

IN MEMORIAM: HERBERT GIRTON DEIGNAN¹

by

Herbert Friedmann²

Herbert Girton Deignan was born in East Orange, New Jersey, on December 5, 1906, the son of Harry Francis and Anna Galena (Warren) Deignan. He grew up in the pleasant, semi-rural, semi-small-town environment of Pennsylvania and eventually entered Mercersburg Academy, where he prepared for Princeton. During these years he had already begun to make local field trips and to familiarize himself with the bird life of the region.

In 1924 he entered Princeton where he graduated with an Arts Baccalaureate degree in October 1928. During the four years there he majored in English and other European languages and literature. His already established interest in ornithology was there stimulated, furthered and channeled by close association with Charles H. Rogers, curator of the Princeton zoological collections. Toward the end of his undergraduate years, Deignan saw and was much enamored of a motion picture "*Chang the Elephant Boy*", a film dealing with the natural history of Siam. Already desirous of foreign travel, this caused him to think more and more of that particular part of the world, and this decision came to fruition very shortly thereafter. Soon after his graduation from Princeton Deignan took a position as Master, really a teacher of English, in the Prince Royal's College, in Chiangmai, northern Siam. He remained there for four years, 1928 to 1932, and during that time found occasion to make a collection of the birds of that region. These were sent to Princeton at the request of Charles Rogers, and have become part of the world-wide bird collections there.

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2) Los Angeles Country Museum of Natural History, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, California 90007, U.S.A.

In 1932 **Deignan** returned to the United States only to find the Depression at its worst, and jobs scarce and poorly paid. From November 1933 to February 1934 he held a temporary assignment in the U.S. National Museum, arranged for him through the sympathetic interest of its then director, Alexander **Wetmore**. This was followed by an assignment at the Library of Congress from June 1934 to January 1935, where his familiarity with Asiatic languages enabled him to further the card catalogs and indices of the Library's great holdings in Sanskrit and Siamese literature. At the end of this tenure, with no prospect of the Depression ending, **Deignan** decided to return to Chiangmai where his old position was available to him. He went back there for another long stay, from early in 1935 to late in 1937. This time, however, the Smithsonian Institution, at the instigation of Dr. **Wetmore**, provided funds for the employment of native assistants, for local travel and for collecting supplies, which enabled **Deignan** to amass large and very significant collections of Siamese birds and, to a lesser extent, of other creatures, all of which eventually came to the National Museum.

Deignan was by now deeply involved in Siamese ornithology, and when he returned home early in 1938 he was appointed to a position of Scientific Aid in the Bird Division of the U.S. National Museum. The following year he was granted the Smithsonian's **Bacon** Scholarship which enabled him to visit the major European museums for the first time, and to study their southeast Asian collections.

During this year he met and married Dr. Stella M.A. **Leche** a human anatomist and physical anthropologist, with a special interest in dermatoglyphics, formerly associated with Tulane University Medical School. Later, during their Washington years, she was the organizer and director of the Medical Science Information Exchange, of the National Research Council, which was later incorporated into the complex of the Smithsonian Institution as its Biological Sciences Information Exchange, which she headed until leaving Washington for Europe. Together they had a mutually rewarding and satisfying life until his untimely death on March 15, 1968.

During World War II **Deignan** served in the Office of Strategic Services, 1944 to 1946, primarily in southern Asia. After his return to the National Museum he went to northern Australia in 1948 as a member of the Smithsonian-National Geographic-Australian Arnhem Land Expedition. In 1952-1953 he revisited Thailand as a Guggenheim Fellow.

In June 1940, on the basis of his proficiency and his productivity in ornithological publication, **Deignan** was advanced to Assistant Curator, two years later to Associate Curator, and in 1959 he became Curator, after the present memorialist had become Head Curator of Zoology. **Deignan** represented the Smithsonian as its delegate to the 10th Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu in 1961. He retired from his position in 1962 to take up permanent residence in Switzerland. However, in that same year, although officially retired, he joined a Smithsonian field party in Madagascar, where he made bird collections for the Museum.

This was his last field assignment, but he continued to work in Europe on sections of the Check List of Birds of the World, making trips, as needed, to consult collections in London and Paris.

