

Obituaries

Colonel Andrew Croft, DSO, OBE, Arctic explorer, commando, and educator, died in London, 26 June 1998, aged 91.

Few lives are so rich in success in so many spheres — in active soldiering and military planning, in the care for and training of young people, in the unknown wilderness of the north and the India of the Raj, in police and civil affairs, in mountaineering and exploration — as was that of Andrew Croft.

The son of a clergyman who was later rural dean of Chelmsford, Croft was born in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, on 30 November 1906, St Andrew's Day, for which he was named. At Lancing College, he lived in the house run by J.F. Roxburgh, who took Croft and two others with him to help found Stowe School in 1923. After only one year, Croft became head of school. He followed this with periods at Christ Church, Oxford, and at the University of Manchester.

In 1927, the young Croft was selected to work with the American Committee of the League of Nations, an experience that allowed him to meet Fridtjof Nansen. It appeared that he would follow a career in teaching, and he went to the Continent to learn French and German. While in Berlin, he witnessed the Reichstag fire early on the morning of 28 February 1933.

After a short spell teaching, Croft's life took on an entirely new direction when, in the autumn of 1933, he was asked to replace Roger Pettiward on the three-man British Trans-Greenland Expedition led by Lt Martin Lindsay. The primary goal of this expedition was the exploration of a mountain range in East Greenland, which had been seen from the air on Gino Watkins' British Arctic Air Route Expedition (1931–32).

His participation in this expedition began Croft's career in polar exploration, in which he was one of the true stars of the inter-war years. With Martin Lindsay and Daniel Godfrey, he made the longest unsupported dog-sledge journey recorded across Greenland, an epic in itself. But just as significant were the months before, which he spent in West Greenland, choosing, buying, and training his husky teams, in the course of which, with his growing understanding and affection for them and for the art of dog-driving, he became perhaps the most accomplished dog driver this country has ever produced.

Following a year in India as the ADC to the young Maharajah of Cooch Behar, Croft returned to the Arctic as second-in-command of the Oxford University expedition to Nordaustlandet. Whether in one of the ice-cap stations during the winter darkness, on depot-laying or surveying journeys, or at the base where ionosphere research was sustained night and day, his expertise and personal leadership made a strong impact on all of his fellow expeditioners,



Fig. 1. Colonel Andrew Croft (1906–1998).

many of whom, such as Sandy Glen and John Wright, had significant polar careers themselves. On the way home from this expedition, Croft and an army signaller, 'Brownie' Whatman, climbed the highest peaks on Spitsbergen.

Several years working as the assistant to the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge were interrupted by his secondment to an ethnological expedition to Swedish Lapland. He returned to Scandinavia at the beginning of World War II, as a British liaison officer organising aid via Norway for the Finnish army in its defence against the invasion by the Soviet Union in 1939–40. When the Germans invaded Norway, he escaped from Bergen and trekked over the mountains to join the Allied evacuation.

In 1941, Croft was sent to neutral Sweden as assistant military attaché, following which he and Glen conducted a series of long and hazardous flights to map the sea-ice edge in the Arctic Ocean, in order to help establish a route for convoys to Russian ports. The next year, he joined the commandos, and, first from North Africa and then from Corsica, he launched a series of raids on the coasts of Italy and France. After the surrender of Italy, he conducted Special Operations Executive missions in support of the Allied invasion of southern France, training in parachuting

and organising sabotage of German routes of retreat. For all of these efforts, he was awarded the DSO, receiving it, like his Polar Medal, from King George VI.

By the end of the war, Croft had become recognised as a leading authority not only on special operations in general but particularly on Arctic warfare. He was attached to the Canadian Forces for Operation Musk Ox (1945–46), an exercise conducted in the Canadian Arctic to test equipment and vehicles in extremely low temperatures. These tests proved invaluable when United Nations forces found themselves in such conditions in the Korean War.

After being posted again to India — where he witnessed the massacres following the separation of India and Pakistan — he returned to Canada as liaison officer to the United States (1952–54).

In the 1950s, Croft first took over the Boys Battalion at Plymouth and then the Army Apprentices School at Harrogate, where he helped inspire a whole new generation of young men. Retiring from the army in 1960, he then became commandant of the Metropolitan Police Cadet Corps, which he reorganised and guided to a new level of excellence before his final retirement in 1971. For these contributions he was appointed OBE in 1970.

