

A Naturalist for All Seasons: Richard Merrill Saunders, 1904–1998

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The year 2014 marks the 110th anniversary of Richard Saunders' birth and this tribute invites the reader to discover, or rediscover, something about the life of this popular ornithologist.

The lure of the unexplored, the beckoning finger of novelty — what field naturalist can pass them by? The chance of finding a new bird, a new flower, the hope of having a new experience with some old friend of the wild in a new setting — these are sure enticements to send the ardent naturalist afield in search of adventure.

Saunders wrote these words in 1945, and they indeed sum up this ardent naturalist, who spent most of his long life observing the birds and wildflowers of Canada and beyond. The natural world, however, was not the vocation for which he had trained. As a professor of history, he taught at a number of universities for over 40 years, during which time he published several academic papers. Had this been his only achievement, he could still be considered to have made a worthy contribution to society. But there was another side to the man: his love of nature and his joy in communicating and sharing it with many people. It is for this that he most deservedly should be remembered.

Richard Merrill Saunders was born on 16 November 1904 in the bustling fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his father, Lee Saunders, was in the catering business. Two years later his parents' marital problems reached crisis point and his father left the family home. His widowed maternal grandmother lived in Worcester, 60 miles to the east and it was there that his mother, Grace Merrill Saunders, together with Richard and his younger brother, Carroll, moved after the breakdown of the marriage. To provide for her family, Grace lived in Boston, where she worked full-time as a secretary in what was then predominately a male-dominated world of business, while her son was looked after by his grandmother, Sarah Jane, and a bachelor uncle who was the boy's masculine influence. To break the family up still further, his brother was looked after by a family in Quincy. It says much for Saunders' character as a youth and a teenager that, under those unusual family arrangements, he successfully completed his schooling in Worcester and, having decided on a teaching career, he entered Clark University as an undergraduate in 1920, obtaining his bachelor's degree four years later at the age of 20 and his master's the following year.



FIGURE 1. Richard Saunders c 1935.

He began his long academic career, not in the United States, but in distant Beirut, Lebanon, at the American University, where he taught history. It was an appointment that was to change his life in a most unexpected way. Unbeknown to him, Dr. West, one of the professors at the University had died leaving a family of six children in the care of his widow. She had remained at the campus and had eventually become the housekeeper for the entire University. She must have been a resourceful woman for she put all six children through Ivy League universities or Seven Sisters institutions.

One of her daughters, Anne, had just completed her studies at Vassar College in New York when Saunders met her on board ship as she returned to Beirut. It proved to be the happiest of meetings, and it soon blossomed into courtship. While in Beirut (despite a bad

bout of malaria), Saunders made a number of visits to Europe, including France, where he purchased a beautiful Sèvres vase for Anne, a gift which must surely have made a large hole in his pay packet but which must equally have impressed her hugely. They married in June 1929 at South Kent, Connecticut, having left Beirut and settled back in the United States in Ithaca.

Shortly afterwards, Saunders took up a post teaching history as a Boldt Fellow at Cornell University in New York. During this time, he studied for and in 1931 achieved his Ph.D. What followed next is recalled by his daughter:

It might be wondered how an American ended up at a Canadian university. When father completed his Ph.D. it was deep in the Depression. He sent resumes to all the universities in North America and got no replies. One day Mother was house cleaning and picked up the rug in front of the door that had the mail slot. Under the rug was a letter from the University of Toronto saying they would accept Father, but they needed to know the next day! Needless to say, an expensive phone call was made immediately.

The couple moved to Toronto in 1931, where Saunders accepted the position of associate professor of history at the University of Toronto, specializing in the Age of Enlightenment European history. There he remained until his retirement from academia in 1970.

Such are the bare facts of the career of this energetic and much-loved teacher. But what of the man himself, and what sparked off a parallel career in natural history? He provides a slight clue in a book recounting his visit to South Carolina. Describing the experience of being mobbed by Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*), he likens it to a similar encounter with Common Terns (*S. hirundo*) in Massachusetts. From this, we might deduce that his interest dated from his childhood or teens there. By 1938, however, he had become sufficiently well known and respected in Toronto ornithological circles to be invited to become the editor of the Toronto Field Naturalists' newsletter, a position he held for 27 years.

During the war, he continued to teach at the University, publishing several academic papers on aspects of French Canada, (although he always considered himself a teacher first and a writer second) and of course continuing his birdwatching. This latter activity was not without its risks; having a pair of binoculars around your neck and being in the vicinity of what are now termed "sensitive installations" was a recipe for trouble. On more than one occasion he was apprehended and interrogated in the local police station. Experiences like this were common among the birding fraternity in the early war years, such was the fear of spies. However, as time went on the birdwatchers became known to the police, who treated them at best with interest and at worst as harmless eccentrics.

