

In Memoriam

LOKE WAN THO

(With a plate)

The death on 20 June 1964 of Loke Wan Tho is a grievous loss to the Society, to his innumerable friends throughout the world, and to the cause of ornithology of the Oriental Region. He was killed in an air crash in Taiwan while returning to Taipei from a visit to the museum at Taichung—a paltry half-hour's flight. It was typical of Loke's passion for the rare and the beautiful that he could never resist even a fleeting opportunity to look at a good art gallery, or a collection of old porcelain, or books, or birds, or a spell of bird watching and photography. On this fateful day he had a few hours to spare from official engagements, so while the other members of his delegation to the International Film Festival slept off the exhaustion of a hectic week in preparation for the grand finale that evening, Loke thought to employ his leisure to better purpose—with this tragic result.

Wan Tho was born at Kuala Lumpur on 14 June 1915. He was sent to an English school (Chillon College) in Switzerland at an early age because of his delicate health, passing thence to Cambridge (King's College) where he took his M.A. in English Literature and History in 1936. Thereafter he attended the London School of Economics for two years before returning to Malaya. English literature and poetry were among his great loves, and among his severely pruned personal kit on expeditions were always to be found a couple of favourite anthologies which were the first things to be unpacked as soon as camp was established.

Loke's connection with the Bombay Natural History Society dates from 1942, not long after he landed here as an evacuee from Singapore in the wake of the Japanese occupation. During the adventurous voyage out his ship was bombed by Japanese aircraft, he himself being rescued from the sea, temporarily blinded and half killed. Being in the fortunate position of not having to seek an immediate livelihood, a happy coincidence launched him into the serious study of birds to which he already possessed a strong natural leaning. It was during this period that some of the regional bird surveys by myself under the sponsorship of the Society were under way. No great persuasion



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was needed for Loke to attach himself to one of these. He soon proved an exceptionally enthusiastic observer and collector of birds, and later also a capable assistant in the taxonomical studies on the collections, acquiring in the process a sounder all-round knowledge of Indian ornithology than is possessed by many a more seasoned amateur. His unfailing courtesy and quiet good manners, friendly disposition, and capacity to mix at all levels and to remain cheerful and unruffled under a leader not reputed for sweetness of temper were other qualities that made him a welcome adjunct to the field camps. Never grumbling or complaining, ever ready to share all physical hardships and deprivations, even with a show of enjoyment, he was an ideal companion. Any one with experience of this type of rough-and-ready camping in India—often living for days in bug-infested dharamsalas or dilapidated drafty cattlesheds under the light of smoky hurricane lanterns at night—with one eye constantly glued on the budget, as was doubly necessary in the war years—will admit that this is the supreme test of a congenial camp companion. And through it all he never lost his capacity to look on the humorous side of uninspiring situations.

One of the wealthiest men in Malaysia, Loke was a rich man with a difference, especially as millionaires in our part of the world go. All his tastes were essentially simple, cultured, and humanistic, and his love of Nature an enduring passion. Since his return to Malaya at the end of the war, in 1945, he became increasingly caught up in business affairs. Responsible honorary public offices were thrust on him one after another by an appreciative public and Government. The tact, conscientiousness, and complete integrity and efficiency with which he discharged his functions won him the respect and admiration of all. All this in addition to the cares of the vast business empire he had built up around himself left people amazed at how he ever managed to find the time to keep so closely in touch with his intellectual pursuits. It was also a wonder to his more intimate associates how he kept himself so well informed about details of the various enterprises with which he was connected—for instance the comparative merits of different types of aircraft, the latest automobile engines and their relative performances, the superiority of Swedish telephone systems and equipment over those of other countries, and things of that sort.

