

Pioneers in Birdwatching (Ornithologists in History): G. C. Madoc (1911-1999)

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This, our third in the series on Ornithologists in History, features Guy Charles Madoc (1911-1999). Madoc is an ornithologist that is well known and has contributed extensively to data on birds in Peninsular Malaysia. He had a significant impact on birdwatching, especially for many of the older Malaysian birdwatchers, through his published bird book and enormous field data.

Note that a considerable part of this article first appeared in the September 2011 issue of the Malaysian Naturalist magazine, Malaysian Nature Society.

Madoc was born in England on 16 January 1911 and moved to the Isle of Man at 3 months of age. He was raised, and educated on the Isle of Man, at King William's College. His father had been appointed Chief Constable of the Island in 1910, hence the family's residence there. Madoc's father, Henry W Madoc, was a keen and accomplished ornithologist who published 'Birds of the Isle of Man' in 1934. Undoubtedly his father influenced Madoc's passion for ornithology and his choice of career – the Colonial Police. His childhood in the Isle of Man was an idyllic time and fostered in him a love of exploring open countryside and observing its flora and fauna. By the time he left the Island to go overseas to Malaya, he knew the Island as well as anyone. When he retired there in 1959 he continued to walk and explore the island right up until just weeks before his death in August 1999.

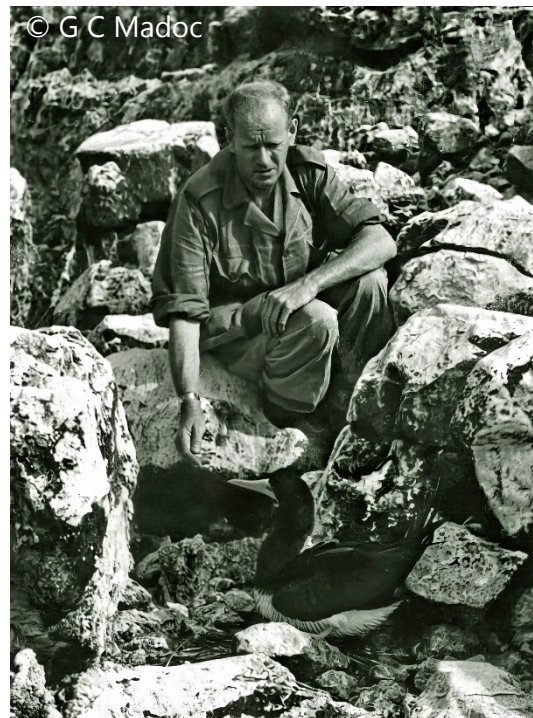


Plate 1: Madoc with a Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Pulau Perak, Malaysia, 1954.

Madoc, (CBE, KPM, JMN, MBOU) joined the Federated Malay States Police as a police probationer in 1930. He arrived in Malaya in January 1931 and, after a period of 18 months at the Police Depot in KL, was given his first position of responsibility, Officer in Charge of the Police District, in Jelebu, Negeri Sembilan (1932-35). He found the remote rural district quite delightful and, having become fluent in Malay, quickly came to know the country and its people very well. He always used to say that Jelebu was one of his very favourite places in Malaya, and on his 3 return visits after retirement always went back and spent a day walking in the jungle, watching birds.

Soon after arriving in Malaya in 1931 Madoc met Viv Ryves, a Game Warden in Negeri Sembilan and a keen naturalist. This friendship did much to encourage Madoc in pursuing ornithology in his new surroundings. With the help and encouragement of Ryves, Madoc learned jungle lore and the two men undertook several expeditions deep into the virgin jungle of the peninsula. Harvey Ryves, Viv Ryves's son, later became Madoc's junior in the Police and

became a very close personal friend – they shared a cell in Changi, a space intended for one and occupied by three!

During home leave in 1935 Madoc married his childhood sweetheart, Nancy Farrant, also from the Isle of Man. On their return to Malaya his postings were: Kuala Selangor, Klang, Kuantan and, when the Japanese invaded Malaya in 1941, he and his family were stationed in Alor Setar. Following the retreat down the peninsula during the Malayan Campaign, Madoc ended up in Singapore. He was briefly seconded to the British Army in the capacity, as he put it as their 'mangrove expert', based on the fact "*I'd often studied birds in mangrove swamps and knew slightly more about the terrain than the recently arrived soldiers of the 18th Division*".



Plate 2: Madoc with friends. Third from left is Madjid, his 'right-hand man' in bird exploits, Terengganu, Malaysia, 1953.