Flashing Wings appeared in 1947, the year Saunders became a committee member of the American Ornithol-



FIGURE 2. Saunders with Sally, his daughter, strawberry picking at Orangeville in 1944/5.

ogists' Union, speaking at a dinner they held in Toronto. Far from being the only book he published (there were at least a dozen more titles covering historical and natural history subjects), it is perhaps the most unintentionally autobiographical. Tucked away in its pages are various clues and insights into some of his other talents. For example, speaking of the value of learning bird calls, he says: "Probably my own musical training gave me an advantage." He was a good pianist, but he suddenly gave it up in the late 1940s because the pressure of his work (and no doubt his constant bird-watching) did not allow him to keep practising to his satisfaction. However, he was interested in encouraging his students to know and appreciate music from the period he taught, and they would gather in his house to listen to records of Mozart and Haydn.

His book covers the period from 1934 to 1946, 12 years that saw him combining a busy program of teaching at the University with his passion for the outdoors and the birds of his adopted city of Toronto. One of the great virtues of Saunders' writing is his power to evoke landscape. There is a passage at the beginning of the book in which he details a snow-covered wood of hemlock trees near Maple where he watched Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) and White-winged Crossbills (*L. leucoptera*) moving from branch to branch feeding. It is a magical description. He was a man clearly sensitive

to the beauty of nature and more than once observed that no artist could possibly do justice to the scene in which he was birding. For three of those 12 years he was president of the Toronto Field Naturalists, a further indication of the esteem in which he was held. During this time he also experienced first extreme happiness with the birth of Sally his daughter and then extreme despair when his four-year-old son Alan died from leukemia. This affected Saunders in an unimaginable way, creating within him a sort of denial (henceforth, he rarely mentioned his son's death) driving him to find solace in his field trips with the Toronto Field Naturalists and his work at the University.

He recounts in *Flashing Wings* many of those field trips he led, prompting George Bryant to recall recently:

On Wednesday mornings, when I was a child my friend and I would cycle to Cedarvale Ravine before school where Saunders led weekly early morning spring migrant walks. He was a professor of history and had a most commanding presence. His voice was resonant, mellifluous and instantly recognisable.

Another participant on these May morning walks was Bruce Falls who recalls: “[Saunders’] deep resonant voice could be heard calling out the names of the birds he heard and observed for the benefit of his flock of devoted followers,” later adding, “he was an enthusiastic, indeed exuberant birdwatcher,” and, “one of the most active and best known birders of his day.”

His appearance at the field trip meetings was imposing — leather jacket, breeches, high laced-up boots, and fur hat in the winter or, on other occasions, French beret, shirt with special plaid tie, and wool jacket. He was a naturalist for all seasons and an ornithologist for all weathers. In November, he writes with gentle censure, “The woods are empty of watchers. They are at home, no doubt, sleeping away the winter like the bear — hibernating naturalists!”

His daughter, who frequently accompanied her father on his birding trips, comments that her father spoke as he wrote, whether it was trying to get people to see a bird or to conduct a lecture, or both, as on one occasion while he was taking a tutorial he suddenly asked his students to put on their coats and go out into Queen’s Park to see a Great Grey Owl. Falls, who was professor of zoology at Toronto recalls:

I was surprised to learn that some of his colleagues in the Department of History regarded Professor Saunders as rather retiring. Apparently they had not attended his lectures that were animated and forceful. He sometimes appeared in period costume to heighten the drama.

Being in his presence must certainly have been an exciting experience. Sally recalls that during a lecture on Martin Luther, her father became so enthusiastic when recounting how Luther had nailed his “Ninety-five theses” to the door of the chapel in Wittenberg, Germany, that he stamped his foot so hard it went clean through the floor boards of the lecture room. Other



FIGURE 3. Saunders with his wife Anne in 1947.

examples of his humour surface from time to time in his writing, such as when he mentions his birdwatching — although unrelated namesake — W. E. Saunders:

How old Mr. Saunders gets around. He is seventy-four and he goes everywhere and all the time to see his birds — down to Kingsville, up to Toronto and over to Hamilton all in one week. Quite a record for an old man. But he is not an old man! His birds and flowers keep him young; a retired business man but what a one. Most of them die of boredom and golf. He lives.

