

# the FLEMINGS of KATHMANDU

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ABOUT a year ago there was published *The Fabulous Flemings of Kathmandu*<sup>1</sup>, the story of Drs. Robert and Bethel Fleming and the United Christian Medical Mission to Nepal. It is an inspiring story, first, of their struggles to get permission to enter the country, and then of the growth of the mission from a small clinic in Kathmandu to modern hospitals in Kathmandu and Tansen and numerous clinics in outlying villages.

No one who reads this book could fail to be stirred by the courage and dedication of Bob Fleming as superintendent of the mission, and his wife, Bethel Fleming, as medical chief of the hospital. Their contribution to the people of Nepal in introducing modern medicine can only be appreciated when it is realized that as recently as 15 years ago foreigners were barred from the country and there was no medical service in our sense of the word at all.

However, while we at the Museum are proud of the Flemings and the dedicated work that they are performing, we are also happy to realize that it was through Bob Fleming's association with the Museum that his first opportunity to visit Nepal arose. As Bob says, they entered Nepal "on the wings of a bird," and it was his interest in birds that brought him to the Museum, first as visitor, then as collector, and now as Field Associate and co-author of three publications on the birds of Nepal.

It was in 1937, when on leave from the Woodstock High School in Mussoorie, India, to earn his Ph.D. in education at the University of Chicago, that Fleming first came to the Museum. Seeing an Indian pheasant on exhibition that he considered to be mislabeled, he boldly requested permission to speak to the curator. Thus began an association that has brought to the Museum several thousand birds, and to Fleming the delight of traveling the length and breadth of India and eventually reaching Nepal. When Fleming realized that the Museum would actually pay him to pursue his passion for birds, he received a brief but intensive course in collecting—one chicken skinned jointly with curator Emmet R. Blake—and was sent on his way with the minimum of equipment and our most fulsome hopes. These were justified, for the accession cards for the following years read like a gazetteer of India—Punjab, Assam, Manipur, Mussoorie—as Fleming used his long Christmas vacations to further his collecting.

By 1949 Fleming's heart had settled on Nepal, still closed to foreigners but with a wealth of fascinating birds. However, a foot had been put in the door to Nepal by two Ameri-



*Dr. Fleming examines a pheasant collected for the Museum  
(photograph by Toge Fujihira).*

cans, Walter Koelz and Dillon Ripley, who had collected there the two previous years. In mingled hope and desperation Fleming requested permission to go there through our embassy in India. To his amazement, permission was granted almost immediately, and there ensued an eager period of preparation. Financial support was offered by the late Boardman Conover, Research Associate and Trustee of the Museum, and Dr. Bethel took over a 150-bed hospital at Fatehgarh so that Dr. Carl Taylor of the Presbyterian Mission could accompany Bob. In October of 1949 the party reached Tansen in west Nepal, and the next three months were spent collecting along the Kali Gandahk River, reaching within 30 miles of the Tibetan border and altitudes up to 18,000 feet.

But exciting as he found the birds in this unknown country, Fleming was even more impressed by the tremendous need for medical assistance. Wherever he and Dr. Taylor camped word quickly spread that there was a doctor in the party, and soon there was a constant stream of patients arriving, all desperately needing attention. The slender medical resources that they had brought in with them were soon exhausted, and Fleming realized that medical work was the most important way in which his mission could help the Nepalese. This belief was the genesis of the United Christian Medical Mission to Nepal, although its consummation was to require another four years.

Although the first request to start a medical clinic in Nepal was refused, the friends that Fleming had made among the governing Rana family asked him to return, both to



collect and to bring medical assistance. In October of 1951 he was back again in west Nepal, this time accompanied by Dr. Bethel, son Bob, and the Dr. Carl Friedericks. While the two Bobs were off collecting, the two doctors established a clinic in Tansen. After treating 1,500 patients in 40 days, they returned to India even more convinced that their mission lay in Nepal. Again, though, they were disappointed when their request was not granted. It was not till 1953 that they were to succeed.

