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Seizing The Day: Pérrine Moncrieff and Nature Conservation in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This study examines environmental work by the ornithologist and conservationist Pérrine Moncrieff between 1920 and 1980. It discusses her Millais family background and vitalist beliefs as factors assisting the publication of her field guide, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them*, her advocacy for Abel Tasman National Park, and her Presidency of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. She and her work were marginalised in the mid-century development era but she became a mentor of conservationists in the 1970s.

KEYWORDS

Vitalism, ornithology, conservation, preservation, national parks, gender.

Settling in New Zealand in 1921, Pérrine Moncrieff's timing was a lucky happenstance. Her arrival coincided with a second episode of environmentalism which emphasised the permanent preservation of indigenous birds and forests. Moncrieff's passion for birds and the well-being of their environments led to her deep and sustained involvement in New Zealand's conservation movement, not only in the second and third episodes of environmentalism but in the decades of nature development that lay between them.¹ By the time she died in 1979 she had written New Zealand's first pocket field guide to birds. She had been successful in campaigns for the acquisition of national parks, scenic, and nature reserves. She had become the first woman President of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, now Birds Australia. Her work illustrates a use of the natural world which dismisses wholesale change of particular ecosystems in the name of progress, and which promotes the rights of other species as well as those of human beings.



FIGURE 1. Périnne Moncrieff (left) on Stephens Island in 1933 with a group from Nelson's Cawthron (Research) Institute. Reproduced with the permission of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand and the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

BACKGROUND

The roots of Moncrieff's passion, and of her ability to publicly promote her conservation causes, lay in her family heritage. She was born in London in 1893, the daughter of Everett and Mary Millais and the granddaughter of the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Millais and his wife Euphemia (Effie) whose first husband was John Ruskin. Moncrieff attributed her love of birds to her uncle, the ornithologist John Guille Millais.² John Guille belonged to that upper-class group with amateur scientific, artistic, and leisure interests in the natural world. Through field and taxonomy studies, he researched, painted, and published life histories of birds. He killed birds for collections. He was also a big-game hunter and, through this, an early member of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, now Fauna and Flora International, which was formed in 1903.³ Science and art, key components of Moncrieff's passion for the conservation of the natural world, therefore derive from her paternal heritage.

Moncrieff's female relatives also endowed her with useful characteristics for her public role by providing models of strong women. Her grandmother, Effie Millais, although known more as a pawn between her famous first and second husbands, nevertheless negotiated her position with resourcefulness and courage throughout the annulment of her first marriage.⁴ It is a family belief that Moncrieff's mother, Mary Millais, was a Justice of the Peace, and that Moncrieff inherited her mother's strong character and sought to emulate her.⁵

Moncrieff also absorbed a social assurance from her wealthy, extended family. Through them, she developed a concept of heritage which, in New Zealand, she transferred to the conservation of what she called its ancient flora and fauna. Her formal education, with its emphasis on languages, art, and music, was typical for upper- and middle-class girls of her time. A governess began her education at home. She then attended two London schools and finished her education studying music and languages in Brussels.⁶

Growing up, she was known in the family for her interest in birds. Apart from her uncle's influence, her fascination may have been stimulated by several programmes begun in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1900 Nature Study became a compulsory subject in the English primary school curriculum. In 1903, with funding from the conservationist W. H. Hudson, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds organised the Bird and Tree Challenge Shield essay competition.⁷ About this time, Moncrieff won a prize at her school for a natural history project. Whatever the genesis of her natural history education, it stimulated in her a lifelong desire for knowledge gained firsthand by observation and expanded by reading. Her bibliographies and correspondence refer to significant figures in the past like Gilbert White and George Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, as well as contemporary ornithologists and naturalists like Julian Huxley, Margaret Morse Nice, and New Zealand ornithologists.

