

—Obituary—

R. A. Stewart Melliush (?–2008)

Stewart Melliush arrived in India circa 1958. He was a most attractive young man with a range of interests in which he excelled. Good looks were the least of his assets. He could have been a professional pianist, an artist or a writer. For some years he was the Manager of the Oxford University Press in Madras, and when R. E. Hawkins, the boss in India, retired Stewart could have taken his place, but he decided to settle down in Oxford instead.

Many of you will recall his carefully researched and beautifully written articles in the early years of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. When he went out birding he came back with shorthand notes to be pondered over later, but sketches of birds, made on the spot as a further aid to identification, also accompanied these. I recall the several sketches he made of harriers during our walk in Madras. He later telephoned to say that he had pinned down the bird as a female Hen Harrier in not very good plumage!

Exceptionally gifted people have their eccentricities. Stewart, the aesthete, hated the egg yellow colour of the Burmah Shell petrol bunks and never ever used them, even when the fuel indicator was critically low. In the Gir Sanctuary I found that he was so interested in the history of the ancient railway steam engine that we had to sacrifice some of our scarce birding time around the engine. He was fascinated by the environment in Kihim, and wrote in our '*akhbar*' book 'Kihim must be one of the most beautiful places in the world.' This naturally endeared him to us.

To get the full measure of this rare man I requested Girish Karnad, the famous playwright, to join in this tribute and this is what he sent...

'Stewart Melliush was a perfectionist—rather he was obsessed with the notion of approaching "perfection" as closely as possible. I was his Assistant Manager at Oxford University Press, Madras, for six years and what I learnt from him during that time covered areas way beyond the realm of publishing.

'He had a perfectly cursive italic hand and even the normal letters he wrote looked as though they were printed. He was an excellent draftsman, and since we were often driven to try every means of reducing the cost of production of a textbook, not only did he design book covers but sometimes even illustrated the texts. He was meticulous and even the layout of a title page could take hours. His joyful indulgence in choosing the right typeface or working out the precise spacing could be maddening but the results were always impeccable.

'When our office moved from its ramshackle old quarters into a specially constructed building, he took hours choosing the right shade of deep green for his office wall. We were both members of a local amateur dramatic group called The Madras Players and I directed him in a play called *The Caretaker*, by Harold Pinter, in which I cast him in the role of a cockney tramp. From the first day of the rehearsals until the play was over, Stewart drove his friends crazy by carrying on conversation only in the cockney dialect. This was his first play ever and he was bitten by the stage bug. Later, as Beckett's "Krapp" he gave a performance which was, as a member of the United States Information Services commented, as good as anything one could get to see on the professional stage in the West. It was the beautiful rendering of a funny poem by Hillaire Belloc at a British Council event that attracted him to his future wife, Shameem. He spoke about it for days.

'He lived in a huge bungalow called Holloway's Cottage, with an enormous garden and a pillared portico, and loved its colonial

air. He filled the place with objects that fitted in perfectly with its turn-of-the-century ambience so that to walk into its compound, down a winding driveway, was to be carried back half a century in time. No one, who had spent a long evening in the garden, lounging in a cane chair sipping gin and lime amidst the ruckus of babblers, is ever likely to forget the nostalgic mellowness of that experience. I often thought Holloway's Cottage had much to do with moulding him into the image of a nineteenth-century Englishman in India, the type one is grateful to for filling the gazetteers with such delightful detail. The office had given him a Herald Triumph, but he had an old Sunbeam, which he loved. During weekends, he would pack the Sunbeam with a tent, food, a gas stove and binoculars and head for the countryside with his "factotum" (his word)—Jayaram. He loved the Sunbeam so much that he decided to find out how it worked, and he and Jayaram dismantled it to the last screw. They reassembled it, savouring the process, and it worked, but to Stewart's immense disappointment, the Sunbeam was never quite the same again.

'In his childhood, he told me, he used to go bird-watching with his father. But in Madras, the hobby turned into a passion, and it is to his credit that he persuaded Roy Hawkins, the General Manager of OUP, who himself was a keen bird-watcher, into taking on the publication of the ten-volume *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan*.

'Stewart was capable of immense charm and warmth, and when with people he was fond of, was full of lusty laughter. He was also immensely sensitive and got hurt very easily, although he would have died rather than reveal his feelings. However, he could also be curt when he chose. "It's easy for me to be ungracious," he used to say.

'The most vivid memory I have of Stewart, however, is not visual but of an incident he himself narrated, from the days when he was still the Assistant Manager in Madras. In those days, the Manager's office was separated from the Assistant's by a partition, which was mounted on a stand, raising it about two feet off the floor. That day, there had been a disagreement between the two, and Stewart was feeling peeved. It was late evening, long past the time the Manager normally left for home, and a sudden urge gripped Stewart to tear his boss apart. He got down on all fours, and, snarling and growling like a tiger, crawled menacingly under the partition into the Manager's office. He was half way in and directing his fiercest growl toward the Manager's chair, when whom should he see there but a very startled-looking Manager, still at work, staring back at him. Stewart dropped his snarl, quietly withdrew into his office and continued his work. The episode was never mentioned again between the two.

— Zafar Futehally

Errata

Indian Birds Volume 4 No 1 (January–February) 2008.

The following photograph should have accompanied the short note entitled, 'Southern-most breeding record of the Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* from India', by Grubb *et al.* (p. 15). The error is regretted.

