

# THE AUK

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF  
ORNITHOLOGY

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VOL. 91

JANUARY 1974

No. 1

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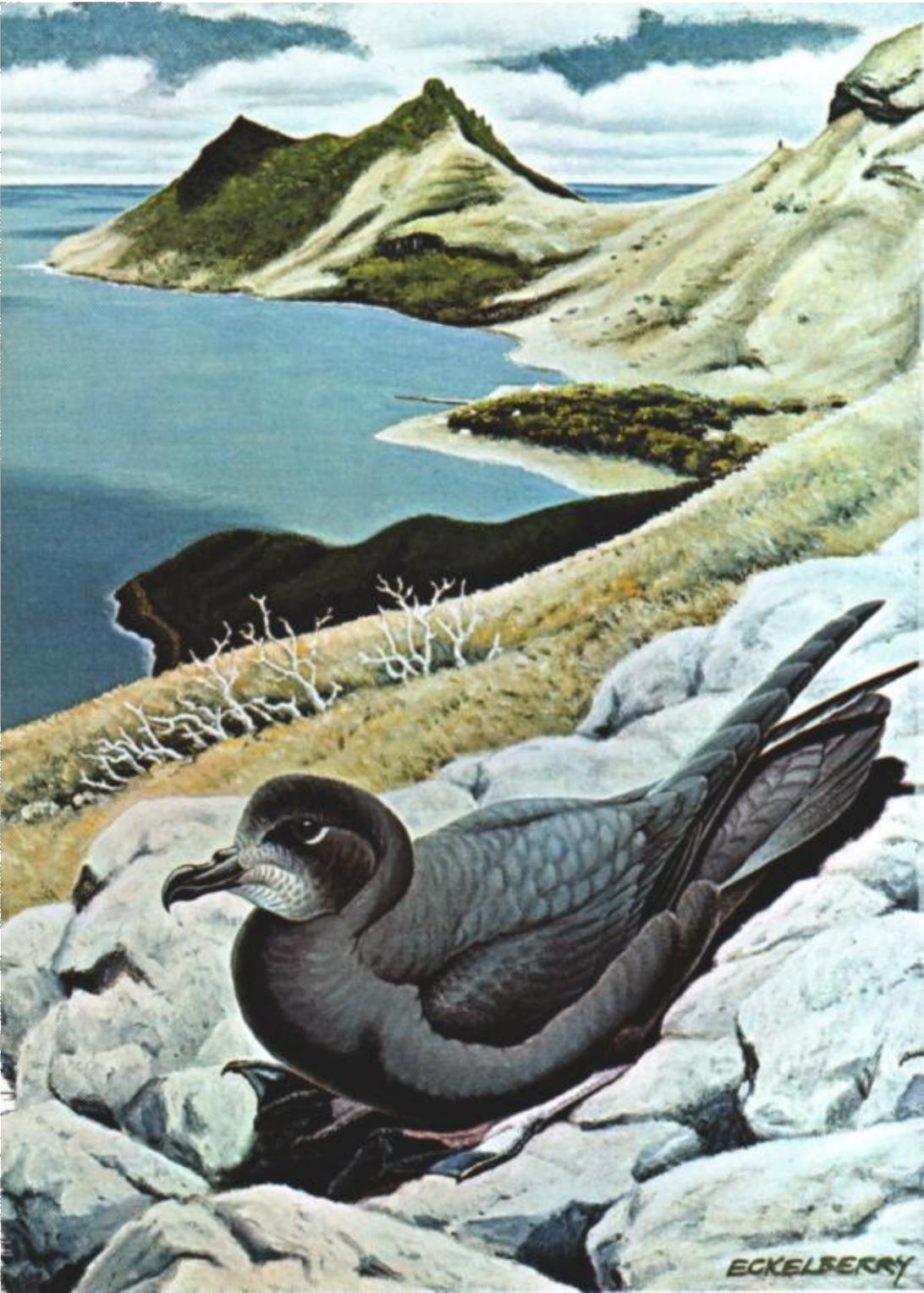
## IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY APRIL 29, 1887–MARCH 20, 1973

