

# Desmond Vesey-FitzGerald

ON THE SHORES OF Lake Chila, the small spring water lake on the outskirts of Northern Rhodesia's most northerly town, Abercorn, is a "house of many rooms". It is the home and private museum of Desmond Edward Foster Vesey-FitzGerald, a stocky, bushy-browed naturalist, whose contribution to the natural history knowledge of Northern Rhodesia has been greater than any other man's.

Without a trace of Irish brogue, despite his pride in his Irishness, he says: "I built the house not only for myself and my family, but for my collection of small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects as well: hence all the rooms."

For his music-loving wife Octavia, 17-year-old daughter Maureen Pamela and 23-year-old son Brian — at present doing post-graduate research in anthropology at Manchester University — the house is far more home than museum. But the key to Desmond Vesey-FitzGerald's

life is the collection of stuffed animals and birds, pickled frogs, snakes, and lizards, the moths, butterflies, fish and plants that it houses. He is the complete naturalist.

James Whellan, president of the International Red Locust Control Service, and former chief entomologist in the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, says: "I have heard Vesey described as the best all-round naturalist in Africa, and I believe this may well be true. His contribution to various branches of natural history in Central Africa has been enormous, and his specialized interests are extremely wide. Through his writings he has earned the respect of naturalists in many parts of the world."

In natural history Vesey-FitzGerald, principal scientific officer of the International Red Locust Control Service, is dedicated to working in the field and he lacks the temperament of the research scientist working in the laboratory. He happily accepts the challenge of cataloguing the form, habitat, foods and

habits of all living things in Central Africa; working closely in conjunction with the National Museum in Bulawayo he arranges for his specimens to be named and classified, and for their ecology (habits, food and distribution correlated to vegetation) to be recorded.

Unlike many dedicated specialists, Vesey-FitzGerald has never allowed his natural history interests to dominate his existence, though the borderline between his professional and personal spheres appears to be hazy. An Anglican, he is a regular attender at church, and as fire chief he is in charge of Abercorn's part-time volunteer fire brigade. He is sociable and a good conversationalist; at a party his hearty, infectious laugh can be heard all over the room.

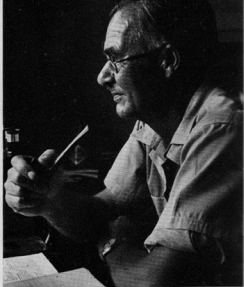
The 54-year-old naturalist was born in the west of Ireland. "My only claim to ancestral fame is the Foster in my name," he says. "John Foster, a forebear, was the last Speaker in the Irish House of Commons at the end of the 18th Century." Fading prints of John Foster adorn the lounge of Vesey-FitzGerald's home.

At an early age, Vesey-FitzGerald went to Haslemere in Surrey to be brought up by his grandmother. He attended school at Charterhouse and then studied agriculture at Wye College in Kent. His life of travel and adventure started in 1932, when he joined the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad. He was soon in South America, working along the Amazon, studying the biological control of insect pests for the West Indies.

From this work he went to the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. "I investigated the parasites of the coconut palms there," he says. "This led to my first visit to Central Africa in 1939 when I collected beneficial parasites — ladybird beetles — which were then bred and liberated in the Seychelles. They cleaned the palms up."

His next job was in Malaya and, en route, he passed through Abercorn and fell in love with its beauty, and with the professional prospects it offered in his field.

When war broke out he joined the Federated Malay Volunteers as a sergeant but the force was soon disbanded. "That a unique situation arose," he recalls. "I was put into what was known as the



Chinese People's Army — the Communists — and I held the equivalent rank of lieutenant." Technically, he maintains, he is still a member, as he has never been discharged.

He was in Singapore in 1942 when it fell to the Japanese but he escaped to Colombo through Sumatra and Java. "The journey was in a Chinese river steamer," he says. "A Japanese submarine fired two torpedoes at us but because of our shallow draught both passed under the vessel and we got away."

In Saudi-Arabia he was next engaged on a project that finally led him to Northern Rhodesia. This was locust control by a military unit. "But to all intents and purposes we enjoyed a civilian set-up," says Vesey-FitzGerald, who was chief locust officer. For his services in the campaign against desert locusts he was awarded an MBE.

By 1947 his driving ambition was to do biological work, so he joined the Kenya Game Department. "I had a high-sounding name — senior assistant game warden — but there was little scope for biology. I realized that there was more chance of achieving my ambition through locust work and so I came to Abercorn."

He joined the International Red Locust Control Service in 1949, the year of its establishment, and became its principal scientific officer, based at the headquarters in Abercorn. The Control Service was formed to prevent a recurrence of a locust plague similar to that which gripped



Africa from 1930 to 1944. The service has gradually evolved a strategy that today employs aircraft and the most modern insecticides available to kill the locusts as they breed in the swamps and plains of Southern Tanganyika and the marshlands of the Mweru swamps in Northern Rhodesia, so preventing them spreading from these "outbreak" areas. In this it has been singularly successful.