Many obituaries have paid tribute to all of these achievements, in the Arctic, with the Special Forces, and in educating the young. But the essence of it all was the man himself. The words of Sir Brooks Richard, himself of the same brand, spell it out: ‘Andrew...a perfectionist, gifted teacher, born leader whose moral courage matches his determination and physical bravery...the philosophy of the man, wise, courteous, and humane.’

*Sir Alexander Glen
Beau Riffenburgh*

John Mayston Béchervaise, OAM, MBE, FRSA, FRGS, died in Geelong, Victoria, on 14 July 1998, at the age of 88. He was born in Melbourne on 11 May 1910.

The death of Béchervaise ended a life rich in its diversity. Teacher, writer, poet, artist, lecturer, and explorer, his keen intellect was fed by an insatiable curiosity. With his great physical strength, mental stamina, and organisational skills, he made full use of his talents.

As a teacher, he had that essential ability of imbuing his students with his own enthusiasm for knowledge. His rare qualities were brought to the notice of the principal of Geelong College, the Reverend Francis Rolland, who commissioned him in 1934 to establish a leisure-time activities centre at the College. In that same year, he married Lorna Fearn Wannan, who also was appointed to the College staff.

The centre, the House of Guilds, was a success, and it remains so to this day. One of the clubs (they were called guilds) was the Ramblers’ Guild, which conducted extended hiking trips in the largely untracked Victorian bush. One of Béchervaise’s ex-‘tigers’ evaded capture after the Japanese victory at Rabaul by making his way through the

jungle of New Britain. He maintained that he owed his life to the bushcraft learnt from Béchervaise.

In 1937 the Béchervaises took one year’s leave of absence and sailed to Europe. When their funds ran out, Béchervaise accepted the post of art teacher at St George’s School, Harpenden, remaining there until 1945. While at St George’s, he was able to attend the Courtauld Institute, where he received training as an art historian, hoping to obtain an appointment in a public art gallery.

During 1939 Lorna visited Australia with their first child, Elizabeth, but was unable to return because of the war. Six years elapsed before they were reunited.

In 1945 Rolland wrote, suggesting that Béchervaise resume his position at the House of Guilds. By the standards of the time, the terms were generous, so Béchervaise, although reluctant to leave St George’s and the Courtauld, accepted Rolland’s offer. Thus he was reunited with his family, as well as the House of Guilds.

In England, Béchervaise had been impressed by the schoolboy exploration movement. This, and his UK-acquired rock-climbing skills (he was a member of the Climbers’ Club of Great Britain and a life member of the Fell & Rock Climbing Club), led him to emphasise the importance of the Ramblers’ Guild.

This soon became the Geelong College Exploration Society, and his expeditions during the next four years gained him a considerable reputation in this field. His exploration of the cliff-bound Bass Strait island, Rodondo, was front-page news. Typically, he used this publicity to persuade a leading Melbourne daily newspaper, and some Old Geelong Collegians, to finance the purchase of two ex-army four-wheel-drive trucks. These were renovated by the Ford Motor Company of Australia at their Geelong works. Among the trips Béchervaise made with these vehicles were two expeditions into the Australian interior, to the then rarely visited and little-known Mount Conner, Ayers Rock, and Mount Olga.

The first ascent of the remote Federation Peak in the wilderness area of southwest Tasmania in early 1949 was his last expedition with Geelong College. In that year, he took the position of co-editor of *Walkabout*, the journal of the Australian National Travel Association, and was appointed assistant manager of the Association. He travelled widely throughout Australasia and the Pacific, and he led the first scientific survey of the Archipelago of the Recherche in Western Australia.

During his three years with *Walkabout*, Béchervaise also lectured on art at the National Gallery in Melbourne, and on natural history and exploration for the Council of the National Museum. Phillip Law, then newly appointed as director of the Antarctic Division, was a guest speaker at one of these lectures. He proposed that Béchervaise undertake an Antarctic assignment for the Antarctic Division.

In a 1976 interview with the oral history librarian of the National Library of Australia, Béchervaise said, ‘I had to decide whether to continue with *Walkabout*, or discover

the possibilities the National Gallery offered, or change over to Antarctic exploration. My choice was polar work.'

In 1953 Béchervaise led the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) at Heard Island. There, with Peter Shaw and Fred Elliott, he made two unsuccessful attempts at the first ascent of the 9000-ft mountain, Big Ben. An account of the climbs is given in *The Journal of the Fell & Rock Climbing Club* (19 (56): 225–243 (1962)).