In London in 1914 Pérrine Millais married Malcolm Moncrieff, a British Army officer who had retired after being severely wounded in the South African War. Malcolm's experiences of mysticism encouraged him to metaphysical speculation and publication.⁸ Having studied the French philosopher Henri Bergson's *élan vital*, Malcolm also propounded vitalist theories.⁹ He justified his metaphysic with an argument used by some of today's environmentalists that the theory of relativity, developed in the early twentieth century, undermined the truth and certainty claimed by Western orthodox scientists.¹⁰

Vitalism has been both normative and marginalised as a western world-view and its components amended over time but two tenets have endured. The first is that a life-force or vital spirit, conferred by a creator, inhabits and links together all living beings in an animate world. Secondly, that such a spirit demands from human beings a respect for all life and its environments. Vitalist thought thrived around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a response to the randomness and competitive struggle of Darwinism and the mechanist materialism of orthodox western science.¹¹

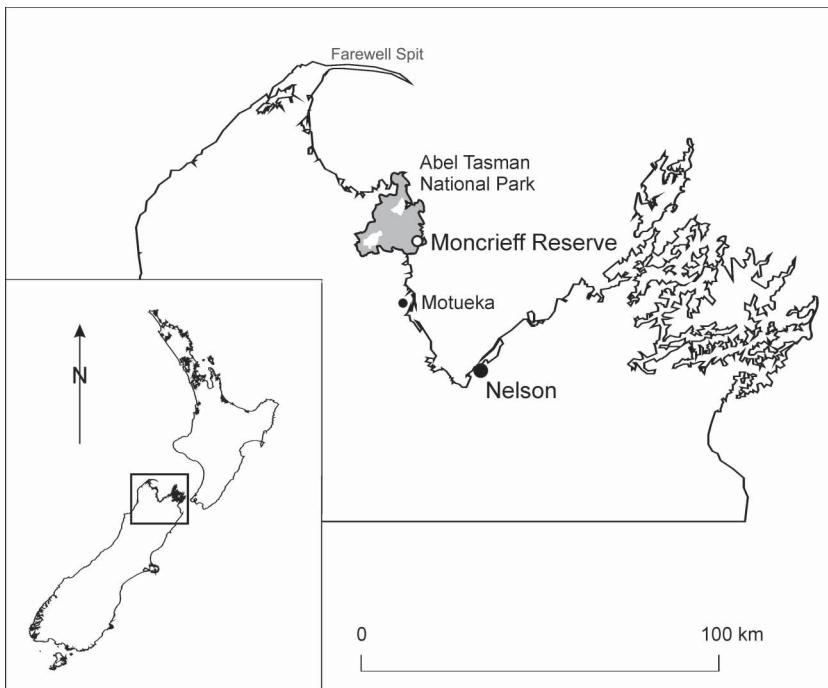
Although she did not name vitalism in her articles and correspondence, Pérrine shared Malcolm's holistic world-view. She presented a world, brought about by a Creator she called Nature, in which human beings were entrusted with the well-being of flora and fauna in their particular country, a responsibility also owed to the rest of the world. Moncrieff viewed nature as dualistic: an insightful instigator of harmony where all creatures could exist in 'intimate association' if human beings obeyed Nature's laws but a creator who would also punish the trustees for law-breaking. Friendship with nature, Moncrieff believed, held the key to living harmoniously in the material world where the welfare of other species, on occasion, should take precedence over the wishes of human-beings.¹² Vitalism seems to have been the same motivating force for Moncrieff as it was for some British nature conservationists in those decades.¹³ Such a metaphysic accorded well with the ecological field science she advocated and practised.

COMING TO NELSON

With these influences and interests, Pérrine, Malcolm and their two sons, Alex and Colin, left Britain intending to emigrate to British Columbia in Canada after a world trip. But, succumbing to the romantic beauty in the north of New Zealand's South Island, the family decided to remain in the small city of Nelson.

The Nelson provincial region is an area of mountains, lakes, and river gorges, rent occasionally by severe earthquakes. By 1921, although its more accessible, flatter districts had been converted to European grasses for sheep farming, or smock-dotted with orchard trees and hops, over half of Nelson province remained in indigenous forest. The warm, wet climate allows low-altitude forest, including podocarp species from northern New Zealand, to appear lush and tropical. Southern hemisphere beech species flourish at higher altitudes. Reaching out across the mouth of Tasman Bay, at the head of which is Nelson city, are the tidal flats and sand dunes of Farewell Spit where godwits and other migratory birds spend the summer before their autumn migration to the Arctic. Moncrieff was instrumental in having Farewell Spit, one of the country's most important nature reserves, gazetted as a reserved area.