Vesey-FitzGerald has for almost 15 years accumulated a vast store of knowledge about the ecology of these outbreak areas, studying the grasses and plants of the areas, the locusts themselves and their various predators.

The battle still appears to be an unending one, but next year Vesey-FitzGerald will retire from the work. "Then I will have more time for studying wild life, pastures and botany," he says. "I would like to write a book about it all, too."

As one might expect, Vesey-FitzGerald has written many authoritative articles, in a great variety of responsible publications, about his part of Africa and its inhabitants. He has also given talks on the BBC. Many of his articles are self-illustrated by photographs and line drawings.

Not unnaturally, Vesey-FitzGerald has been appointed honorary game ranger of both Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia. "We are not too hard on Africans who hunt by traditional means," he says, "but we come down on night shooting, wire snares and muzzle-loaders. When we catch an African poacher we never have any trouble. They regard it as fair — but some of the Europeans get nasty."

How does this naturalist see his destiny? As an ardent game preservationist his answer is succinct: "I wish to contribute to the cause of wild life for the benefit of future generations."

Although most of his time is devoted to his researches, Vesey-FitzGerald is an avid reader of travel books and historical novels. He is also an accomplished carpenter and makes his own aquaria and the cabinets for his collections.

In his lounge is a brass, astronomical telescope. But it is not directed at the heavens. "I mount it on my vehicle and it is first-class for observing wild life," he says. His equipment on such expeditions includes a 35 mm. camera and telephoto lenses.

With his son Brian, a graduate of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, he has conducted an intensive study of birds in Abercorn, and together they have listed some 400 species from the township area alone.

On all his field trips Vesey-FitzGerald is accompanied by his personal assistant, Ananiya Mwangomo, whom Vesey sent to



be trained at the Nairobi Botani Museum. The working collections in the "house o many rooms," he says, owe much to the sympathetic dedication of Ananiya.

In the field of botany he relies heavily on the help of his fellow worker, Mrs. Mary Richards, who helps him run the Locust Control Service herbarium at Abercorn, and who is in her own right an almost legendary pioneer in her field.

It is perhaps typical of Vesey-FitzGerald

that in all his extended tours in the bush he never carries firearms of any sort — though he is often in areas densely populated by big game.

The best protection against so-called dangerous animals is not a weapon but knowledge, he maintains.

"Once a companion and I were confronted by a hippo," he says. "I saw by its head movements that it was going to charge so I got my companion and myself into our vehicle. The only thing the hippo's teeth got hold of was the Land-Rover. Had we hesitated things would have been very different."

Vesey-FitzGerald, ruggedly endowed, both mentally and physically, is playing a notable part in increasing man's knowledge of his environment in Northern Rhodesia, and is laying valuable foundations on which others will be able to build.

## PROFILE 2

# Mary Richards

**I**N THE VAST HERBARIUM of Kew Royal Botanical Gardens in London almost 20,000 specimens of Northern Rhodesian plants are dried, pressed and scientifically arranged for study. Five thousand miles away, at Abercorn, in Northern Rhodesia, is another collection of 30,000 specimens of plants, trees and shrubs. Both collections are known to botanists throughout the world and behind both stands one person — 78-year-old widow Mary Richards.

The Kew collection is almost entirely her work, and she has made a major contribution to the Abercorn collection, which she runs together with Desmond Vesey-FitzGerald.

Yet the remarkable thing about Mrs. Richards is not simply the enormity of her contribution to Northern Rhodesian botany, phenomenal as this in itself is. Even more amazing is her mental and physical resilience; her energetic devotion to many loyalties — to Northern Rhodesia, to Wales, to her family, her profession, her church and her fellow-workers.

Petite Mrs. Richards gives a false appearance of fragility. She does not seem to be a very strong woman but rather one who should be protected from the hard knocks of a rough world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her deceptive, tiny

frame conceals a physical toughness that is more than equal to the exacting demands of her chosen life. She is courageous but unassuming. She talks of alarming and dangerous incidents in remote districts, using a tone that most people would adopt when describing the common events of an everyday life.

Her mind is keenly alert and her quick thoughts are transmitted rapidly in a staccato, high-pitched and very English



accent. Her gestures match her speech. Delicate expressive hands flutter purposefully as she accentuates conversational highlights.

Mary Richards is a happy extrovert. Her subtle wit has the speed and sharpness of a rapier. She uses laughter as a means of punctuation and she uses it liberally. One cannot be dull and morose in her sparkling company.

Out of the bush she wears clothes that would not be out of place at a vicarage tea party. But her tanned and mobile face gives the lie to this impression. Undoubtedly tough and resilient, her old world mannerisms are, however, the antithesis of the popular conception of a modern adventurer.

### A woman of purpose

She is, above all, a woman of purpose and dedication. In Africa she has found a happy and receptive land for her constructive talents. In her homeland her energies might have been shackled by the conventions that seem to govern elderly people. She has become a Peter Pan figure in Abercorn where she appears to have discovered the secret of prolonging youthfulness. A woman half her age would be enriched by a personality as effervescent as that of Mary Richards.