He was captured at the fall of Singapore in 1942 and became a prisoner of war (POW) in Changi. In 1947 he was promoted to Superintendent of Police and posted for special duties as First Secretary (Malayan Affairs) at the British Embassy in Bangkok. On returning to Kuala Lumpur in 1950, he was promoted to Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP). In 1952 he became head of the Federal Special Branch with the rank of Senior Assistant Commissioner (SAC 'E'). In 1954, he became the Director of Intelligence. With the abolition of the post of Director of Intelligence at Malayan independence in 1957, he became Deputy Secretary (Security & Intelligence) in the Prime Minister's Department.



He left Malaysia on retirement in September 1959 and returned to the Isle of Man. There he was a member of the Police Authority of the Isle of Man from 1963 to 1988.

Madoc wrote the first edition of his book on birds, *An Introduction to Malayan Birds*, while imprisoned in Changi Prison during the Second World War. Anyone who has published a book on birds would recognize how much effort goes into the writing and production of such work, even more so considering the hardships Madoc faced while in prison. That first edition, published in May 1943, was limited to one copy. It was typed on paper stolen from the Japanese commandant's office, with a 'secret typewriter'. D. B. Molesworth (Dr) provided excellent illustrations and diagrams and C. A. Gibson-Hill (Dr) helped in compiling the definitions in the Appendix. The book binders were two French prisoners of war (POWs) who used the red leather from the seat of a wrecked car in Singapore City. You can see that the type print is a bit faint as the typewriter ribbon was running out (Plate 3). As Madoc says "*My acknowledgments are due to the kind gentleman who has lent me his typewriter, and to whose identity must remain a secret lest he be overwhelmed by many machineless typists in Changi.*" This book was circulated widely in the prison and served as the source of his second and third editions of the book.

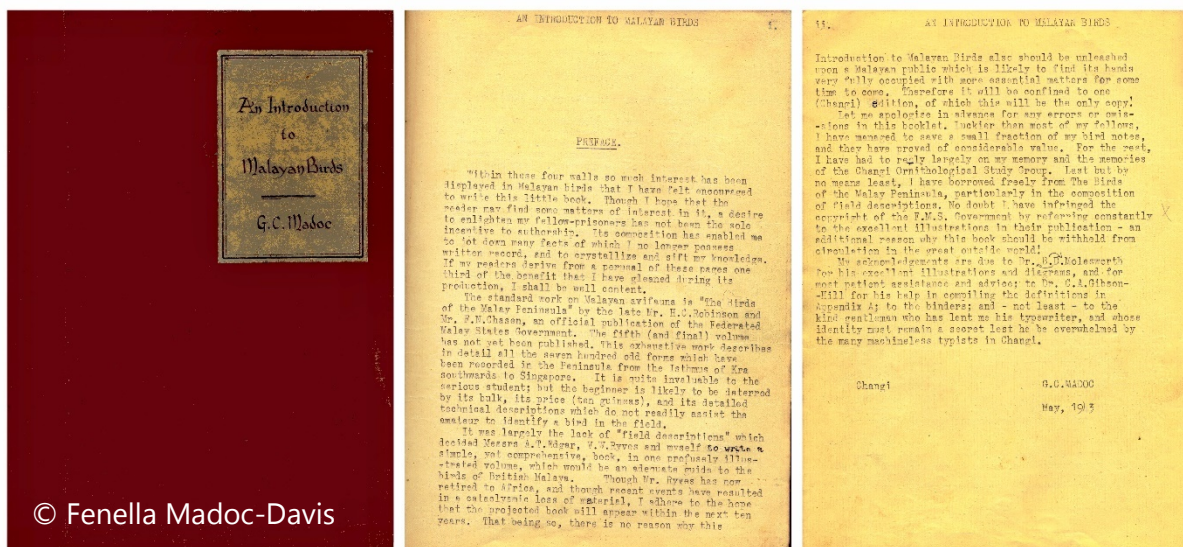


Plate 3: Front cover and preface of Madoc's 1st edition book 'An Introduction to Malayan Birds'.

Fenella relates a story Madoc used to tell her about his time as a POW, which provides an interesting and, retrospectively delightful insight, into those difficult times: "*In the first 18 months of internment conditions in Changi were relatively benign and many classes and societies flourished. In fact, Changi during that period has been referred to as a 'university'. My father gave talks about birds to fellow prisoners and his 1st edition was widely circulated in the prison. On one occasion he was given permission to lecture in the Women's Camp, a rare privilege. In the course of his talk, he gave an imitation of the whooping call of the Hornbill. Seated behind him as he spoke was a Japanese guard armed with a rifle and fixed bayonet. As Guy's whooping cry reached a crescendo the guard sprang to his feet, shouting 'Curra' and waved the bayonet threateningly until Guy returned to a more restrained delivery, without sound effects!*"