DEAN AMADON

BORN in Brooklyn where his father was a secondary school official, Robert Cushman Murphy's family soon moved farther out on Long Island to Mt. Sinai. In a diary "kept for less than one month in July and August 1903, the year before I entered Port Jefferson High School," we find that he was already a naturalist and acquiring an interest in things nautical. A few scattered entries give the flavor: "July 25, arose at half past four and went out after bluefish in Captain Davis' sloop-rigged, flat-bottomed sailboat . . . July 27. My father's fiftieth birthday. Worked on the chicken-house all morning, and stayed home in afternoon while the rest of the family went to the Sound beach for a swim . . . Aug. 3. Sawed wood, took a swim, and made a bow of red cedar. Caught a fledgling olive-backed [Parula] warbler . . . Aug. 8. Cleaned ten flounders in 25 minutes." Bob went through Port Jefferson High School, walking the 3 miles each way to and from home as his daughter comments "in approved great-man's-childhood fashion."

He then went on to Brown University and while in Providence met his future wife, Grace Alison Barstow. A quaint little booklet, second edition, 1886, gives the history of cooking and heating devices from ancient times and the part played by the Barstow Stove Company of Providence in their improvement. Mrs. Murphy and their three children, Mrs. Alison Conner, the Rev. Amos C. Barstow Murphy, and Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy, Jr., survive him.

Grace and Bob were married shortly after he graduated with a Ph.B. in 1911, but she insisted that he accept an opportunity to sign on as seaman (actually naturalist) on the whaling brig 'Daisy,' built in Setauket, Long Island in 1872 by Nehemiah Hand, but sailing out of New Bedford. Perhaps the last of whaling cruises under sail, this voyage, including a stay of several months on South Georgia Island, was the formative period in Murphy's career as a scientist. His bookplate bears the likeness of a South



MURPHY'S PETREL, *Pterodroma ultima* Murphy 1949,  
on Rapa Island, eastern Polynesia

From an oil painting by Don R. Eckelberry. Plate contributed by  
Dr. Murphy's colleagues on the staff of  
The American Museum of Natural History

Georgia elephant-seal, and his researches there on the King Penguin and other marine birds channeled his interests for the remainder of his life.

The 'Daisy' was captained by Benjamin Cleveland, a Bible-reading Puritan who, as Murphy said years later "thought that civilization extended in a belt 40 miles wide from New Bedford to Boston, and that everyone else was a heathen." Learning that young Murphy was a Unitarian, he remarked that members of that denomination "don't believe in a goddamned thing and live up to it every day of their life." But Murphy got along with the gruff old boy, and helped him with his navigation. He also struck up a friendship with the ship's barrel-maker, one José Correia, and taught him to make bird skins. Correia later spent years on the 'France' with Rollo Beck on the Whitney South Sea Expedition and went with Murphy to the Gulf of Panama.

The Murphys spent their first decade of married life in Brooklyn, where their three children were born. In 1921 they bought a house in suburban Bronxville, Westchester County, New York, where the children spent their school years, and Bob's tall, spare frame was conspicuous among the commuters on the Harlem Division of the New York Central. The family spent their summers on Long Island in a cottage on a hillside above Mt. Sinai Harbor. In the late '30s after the children were grown, they moved to Long Island to live year-round, selling the Bronxville place and buying one at Old Field Point in Setauket. In 1969 Bob and Grace moved to a smaller place in Stony Brook, where the naming of the "Robert Cushman Murphy Junior High School" in his honor pleased Bob greatly. He would be even more pleased to know that he and Grace were recently elected to the Long Island Hall of Fame.

As early as 1906, before entering college, Murphy had spent a year at the American Museum, where his first task was to assist Frank Chapman in checking descriptions and reading proof for the latter's "Warblers of North America." He also established ties with the Brooklyn Museum, which then had a natural history division. After the cruise of the 'Daisy,' he went to Brooklyn for several years before returning to the American Museum. Here he continued his studies of marine birds. In particular he visited the vast colonies of "guano" birds on the coastal islands of Peru and wrote a semipopular book on the subject, "Bird Islands of Peru" (1925). He then organized the Brewster-Sanford Expedition with the incredibly energetic, if somewhat obtuse, Rollo H. Beck as leader. The great series of marine and coastal birds assembled by Beck, along with Murphy's own years of work in field and museum became the basis for Murphy's major contribution to ornithology.

