

SEABIRD GENIUS: THE STORY OF L.E. RICHDALÉ, THE ROYAL ALBATROSS, AND THE YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN

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We stand on the shoulders of great seabird biologists; yet in today's modern world few are recalled. Neville Peat has written a long-sought-after biography of the New Zealand seabird researcher Lance Richdale in a loving portrayal of a life well lived and science well executed by a unique husband and wife team. This highly recommended biography reminds us of how in the last century, seabird science began with people motivated by the same marvel we experience today, except that they had no support, with only their drive to pursue the understanding of these marvelous marine creatures. Lancelot Eric Richdale is one such person. The "father" of albatross research, Lance had the great fortune to hail from New Zealand, the seabird capital of the world.

Lance Richdale first taught agricultural subjects and allied science disciplines in remote rural schools before trading them for Dunedin in the South Island of New Zealand. Dunedin is the only city in the world with an albatross colony, and it is thanks to his coming to the city in 1928 (his uncle was there in 1911 as Tairaroa head postmaster) that a Royal Albatross and a Yellow-Eyed Penguin colony exist there today.

Called the "Nature study-man" by his pupils, and known as a teacher and educator, Richdale began studying Royal Albatrosses at Tairaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula in 1936, but first he had to save them. Vandals had been killing birds and smashing eggs, leading Parliament to pass strict trespassing laws in 1942. Their passage had an effect, for five albatrosses fledged after that, and a chick that fledged in 1942 returned to nest in 1948, the first of the Tairaroa Head progeny to breed. Lance said: "The buildup is very slow and may take as long as 15 years." By observing what happened at the colony at Tairaroa Head, we can gain insight into what is happening with albatrosses at other breeding colonies such as the Short-tailed Albatross colony at Midway Island.

Richdale was the first to band seabirds systematically in New Zealand. He began his marking of birds by using a tram conductor's punch on their feet, and then he tried hand-making bands using #16 gauge aluminum. He finally used celluloid rings that he could read via a telescope at 40 m. His banding program for Royal Albatrosses provided information on their longevity, and the most famous testimony was a record made from the re-sighting of a female Royal Albatross ("Grandma"), a founder of the colony, 61½ years post-banding – a record matched only by "Wisdom," a Laysan Albatross at Midway Island. Researchers lost sight of Grandma in 2011 and assumed she died.

Few ornithologists worldwide have ever amassed as much data as Lance Richdale did. His research on Yellow-eyed Penguins started in 1936 and ran until 1954: an 18-year study with 800 visits by him. This work on penguins yielded the four volumes of *A Comprehensive History of the Behaviors of the Yellow-eyed Penguin*. This massive work was at first rejected by publishers because of reduced publishing volume in wartime but was printed and distributed after World War II. This tome added to his many published works in *Emu*, *the Condor*, *Auk*, *Wilson Bulletin*, *Ibis*, and *Bird Banding*.

Richdale pioneered that Holy Grail of seabird biology, long-term data sets. He had no patience for biologists who made remarks not backed up with data. His counter to a statement by R.C. Murphy that albatross parents deliberately starved their chicks for 3 months before fledging was to disprove it by research (Murphy, however, can be forgiven for his error by his statement: "I now belong to a high cult of mortals for I have seen the albatross").

In 1942, Richdale visited the muttonbirding camps (camps where people harvested Short-Tailed and Sooty Shearwaters for food, oil and feathers) and produced a detailed account of the practice. He also reported the decimating effects that feral cats had on the island's avifauna, eventually leading to their control.

Next to nothing was known of the breeding of the *Pterodromas* when he began a study on Whero Island where he and his wife Agnes studied four species. At the end of his research, much was known. It is safe to say Lance would not have achieved his status without Agnes – she typed his notes, drafts and correspondences throughout his career. Years later, at a Cooper's Meeting in Berkeley in 1951, Lance reported that a Sooty Shearwater banded at Whero in 1950 was found in Monterey California in 1957, the first evidence of a transpacific migration.

Richdale was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship at Cornell University and brought along Agnes. They met many different and key people there. The highlight of his sojourn at Cornell was meeting Margaret Nice, the song sparrow maven, whose systematic marking of birds was the first in the US. Lance had earlier claimed the title of the first person in the world to carry out systematic marking. In New York, Lance and Agnes dined with R.C. Murphy, an American ornithologist and curator of birds for the American Museum of Natural History, and his wife Grace, and at Cornell he became acquainted with Rosalie Barrow Edge, a conservationist, essayist and Women's Rights Activist who raised funds to buy Hawk Mountain in 1932 to save raptors from recreational hunters. While overseas in North America, the UK and Europe, Lance and Agnes were entertained by various keystone people of the 20th century, including Alfred Bailey, the American ornithologist and director of the Denver Museum; Olaus Murie, the wildlife biologist; David Lack, the British evolutionary biologist; Robert Storer, the American ornithologist known for his work on systematics and evolution; Bill Sladen, the Antarctic biologist; and Ronald Lockley, the Welsh naturalist and catalyst for the entire British Bird Observatory movement.

By 1972, Lance, in his early seventies, and slowing down after contracting Parkinson's disease, and Agnes retired and relocated to North Island. He continued to write with the co-authors John Warham and Christopher Robertson, who began to develop a keen interest in Lance's legacy and who inspired Neville Peat to write this book.

In 2011 at Tairaroa Head, 75 years after Richdale began his work, the population of Royal Albatrosses numbered about 200 birds and

24 nests. The 500th chick recently fledged, the last hatchling of Grandma. Forty-three percent of all the individuals that have ever nested on the colony (360) have been managed by rangers who have provided artificial incubation, supplemental feedings, fostering and first aid. No seabird colony has had such stewardship for so long.

Richdale's work with the other main species he studied, the Yellow-eyed Penguin, eventually led to the realization of a need for a trust fund, the Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust, that has purchased and set aside beach areas for nesting birds. These two protected areas have made Dunedin the wildlife capital of New Zealand, and it draws in NZ\$100 million a year from eco-tourism.

For his final honors, Dr. Lancelot Eric Richdale received the Queen's medal and the Order of the British Empire in his last year of life, dying on 19 December 1983, a fortnight shy of 84. Agnes lived over another decade and died at 98.

Was Lance a genius? If an infinite capacity for careful research and documentation, as well as an absorbing curiosity, define genius; if exceptional talent for researching seabirds, determination, and tolerance for privation and intensity of focus means genius; then yes, Lancelot Eric Richdale was indeed a seabird genius.

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