In later years he sometimes said with a touch of sadness that though he was fortunate enough to possess the means for carefree indulgence in the things nearest to his heart—outdoor life, expeditions, camping, mountaineering, studying and photographing birds—he found

himself left with less and less leisure to take advantage of the facilities. Therefore, he had to take his pleasure in these things vicariously by helping scientific expeditions and other deserving causes with funds and in other ways. His generosity and munificence were as liberal as they were unostentatious and genuine, and his patronage extended in multifarious directions—helping promising youngsters to higher education and technical training abroad, sponsoring the visit of a badminton team to a foreign country, or promoting the building up of a school or library.

Loke was a great lover of English literature with a fine sense of appreciation and criticism. This made him a charming and stimulating companion in camp when, after dinner, all the mundane chores were over and we sat reading with the help of a couple of miserable hurricane lanterns. He would break out into reading aloud to his companions passages which especially caught his fancy, sometimes with a chuckle and often an obvious smacking of the lips. He himself wrote pleasingly with an easy style and a keen sense of humour, and his contributions to journals and magazines were eagerly sought after. His articles from time to time in the journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, illustrated with his own excellent photographs were always enjoyed and greatly looked forward to. He became an EHA-fan while in India and wrote a beautiful little biographical sketch of EHA to preface a new edition of the classic COMMON BIRDS OF BOMBAY published by Thackers in 1943 under the altered title COMMON BIRDS OF INDIA. Loke kept a detailed diary of day-to-day activities and happenings in camp which he wrote up meticulously every night before going to bed, and thus amassed a good deal of material for future literary efforts. The only book he published was entitled—after a favourite passage from EHA—A COMPANY OF BIRDS. It quickly ran to two impressions and drew an appreciative press. It is chiefly an album of some of his outstanding bird photographs with a useful introduction to the techniques he so successfully employed and some very readable reminiscences as a bird photographer. In photography as in everything else he chose to take up, whether for business or pleasure, Loke was a perfectionist. While seeming to airily click his camera he would have carefully calculated in advance the result he was likely to attain by underexposing by so much and later by overdeveloping the negative by so much, minutiae that accounted for the disparaging difference his companions usually found between exposures made by themselves—of the same subject, at the same time, and from the same spot—and the results *he* produced! It was therefore by no accident that he came to be

regarded as one of the finest photographers in the East, not only of birds but also of archaeological subjects. His photographs illustrating Malcolm Macdonald's book on Angkor testify to this verdict. The ease and willing readiness with which he made his photographs available to all and sundry magazines and scientific publications that sought his co-operation brought his work to the notice of a wide international circle of discriminating ornithologists and photographers and served to enhance his fame. He received many coveted awards at numerous international photographic exhibitions.

At the time of his death Loke was, among other things, Pro-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, a member of the Court of the University of Singapore, Chairman of the National Library Board, Singapore, and Member of Council of Singapore Institute of Management and Economic Development, and held similar honorary offices in numerous other public and quasi-governmental bodies. He was Chairman of Malayan Air Lines, and served as Chairman of the Singapore Telephone Board during its formative phase between 1953 and 1959. Besides these he was President, Vice-President, or Council Member of innumerable societies connected with social service, sport, natural history, photography, music, and other cultural pursuits, a Vice-Patron of the Bombay Natural History Society, representative of Malaya on the International Council for Bird Preservation, and Chairman of the Malaysian National Section of the same. He was the recipient of high honours and decorations from the State of Kelantan and the Federation of Malaya for his public services and benefactions, and also personally from Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia and the Emperor of Japan. In addition there was, of course, his own gigantic Cathay Organization with its chain of 60 cinemas throughout Malaysia, and film production studios and hotels in Hong Kong, Fiji, and Singapore. He was director or chairman of numerous companies concerned with rubber, tin, and real estate in Singapore and Malaya, and with banking, shipping, insurance, automobiles, and other business.

Apart from a genuine well-wisher and active life member, the Society has lost in him a continuing benefactor who has helped financially and by personal participation in many of its scientific field projects and publications, and in other ways.

Loke was married last September in London. His wife was also killed with him in the crash. He leaves behind his mother, two sisters, and a step-daughter (by his wife's former husband). To them the Society extends its sincerest condolence.

SÁLIM ALI