"Oceanic Birds of South America" was published by the museum in 1936 (it was reprinted, less expensively, by MacMillan in 1947). The two vol-

umes contain about 1,200 pages and are illustrated by numerous photographs, maps, and a series of superb color plates by Francis Lee Jaques. The text is noteworthy for its remarkably readable style.

The introductory portion of "Oceanic Birds" runs to about 300 pages and traces the effects of climate, hurricanes, ocean currents, and land masses on the biology and distribution of seabirds. This is followed by "An ornithological circumnavigation of South America," in which the physical features and the natural history, especially the waterbirds, of the various coasts and islands are discussed scholarly and meticulously. Islands as distant as St. Helena are included. The remaining pages of the work comprise species accounts, each beginning with a description of the bird, its distribution, nidification, etc., followed by a general account of its natural history both from the literature and the author's personal experience. For the better known or more important species, these sometimes run for many pages. The term "oceanic birds" is broadly defined to include freshwater species that go to the coast seasonally. "Oceanic Birds" will remain an important source work on marine birds, their biology, and the factors controlling their distribution. Anyone interested in natural history and in fine books enjoys having these two volumes in hand or on the shelf.

Even before "Oceanic Birds" was finished Rollo Beck had boarded the schooner 'France' to lead the Whitney South Sea Expedition. Murphy was general manager of this expedition, which lasted a decade or so. L. C. Sanford then persuaded Harry Payne Whitney and his family to contribute, in cooperation with the City of New York, funds for a new wing of the museum to house the rapidly growing ornithology department.

Murphy was shortly occupied with the acquisition of the Rothschild Collection (another Whitney gift), which he personally packed and shipped in England, and with the supervision and construction of the Whitney Hall of Oceanic Birds. Dr. Chapman, who did not retire until he was 78, was chairman of the department until 1942, but left much of the detail to his younger colleague, who had the assistance of others on the staff.

It is surprising that Murphy never joined the Whitney South Sea Expedition in the field. Here I suspect he suffered from the at times capricious whims of Dr. Sanford, a permanent member of the museum's Board of Trustees and one who, to vary the Boston cliché, "spoke only to the Whitneys and the Whitneys spoke only to God." On one occasion Murphy reached San Francisco on his way to join Beck on the 'France,' only to be recalled by telegram.

Sanford insisted that the collections coming in from the expedition be studied immediately, and in those years one finds a few papers by Murphy on such unlikely subjects (for him) as the white-eyes of the Solomon Islands. But his pace was too slow and Sanford at one time planned to get

Gregory Mathews over from England to work up the material. This potential disaster was averted when the young Ernst Mayr, fresh from New Guinea and the Solomons, was brought to the museum and turned out a spate of excellent reports.

Murphy had a fine command of written as well as spoken English. He once told me that in odd moments he had read through the "Oxford Dictionary." Perhaps this was the "shorter" two-volume Oxford that he turned over to me, but even so it has 2,400 big pages of fine print. Writing of our lamented mutual friend, E. T. Gilliard, (1966, *Auk* 83: 419), I thought that he caught the spirit of the man in a single sentence: "He loved the world in its primordial guise, without the scars that overpopulated and over-technologized man has scratched upon it."

Murphy served several years as Grand Marshall of the Brown University commencement. Slender, six foot three, he cut a handsome figure. Brown gave him an honorary Sc.D. in 1941, but Bob was proudest of his honorary doctorate from the oldest university in the western hemisphere, that of San Marcos in Lima, Peru. Like Professor Kittredge of Harvard, if asked why he did not get an earned Ph.D. he might have replied, "who would examine me!"

Two of Murphy's books other than "Oceanic Birds" are destined to remain minor classics. "Logbook for Grace" is an account of that early 2-year voyage on the 'Daisy,' written for the bride he had been obliged to leave behind. The other, "Fish-shape Paumanok," is a charming little volume on the Long Island he knew so intimately, having walked the length and breadth of it from his early years. Published by the American Philosophical Society, the title, from Whitman, adopts the Indian name of the island. Murphy's Long Island diaries, kept for decades, typed and neatly bound, are in the archives of the same society. He even wrote a duplicate of every check he made out, to provide, for some later generation, one index to the life of an average family of our time; though the Murphys were not quite that.