Most of the indigenous forest in Nelson province, as well as rivers, lakes and coastal littorals, is in public ownership after the Crown acquired it in the 1840s and 1850s from former Maori owners. In gaining control of what was designated 'waste' land because Maori had hunted on it rather than improved it by agriculture, successive New Zealand governments wished to settle European colonisers as small farmers. In Nelson's interior, as in other steep remote areas, natural and accelerated erosion, distance from urban markets, and uncertain international prices for meat and dairy products defeated these objectives. By the 1920s, limits to growth and progress via land transformation had temporarily



MAP 1. The Nelson Area showing the location of Abel Tasman National Park

been reached. This halt to agricultural expansion coincided with the second conservation episode. In Nelson province, especially, large areas remained with the potential for permanent preservation.

In the 1890s some Nelson residents had been part of the first conservation episode when they formed the Nelson Scenery Preservation Society. Although it was short-lived, and no longer in existence when the Moncrieffs arrived in Nelson, it had campaigned, sometimes successfully, for areas to be gazetted as permanent scenic reserves.¹⁴ That decade had seen many conservation initiatives including the declaration of Tongariro as New Zealand's first National Park in 1894. The three mountain summits, which are its core, had been gifted by their Maori owners, Ngati Tuwharetoa, in 1887.¹⁵ In the wish to permanently protect land, conservationist objectives coincided with those of Ngati Tuwharetoa who wished to assert their *mana* or ownership. But the conservation of land, flora, and fauna proved contentious for other Maori when the Crown gained control through compulsory clauses in legislation.¹⁶

ORNITHOLOGY

Once settled in Nelson, Moncrieff began to explore the surrounding terrain and to study the flora, fauna and ecological interactions she found. She became friends with New Zealand ornithologists such as W. R. B. Oliver of the Dominion Museum and R. A. Falla, then a teacher but later also of the Dominion Museum, and the conservationist E. V. Sanderson. Like these men she also joined the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), based in Victoria, Australia, and New Zealand's Native Bird Protection Society, now Forest and Bird. Organised in 1901, the RAOU had both scientific and conservationist objectives but Forest and Bird, formed in 1923, was purely a conservationist organisation.¹⁷

With their encouragement she wrote a pocket field guide to New Zealand birds entitled *New Zealand Birds and How To Identify Them* which was first published in 1925. This project is an early example of her 'seizing the day' whereby she identified an opportunity and proceeded to effect it. At that time New Zealand had a number of bird books, including Walter Buller's nineteenth century foundation text *A History of the Birds of New Zealand*. As they were often large and heavy, and required some knowledge of bird taxonomy, they were not easily consulted out-of-doors by novice birdwatchers.¹⁸

Moncrieff's project was based on a field guide she had used in Britain, *The Ready Guide to British Birds*, by B. A. Carter. This was one of many compact field guides which became popular in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of amateur and professional scientific field ornithology and ethology.¹⁹ Carter's book, intended for the novice, used the bird's size as its primary identification. Moncrieff followed this technique, arranging indigenous and introduced birds by size, from the three inch rifleman to the 44 inch royal albatross, the measurements being those of male birds from tail tip to bill tip. She also provided briefer, cross-referencing lists of birds by their classificatory orders, their habitats, and their scientific, English, and Maori names. Her friendship with Falla enabled her to incorporate his recent discovery of the only breeding place of Buller's Shearwater, *Puffinus bulleri*, on the Poor Knights Islands off the North Island's east coast, now a Marine Reserve.²⁰ This was the first of many occasions when she used the help of Falla and Oliver as scientific professional ornithologists. Their correspondence with her over several decades indicates that they were very forthcoming with the latest information.