Flashing Wings chronicles a quite astonishing coverage of bird life in and around Toronto. In those days, the city was much smaller than it is now although there were signs of what was to come with his frequent references to building concessions and the loss of habitat. However, *all* has not been lost, and some of the areas that survive include Saunders’ beloved Cedarvale Ravine (although parts have been lost to a subway station), Scarborough Bluffs, and Grenadier Pond. To read this book is to walk through a vanished landscape, but one that is described so accurately that one might be watching a documentary film about it. The book includes 37 fine drawings by his friend Terence Shortt (1911–1986). Shortt was then artist-ornithologist with the Division of Birds at the Royal Ontario Museum, becoming, in the year after *Flashing Wings* was published, chief artist of the Department of Art and Exhibits. In an appendix, Saunders also includes what is almost cer-

tainly the first table of arrival and departure dates of birds in the Toronto region, which is based on his and Jim Baillie's observations, making it a significant contribution to the ornithology of Ontario.

Saunders seems to have integrated his academic and the ornithological activities well, particularly after purchasing a house on McMaster Avenue, in a leafy Toronto suburb; it became the family home until he left it the year before his death. Many are the observations he made of birds seen during the mile or so walk to and from the university, and it was there that he wrote his next book *Carolina Quest*, published in 1951. It describes a birdwatching trip to South Carolina with Thomas Murray, a student in modern history at the University of Toronto and an active birder in the young group that banded with the Toronto Field Naturalists.

Although it was written four years after *Flashing Wings*, *Carolina Quest* in fact chronicles a visit to South Carolina made in June 1936 when Saunders was 32 years old. The earlier book had been well received, a fact which no doubt prompted him to build on its success. The narrative in the first section of *Carolina Quest* is a fine evocation of life and landscape in the Deep South, culminating in a brief but unforgettable sighting of a pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*), thus numbering him among the small band of ornithologists who have seen this birdwatchers' Holy Grail, a bird now almost certainly extinct. The 12 beautiful woodcuts in the book are by Sylvia Hahn (1911–2001) who was the daughter of the artist and teacher, Gustav Hahn, and the sister of Saunders' secretary at the University. In 1934, she had joined the staff of the Royal Ontario Museum, to which she dedicated almost her entire artistic and amazingly versatile career. The final chapters deal with some of the birds that, in the past, had seemed so characteristic of the South and which were now increasingly to be found within the borders of Canada, thus providing an avian bond between the "Dominion of the North" and the "Deep South." A hint of things to come occurs when Saunders cites global warming as a possible factor for this expansion. He also includes what must be one of the earliest (and most humorous) descriptions of a full-blown "twitch" (numbering 80 birders) when a King Rail (*Rallus elegans*) appeared at Catfish Pond, High Park in Toronto.

The 1960s saw a quite radical decision made in the Saunders household. Having lived in Canada since they were married, Richard and Anne had grown used to, and now preferred, the Canadian way of life and so chose to take the nationality of their adopted country — although in those days it was a requirement that in so doing they had to relinquish their American citizenship. They felt that having Canadian passports made travel easier, particularly as America was then heavily involved in the Vietnam War, a fact that may well have contributed to their decision.

They were soon to make good use of these new passports, as Saunders, accompanied by Anne, took a sabbatical from the University, first visiting Europe, then the United Kingdom, travelling by steamship. For several weeks, they journeyed around Europe, mainly in France, a country whose language he spoke fluently, before crossing the channel to England. Here they stayed for four months while Saunders undertook historical research. Nevertheless, he still found time to make many field trips and to meet and become acquainted with Britain's ornithologists and discover its birds. The second part of the sabbatical was spent back in North America, driving down the east coast to Florida then continuing west to California, before turning north to Vancouver, taking in Yellowstone Park and the Canadian Rockies and returning home to Toronto. As her husband had never learned to drive, this challenging itinerary was undertaken by Anne.

Resuming his University duties, Saunders recalled how on one occasion his authority was challenged:

In a fourth-year seminar in Sidney Smith Hall a girl arrived one afternoon, sat down and took out a nice black pipe which she proceeded to light up and to puff boldly, cocking an eye at me every so often. The rest of the group also watched to see what would happen. As it was obvious that, in the spirit of that day, she was trying to push me into some sharp reaction I decided to pay no attention at all and carried on the group discussion as usual. As it worked out she never tried anything like it again and proved to be a very good and attentive student. Nonetheless, she defied the professor and had done her own thing in good 1960s style.

Saunders' calm and experienced approach to handling this situation says much about his character.

In 1965, he relinquished his position as editor of the Toronto Field Naturalists' newsletter, bowing out with a résumé of the activities of that lively institution, which he published in the 26-page booklet *Toronto Field Naturalists' Club — Its History and Constitution*. He retired from academic life a few years later, having become increasingly afflicted by deafness which also dramatically reduced his birding activity. Bird identification through birdsong had always been his strength, and he once observed that when springtime arrived with its heavy foliage, 75% of bird observing was done by the ears.