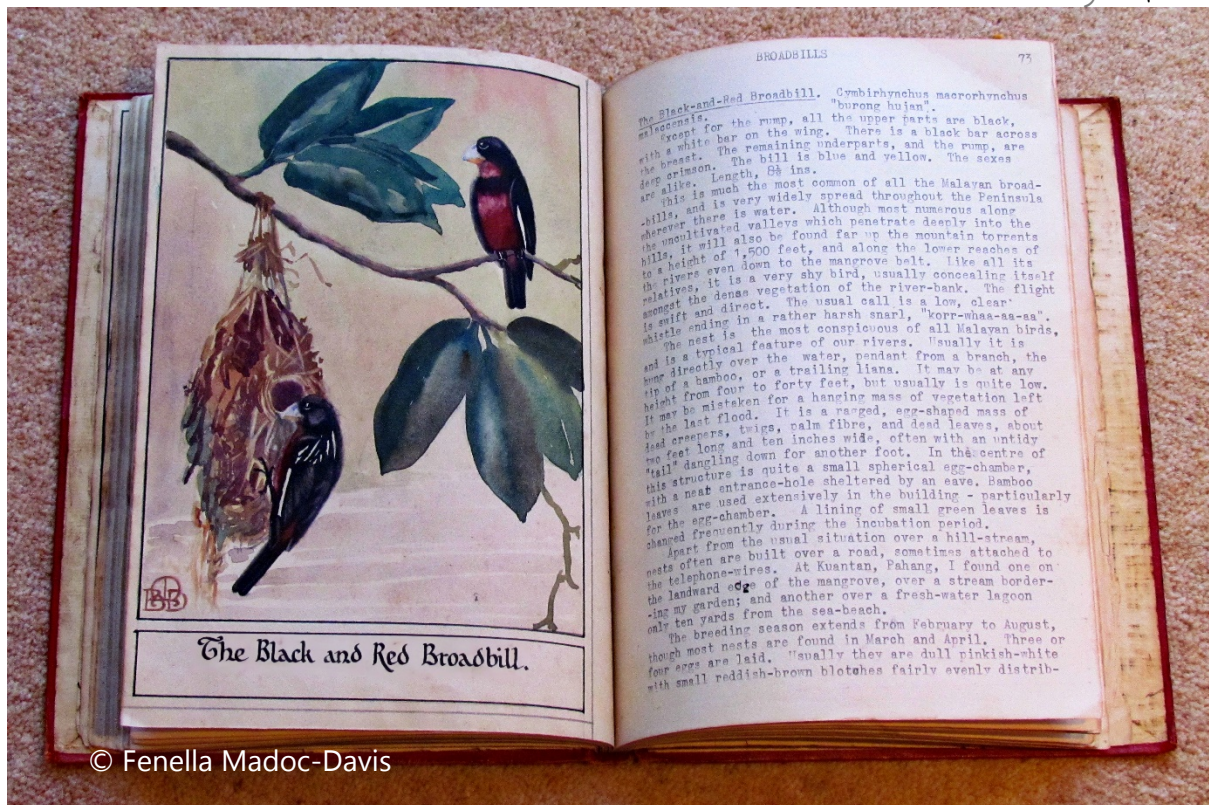


Plate 4: Inside view of Madoc's 1st edition book 'An Introduction to Malayan Birds' with an illustration by Molesworth.

After the war Madoc revised and published the 'An Introduction to Malayan Birds' with the Malayan Nature Society in 1947. It was revised again in 1956 with a second impression in 1976. The beauty of Madoc is that his descriptions of birds and their behaviour were so apt and delightful that they stimulated the interest of many to watch birds further.

The Malayan Nature Society, in their 1976 reprint of Madoc's book says "*There has been a steady demand for the book over the years... It seems desirable that this book, which may now be regarded as a classic, should again be available ...*"

Although there have been a number of books since, most focus on field identification and do not spend sufficient time on describing the birds in any great depth, information that many desire.



Plate 5: Front cover of Madoc's 'An Introduction to Malayan Birds', Malayan Nature Society.

What makes bird watching so fascinating is not the identification or photography of another 'new' bird but the fascinating discovery of more about a single bird, even a common one (of course, to many bird watchers there are no common birds!). Madoc was one of the first to encourage 'depth' in bird watching.

Madoc was a comprehensive and exhaustive birdwatcher, as can be seen from the eight illustrated volumes of extensive field notes that were bequeathed to the British Natural History Museum in London. These comprised 8 volumes in 4 boxes of text typed from observations between 1946-1948, with additional text added over the years until 1959, and illustrations comprising original black and white photos. He had actually lost much of his material during internment in Changi and says *".... though recent events have resulted in a cataclysmic loss of material, ... Luckier than most of my fellows, I have managed to save a small fraction of my bird notes, and they have proved of considerable value. For the rest, I have had to rely largely on my memory."* He also had a habit of sending copies of important records to Chasen at the Raffles Museum and was able to retrieve some of his notes from this source.