In January of that year the Flemings were able to make their first trip to Kathmandu, the capital of the country. By now the political climate had changed, the king had been restored to power, and outside aid was being sought. After collecting in the hills around the Kathmandu Valley, Bob gave a lecture to 80 of the leading people of the capital, exhibiting his birds and explaining their hopes for the mission. Whether it was the impact of his sparkling personality (and it is a personality impossible to resist) or whether it was just that the time was ripe, not long after their return to Mussoorie they received word that their prayers had been fulfilled; they were invited to start a medical mission in Kathmandu and Tansen. By January, 1954, the mission, however modest in the beginning, was a reality, and its growth during the ensuing years is a fascinating part of Miss Fletcher's book. We at the Museum have followed that growth with affection and pride, for we have felt, however indirectly, that we have a part in the mission.

In the meantime, Dr. Fleming has not let the responsi-

bilities of being superintendent of the medical mission keep him from his interest in birds. The results of his earlier trips were published in collaboration with Chief Curator of Zoology, Austin L. Rand<sup>2</sup>, and subsequent vacation periods have found Fleming always in the field. His travels have taken him from Nepal's far western border with Garhwal to the far eastern border with Sikkim, and it is doubtful if any man, foreigner or Nepalese, has seen as much of the country as he. In 1960-61 he participated in the World Book Scientific Expedition to the Himalayas, and I have had the pleasure of collaborating with him in publishing the results of these collections<sup>3</sup>. During this past year he has been able to devote full time to his scientific efforts through the medium of a Fulbright grant.

Young Bob, Jr. has shared his father's interests since the early days when he first accompanied him into the field. He himself is now teaching at Woodstock School and working on his Ph.D. thesis, which will be, naturally enough, on the birds of the Himalayas. This is good news for all of us, for it puts off indefinitely the day when we need be concerned that there will be no Flemings associated with the ornithology of India. ■

<sup>1</sup> Grace Nies Fletcher. *The Fabulous Flemings of Kathmandu* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Rand, A. L. and Fleming, R. L. "Birds from Nepal," *Fieldiana: Zoology*, Vol. 41, 1957, pp. 1-218.

<sup>3</sup> Fleming, R. L. and Traylor, M. A. "Notes on Nepal Birds," *Fieldiana: Zoology*, Vol. 35, 1961, pp. 447-487.

<sup>4</sup> ———. "Further Notes on Nepal Birds," *ibid.*, 1964, pp. 495-558.

## MUSEUM NEWS

### *Summer Programs For Children*

The Museum's summer series of free movies for children begins July 8 and runs for six successive Thursdays. The programs on the last four dates are scheduled so that children may attend the Grant Park Young People's Concerts at 11:00 A.M.

July 8 10 and 11:15 A.M.

#### **The Restless Sea**

Story of one of the "New Frontiers" in science: the sea's currents, tides, bizarre plants and fish, and the effects of volcanoes on the ocean floor.

July 15 10 and 11:00 A.M.

#### **The Enduring Wilderness**

Some of the scenic areas of Canada, where native plants and animals are being preserved for our enjoyment.

Cartoon also

July 22

10 and 1 P.M.

#### **Tales of Children**

How children live in the mountain villages of southern Spain and Bolivia and the fiord country of Norway.

July 29

10 and 1 P.M.

#### **Animals**

From Latin American jungles to our own area.

Cartoon also

August 5

10 and 1 P.M.

#### **Australia**

The strange and interesting creatures of the continent "down under."

August 12

10 and 1 P.M.

#### **Ranch Life**

Early days in California and a little spoofing of Western movies.

Cartoon also

### *South American Hall Reopens*

The Hall of Ancient and Modern Indians of South America (Hall 9) is now reopened after having been closed

since 1962. During that period the space occupied by the hall was remodeled to make room for a special exhibition area, adjacent to Stanley Field Hall, for the display of temporary exhibits.

Visitors to the reopened hall will find it rich in materials from the ancient cultures of Colombia and Peru and the recent Indian tribes that live in the tropical forests east of the Andes.

Among the archaeological materials are painted effigy and portrait jars which bring to life the ancient Chimú people, whose civilization reached its height in the eighth century of our era. Three new cases display the elegant pottery made from the first to the eighth century by the Nazca and Paracas peoples of Peru.

Outstanding among the artifacts made by recent Indians are ceremonial costumes used by the head-hunting Jivaros of Ecuador and Peru. On a backing of bark cloth or woven human hair, these dance skirts and headdresses boast intricate and lovely designs fashioned of shell, seeds, dyed bird bones, monkey

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