

Centenary of Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club

By WM. MARTIN

This year marks the centenary of the Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club. The "Otago Daily Times" Oct. 7, 1872, reported :

"A meeting of the Field Naturalist Club was held in the Museum on Saturday afternoon, Dr Black in the Chair. After some preliminaries, a code of rules, drawn up from those of several similar Societies in the old country was read and after some slight alteration, adopted for the management of the Club. The following office-bearers were then elected for the year : President, Mr J. S. Webb; Secretary, Mr P. Thomson; Committee, Dr Black and Messrs Alex Bathgate, A. C. Purdie and G. M. Thomson."

Dr W. B. Benham, F.R.S., formerly Curator of the Otago Museum and Professor of Zoology, also a life member of the Naturalists' Field Club once wrote of the debt the Club owed to the Hon. G. M. Thomson, F.L.S., who in the early days accompanied members on their excursions, which were rendered fruitful and interesting by his knowledge, always freely given.

George M. Thomson was born in Calcutta in 1848, the same year in which the early Scottish pioneers arrived to found the settlement of Otago. At the age of 20 he arrived at Dunedin, where he lived for the rest of his life. In 1871 he joined the teaching staff of the Otago High Schools, where from 1877 to 1903 he was the Science Master.

In an obituary, published by Dr Benham in Vol. 64 of the Transactions of the Royal Society of New Zealand (1935) he says of G. M. Thomson " He cared nothing for syllabus or for examinations; his method was such as to excite the real interest in his subject; his aim was to awaken in his pupils a love for nature, and this he succeeded in doing both by his work in the class-room and in his walks around the Town Belt." At the early age of 23, he had already interested many of the local citizens in the natural history of the Dunedin district.

The membership of the Club was small, but the various excursions to areas in the vicinity were mainly devoted to compiling a catalogue of the plants, birds, insects and other living things observed. By persistence and enthusiasm the newly-formed Club overcame such difficulties as are frequently encountered by newly-formed organisations, and with one or two brief lapses, the Club has continued to progress and grow until today the membership exceeds 200.

In its earliest years the Town Belt was the venue for many of the excursions, consisting as it then did entirely of native plants and peopled largely by native birds; but, strangely enough, no complete list of the native plants located in the Belt has ever been published. A very large number are now no longer there; but several catalogues have been prepared and published listing the plants both native and introduced for the area of Dunedin and neighbourhood, and recording the localities in which they may be found: The seaweed's of the local coastline and of the Otago Harbour were compiled by W. A. Scarfe and Crosbie-Smith and the list later enlarged by others. The first catalogue appeared in 1916 and included for the first time lists of the ferns and seaweeds.

In 1924 the writer, when President of the Club, published a series of newspaper articles in the Otago Daily Times on the plants of the Dunedin area at the request of Sir George Fenwick. This was later issued in pamphlet form. A second edition of this, rewritten and enlarged, was produced in 1962 as a Club publication, using the revised nomenclature then current. The writer has also compiled for the Club a list of mosses and lichens indigenous to Dunedin and its environs, but there yet remains a need for a catalogue of the fungi and hepatics. No member of the Club seems ever to have compiled a list of hepatics present in the area, but the fungi became a special study of Miss Helen Dalrymple, Mrs J. Moore, and several other Club members and preparatory lists of the local fungi were compiled.

Many Club members have been more interested in the bird life of the district than in the plant life, and many observations of interest have been made. In the early years of the Club, kakas, parrakeets, native quail were still to be seen; and robins, wrens, tomtits, bush hawks,

and other native species were plentiful. Most of these have now disappeared from this area. Even the kingfisher is now seldom seen in this area. Other Club members regularly study the shells and shellfish of the area and compile lists of species with their localities and habitats. Coastal marine life of all forms is regularly observed and notes made.

For many years the Club has held fortnightly indoor meetings when exhibits are examined and reports presented by section leaders. The main item of each evening is usually an address on some aspect of Natural History by members of the Club or by members of the University lecturers and other specialists. There is scarcely any branch of Natural History that has not been the subject of many addresses, and even the Professors of Botany (Dr Benham, Dr Holloway, Prof. Baylis) have spared the time to address the Club on many occasions as have the Professors of Zoology and their staffs, and those of other departments also.

On alternate weeks or Saturdays preceding the indoor meeting an excursion is made to some locality in the surrounding district with a designated topic of study and a leader for the day to co-ordinate the activities of members, to identify specimens, or answer questions by Club members ; but on each excursion observations are made on any branch of nature where such observations are worthy of record.

At the following meeting on Monday evening reports are made, specimens exhibited, or slides screened. In recent years the Club has introduced the practice of a midsummer excursion to some area of special natural history interest far distant from Dunedin, there to observe plants or animals not present in the Dunedin area and so to extend members' knowledge of the New Zealand flora or fauna, or it may be of the geology and fossils present in the selected area. Such excursions have been well attended by members and often extend for a week. They have ranged as far afield as Nelson, Marlborough, and Westland.

Members have included many who had specialist knowledge of some branch of natural history — as moths (George Howes, F.L.S.), beetles (Chas. Clark, F.L.S.), fungi (Miss H. Dalrymple, M.A.), seaweeds (W. A. Scarfe), Dr D. M. Watt (slime fungi), Miss E. Sutherland (orchids), Native mosses and lichens (W. Martin, B.Sc.) — to name but some with such special interests.

The Naturalists Field Club in Dunedin is the oldest in New Zealand, and it may be in the Southern Hemisphere. It is now at its maximum numerical strength and its meetings held on alternate Monday evenings in the Red Lecture Theatre, Medical School, Great King Street, are well attended. The Annual Subscription has remained for very many years at 50 cents. Life membership is given for conspicuous service to the Club and those at present holding this distinction are Misses O. R. Cartwright, E. Sutherland and B. Stewart, Mrs A. Baxter and Messrs W. H. Davidson, W. T. Popplewell, B. W. Campbell and W. Martin.