Fenella relates that *"Madjid was my father's 'right-hand man' in bird exploits"*. Madjid assisted Madoc in assembling a large egg collection. Majhid regularly constructed bird hides for Madoc (Plate 6). In the image it was a bamboo platform with a framework of bamboo poles supporting a rectangular hide made of hessian. There was a peep hole on the side nearest the bird's nest from which the bird could be observed and photographed. Madoc used to spend hours in these hides, often deep in the jungle, waiting firstly for the bird to become relaxed about the hide, and then to take the best image.



Plate 6: A 1947 photo of Majhid taken with one of the bird hides he regularly constructed for Madoc, Selangor, Malaysia, 1951.

Fenella lived in Malaysia until she was ten and was a regular participant in Madoc's birdwatching expeditions. *"When I was a small child in KL in the 50s Dad brought me up to be a birdwatcher and I have strong memories of many of the garden birds you describe. On Sundays he would take me into the jungle along the road towards the Genting Pass or there would be trips out to the mangrove swamps around Port Swettenham. There were also holidays at Fraser's Hill when Dad took me along the jungle paths around the hill station. I have been back to Malaysia three times in my adulthood. Much has changed but Fraser's Hill was the place I found the most unaltered and nostalgic."* Fenella is also a keen birdwatcher and is focused on species found in Cumbria, north-west England.

When Fenella delivered the eight volumes of field notes to the Library of the British Natural History Museum, in February 2000, she relates that *"there was great excitement and I subsequently received an email from David Wells, who was on the point of publishing the 2nd volume of his bird book, saying how helpful it was to be able to refer to the original notes made between the early 1930s and late 1950s."* Madoc's field notes have formed an important source of information for the exhaustive work produced by Wells.

Madoc states, in the preface to the revised edition of his book (1956), *"I hope someday it (his book) will be superseded by a Nature Society publication in which the pooled knowledge of all Malaya's ornithologists will be presented comprehensively."* Fortunately, we had two excellent publications in this form by David R Wells, with some of the information coming from Madoc's observations. In addition, the Birds of the World now serves as a living and growing repository of all bird knowledge from ornithologists worldwide.

Apart from his book, Madoc has also published a number of articles in the Bulletin of the Raffles Museum and the Malayan Nature Journal. Madoc also has the distinction of having a bird named after him, the Blue Rock-Thrush (madoci) *Monticola solitarius madoci*.

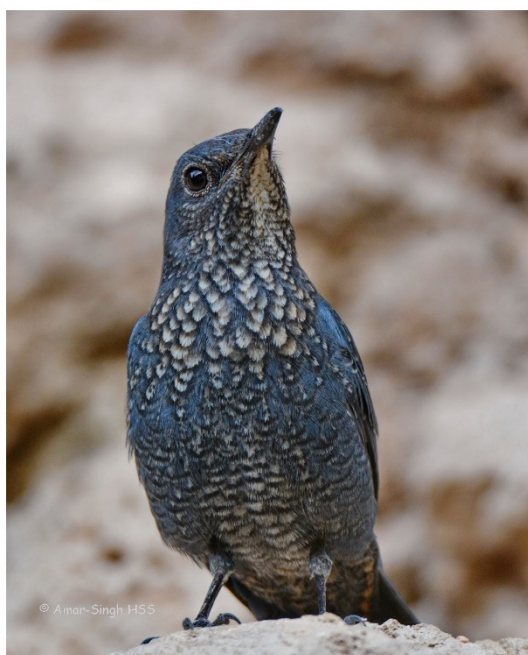


Plate 7: Madoc's Blue Rock-Thrush, female (left) and male, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia.

To summarise, Madoc inspired us to look deeper at birds, see their behaviour and character. He is considered by many to be one of our finest birdwatchers/ornithologists. I hope that many will follow in his footsteps by cultivating 'friendships' with birds.

Postscript

Madoc's legacy lives on.

In 2014 the National Museum of Singapore's Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, the successor of the original Raffles Museum, mounted a permanent display of Madoc's work. This includes several bird species he collected and had stuffed for identification, a reconstruction of the original Changi book and a portable typewriter similar to the one he used to type the book.

Fenella visited the exhibition and while there was shown the original Madoc's Blue Rock Thrush which he collected in 1940 (Plate 8). It was this specimen that enabled him to prove that the bird he had observed in Alor Setar was a different species.



Plate 8: Fenella Madoc-Davis with a display of Madoc's work, Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum December 2014.

In January 2025 Fenella was invited by the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum to take the original, unique Changi book to Singapore for it to be digitised. As a result of the

digitisation Madoc's original book is now permanently available for scholars and historians to access.

Acknowledgment

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