To compensate for the onset of deafness, there were the wildflowers — an area of natural history that had interested him as a photographer since his meeting with Mary Ferguson in the late 1960s at the Toronto Photographic Club. She had a deep knowledge of flowers, and they had an immediate rapport. Mary's husband was a professor in the Department of Pharmacy at the University and the Saunders and Ferguson families soon became close friends. They began to go on field trips together and were frequent guests at the Fergusons' cottage on the shores of Lake Huron at Georgian Bay.

In 1973, the two families' most extensive journey together took them, this time by aeroplane, on an extended tour of Europe across France, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. It is regrettable that Saunders never turned this trip (or indeed that made on his sabbatical) into a book. While in Europe, it is likely that plans were discussed with Mary, which resulted in the joint production of two books, *Canadian Wildflowers* (1971) and *Canadian Wildflowers through the Seasons* (1982). In the preface to the latter, Saunders wrote:

The discovery of a rare or unusual flower, a new species... or an expanse of flowers in fields, woods or swamps exhilarates and spurs us on. We forget the swarming black flies and mosquitoes, the difficult progress into a bog or the tiring climb up a mountain trail.... When you go out with the same purpose, take along patience and perseverance as part of your equipment, and take pictures for the joy of it.

Note how his words, "the discovery of a rare plant or unusual flower," echo those quoted in the opening paragraph of this tribute: "the chance finding of a new bird." Saunders was very much an active, rather than a passive naturalist.

His contribution to ornithology and conservation can be summed up in those four last words from the preface quoted above: "for the joy of it." He communicated that joy in an infectious yet authoritative way, and in so doing introduced a great many people, both young and old, to a lasting enjoyment in studying birds.

The final decade of Richard Saunders' life was totally overshadowed by his wife's suffering a severe stroke which confined her to hospital until her death in 1993. They had been happily married for 64 years. Now profoundly deaf, and at his request, Saunders spent his last year in a senior retirement home close to his daughter where, sitting on his veranda, yet unable to hear his beloved birds, he could at least enjoy the sight of them at the feeders. After a short illness, he died in a hospital in Huntsville on 25 July 1998 aged 93 and is buried in the family grave in his beloved adopted city of Toronto.

That he was an *interesting* man is without question, and interesting people must never be allowed to sink into oblivion. If this tribute has opened a small window onto his life and stimulated others to research it still further, then it will have achieved its purpose. Let the final words be from the man himself:

Often people ask me why I continue to look at the same birds week in and week out, year after year. Somehow they don't seem to realise that a sort of friendship springs up between observer and birds. And whoever comes to the end of wanting to see friends and to learn more about them?

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FIGURE 4. Anne Saunders favourite photo of her husband. Late 1960s.

president of the Toronto Field Naturalists (TFN) for her helpful information and for enabling the initial contact to be made with Sally; Marilynn Murphy, formerly on the TFN newsletter committee; George Bryant and Bruce Falls for their recollections; and Sandi Kane of Clarke University Massachusetts and Michel Duquet of the Canadian Historical Association.

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Associate Editor's Footnote

R. Saunders should not be confused with two unrelated W. Saunders, who are familiar to many Canadian naturalists.

“Known as Will or W.E. (short for William Edwin), W. E. Saunders was born in 1861, second in William Saunders’ family of one daughter and five accomplished sons. The senior Saunders later became founding director of the Dominion Experimental Farm in Ottawa.

“Of the brothers, only W.E. remained in London, where he operated a wholesale pharmaceutical company until his death in 1943. Saunders’ broad-ranging interests found outlets in civic, historical, horticultural, educational and musical circles.” From Wake, Winifred. 2011. W. E. Saunders, London’s beloved naturalist. *Londoner* 18 October. Available: www.thelonodon.ca/2011/10/18/w-e-saunders-londons-beloved-naturalist (accessed 19 May 2014).

Will Saunders was a major part of the early naturalists group active at Point Pelee as partly documented by a later University of Toronto historian who includ-

ed many references in *A Life with Birds: Percy A. Taverner, Canadian Ornithologist, 1875–1947* by John L. Cranmer-Byng. Canadian Field-Naturalist 110(1): 1–254 (1996).

For information about W. Saunders, senior, see Cody, W. J., D. B. O. Saville, and M. J. Sarazin. 1986. Systematics in Agriculture Canada at Ottawa 1886–1986. Agriculture Canada Historical Series number 28. 81 pages.

About the Author

Philip Collins lives in the United Kingdom and has been bird watching since childhood. He was a member of the Southwest Lancashire Ringing Group where he organized a Barn Owl nest box scheme and study group. He is currently secretary of the Liverpool Ornithologists Club. Back in 1964, he was given a copy of *A Birdwatcher’s Anthology* edited by Roger Tory Peterson, which included an extract from Saunders’ book *Flashing Wings*. The passage so captured and remained in his imagination that he finally determined to discover all he could about the life and work of its author.