Moncrieff's was more than a bird book. She promoted her enthusiasm for field ornithology and her passion for conservation, both summed up at the end of her introductory essay when she proclaimed: 'The study of birds in their natural surroundings should be the aim of every naturalist, and how can we attain this better than by seeing first and foremost that our birds, those unrivalled denizens of New Zealand, are well protected.'²¹

She reworked *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them* for four more editions in the next four decades. The longevity of Moncrieff's book is a testament to its usefulness and popularity. It was a new initiative in New Zealand in the 1920s, the beginning of the diversification of bird books as knowledge expanded. Its tenor was novel. Moncrieff believed that indigenous birds would and should be conserved whereas earlier ornithologists had assumed the birds' extinction or were pessimistic about their survival.

Despite the help of Oliver and Falla, both the book and Moncrieff have been discounted in ornithological historiography.²² Ornithological scientists of her day and later found her descriptions of birds imprecise, poetic and sentimental. Her prose 'exasperated' them with its 'quirky combination of impressionistic notes and factual material', wrote E. G. Turbott, who co-edited *A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* with Falla and E. B. Sibson in 1966 and wrote the Foreword to the 1996 *Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand*.²³ It is true that her descriptions were individual and her prose, on occasion, fulsome and emotional. But scientific critique of her book must be seen within a wider context. Moncrieff was at the cusp of change when science in New Zealand had become self-consciously professional. Within ornithology, factual bird books were written by professional ornithologists, beginning with Oliver's *New Zealand Birds* in 1930. There was still a place for the amateur but their books were reminiscences of birdwatching experiences.

Another reason for her discounting is gender relationships within the ornithological world. Male ornithologists, both professional and amateur, formed a tight network whose members were mutually supportive in work and leisure. Birdwatching expeditions, particularly those which lasted weeks to New Zealand's southern island groups, cemented the bonds of companionship and solidarity. 'It was a great adventure, with many a tale at mid-winter reunions in later years', wrote Charles Fleming of the secret 'Cape Expedition' during World War Two when Falla arranged for Fleming and other young naturalists to join Army parties which spent a year in the Auckland and Campbell Islands keeping watch for German vessels.²⁴ Women could only operate on the periphery of these adventures, usually as passengers or unequal assistants. They were not accorded the equal status as an ornithologist that Moncrieff assumed for herself on her own expeditions to Taranga and Stephens Islands.²⁵ Male bonding seems to have been helped by the application of sexist humour. Moncrieff was joked about privately in terms of 'Come up and see my tits'.²⁶

Male ornithologists may have marginalised Moncrieff's field guide, but it was remembered affectionately by those who paid regard to its objective of encouraging bird conservation in children. Don Merton, now internationally recognised for his 'recovery' work on endangered bird species, is one of several scientists who credit her book for its early influence on them.²⁷

ABEL TASMAN NATIONAL PARK

A second example of Moncrieff ‘seizing the day’ is her campaign for the creation of Abel Tasman National Park in 1941–2. Abel Tasman, unusual for New Zealand national parks in being small (17,000 hectares) and much-modified environmentally, is one of the country’s most visited reserves. Situated near Nelson city, it contains the contrasts of coastal forest and ferns with beech forest; beaches of golden sand with limestone outcrops and sink-holes. There are birds of various habitat and large, carnivorous land snails, relics from the Gondwana heritage. Beside the romantic and ancient, introduced gorse and radiata pine attest nineteenth-century European settlement, but these are being eliminated or smothered by the indigenous.

