warbler nest for Canada at the White's Woods section of Springwater Conservation Area southwest of Aylmer. Fred wrote a very nice account of this find in an essay in the 2004 monograph *Birds of Elgin County – A Century of Change* published by the Naturalists of Elgin County. The used nest was collected and is in the nest collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fred was a much-sought leader of worldwide ornithological tours to various destinations including Japan, Poland, Africa and India, to name but a few. In 1985, he and Margaret were able to tour both Poland and parts of the Soviet Union with Russian ornithologists with the local royalties from sales of *Last of the Curlews* that were not permitted to be taken out of Russia. Fred's own lifetime of personal ornithological records was heavily drawn upon in the production of the 2004 monograph *Birds of Elgin County – A Century of Change*. He served as President of the Toronto Field Naturalists in 1960 and 1961. Fred was a long-time Director and former President (1964-1967) of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (now Ontario Nature) and was instrumental in their establishment of the Dorcas Bay Nature Reserve. He was an Honorary Director (since 1970) of the Long Point Bird Observatory and Bird Studies Canada, and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the James L. Baillie



Fred participating in wilderness survival skills training in the early 1950s. Photo: Canadian National Defense Department

Memorial Fund for Ornithology (1975-1989), which was very appropriate, since the late Jim Baillie had been a close personal friend of his for many years. Fred was one of the longest-serving members of the Brodie Club (since 1953), the Toronto Ornithological Club (since 1949; becoming an honorary member in 2002) and the Ontario Field Ornithologists (since 1983) at the time of his death, and he always thoroughly enjoyed the meetings of each of these clubs, where he was still a regular attendee into the summer of this year. True to Fred's style and sense of whimsy, his 90th birthday party was held in Kerr Park and featured a tour of the adjacent Bracebridge sewage lagoons. Among many speeches made after a walk around the lagoons, Fred delivered the line of the day when he finished his speech with the words "Oh, to be 80 again!."



In 2005, Fred was hosted in his hometown at a ceremony where the Port Burwell branch of the Elgin County Library was named in his honour.

*Photo: Tara Hammah*



Fred Bodsworth and Glenn Coady examining specimens of Eskimo Curlew in the Royal Ontario Museum bird room in 2002.

*Photo: Leslie Johnston*

There is likely no better way to describe Fred's novels than by using his own words (as he prepared them for a brief biography in *Canada Writes!*, the Writers' Union of Canada's first members' directory in 1977): "The major part of my work has been novels linking human and animal characters in a fiction format with strong natural history content and wilderness backgrounds.

The nature storyteller who uses birds or mammals in fictional situations treads a narrow path if he wishes to be scientifically authentic and portray them as they really are. On the one hand, he has to personalize his animal as well as his human characters or he simply has no dramatic base for his story. Yet if the personalizing of animal characters goes too far and begins turning them into furry or feathered people — the nature writer's sin of anthropomorphism — the result is maudlin nonsense that is neither credible fable nor fiction. I enjoy the challenge of presenting wildlife characters as modern animal behaviour studies are showing them to be — creatures dominated by instinct, but not enslaved by it, beings with intelligence very much sub-human in some areas yet fascinatingly super-human in others. Out of the

blending of human and animal stories comes the theme that I hope is inherent in all my books: that man is an inescapable part of all nature, that its welfare is his welfare; that to survive he cannot continue acting and regarding himself as a spectator looking on from somewhere outside."

I cannot envision capturing the essence of Fred's writing more completely or eloquently. The impact of Fred's writing, particularly that of *Last of the Curlews*, was equally as influential as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) in the stirring up of a collective ecological conscience among society that gave impetus and urgency to the popular post-War environmental movement.

Perhaps the most telling fact that I could share about Fred's life is that among the many hundreds of friends and acquaintances that I have shared with Fred over our friendship of several decades, I have never heard a single one of them utter anything but praise and admiration for his knowledge, wisdom, infectious inquisitiveness, sense of both humour and fairness, and his love for family, community, birds and the environment. That truly is the exemplary hallmark of a life well lived.

Fred passed away peacefully on Saturday, September 15th at Toronto's Scarborough General Hospital. He was predeceased by his loving wife Margaret Banner on 17 February 1998, and is survived by his daughters Barbara and Nancy, his son Neville, grandchildren Wendy, Erin, Lisa, Lori, Tyler, Tara,

**One of my own favourite** pieces of Fred's writing is an article entitled "Why Wilderness?", a call-to-arms for enlightened wilderness preservation, which was published in the December 1967 issue of *The Ontario Naturalist*. Here is one of my favourite passages:

"Conservationists are not trying to stop progress or to halt further development of soil and forest resources; but if we believe that man's heritage includes not only the works of man but also the works of creation, we have an obligation to the future to ensure that good samples of creation's multiformity of natural patterns are preserved. To argue that wilderness preservation is ludicrous because we already have too much Canadian wilderness is like arguing that we don't need to preserve our Tom Thomsons or Krieghoffs because we have galleries full of other paintings."

Margaret, Aidan and Cameron, and great-grandchildren Cristian and Holden.

I learned the intricacies of shorebird identification leaning heavily on books crafted by men named Fuertes, Forbush, Peterson and Godfrey, but fully comprehending them as "minute specks of earth-bound flesh challenging an eternity of earth and sky" was a gift bestowed on me by Fred Bodsworth.

A fond adieu to our friend Fred — he will be dearly missed by countless friends and fans alike.

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*Glenn Coady*, 330 Crystal Beach Boulevard,  
Whitby, Ontario L1N 9Z7

E-mail: glenn\_coady@hotmail.com