Although Dr. Murphy was first and foremost an ornithologist, he was not narrowly specialized. He never joined, I believe, the Wilson or the Cooper Society; on the other hand he was very active in several nonornithological scholarly societies. He regularly journeyed to Philadelphia to participate in the meetings of the American Philosophical Society, and stood high in the councils of the American Geographical Society and of the Century Club of New York. He was also president for years of the Long Island Biological Association, which operated the experimental station at Cold Spring Harbor. Dr. Murphy received his share of medals and awards, including those of the Explorers Club, the John Burroughs Association, and

the Collum Medal of the Geographical Society, in addition to our own Brewster Medal.

Murphy, early on, had given careful attention to elocution and public speaking, and he did much public lecturing. In the 1920s and 1930s he was one of the museum's most popular lecturers at the regular Saturday public presentations by staff members. He tended, like Dr. Johnson, to come through equally strong in private. I suspect this was the result of his wife's increasing and eventually total deafness. Shy or uncertain individuals were often uneasy or a bit put off in his presence. They missed the twinkle in his eye and the fact that he was always eager to help others, old and young. To mention a couple of examples: returning from a trip to the Snares Islands to find that James Chapin had been prematurely retired on the pretext of a budget crisis, Murphy immediately obtained funds from a private donor to permit his friend to continue work on his Congo birds at the same salary as before. In 1947 when I asked to take leave of absence to finish up work for my doctoral degree, Murphy at first said he was having difficulty in persuading the museum's director to grant it; a day or two later he reported that the permission had been given. It wasn't until I continued to receive pay checks while away that I learned that Bob had requested leave with full pay. The reason given was that I had carried out ornithological work while with the Army in the Pacific. He had previously written to the president of Cornell University, a personal friend of his, to suggest that in my case, the regulation that the final two terms of graduate work must be in residence, be waived.

Dr. Murphy was inclined to travel through life first class and his self assurance and appearance made this easy. Opening a file cabinet marked "Procellariiformes" some time after his death, to see if perchance it held the manuscript of the book on that order he was writing, the first letter I pulled out, dated December 23, 1946 was characteristic. Written to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, it reads, in part: "My dear Admiral: I have been wanting to thank you for the distinguished courtesy of commanding your motor car and Marine chauffeur at the time of my recent departure from Washington . . . One of our Japanese colleagues, the Marquis Masauji Hachisuka, has just sent us some ornithological information of importance. I want to put the data into your hands because I have a feeling that you may wish to make use of it. The information is that a colony of short-tailed albatrosses (*Diomedea albatrus*) has been found breeding on Torishima."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lord only knows what my good friend, the late (and rascally) "Masa" Hachisuka, was trying to achieve with this gambit, which was utterly false! The albatrosses did not return to Torishima until 1953.—ED.

It was easy for Bob to raise funds. At the time of the 75th anniversary meeting of the A.O.U. in New York in 1958 I asked him (already retired) if he would sign a letter to be sent to a few well-to-do members of the A.O.U. requesting gifts to help with the special expenses of the meeting. As we sought to cut the list to about fifteen, he remarked, smiling, "It is sometimes difficult to decide who shall be given the privilege of contributing."

