

STELLA MARIS TURK, MBE (MARCH 27 1925–APRIL 3 2017)

About seven years ago, during a visit to Stella Turk's home in Reskadinnick, she passed me a large body of conchological correspondence for archiving. I was reminded of this when I was looking through all my own papers relating to the long friendship I enjoyed with Stella since meeting her at my first Conchological Society meeting in 1981. I came across an index she had compiled – one of many – for she was an ardent and natural archivist. This index lists her Conchological correspondents through the period 1960–2005. At the time of helping her to sort her files of papers there were numerous other folders for her correspondents relating to other subjects in natural history, both particular and general. The Conchological list contains some two hundred names and her correspondence was filed in a range of stuffed manila folders and brown envelopes. All Stella's correspondence is now held at the Leeds Museum storage facility. Her extensive correspondence network, along with the large number of Cornish folk, as well as visitors from outside the county, who frequented 'Shang-ri La', Stella's home of nearly eighty years, exemplify just one aspect of this remarkable and important personality who was integral to the Cornish wildlife and conservation scene.

Stella Maris Treharne Phillips was born on St Mary's, Scilly, the fifth of six children, in March 1925. Her father was a clergyman and in 1927 the family emigrated to New Zealand where her father administered the parish of Otorohanga for five years. During those years Stella received formal education but upon her return to Cornwall she would be educated by her father, a former schoolmaster, as well as by her older brother, David, at their vicarage home in Treleigh, near Redruth. Stella retained no early memories of Scilly and it would be many years later that she would return to teach natural history courses. At Treleigh Stella's time would be immersed in natural history, a shared passion with her brother Michael. They kept a range of pets and maintained a museum in the loft where they bred Lepidoptera and kept pet mice. Those mice, George and Mary, would give Stella an early lesson in the indifference of nature. In her conversations Stella frequently recalled the horror she

felt when those rodent parents ate their young. When her father retired in 1939 the family moved to Feock, and her attention turned to river and shore. She and Michael paddled around in their leaky boat and poked around on the shore looking under stones to see what lived beneath.

During the war Stella served in the Land Army before helping in a children's home in Plymouth during the Blitz. Later still she would work on a farm. At this time Stella joined some adult education classes run by Frank Turk, always known as FAT, some 14 years her senior. He helped her acquire a second-hand microscope and nurtured her enthusiasm and talent for natural history studies. He encouraged her to write a short paper for the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society Annual Report for which she received the Sir Edward Nicol Silver Medal. He introduced her to the world of literature and booksellers, fostering her interests and it was on joining the Conchological Society in 1960 that her interests focused on molluscs. Thus she had set her sail fair for a life committed to molluscan studies, but with plenty of room in her life



Stella on the oars, in 1954, with FAT in the background. Family photos.

to pursue her other natural history enthusiasms. When talking to her some years ago about special molluscan memories she recalled finding her first so-called 'bubble shell', *Akera bullata*, bobbing in the water, and from this time her shell collection started to grow.

'Shang-ri La' is the cottage which FAT bought in 1939, Stella meeting him in the early 1940s. She married FAT in 1947. FAT believed that you travelled young (in your 20s) and by the time he met and married Stella he was ready to settle down to a life devoted to oriental and natural history studies. He became more and more reclusive, finding the visits of others a distraction and the source of dissipation of his own time to work on his many areas of interest and expertise. It was the task of Stella to screen visitors and protect him to some extent. Stella, meanwhile, started to build up the large network of fellow workers and contacts that she nurtured and valued throughout her life. Many visitors to the cottage seldom met Frank: during the course of my visits Frank would be ensconced elsewhere; I never met him.

Between the 1960s and 70s Stella assisted FAT with his adult education courses offered for the Workers' Education Association, by Cornwall County Council and Exeter University. She curated the British Mollusca collections in the Royal Institution in Cornwall. In 1972, following her meeting with David Heppell, who was Marine Recorder of the Conchological Society, her activities in marine recording were cemented. At this time centralisation of the biological records for the whole of Cornwall was getting under way at the Institute of Cornish Studies. Stella played a central role in this, at the same time as taking over the role of Marine Recorder for the Conchological Society. She was instrumental in initiating fieldwork to feed the Marine Census and is remembered as 'a tower of strength' and 'a mine of information' at that time, continually loaning and identifying specimens. It was also in her capacity as Recorder that the expansion of her huge correspondence came about. It must have been time-consuming but one could imagine that Stella must have welcomed this – taking her out into the world of conchology where she met many interesting minds, and she never had to stir from her beloved Cornwall. To quote Stella, "It isn't just the conchs but the conchologists too"

The long correspondence which demonstrates Stella's passion for responding to enquiries and sharing information brought her into contact with so many familiar names; luminaries in the conchological and malacological communities as well as her contemporaries in the Conchological Society and other molluscan workers of her time, and it is invidious to try and single out names as worthy of particular mention from the long list. She did, however, have a prodigious correspondence with Nora McMillan (a former Marine Recorder and President) over many years, but they never progressed beyond the formality of Mrs Mac and Mrs Turk! Of Arthur Ellis (a former Non-marine Recorder and President) she wrote, "It is difficult to categorise people. Should one even try? We are all multiple in a singular way". Over the years I came to see that Stella read people very well.