Deignan joined the American Ornithologists' Union in 1923 and rapidly advanced in its membership to the status of Elective Member in 1938, and in 1946 he became a Life Fellow. He served as its Secretary from 1959 to 1961, and during the 45 years of his association with it he was always much interested in all aspects of its existence and activities.

A memorial is not merely a listing of biographical data but should also be an appraisal and a description of the work and personality of its subject. In this connection I may state that for a quarter of a century Bert **Deignan** and I were in practically daily contact, and while we worked very largely independently of each other, on different birds, on different areas of the world, on different aspects of avian taxonomy, we regularly discussed the things before us to our mutual advantage and interest, and we shared an active participation in, and concern for, the progress and development of the bird division of the U.S. National Museum. In all those years I cannot recall a single serious disagreement, and I could not have asked for a more cooperative colleague, one easier to deal with day after day, or one

quicker to see the point of whatever ornithological material or data we might be discussing. He did meticulous and useful work, particularly on the birds of southeastern Asia, a part of the world on whose birds he became a leading authority. His numerous publications on Siamese birds were much more than careful documents of specimen data, but reflected long personal familiarity with the creatures in their native habitat.

His years of study of southeast Asiatic birds caused him to become interested in a number of passerine families then in need of revision, especially the Asiatic bulbuls and the babbling thrushes. These interests eventually resulted in his definitive revisions of the genera *Pericrocotus*, *Hemipus* and *Tephrodornis* and the oriental Pycnonotidae in the ninth volume of the Check-List of Birds of the World, and of the Orthonychinae, Timaliinae, Panurinae, and Picathartinae, in the tenth volume of that indispensable work. These and other systematic revisionary studies also caused Deignan to become interested in the necessary, if tedious, minutiae of nomenclature, which he endeavored to straighten out by rigid application of the international code governing such matters. It was all part of his perfectionist attitude toward the museum side of ornithology.

From a long and continuing specialization in Siamese birds, he also branched out into studies, involving field as well as museum work, on the birds of Borneo, of Arnhem Land, northern Australia, and, later, and in a lesser degree, without personal field exploration, of Taiwan. However, he will doubtlessly be best remembered as the outstanding specialist on the avifauna of Siam and immediately adjacent areas, the crowning results of which preoccupation were two books, "The Birds of Northern Thailand", published in 1945, and a "Checklist of the Birds of Thailand" which came out in 1963.

Aside from this regional specialization, he also did a vast amount of careful historical work on the routes of expeditions that contributed specimens to the National Museum that were later used as types of new species and races. His 1961 volume "Type Specimens of Birds in the United States National Museum", a stout publication of over 700 pages, contains a very large number of historical and

geographical facts concerning the original provenience and collecting of the specimens involved. It is the sort of book that will inevitably be much used and consulted but seldom acknowledged by subsequent authors, although it will help them to avoid minor errors of statement in the literature that might otherwise mislead them and waste their time.

This particular catalog, discussing avian specimens from all parts of the world, and involving innumerable collectors, and publications in many languages, is literally a vast assemblage of discrete bits of information that relatively few ornithologists would have the patience to ferret out, to check, and to present in readily useable form. Through its use Deignan's years of work will become incorporated in countless studies by others who may hardly be aware of their benefactor.

Approaching ornithology, as he did, from a college background in which he specialized in languages and literature, Deignan brought with him an unusual linguistic flair. He was familiar not only with major European languages' but also with Siamese, which he could speak as well as read, and even with Sanskrit, the knowledge of which helped him to get a temporary position in Library of Congress during the "Depression" of the 1930s.

By temperament and interests Deignan would have been happier in a world of comfortable and foreseeable stability than in that of the Depression, of the Second World War, and of social uneasiness and disturbance, in all of which he could not help but sense problems and proposed solutions that displeased him. The difficulty of accepting this ambience of social and political tension probably had much to do with his decision to retire and to move to Switzerland. Museums and research were to him havens of refuge in a troubled world, and as he saw little in the way of easing the troubles, he preferred to absent himself from as much of them as he could. To his friends and to colleagues of interests similar to his own, he remained unchanged; it was only to outsiders that he seemed to be withdrawn.