In 1955 Béchervaise was officer in charge (OIC) of the ANARE Mawson Base, which Robert Dovers began in 1954. Béchervaise's group doubled the size of the base and began scientific programmes in preparation for the International Geophysical Year (IGY). Although exploration inland was limited by the unreliability of the Weasels, the Prince Charles Mountains, sighted by Dovers in 1954, were reached, and the Framnes Mountains explored. Béchervaise was awarded the Queen's Polar Medal in 1956.

Béchervaise's leadership withstood severe testing during his last tour as OIC at Mawson in 1959. An April fire destroyed the new powerhouse. From the wreckage, a new powerhouse was built and a spare engine installed within one week. There were no workshop facilities left, so the engineer had to be flown 400 miles to use the workshop at ANARE's Davis Base in the Vestfold Hills. Then, in August, fire destroyed the outstation at Taylor Glacier, fortunately without loss of life. Finally, on 28 December, a hurricane destroyed both Beaver aircraft on a plateau airstrip.

At 50 years of age, Béchervaise returned to teaching. Now at the Geelong Grammar School in Corio, he became director of studies, a position he held until his retirement at the end of 1972. Still very fit, Béchervaise travelled widely, never as a tourist, but as an explorer seeking to extend the frontiers of his knowledge. In 1965, he was an Australian observer with the US Operation Deep Freeze at McMurdo Sound and Byrd and South Pole stations. He led tour trips to China, Tibet, and Nepal, and he travelled in Europe and the Americas.

Béchervaise's vast output of Pepys-like journals chronicled his odyssey and provided the source material for much of his writing. He published 29 books; the last, published at the onset of his final illness, was a biography of John Rymill.

Deakin University acknowledged his literary achievements with an honorary doctorate of literature. He also received the Con Weickhardt Award for Australian Literature in 1968.

Béchervaise is survived by his wife, Lorna, their three daughters, Elizabeth, Judith, and Anne, and their son, William.

Fred Elliott

Wing Commander Derek le Roy (Dicky) Bird, chartered engineer, test pilot, mountaineer, polar traveller, and master carver, died 8 June 1998, aged 75.

As a boy, Bird lived in Cambridge, where he attended local schools and was a choir boy at Jesus College. His home in Coldhams Lane commanded a fine view over Coldhams Common and Fen Ditton Aerodrome. On three occasions in the early 1930s, Sir Alan Cobham brought his famous flying circus to this pioneer airfield, which was situated just to the west of the present Cambridge airport. The aim was to quicken interest in aviation. Bird had a grandstand view of the displays from his bedroom window, his love for flying was kindled, and, at 15, he joined the RAF, determined to fly. Another strong influence during those early years had been his visits to the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Having entered the service as a boy apprentice at Halton, after three years Bird was recommended for officer cadet training, and in September 1943 was commissioned as engineer in the technical branch. From 1943 to 1956, he held a variety of posts up to the rank of squadron leader and was concerned with the maintenance, repair, salvage, and modification of RAF aircraft.

Early in 1945, Bird was posted to Calcutta, where he served with an RAF repair and salvage unit. Later in the year, he sailed with his unit in a combined task force for the relief of Hong Kong. There he was one of a small RAF party that landed a few days after the Japanese surrender, charged with bringing Kai Tak airfield back into operation. In 1946 he served in Java and Sumatra, searching for Japanese troops still holding out in the jungles. He returned home in 1947.

Bird gained a private pilot's licence in 1951 and qualified as an RAF pilot the following year. He did a single tour on Canberras before passing through the Empire Test Pilot's School. Posted in the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment (A&AEE) at Boscombe Down, he was one of the first RAF pilots with an engineering background, an invaluable combination. He became senior test pilot of B Squadron and was responsible for the preview flying of the Vulcan Mk II bomber. Crews that flew with Bird trusted him implicitly for his instinctive ability and flying skill in what was, by its very nature, a difficult and dangerous branch of aviation. Thirty-three aircrew lost their lives test flying at the A&AEE during his tour, a telling statistic for flying in peacetime. Bird was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air when he retired from Boscombe Down in 1960.

Bird then transferred to the general duties branch of the RAF, with the rank of wing commander, and he held a number of technical, administrative, and flying posts at home and abroad until he retired, aged 54, in 1978. He had served for nearly 40 years and had flown 46 types of aircraft.

In addition to the challenge of test flying, the other great passion in Bird's life was mountaineering. Indeed, he would have been hard pressed to say which had the greater hold on him. The wild places of the world were where he felt happiest and most at home. He was chairman

of the RAF Mountaineering Association from 1962 to 1975, and during this period took part in five major expeditions.

