

## OBITUARY

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### IAN FRANCIS BELL COMMON (23 JUNE 1917 TO 3 JUNE 2006)



Ian Francis Bell Common (23 June 1917 to 3 June 2006) was an outstanding Australian entomologist who exerted a major influence on studies of Lepidoptera, not only in Australia but throughout the World.

I first met Ian in 1968 when he was researching his book *Butterflies of Australia* and commenced work with him at Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Division of Entomology, Canberra, in November 1970. We worked on many moth groups in the Australian National Insect Collection (ANIC) and our close working association continued through Ian's retirement until his death.

He was brought up in Toowoomba, Queensland, and after a spell in his father's business he entered Toowoomba Grammar School and matriculated in 1937. He attended the University of Queensland graduating with a B.A. (first class honors in Philosophy) in 1941 and B. Agr. Sc. in 1945 (with honors in 1947). In 1941 he volunteered for military service but was rejected because of his feet.

In 1944 Ian was appointed Research Officer with the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Stock and was employed part time by CSIR Division of Economic Entomology to work under Ken Key to study clothes moths infestations in Brisbane wool stores. A letter to Ian survives from this time written by A.J. Turner, then doyen of Australian amateur lepidopterists, outlining the different clothes moths (Tineidae) known from Australia. Ian continued at the University of Queensland graduating with a M.A. in Philosophy in 1946 and M. Agr. Sci. in 1953. He was later, in 1969, awarded a D. Agr. Sci. by the University of Queensland.

From December 1944 to June 1945 Ian worked for the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Stock at Biloela and then at Rockhampton from 1945 to 1948. He worked principally on cotton pests, tomato pests and the yellow-winged locust.

His interest in Lepidoptera had developed early and he had tales of collecting with school friends around Toowoomba and there are many specimens dating from his early collecting now in the ANIC. For many years there was a small cabinet, made by Ian from silky oak wood, housing immaculate, minute, reared Gracillariidae collected in his youth but now all incorporated into the main collection. In his formative years and the early years of his career Ian worked without close contact with other lepidopterists. Few people could have developed the skills and knowledge that Ian possessed without close contact with experienced, practising lepidopterists. That he overcame this immense challenge so successfully is a measure of the man. Although this close contact with other lepidopterists was denied to him he greatly admired F.A. Perkins then lecturer in entomology at the University of Queensland.

While at university Ian met Jill Dowzer who had come to Brisbane from Rockhampton to study Arts. They met again when Ian was posted to Rockhampton and married in 1946. They had two daughters Frances and Jennifer. Throughout his subsequent life Ian was to benefit greatly from the constant support of his wife and family.

Ian was appointed to CSIR Division of Economic Entomology on 25 May 1948 after a State-

Commonwealth tussle eventually involving Prime Ministerial intervention. He became Technical Secretary to A.J. Nicholson, Chief of the Division, and able to work half time on the taxonomy of Lepidoptera. In 1947 the Turner collection had been transferred to the Division of Economic Entomology which was an added incentive for Ian to join the Division. In 1951 he transferred to full-time work on cereal crop and pasture caterpillars.

Ian's early years with the Division were marked by a series of world-class revisions of pest moth groups in Australia including *Heliothis*, *Agrotis*, *Persectania*, *Pectinophora*, *Scirpophaga* and *Epiphyas*. Also at this time he published his classic work on the bogong moth migration. In the 1960s he started revisionary work on the Australian tortricine Tortricidae following his work on *Epiphyas* and *Merophyas*. He later worked extensively on the higher classification of the Lepidoptera culminating in the internationally widely acclaimed Lepidoptera chapter in *Insects of Australia* (1970 and revised with E.S. Nielsen in 1991). In this phase of his work he described one new superfamily (Immoidea), two new families (Carthaeidae and Lophocoronidae), one new subfamily (Munychryiinae) and a new tribe (Epitymbiini). Following this he commenced work on the Oecophoridae, the favorite subject of his long and abiding interest in the vast Australian fauna. Throughout his career he also published on relevant or interesting items as they arose.

Altogether he published about 100 papers and seven books on Lepidoptera. The first books were the Jacaranda guides *Australian Moths* (1963, revised 1966) and *Australian Butterflies* (1964). In 1972 *Butterflies of Australia* (with D.F. Waterhouse) was published with a revised edition in 1981. This book revolutionized butterfly studies in Australia empowering a growing band of butterfly enthusiasts to make many original discoveries and observations. In retirement he published the massive and internationally significant *Moths of Australia* (1990), which was awarded the Whitley Medal by the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales and his three great volumes on the *Genera of Australian Oecophorinae* (1994, 1997, 2000).

Besides his huge published contribution, Ian built the ANIC Lepidoptera collection from Turner's small, but important and well-identified, collection into the immense resource it is today. Ian's exquisitely preserved, set and labelled specimens of microlepidoptera still dominate the ANIC collection. He recognized the need to maintain a good working collection and, whatever the backlog of accessions, always kept a well-sorted, named, core so that the ANIC could maintain an identification

capacity across the whole Order. The good order, high curatorial standards and large holdings of the collection attracted many top overseas Lepidopterists to Australia and greatly facilitated their work on the Australian fauna. With Ken Key, Ian helped in establishing protocols for the high quality maintenance and operation of the collection well in advance of their time.