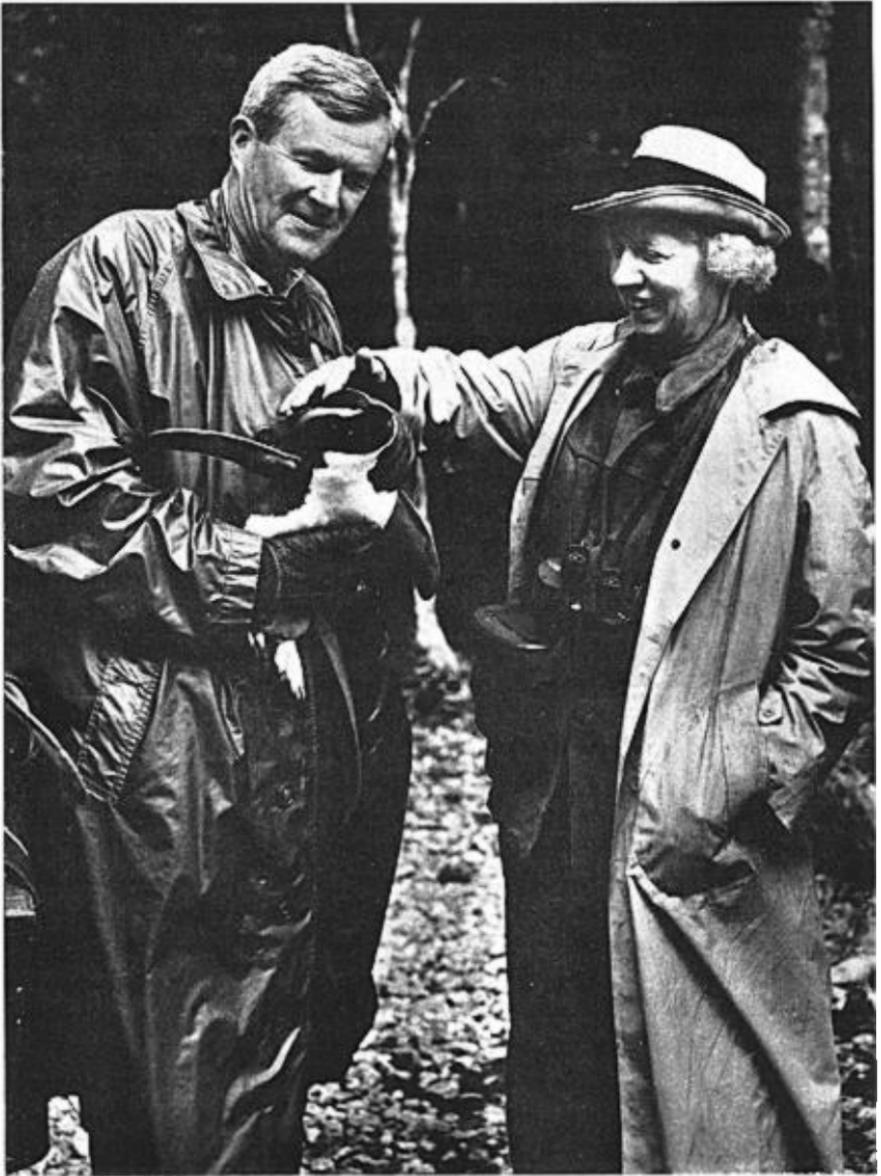
One might have expected Murphy with his circle of wealthy or influential friends to be a hidebound conservative. Actually he was refreshingly liberal in political outlook—after all he was born in Brooklyn.

President of the A.O.U. from 1948 to 1950, Dr. Murphy helped the Union in other ways through the years. At the 50th anniversary meeting in New York in 1933, Frank Chapman had Murphy as his right-hand man. I have seen Bob's meticulous account book as treasurer of the local committee: all correspondence and bills carefully pasted in. Indeed, some of the details that interested him were surprising. When nylon socks came in and at first seemed indestructible, I was astonished one day when he consulted a pocket notebook to determine how many times he had worn the pair he had on.

Such a man might have been a stickler as an administrator. Quite the opposite was true. Things that didn't interest him were ignored for months or years; there were sections of the department he didn't visit for similar periods. I guess, too, that he was averse to the personal friction that might result if he had sought to "take matters in hand" as the saying goes. He seldom showed annoyance; at most he might complain about a report demanded by the museum's director that took weeks to write and was then filed without a glance. But with his scientific colleagues he was always helpful in every way, and things flourished.

"Logbook for Grace" was not published until 1947, 35 years after the voyage it commemorated. And it was not until 1967, another 20 years, that Murphy published "A Dead Whale or a Stove Boat," a photographic account of a vanished era in whaling. "Most of the photographs were made by the author more than a half century ago. The negatives were developed on shipboard in sea water." The lengthy gestation of these books reflect in part Murphy's leisurely approach to life. Or perhaps, like Melville, he thought that the vast seas and their inhabitants should be contemplated at length.