In the 1930s Moncrieff had unsuccessfully encouraged officials of the Lands and Survey Department, since much of the land was publicly owned, to declare it as scenic reserve. But in 1941 she again saw her chance. The following year, 1942, was to be not only the centennial of Nelson’s founding as a New Zealand Company settlement but also the tercentennial of the country’s ‘discovery’ by the Dutch explorer Abel Janzoon Tasman. Moncrieff saw that, with the financial stringency of wartime, the declaration of the park could be an acceptable way for the government to commemorate both events. And so it proved, although not without effort on Moncrieff’s part. Her continuous lobbying of senior government officials and cabinet ministers helped, but she also mobilised local body officials, the local newspaper, Forest and Bird members, and suggested that Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands be asked to become the park’s Patroness. With the Queen’s agreement to the position Abel Tasman National Park was established on 19 December 1942, three hundred years after Tasman’s two ships anchored briefly off New Zealand’s coast.²⁸ For Maori, the Park’s dedication was less confrontational than had been the original meeting between Maori and the Dutch explorers, when four of Tasman’s men were killed. Moncrieff had also approached Maori leaders for their opinion as she was in the habit of doing on forest conservation. At the opening ceremony she was thanked on behalf of Maori people for her persistence in attaining the Abel Tasman National Park.²⁹

PUBLIC OFFICE

A final example of Moncrieff ‘seizing the day’ is her election as President of the RAOU in 1932–3. While women headed conservation and ornithological societies in Britain, this was unknown in New Zealand, where gendered expectations confined women’s role to the private sphere, or health and welfare agencies in the public arena.³⁰ Because of these expectations Moncrieff carefully avoided being seen as too eager for office but accepted, first a Vice-Presidency of the RAOU and then the Presidency, when these roles were offered her.

Holding an elected presidential office gave her a status which, she seemingly believed, added authority to her ornithological and conservation writing. Although she did not attend meetings in Australia – Malcolm's health and their finances were uncertain at the time – her Presidential Address comprised a history of women's associations with birds through the ages. Moncrieff argued that, for much of the Christian era women had only domestic, utilitarian associations with birds, but by her day they should be able to be naturalists, ornithologists, and conservationists in the public sphere.³¹

ASSESSMENT

Opponents accused Moncrieff of wanting 'to lock up land' that should be used for agriculture or forestry development with campaigns such as that for Abel Tasman National Park. Her status in her community, wealth, and access to political power conforms to the pattern of many nature conservationists from the upper classes of developed countries who advocate the protection of wild nature which, in the past, they may have exploited to attain their wealth. When areas of wild nature are permanently protected by law, opportunities for its use by other classes or under-developed countries are restricted.

But Moncrieff saw national parks and reserved areas in a romantic sense as places of physical and spiritual rejuvenation and, in a scientific sense, as museums of living flora and fauna. And, with her vitalist belief in the intrinsic value of other species, she saw protected areas as permanent habitats for the ancient species of New Zealand, especially the birds, which had captured her heart. These reasons, she believed, justified their permanent protection.

Despite her efforts, in the two decades following World War Two New Zealand went through another period of environmental development which threatened conservation achievements. Agriculture was encouraged by the heavy hand of artificial fertilisers and pesticides. Electricity for manufacture was generated through the construction of hydro-electric stations, the damming of rivers, and the alteration of lake levels, and carried throughout the land on intrusive pylons. Plantation forestry with introduced tree species gathered force. Proposals were made to fell large swathes of indigenous forest and to infill coastlines.

This progressive era led, in turn, to the third conservation episode in the 1970s. By then Moncrieff was elderly but more than ready to again 'seize the day' to help the younger generation of conservationists with financial donations and public appeals. Craig Potton, one of this generation, said of her, 'She didn't mince words at all. She was very stroppy the way she spoke in public....She'd say, "You people are *wrecking* our heritage."'³²

Strong words, but only a continuation of her earlier efforts. As well as ornithology and conservation, Périnne Moncrieff was involved with the early

organic movement in New Zealand and many cultural activities in Nelson. But, with her field guide on New Zealand birds, the creation of Abel Tasman National Park, and her Presidency of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, she 'seized the day' to encourage in human beings a conservationist view of the natural world and the protection of indigenous, wild species.

NOTES

¹ New Zealand's episodic development of environmental groups roughly reflects that of Britain's: Philip Lowe and Jane Goyder, *Environmental Groups in Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 15–17.

² Moncrieff to Drummond, 5 September 1925, James Drummond Papers, Canterbury Museum Archives, Christchurch.

³ John M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 323. Millais wrote 16 books on game birds, hunting, travel, and rhododendrons, as well as a biography of his father.

