

LOCKLEY, RONALD MATHIAS (1903 - 2000), farmer, naturalist, conservationist and author

Name: Ronald Mathias Lockley

Date of birth: 1903

Date of death: 2000

Spouse: Doris Edith Lockley (née Shellard)

Spouse: Eileen Mary Gaudin Lockley (née Stocker)

Spouse: Jean Frances Macara St Lawrence (née Graham)

Child: Ann Mark (née Lockley)

Child: Martin Lockley

Child: Stephen Lockley

Parent: Emily Margaret Lockley (née Mathias)

Parent: Henry Lockley

Gender: Male

Occupation: farmer, naturalist, conservationist and author

Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture; Literature and Writing

Author: Jeremy Leighton John

Ronald Lockley was born on 8 November 1903 in Cardiff, the fifth of six children of Harry Lockley, a railway clerk, and his wife Emily Margaret (née Mathias) from Milford Haven. His father gambled and was away for long periods. His mother supported her family by establishing a school - Milford House in Whitchurch - beginning with five of her own children and a single paying pupil. In ten years she developed the school to one hundred pupils including boarders. Ronald had his early education at his mother's school, and later attended Cardiff High School.

Fascinated by islands from a young age, he built himself a hut on a small island - which he called Moorhen Island - in swampy ground near a wood and the Glamorgan Canal. Using money he earned from a local farmer, he visited Lundy Island and saw his first Manx shearwaters heading northwards over the waves. On failing his matriculation examination in London, he and his mother determined that he should become a farmer. For a while Lockley thought of growing plants for traditional herbalists. Having already developed his own outlook of living simply and appreciating the ways of nature, he was alerted by his younger sister Marjorie to *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. With the help of his mother he secured ten acres of land seven or so miles away close to St Mellons, in Monmouthshire at the time, and with his eldest sister Enid established a smallholding. It began with poultry, but a naturalist's paradise was planned complete with an island in a flooded hollow.

An attempt to visit Steeppholm failed but he and an older neighbouring friend - Harry Walter Shellard, known as the Admiral - succeeded in June 1927 in landing on the red rocks of Skokholm in Pembrokeshire, and they discovered that the tenant of the island lived on the mainland and no longer wished to retain an interest. Lockley was 23 years old, and after obtaining a 21 year lease to the island, he was met with familial scepticism but the Admiral's daughter, Doris Edith Shellard (1893-1989) responded with such envious enthusiasm that Ronald proposed marriage to her.

By November he had moved to the island with the help of local fishermen. In February 1928 the schooner *Alice Williams* ran aground on Skokholm and Ronald paid £5 for the right to salvage the wreck. Timbers from the boat were used to repair the dwelling house, and the salvaged coal lasted several years. On 12 July 1928 he and Doris married, and went on their honeymoon to Grassholm which Ronald had promised he would not explore without her. Nearly two years later in May 1930 their daughter Ann was born. The early years were documented in his book *Dream Island* (1930) and its sequel *Island Days* (1934) published with drawings by Doris.

From 1928 to 1940 Lockley established himself as an internationally renowned naturalist. By May 1929 and at the instigation of H. F. Witherby, he was ringing shearwaters. With two significant papers in 1930 and 1931 documenting the incubation and fledging periods, and other findings, Lockley transformed knowledge of the Manx Shearwater revealing for the first time the nature of the breeding of these extraordinary birds, which live in burrows on the island.

In 1930 he documented the illegal discharge of oil by a passing tanker, leading to the first successful prosecution under the 1922 Oil in Navigable Waters Act.

Wanting to record the island's natural history, he invited **Harry Morrey Salmon** and Geoffrey C. S. Ingram (1883-1971), both experienced Welsh ornithologists, to help him construct traps for ringing and measuring birds including a Heligoland funnel of netting. As a token of thanks they were allowed to ring the first birds caught in the trap, willow warblers, and Skokholm became the first Bird Observatory in Britain in 1933.

