

With his death we lose one of the oldest members of the Society and another link with the British residents who have done so much for the study of natural history in India.

We extend our heartfelt sympathies to Mrs. Donald.

EDITORS

STANLEY HENRY PRATER

(With a plate)

Stanley Henry Prater, whose name was almost synonymous with the Bombay Natural History Society for nearly a quarter of a century prior to his retirement from its curatorship in 1948, died in London on 12th October 1960 at the age of 70, after a long and crippling illness. He was born on 12th March 1890 in the Nilgiris (south India), the son of William Prater, a coffee planter. He was entered at an early age in St Mary's High School, Bombay, then conducted by Jesuit fathers of the German mission. From his early years most of his school holidays were spent at Khandala in the Western Ghats, and it was but natural that the first sparks of the boy's interest in natural history should be kindled by such surroundings. They were fanned into a steady flame by the sympathetic encouragement he received from the fathers, some of whom were distinguished naturalists. The main influences on his future career were those of Frs. Dreckmann (snakes), Assmuth (termites), and Blatter (plants). Them he always remembered and spoke of in later life with great reverence and affection.

Prater joined the Society's service in 1907, first working under the guidance of E. Comber, and later as assistant to the Society's first stipendiary curator N. B. Kinnear, afterwards to become Sir Norman and Director of the British Museum (Natural History). In 1923, Prater was appointed Curator of the Society and of the Natural History Section of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, Bombay. This position he held with marked distinction till his retirement in 1948 owing to his election to the Indian Constituent Assembly in New Delhi as a representative of the Anglo-Indian community, and the wholetime attention to politics and the frequent absences from Bombay that this would entail. To qualify him for the charge of a really first class natural history museum, worthy of the First City in India and of the Bombay Natural History Society, Prater was deputed by a far-sighted Board of Trustees in 1923 to the United Kingdom to learn the art of modern taxidermy in the studios of the well-known taxidermist L. C. Harwood. In 1927, he was again sent abroad, this time to the foremost museums in the United Kingdom and America, to pick up the techniques of modern natural history museum exhibition—the preparation of habitat groups or dioramas which, starting

in Germany, had reached perfection in the United States, particularly in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and what was then the Field Museum of Chicago. The fruits of his skill and aptitude are evidenced by the artistically designed galleries of the Natural History Section of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, and the superb group exhibits, acclaimed to be the finest in the East.

This era of the Society, between the years 1923 and 1937, during which the new natural history wing was conceived, designed, erected, and opened to the public, was one of outstanding progress owing to the dynamic combination of two dedicated and far-sighted personalities, Sir Reginald Spence as Honorary Secretary of the Society and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Prince of Wales Museum, and S. H. Prater as his able and versatile executive. The Natural History Section is indeed a standing monument to Prater's genius. Not only the best use of his training abroad, but the gift he possessed for passing on the full benefit of his knowledge and experience to his co-workers and staff, and his tact and ability to extract whole-hearted co-operation from them, enabled him to achieve the highest results. He was fortunate in having an exceptionally competent and dextrous lieutenant in Charles McCann, who readily lapped up the imported techniques, adapted them to local conditions, and put them into masterly execution in the museum's galleries.

For the last 27 years of his service, Prater was the executive editor of the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. The high standard which the *Journal* attained during this period earned it international recognition as the foremost natural history journal in Asia. He was a voracious and discriminating reader, particularly of natural history books, in his early years. Reading, writing, painting and plaster modelling were his favourite hobbies during his retirement. The skill and discernment with which he would browse through heavy scientific literature, and the facile manner in which he would then connect up and expound disjointed facts, culled from many sources, and produce harmony from them were enviable. So was his rare capacity for picking out the essentials of anything he read, sorting out and assimilating complicated scientific data, and clothing the substance in simple, jargon-free language for the layman. He was blessed with a remarkably retentive memory, and could usually lay his hands on anything he had read on a subject, may be years before, without hesitation or fumbling. Prater excelled in the art of compilation; he wrote in a readable, easy, and often humorous style, was a good illustrator with pen-and-ink or brush, and a frequent and welcome contributor of popular natural history articles to numerous journals and magazines. The bibliography of his principal contributions in the *Journal*, given below, conveys some idea of the wide range of his interests and versatility. The realization of



Stanley Henry Prater

the crying need for wild life preservation in India was brought home to the public and to the government largely by his able exposition in the introduction to the admirable series on Wild Life Preservation in India which he initiated in the *Journal* in 1935, and by his constant 'plugging' of the problem through numerous well-informed editorials in the *Journals* and newspaper articles, before and since.

The familiarity he acquired with the Society's natural history collections during his long stewardship gave him a wonderful all-round grasp of Indian animals. Though his own leanings were more particularly towards mammals, birds, and snakes, he was quite at home with almost all other groups and could not only name straightaway practically any specimen brought in by members, even of the less common animals, but usually also give their distribution and habits. His intimate connection with mammals during the Society's Mammal Survey between 1911 and 1923, both as field collector and while handling the specimens as they came in from the field, or back from the British Museum after identification, gave him a particularly good knowledge of mammals. This, no doubt, accounts largely for the authenticity and success of his *THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS* published by the Society in 1948. During the mammal survey field work he suffered a serious accident which might well have cost him his life. A gun went off when picked up by the trigger by his local assistant and blew away a large part of his thigh. The injury, though it healed remarkably, incapacitated him for further strenuous field work, and from this time on his activities remained chiefly intra-mural.

Sir Reginald Spence first initiated him into politics so that he might be of service to his Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European community, then in need of able leadership. Prater took up his new avocation with his customary conscientiousness and gusto. The well-informed manner in which he handled all legislative problems, particularly educational, and participated in debates, whether concerning his own community or the public at large, made his opinions respected in government as well as opposition circles, and he was drafted on numerous important committees including the Provincial Franchise Committee and the Greaves Committee on Education. For 17 successive years he was the President of the Bombay Presidency Branch of the Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European Association, which he ably represented in the Bombay Legislative Council before Independence.

Among his other public activities, he was a member of the Provincial Board of Education, and of the Managing Committee of St. George's Hospital, Bombay, and a Justice of the Peace. In 1943 he was awarded the O.B.E. for meritorious services in various fields. His good standing and friendliness with persons of every shade of opinion, political and otherwise, and the confidence he commanded with the ruling party

in the Legislative Council, were an asset to the Society from which it profited in many indirect ways.

Prater was, in truth, a remarkable man—capable, versatile, sociable, ambitious, and a striver after perfection as his many handiworks clearly show.

As friend, companion, and colleague, he was good natured and tolerant, and possessed of a keen sense of humour which never left him even in his last bedridden years. His sociable disposition and considerateness for his dependants and subordinates endeared him to all who came in contact with him. He will enjoy an honoured place in the Society's annals as one of its most stalwart and capable builders.

Appended is a list of the more important of Prater's contributions to the Society's *Journal*. His only book THE BOOK OF INDIAN ANIMALS illustrated by himself, is out of print, but a second edition is in preparation. Besides these, he wrote the section on the fauna in Percival Landon's NEPAL published in 1928.

S.A.

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