When she and her work are discussed, it is surprising how often someone will say: "She is the most remarkable woman I've met."

Mrs. Richards was born in North Wales in 1885. Her interest in botany began during her childhood and has grown ever since. She began her adventures and travels in 1911 when she accompanied her husband, a major in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, to India, Japan and China.

Her own family consisted of a son and two daughters—and now six grandchildren—but this did not deter Mrs. Richards from carrying out her botanical field work in North Wales, or from becoming a county councillor in Merioneth for 18 years, the only woman to hold such a post in the county during this period.

She still holds a deep affection for Wales and regularly returns for visits to her home-town of Dolgelly—or Dolgellau, as she prefers to spell it in its Welsh form. During all this time she continued to build up her knowledge of the area's botany, and last year her prolonged studies resulted in the publication of a treatise on the flora of Merioneth.

Mrs. Richards came to Abercorn in 1951 to stay with her two friends the sisters Hope and Marion Gamwell, who had then been there for almost a quarter of a century. Now she has her own home at Abercorn.

"I immediately took a tremendous liking to the place," she says. "After the restrictions of England, I found a new freedom. I still enjoy the wild life—and the people, too."

Much of her time is still spent in the bush, and her work for the herbarium, at the International Red Locust Control Service headquarters, involves regular bush safaris for anything up to three months at a time. On these tours she is accompanied only by her two African assistants, Ali Omari and Abdullah Mihilu, from Tanganyika, who during their time with her have acquired a fairly wide knowledge of botany themselves.

Mrs. Richards and her assistants travel in the bush in a long wheel-base Land-Rover with a trailer attached. Their equipment includes tents, bedding, food, water and fuel. Her dress for these tours is bush shirt and trousers.

On each side of the vehicle's bonnet are collections of long feathers. "All always puts them there," says Mrs. Richards. "They make us go like a bird," Ali explains.

Mrs. Richards believes a knowledge of the bush and of the ways of wild life is the best safeguard against danger.

Only once, in 1960, has she come to any harm herself. Losing her footing on the top of a high bank, she fell over on to the rocks below. She broke some ribs and badly cut her head. "Had it not been for Ali, who is an accomplished first-aid, I would have been in real trouble," she says. "He carried me a mile to our camp, bound me up and then drove me 50 miles to Mbereshi hospital. I was kept there for ten days." Since this fall Mrs. Richards has suffered from a slight deafness.

### Books to be written

After a day's collecting in the bush, Mrs. Richards spends much of the night compiling notes around the fire. This is the beginning of what, in years to come, will be school books, text books and popular books on the flora of Northern Rhodesia.

Desmond Vesey-FitzGerald says he cannot praise her work too highly. "She does all this purely for the love of it. She has collected the whole flora of Abercorn, including 200 specimens that have never been recorded before. Requests have come to her from many places overseas for Northern Rhodesian plant specimens." One plant, of the grass family, bears her name—*Richardsiella cruciformis*.

The herbarium is Mrs. Richards' first love. "It will give us knowledge of the flora and fauna of Africa," she says, "and will help form a national policy of conservation and preservation of the wild life and beauty of the country."

## Sir Ronald to receive U.S. award

THE NEW YORK Copper Club has announced that Sir Ronald Prain will receive its coveted Ankh Award as the industrialist who "contributed most to the copper industry in 1963," at the club's 20th annual dinner meeting in New York on February 6.

The announcement was made by Mr. William A. Meissner Jr., president of the club and director of the Copper Division of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Business, Defence and Services Administration.

Sir Ronald is the third recipient of the award in the club's 20-year history and the first executive from a foreign country to be chosen. The two previous recipients were Mr. Clyde E. Weed, chairman of the board of Anaconda, and Mr. Simon D. Strauss, vice-president of American Smelting and Refining Company.

## OBE awarded to Leonard Tracey

MR. LEONARD TOLCHER TRACEY, agricultural adviser to the RST group since 1954 and one of Central Africa's leading farming experts, has been awarded the OBE for services to agriculture in the Federation. The award was announced in the New Year Honours List.

Mr. Tracey, 67, whose lifelong interest in agriculture began on a small Devonshire farm owned by his doctor father, came to Southern Rhodesia 44 years ago. For many years he farmed three properties at Chakari, near Hartley, and in 1945 his book, *Approach to Farming in Southern Rhodesia*, was published. It was an immediate and outstanding success and is still regarded as the standard work on the subject.

On his appointment with RST, Mr. Tracey carried out a survey of the agricultural requirements of Northern Rhodesia, as a result of which the group established a pilot polder on the Kafue Flats.

This experiment in irrigated farming, conceived by Mr. Tracey, has since its inception in 1956 been carried out under his guidance. It has attracted world-wide attention and proved that many crops can be grown on the polder soil.

Mr. Tracey, who was a founder member of the Pig Industry Board, is a director of various ranching and farming companies. His two sons, Martin and C. G. Tracey, and his daughter, Mrs. Charles Newmark, are well known in Southern Rhodesian farming circles.