Because one of Stella's aims was to encourage people to work their own patch she took recording groups onto Cornish shores to record everything that could be named, not just molluscs. The results of each survey were collated and typed up by Stella, often with six or seven carbon copies. She said that she took those copies to give to her students and to pass to experts for comment. Her archive was stuffed with carbon copies! She also kept a small marine aquarium for many years. Later in life Stella would come to review that recording effort and see it in the context of climate change, which subject engaged and focused her working life out of her cottage in Reskadinnick.

This would later trigger a valuable role that she would take up in the early 1990s as a volunteer



Stella seated at her desk, with FAT, in the library at Shang-ri La, 1977. Family photos.

worker, maintaining the Strandings Database of Cornish shores. For many years she manned a telephone and email service as first port of call for observations that would need other volunteers to deal with the strandings and subsequent actions. She would spend much time at her computer diligently recording all the necessary information to be passed to Wildlife Trust experts and volunteers.

At the same time Stella would also spend as much time as she could working through the paper archive of records and digitising them with the help of Colin French for the Cornish database, Cornwall being at the forefront of this technological innovation. She coordinated the recording effort on an unpaid basis working with dedicated volunteers, extracting from publications as well as receiving information from amateurs, professionals and members of the public. As a result, a very close-knit relationship developed between Cornish natural historians, conservationists and supporters. At this time Rose Murphy, a long-time friend of the Turks, became botanist in residence. In 2002 Stella estimated that she held a computer database containing 1,300,000 biological records covering some 23,000 species (a duplicate floral and faunal database being held at the Cornish Wildlife Trust HQ). She enjoyed this work seeing it as a bridge between the past and the future. Through her reading of journals and other sources in the Royal Institution of Cornwall Stella started to make lists and compare old and new information. People's names would arise time and again, enshrined in the record, where they went, and when. Cornwall and Scilly have always been of interest to naturalists because of their geographical position. People like Jeffreys, Forbes and Hanley would go to the far north and to the southwest to compare the two regions.

Stella was created a Bard of the Cornish Gorsedh, an honour of which she was particularly proud. In 1980 Stella was awarded the Stamford Raffles Silver medal by the Zoological Society of London for distinguished contributions to zoology and received an honorary MSc from University of Exeter. In 2003 Stella was awarded an MBE for services to conservation and biological recording in Cornwall. "I felt astonishment and pleasure beyond words" she said. Amongst letters of support for this award, her unstinting help and encouragement to all involved in the

Conchological Society, and amongst the Cornish natural history fraternity, would be cited time and again.

Stella rarely ventured out of Cornwall although at one period, when she was working on the Fowler collection in the Natural History Museum she travelled to London on a few occasions, with her friends and fellow workers Pamela Tompsett and Mervyn Hallett, to work on those shells. She once said that all she knew of London was the tunnel that linked South Kensington tube station with the Mollusca Section in that Museum. Apart from attending four Conchological Society meetings during her 2-year Presidency she did not attend its meetings regularly. Yet, for someone who attended meetings so rarely she maintained an amazing connection with numerous members who were always welcome to arrange to visit Stella.

And what an experience that was. Via a small porch you entered the tiny parlour, with its round table and Stella's vintage cane rocking chair. Oriental furniture, ceramics and objets d'art abound. You step down a few steps ahead to pass a bijou dining room, with just enough room for another small round table with chairs, and reach the lean-to kitchen running along the back of the cottage and from which you see the garden with its various huts, both zoological and botanical, as well as a small potting shed. At the time of Stella's death the garden had been maturing for over 70 years. Whilst Rose had always tended the lower garden where she had her botany hut the garden outside the back door fell to Stella's care and encompassed the zoology hut, and was clad with ferns, lichens, mosses, with bamboo margins and maples and small conifers, small statues and figures, all giving a distinctly oriental character. Most fascinating, however, was to enter the library, an extension designed by herself and a unique space accessed from the parlour through a very narrow doorway that would have originally housed a broom cupboard! It was with something of a sense of Narnia that you passed out of the welcoming space of the parlour into an intriguing long and narrow chamber lined with bookshelves and filing cabinets and curiosities of natural history, and yet finding space for a table, a desk with a microscope, later to accommodate her desktop computer.

In her later years and despite declining eyesight owing to macular degeneration, Stella was



Stella seated outside her Zoology Hut. Photo Pamela Tompsett.

able to continue her recording work with help, spending time at the computer screen with one of her regular weekly-visiting friends, entering and vetting biological records. This tangible output represented everything that Stella felt to be valuable in the life she had spent working for the love of studying Cornish wildlife. To the very

end she would insist that for her there was nothing more worthwhile than the study of natural history, especially in the context of conservation and climate change.

In the final years of Stella's life her bed was moved into the library at the cottage. There she received professional care and continued to be supported by her loyal Cornish friends, primarily by Rose, her lifelong companion. Without that care she would not have been able to stay in her beloved home, where, as her life drew to a close she could look through the *Wisteria*-framed window across the Red River Valley to North Cliff. Here, she recalled for me on more than one occasion, she would play with her brother Michael, scrambling down the treacherous cliffs to reach the small, isolated coves below. Stella was an inspirational figure and a team player. She was immensely practical and thrived in the company of others. Outwardly of a gentle nature and very slow to judge, she was nevertheless a woman of strong personality and conviction and is no doubt missed by all those who were fortunate enough to have known her.

Janice Light