He befriended other notable biologists including Julian Huxley with whom he produced in 1934 an Oscar winning (1938) documentary film, *The Private Life of the Gannet*, on Grassholm, and David Lack who assisted in studies of the shearwaters' navigation by releasing one of Lockley's favourites, Caroline, from Devon, the bird returning to its nest in just under ten hours. The year 1934 was historic with well over a hundred members of the Eighth International Ornithological Congress - including future Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz and abdicated Tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria - visiting the islands, courtesy of two of His Majesty's destroyers.

In 1936 Lockley extended his studies of avian navigation by releasing two shearwaters from the Faeroe Islands and bringing a local bird south releasing it at Leith harbour just north of Edinburgh. All birds returned to their respective homes. The research culminated in a book in 1942, *Shearwaters*. In 1939 Lockley brought a razorbill to London for Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, and one of the first live television broadcasts showed him being attacked by the bird as he opened the basket.

Lockley helped to establish the Pembrokeshire Bird Protection Society in 1938; it later became the highly effective West Wales Field Society, producing from 1955 the publication *Nature in Wales* with Lockley as one of its editors. In the second half of the 1940s Lockley was at the heart of the setting up of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and was asked to delineate an official footpath along the coast.

Skokholm being overrun by wild rabbits when Lockley arrived, between two and three thousand rabbits were trapped per annum in the first few years, and replaced with Chinchilla rabbits bred for their silky fur; but when this experiment failed, the hope was to establish pasture for sheep. Unfortunately the wild rabbit population recovered and by 1934 the Lockleys decided that the best source of income would be his writing.

There were two further attempts to reduce the rabbit population in the late 1930s, firstly and unsuccessfully, through the release of the myxoma virus by the physiologist Sir Charles Martin; secondly and relatively successfully, through the blowing of a cyanide compound as dust through the passages of rabbit warrens, as a result of which the population of rabbits was radically reduced, and the vegetation of the island dramatically changed.

R. M. Lockley's observations of the rabbit at Skokholm were not confined to its destruction, for he realised early on that the rabbits were unable to hear or see through the new glass windows that he had installed in the Wheelhouse, a barn where meals were taken, with the steering wheel of the *Alice Williams* looking down from the wall: 'It became our habit to linger over a cup of coffee, gazing upon rabbit society.' Later, at Orielton, Lockley took this insight and designed artificial burrows with plate glass windows that permitted detailed documentation of the behaviour of identifiable individuals.

Along with books about island life, Lockley wrote extensively for periodicals, notably *The Countryman*, *British Birds* and *National Geographic*, reaching popular, scientific and international audiences. Lockley penned several novels, the first as early as 1932, *The Island Dwellers* followed by others including *The Sea's a Thief* (1936) and, much later, *Seal Woman* (1974). There was also a not entirely factual book for children in which Ann their daughter relates her life on the island: *Early Morning Island or A Dish of Sprats* (1939), featuring the Baron, George Henry Owen Harries, a colourful character who had served in the Boer War and from the late 1930s onwards lived with the Lockley family as a mechanic and handyman. An account of his life was written down by Lockley and published as *A Pot of Smoke*, 1940.

During the first year or so of the war, Ronald Lockley wrote letters describing nature and life on Skokholm to John Buxton (1912-1989), his ornithological and literary brother-in-law. The correspondence continued when John was captured by the Germans in Norway and he was transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp where he was able to study the redstart with the help of the German ornithologist Erwin Stresemann (1889-1972), President of the Ornithological Congress that had visited Skokholm. The letters were later compiled for publication as *Letters from Skokholm*, with illustrations by Charles Tunnicliffe (1901-1979).

At the insistence of the War Office, the Lockleys left Skokholm in September 1940, moving to Cwmgloyne Farm near Nevern. Ronald wrote about their farming experiences

in *Inland Farm* (1943) and other books. In the early 1940s, he served with the Royal Navy Intelligence assessing the coastline, during which time he discovered a place where grey seals hauled out in considerable numbers; he named it the Red Wilderness, returning to study seal behaviour there.