To build a collection of a little-known and neglected fauna Ian recognized the need for field work and in the 1960s he and Murray Upton embarked on a series of renowned trips to various parts of Australia. They employed extensively the MV light for the first time and the expeditions were highly efficient camping trips dedicated to collecting with not a minute wasted. They were planned to the last can of beans and nothing was allowed to go wrong. These trips opened the eyes of many to how little was actually known of the fauna. Ian and Murray experimented with many light and sheet combinations and designed very efficient light traps which effectively separated out beetles and other rugged insects from the fragile moths permitting for the first time trapped moths to be obtained in good condition in a warm country where insect activity is intense. Ian introduced the extensive study of moth genitalia to Australia and helped develop new staining techniques and a protocol for the successful mounting of moth wings for detailed study of the venation.

He participated in a 1953 expedition with C.B. Williams of Rothamstead, England, to the Pyrenees to observe insect migration followed by an academic year at the University of Cambridge and four weeks at the British Museum (Natural History) to study types. In 1966 he spent an additional six months at the BM(NH) photographing types of Australian microlepidoptera and dissecting the types of numerous Australian Oecophoridae. In 1979 he visited many overseas colleagues and collections and also gave the presidential address at the Lepidopterists' Society meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Through his career Ian attracted dedicated colleagues who helped each other and obtained by synergy more than each could have attained individually. The Lepidoptera unit settled into a three person team, Ian as scientist, an experimental officer (Ted Edwards) and an assistant (most notably Vanna Rangsi), which achieved an efficiency now no longer possible when scientists have to grovel for funding and assistants are seen as short-term and dispensable. On Ian's retirement this synergy was maintained by his successor Ebbe Nielsen, who encouraged and facilitated some of the most productive projects of Ian's life. This was continued by Marianne Horak following Ebbe's

untimely death. Ian had been one of Marianne's mentors who, with John Dugdale, encouraged her on an entomological career specializing in Tortricidae. Ian always maintained close collaborations with people who used his identifications and advice, overseas colleagues, the State museums, agriculture departments and amateur lepidopterists. He was a wonderful lepidopterist; as 'at home' in telling stories of moths and collecting with amateur lepidopterists as he was with discussing the higher classification with distinguished overseas colleagues. He was a master in all branches of the subject.

Ian achieved the rank of Chief Research Scientist in July 1974 and retired to Toowoomba in June 1982 when he became an Honorary Fellow of the Division of Entomology and in 2003 became an Emeritus Fellow. In retirement he continued to collect for the ANIC and his later books and papers were retirement projects strongly supported by CSIRO Entomology and the Australian Biological Resources Study. Throughout his career Ian remained a dedicated scientist and had no aspirations to enter administration.

He was a member of the Entomological Society of Queensland from 1938 and Secretary 1939-40 and a foundation member of the Australian Entomological Society in 1965 becoming Vice-President in 1969-72, President in 1980-81 and an Honorary Life Member in 1987. He was a member of the Lepidopterists' Society from 1949 and was Vice-President 1957, 1st Vice-President 1965, President in 1978-79 and became an Honorary Life Member in 1987. He was a foundation member of the Ecological Society of Australia, a member of the Linnean Society of New South Wales from 1956 and a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society from 1966. He was also an honorary member of the Sociedad Hispano-Luso-Americano de Lepidopterologia from 1982.

Ian's work was most widely recognized through the award of the Karl Jordan Medal by the Lepidopterists' Society in 1996 for his contributions to the study of Lepidoptera and he became an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2001 for his outstanding contributions to entomology, science and education in the community.

He received the Jacob Hübner Award for Lepidoptera Systematics from the Association for Tropical Lepidoptera in 2003.

Ian was a wonderful person to work with. He saw the implications and ramifications of taxonomic work (and much else) very clearly and often well beyond the view of many contemporaries. He was scholarly, dedicated, thorough, meticulous (a word he employed) as well as very hard-working. Few minutes were wasted. He took great pains to excel in all he did. Yet with this he was indulgent of neophytes provided they had application, interest and enthusiasm. He was courteous, quietly spoken and modest. He was approachable, open handed with his immense knowledge and respectful of other views. He greatly valued the critical faculty which could separate the sound from the unsound. He could also express himself concisely and cuttingly when he found foolishness.

Jill Common has kindly made information on Ian's early years available. A manuscript, an article in *The Canberra Times* on 29 January 2000 and an article in *Qantas* in January 2001 all by Brad Collis have been helpful. Biographies in *The Lepidopterists' Society- Commemorative Volume (1945-1973)*, in *Biologue No. 24* by Ted Edwards and in Murray Upton's *A Rich and Diverse Fauna* have been of great assistance. A useful manuscript source was the nomination for the award of the Order of Australia prepared by the late Ebbe Nielsen. A manuscript biographical note by Ian himself was most valuable. Further biographical sources can be found in Murray Upton's book. Other original sources are housed in the ANIC Archives. A complete list of Ian's publications may be found in Greg Daniels' *Bibliography of Australian Entomology 1687-2000*.

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