In his description of *Pterodroma ultima*, the species illustrated herewith, Murphy wrote: "The species of *Pterodroma* about to be described bears . . . no close resemblance to any other gadfly petrel that has ever come to my notice. For twenty years I have been well aware of the distinctness of this bird, which was obtained in considerable numbers in the central tropical



Bob and Grace Murphy, with Crested Penguin friend in the Snares Islands in 1960.

and subtropical Pacific by Mr. Rollo H. Beck and his associates on the Whitney Expedition. Naming has been deferred because of the apparent unlikelihood that such a large, striking, and abundant petrel could fail to turn up in the collections of museums, or at least in the literature of Pacific

exploration.” How many with a long series of a new species, and with a sponsor pressing for results, would wait a quarter of a century to make sure no one else was about to describe it? The article was in the festschrift marking Erwin Stresemann’s 60th birthday (1949, Heidelberg), a volume, which, because of the use of poor wartime paper, has scarcely lasted 25 years itself.

I don’t know at what point following the publication of “Oceanic Birds,” Murphy projected a handbook on his favorite birds, those oceanic wanderers, the petrels, shearwaters, and albatrosses. I find a letter from Sanford to him as early as 1950 saying that he wanted lots of plates in the book, “but not by Jaques, he is too expensive”; also that he, Sanford, wanted the book to include a complete listing of the Tubinares in the Brewster-Sanford Collection. Neither of these wishes was to be gratified and the plate published with this article was the only one ever commissioned. Murphy made some progress and published a few preliminary papers. At times various research assistants aided him. Like his friend William Beebe, he thought that attractive young ladies make the best helpers. One of them was supported for two years of labor on the project by the National Science Foundation. Characteristically, Bob came back from Washington one day, and said that a friend in the NSF had arranged for him to have a research assistant for two years; in fact the assistant had already been selected. No tedious drafting applications here, though one was sent in *ex post facto*.

But what Murphy needed, if the work was ever to materialize, (after all he had reached mandatory retirement age in 1955) was a co-author, and such did not materialize. I think, also, that the urgings by family, friends, and museum directors to get on with it, may have had the opposite effect. At any rate I would like to believe so, for I never asked Bob how the book was going, thinking that a man in retirement should be free to do anything or nothing as he sees fit. Also, I shared what I presume was his conviction, subconscious perhaps, that the woods are full of young ornithologists who could write a tolerably competent handbook of Procellariiformes, but that there was no one else living who could write “Fish-shape Paumanok,” or an analysis of whaling in the old days of sail.

Murphy was interested in conservation all his life and, following the lead of his chief, Dr. Chapman, was active in the Audubon Society of which he was treasurer and later president of the board. He was the first president of the Long Island chapter of the Nature Conservancy and filed a lawsuit to stop government aerial spraying of his property with DDT. The action was eventually denied, but it was the forerunner of successful efforts by others. In the last decade of his life, the great whales, whose slaughter he had witnessed and deplored as a youth, came to symbolize for him the

conservation movement. A professionally produced film, "And so ends," featured Murphy as the moving force in efforts to conserve the cetaceans. He participated in annual government briefings of personnel going to Antarctica, and was appointed by Governor Rockefeller to a New York State Council on conservation. Mrs. Murphy, too, was active in conservation, and for a time headed her own group on Long Island.

A man who, in his eighties, is still driving sixty miles into New York City and back, over that terrifying Long Island Expressway, has left most of his friends behind, literally and figuratively. I didn't know Bob until he was 50 years of age and regret that this account could not have been written by a contemporary. One of his closest friends, though so different in his careless dress and rambling speech, was the late J. T. Nichols (1971, *Auk* 88: 477). But Bob had a gift for friendship, often with men a generation or two younger.

Murphy remained active and youthful in outlook until the end of his life. When well over 70 he was in the Antarctic on the government icebreaker 'Glacier' at the invitation of the National Science Foundation. Several years later he visited the same area and set foot on South Georgia for the first time in 58 years. When over 80 he attended the Pacific Science Congress in Australia and traveled the length and breadth of that continent by all means of conveyance. He lectured to the Linnaean Society about the trip about a month before his death, and was in his office thereafter. Thus his sudden death caused as much shock as though he had been decades younger.

Patient, shrewd, humane, Murphy would have made a great judge. I close with a quotation from one who was that, O. W. Holmes, Jr. "One learns from time an amiable latitude with regard to beliefs and tastes. Life is painting a picture, not doing a sum." Viewed thus, Robert Cushman Murphy was an outstanding success.

*American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, New York 10024. Accepted 5 September 1973.*