⁴ These characteristics are displayed in her correspondence published by Mary Lutyens, *Millais and the Ruskins* (London: Murray, 1967).

⁵ Interview with Moncrieff's niece, Jane Bowdler, 1994.

⁶ Interview with Pérrine Moncrieff, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 30 May 1959, 10; Felicity Hunt ed., *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987).

⁷ David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 202; John Sheail, *Nature in Trust: The History of Nature Conservation in Britain* (Glasgow, London: Blackie & Son Ltd, 1976), 48.

⁸ Jennifer Robin Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee: Pérrine Moncrieff and Nature Conservation in New Zealand 1920–1950' (PhD. Diss., Massey University, 1999), 16, 28–9.

⁹ M. M. Moncrieff, *The Infinitely Great, the Infinitely Small and Man* (Nelson: Stiles, 1926), 50–62.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8; Peter Marshall, *Nature's Web: An Exploration of Ecological Thinking* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 376–9; David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 246–59.

¹¹ Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1989), 47, 53–5; Peter J. Bowler, *The Norton History of the Environmental Sciences* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 172, 385, 512; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1980).

¹² 'Bush and Bird Notes', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 19 July 1934, 9; Pérrine Moncrieff, 'The Destruction of an Avian Paradise', *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire* June (1944): 23; Moncrieff, Report undated, Department of Conservation, Head Office, Wellington, Farewell Spit LS 6/10/2.

¹³ Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain*, 202.

¹⁴ L. E. Lochhead, 'Preserving the Brownies' Portion: A History of Voluntary Nature Conservation Organisations in New Zealand 1888–1935' (Ph.D. diss., Lincoln University, 1994), Chap 6.

¹⁵ Craig Potton, *Tongariro – A Sacred Gift* (Auckland, Nelson: Landsdowne Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Robin Hodge, 'Scenery Preservation and Protected Areas', in *Crown Laws, Policies, and Practices in Relation to Flora and Fauna, 1840–1912*, Cathy Marr, Robin Hodge, and Ben White (Wellington: Waitangi Tribunal 2001), Chap 11.

¹⁷ Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee', 154–8. For the RAOU's history, see Libby Robin, *The Flight of the Emu: A Centenary History of Ornithology in Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001). The Ornithological Society of New Zealand was not formed until 1940.

¹⁸ Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee', 147–52; Ross Galbreath, *Walter Buller: The Reluctant Conservationist* (Wellington: GP Books, 1989), Chapters 7, 12.

¹⁹ Bowler, *The Norton History*, 485–91; Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain*, 237–8.

²⁰ Listed as Long-tailed or Ashy-backed Shearwater, Pérrine Moncrieff, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd, 1925), 48.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² E.g. Barrie Heather and Hugh Robertson, *The Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* (Auckland: Viking, 1996).

²³ Turbott to author, 10 July 1995; Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee', 145–7.

²⁴ C. C. Fleming, 'Obituary Sir Robert Falla', *Emu* 80 (1980–1): 43.

²⁵ Pérrine Moncrieff, 'A Visit to Taranga, Hen and Chickens Group (N.Z.)', *Emu* 28 (1928–9), 100–110; Pérrine Moncrieff, 'An Island – Yesterday and Today', *The Weekly News*, 23 March 1938, 42.

²⁶ Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee', 327.

²⁷ Ibid., 146.

²⁸ Robin Hodge, 'Creating a Park: Pérrine Moncrieff and the Abel Tasman National Park', (Research essay, Massey University, 1993).

²⁹ H. D. Bennett, Tasman Tercentenary, Archives New Zealand Wellington IA 158/292/8; Moncrieff to Sanderson, 17 April [1929], Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, Archives New Zealand Wellington MS 0444:193.

³⁰ Sheail, *Nature in Trust*, 9–14; L. J. Rintoul and E. V. Baxter were joint Presidents of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club in 1936, Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain*, 222–3; Hodge, 'Nature's Trustee', 321–28.

³¹ Pérrine Moncrieff, 'Birds in Relation to Women', *Emu* 33 (1933–4): 204–18.

³² Interview, Craig Potton, 1996.