In February 1942 the Lockleys occupied the nearby Island Farm on Dinas Island, a peninsula, running both farms as a cooperative. The work began to take its toll on the co-farmers, and there were many set backs including a serious injury. By the end of 1943 the Lockleys gave up Cwmgloyne Farm. Island Farm was agriculturally successful in the last years of the war but the marriage was in the doldrums. By March 1946 Ronald and Doris were divorced.

The West Wales Field Society convened as the war drew to a close, and instigated a survey of Skomer, undertaken in 1946, with Ludwig Koch recording the sound of the Atlantic grey seal. This research included observations which were incorporated within Lockley's 1953 publication *Puffins*.

On the 19th of September 1946 Ronald Lockley married schoolteacher Eileen (Jill) Stocker (1913-2007) in London. Initially Jill and Ronald continued to live at Island Farm where they had met after Doris and Ronald's separation, and they subsequently lived in Jersey for two years, before moving to an old rectory near Tenby in 1950. One son, Martin, was born in the Channel Islands in 1950, the other, Stephen, was born in Tenby in 1953.

In the early 1950s, following a request from Cyril Mackworth-Praed and Peter Scott, Lockley helped to supervise the Orielton Duck Decoy near Milford Haven for studying wildfowl migration. When the owner of the adjacent Orielton estate died, Lockley was able to obtain a loan to buy the estate with its manor house. His wife and two sons moved in with him, and before long his sons were helping him in his studies of bats at Orielton itself.

The Director-General of the Nature Conservancy, Max Nicholson, asked Lockley when he lived at Orielton to look at myxomatosis and its possible ecological impact as the rabbit population declined. The work led to *The Private Life of the Rabbit* (1964), and the identification of the rabbit flea as a vector for the disease. Richard Adams, the author of *Watership Down*, (1972), used the book to inform his fictional writing.

During this time Lockley continued to maintain an active interest in seabirds, the coast and the islands, and in 1954 he coauthored with ornithologist James Fisher (1912-1970) a comprehensive account of the Seabirds of the north Atlantic, within the highly regarded New Naturalist book series.

In 1962 the Lockley family left Orielton due to the cost of maintenance, selling it to the Field Studies Council. Early in 1964 Ronald and Jill were divorced. In the same year Ronald, now in his early 60s, married Jean St Lawrence (1909-1995), a widow from New Zealand, and in September began a survey of seals along the coast of Ireland, travelling in a Bedford Dormobile with his wife.

Lockley strongly opposed the use of Milford Haven for importing oil and the building of an oil refinery, to no avail. In the early 1970s, after living for a time in Farway in Devon, he and Jean moved to New Zealand, where his daughter Ann had emigrated in 1953. There he directed his literary, scientific and conservation efforts towards the southern hemisphere, travelling within New Zealand, to Antarctica and among the islands of Polynesia, while still using his notes to produce works derived from experiences back in Wales.

Having moved to New Zealand in 1961, Doris died in 1989 and her daughter's son Peter took her ashes to Skokholm in 1991. Jean predeceased Ronald who died at Te Puke, New Zealand, on 12 April 2000, and his ashes were taken by his family to the Knoll on Skokholm, to the vicinity of Caroline's burrow in 2001.

His writing was often lyrical and compelling for he was a natural story teller, with fact and fiction occasionally intermingled. Notwithstanding the failed matriculation examination and absence of university training, he was widely recognised for his achievements in natural history. He was awarded an honorary Master's degree by University of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1977, and received The Union Medal of the British Ornithological Union in 1993.

Although by no means the first to study the wildlife of the Pembrokeshire islands, with his dynamic presence on the islands, prolific naturalist writing and pioneering determination, Lockley advanced profoundly the scientific study of the ecology, behaviour and navigation of birds and mammals, and their conservation, in southwest Wales; and he inspired many throughout Wales and beyond with his prescient attitude towards simple and self-sufficient living.

Author

Jeremy Leighton John

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Additional Links

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