

OBITUARY

ERIC D. PRITCHARD 1904 - 1997



Eric Pritchard, early 1950s.

On 17 May 1997 and in his 94th year, Eric Daniel Pritchard, a founding member of the Entomological Society of New Zealand, died peacefully at his home in St Heliers Bay Rd, Auckland. He had suffered ill health for much of his life and although his body was tired, his mind was as alert and his interest in natural history as keen as that of a much younger man.

Eric was born 22 April 1904 in Onehunga. As a boy he had a keen and inquiring mind and demonstrated an aptitude for science with a strong practical bent. In November 1920 he withdrew from the third year engineering course at Seddon Memorial Technical College (now Auckland Technical Institute) to accept an appointment as Laboratory Assistant in the Science and Technology department of the college. His first assignment was to supervise his former classmates for the study of a chapter of the Engineer's Text Book; they found his sudden elevation from pupil to teacher quite diverting. This was followed by a misfortune when, without instruction as to the danger, he had to paint all surfaces in the enclosed Photometric Room with a paint in which the solvent was carbon bisulphide. Eric's health was so impaired by prolonged exposure in the unventilated room that serious injury to bone marrow and blood supply resulted. He believed that this was the cause of the ill health that dogged him throughout his life. Most of the years 1921-22 were occupied with recovery from the onset of this condition and associated heart impairment.

In 1925 he went to Auckland Teachers' College to gain formal teaching qualifications. He had always had a strong interest in natural history and around this time made contact with the Auckland Museum's ornithologist Bob Falla and conchologist Baden Powell, often accompanying them on field excursions. An interest in Collembola was sparked by finding a cluster of these tiny white creatures skipping on water in the bottom of a cicada nymph's burrow in August 1928. Eric assigned them to the genus *Entomobrya* by comparison with the few published illustrations in the meagre literature that was available to him. Bob Falla encouraged him to describe this apparently new species and came up with the specific epithet *cuniculicola*. The description and illustrations were published in the *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum*. This is the only species he described.

Through the contact with Falla and Powell he occasionally worked as a volunteer for the Auckland Museum, particularly after Alfred Philpott's death in July 1930 which left the museum without the services of an entomologist. He made a display case of the puriri moth and its life cycle for the Museum's school loans service. Another task was to pack up the museum's collection of tipulids to send to C.P Alexander in the USA.

Eric recalls that most of the specimens were papered in triangles as was the custom for Lepidoptera, a storage method which seemed rather unsound because of tipulids' fragility, but it kept the broken fragments together.

After Teachers' College he had a number of teaching posts around Auckland but shifted north to Waimamaku (South Hokianga) in 1936 to run the local school. It was at this time that he became interested in beetles, stimulated by the visit of two American entomologists, Dr J. Manson Valentine and Mrs Elizabeth Valentine from the University of North Carolina. The Auckland Museum, knowing of Eric's keen interest in natural history and good local knowledge of the Hokianga area, put them in touch. The Valentines stayed with the Pritchards, and having got on so well together collecting in the Hokianga area the two couples set off on a camping-collecting tour of the North Island. This was the start of a lifelong friendship between them and an enduring interest in beetles for the Pritchards; their beetle collection dates from this time. A significant proportion of Eric's collection came from the Waimamaku area, from the beach to the top of Mt Hauturu. Eric recalled having devoted a lot of effort into searching for the elusive carabid *Maoripamborus fairburni* without success, but he was finally rewarded when dismembering a red rotten log. The beetles drew attention to themselves by making a squeaking noise when disturbed.

Ill health forced his resignation from Waimamaku in 1942 and return to Auckland for medical treatment. During this period he was without salary so put his practical skills to good use by making small objects from native woods with paua inlay (paper knives etc). He sold these to jewellers who found a ready market in the visiting American servicemen during World War II. In the meantime he had been appointed as Nature Study Teacher at the new Manukau Intermediate School which opened on 1 April 1943.

In 1951 Eric was one of the 50 founding members of the Entomological Society of New Zealand and one of the contributors to the first issue of the *New Zealand Entomologist*. Eric's contribution to New Zealand entomology lies mainly in his collection of northern North Island Coleoptera. Despite recurring illness, Eric continued teaching and the Pritchards collected beetles wherever they found themselves. Waihi Beach on the east coast was a favourite holiday location, and many specimens were obtained from this area and north to the Coromandel Peninsula. Exhibition Drive in the Waitakere Ranges and the region between Langs Beach (south of Waipu Cove toward Whangarei) and Mangawhai were also favoured collecting localities. The main part of the collection was donated to the Auckland Museum in December 1984, but some vials were received in 1987. The collection consists of about 5500 specimens, mostly beetles, glued on card in cigarette tins (Eric didn't smoke -the tins came from friends who did). There is also a duplicate collection stored in alcohol. Specimens are coded by number and collecting details are contained in a notebook. Entries in the notebook are meticulous for recording locality, date, time of day, weather conditions and other observations, a standard to emulate.

Eric was a quiet man, not one for self-promotion. Integrity and consideration for others were as natural to him as breathing. He is survived by his wife and lifelong companion Kathleen (Kay) who shared his long interest in entomology and to whom we extend our deepest sympathy.

Bibliography

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