In 1962 he was planner of an expedition to East Africa and climbed the three highest peaks on the continent: Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya, and the Ruwenzori. Three years later, he joined John Sims' Himalayan expedition to make an attempt on Dhaulagiri D5 and D6. Bird, who was transport officer and treasurer, coordinated the two summit bids from camp 2, from where he could observe the final approach. Heavy snowfall and avalanches necessitated a difficult retreat from camp 2, putting paid to any hope of the expedition reaching the summit, which remained unclimbed for many years. During a flight after the expedition, Bird spotted a hitherto unknown peak. Some years later this hidden peak was verified in a survey by the Indian Air Force and the Dhaulagiri Himal were renumbered — D5 became D6.

Bird's next venture, and perhaps his most significant, was in 1967, when, under the patronage of Lord Shackleton — whose Oxford University Expedition had explored an adjacent area in 1935 — he led an RAF expedition to Ellesmere Island. Equipped with two skidoos to haul their heavy sledges, Bird's six-man party made a traverse of the mountainous and glaciated interior of Ellesmere Island. They crossed from Tanquary Fiord to the Arctic Ocean north of Ward Hunt Island, where they encountered open water on the edge of the ice shelf in latitude 83°10'N. They then re-crossed Ellesmere Island and returned to Tanquary Fiord. During a period of two months, much geological fieldwork was done and nine previously untrodden peaks were climbed. These included Barbeau Peak (2600 m), the highest point in North America east of the Rocky Mountains; Commonwealth Mountain, a more challenging peak and the highest in the British Empire Range; and Mount Vanier, the prominent massif that dominates the central ice-cap and that Bird named for the late governor-general of Canada. Poor weather during mid-June scuppered plans to climb several mountains to the north of Mount Vanier, but, on Bird's recommendation, Angus Erskine took a Royal Navy expedition to this area in 1972, when these peaks were climbed and Mount Vanier had its second ascent.

Bird climbed Mount Cook in New Zealand in 1972, and then in 1974 returned to the Dhaulagiri Himal with his own expedition for an attempt on D4, the hidden peak he had discovered nine years earlier. This was an ambitious objective since, at 7650 m, it was not only the highest unclimbed peak in the world but also one of considerable difficulty, for attempts on its summit had already cost 12 lives. The party of 19 reflected Bird's interest in the environment by including four biologists who were to

make a study of the area. Base camp was established below the northern flank after a trek of 300 km from Pokhara in 23 days over very rough terrain with the aid of 200 often-rebellious porters. Unfortunately, after the climb had started well, three Sherpas were killed when a serac collapsed from the ice ridge above them. The climbers abandoned any further attempt on the summit, which was eventually climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1976.

During his 12-year tenure as chairman of the RAF Mountaineering Association, Bird encouraged and assisted many young servicemen in adventurous expeditions to the high mountains and polar regions, and they are all in his debt.

Always skilful with his hands, Bird became in his retirement a master carver and turner of hard woods, ivory, and bone. The eighteenth-century carvings of chessmen from Rajasthan and Berhampur inspired him to carve his own masterpieces. In two articles in *The Chess Collector* (July and October 1996), he described how his interest in the Lewis chessmen had been initiated through his desire to carve his own 'Lewis' set. When he mentioned this ambition to his instructor, he was told, 'Not in a thousand years.' Six years later, he proudly showed that instructor his completed ivory and ebony 'Lewis' chess set.

The second article was entitled 'An original chess set, Eskimo myths and legends.' Here Bird told of how his association with Greenland and the Inuit inspired him to create the carved ivory that, in 1995, won the Bourne and Bidder miniature sculpture award. This is the highest honour a carver can expect to receive from the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors, and Gravers. Bird told how the Inuit stories of perpetual struggle against the forbidding ferocity of the Arctic inspired the design and shape of each chessman. It is a superb revelation of how the artist is influenced by his subject to produce a masterpiece that may be admired for centuries.

The last great adventure in Bird's life was the realisation of his long-held ambition to winter in the Arctic. With generous support from the Royal Society, he set up his base in latitude 70°30'N at Kap Tobin, East Greenland, in October 1996. The aim of the expedition was to measure pollution in the snow and ice of Scoresby Sund. More than 100 samples were drilled from the sea ice and were sent to the Freshwater Institute at Winnipeg for analysis. That December, Bird's wife Kathleen, to whom he had been married for 54 years, joined him, and, although they were both in their seventies, they stayed in the field until August 1997.

Bruce Reid

Ray Jones

Gareth Williams

Tony Billinghamurst