

Exploring the mystery behind a handwritten bird manuscript

by Jim Cassels

Unlike some I enjoy a mystery.

On 20 August 2014 I met with one of the archivists at the Arran Heritage Museum after they had received a hand written document on Arran birds.

I looked at this document with amazement.

It is made up of 114 A4 pages and each page starts with the name of a bird, followed by information and finishing with a list of references like Robert Gray, Birds of Arran, Ball, 1872; John Morell McWilliam, Birds of the Firth of Clyde, Witherby, 1936; and J A Gibson, Birds of the Isle of Arran, Bute Newspapers, 1956.

The information on each bird is a combination of quotes from these sources plus the author's own observations.

The earliest observation was 1929 and the latest 1974. It is an extensive piece of work. There was no name on the manuscript and no introduction giving an indication of why it had been written. A mystery.

When I contacted the person who had donated the manuscript to the museum, he told me that he had got the man-

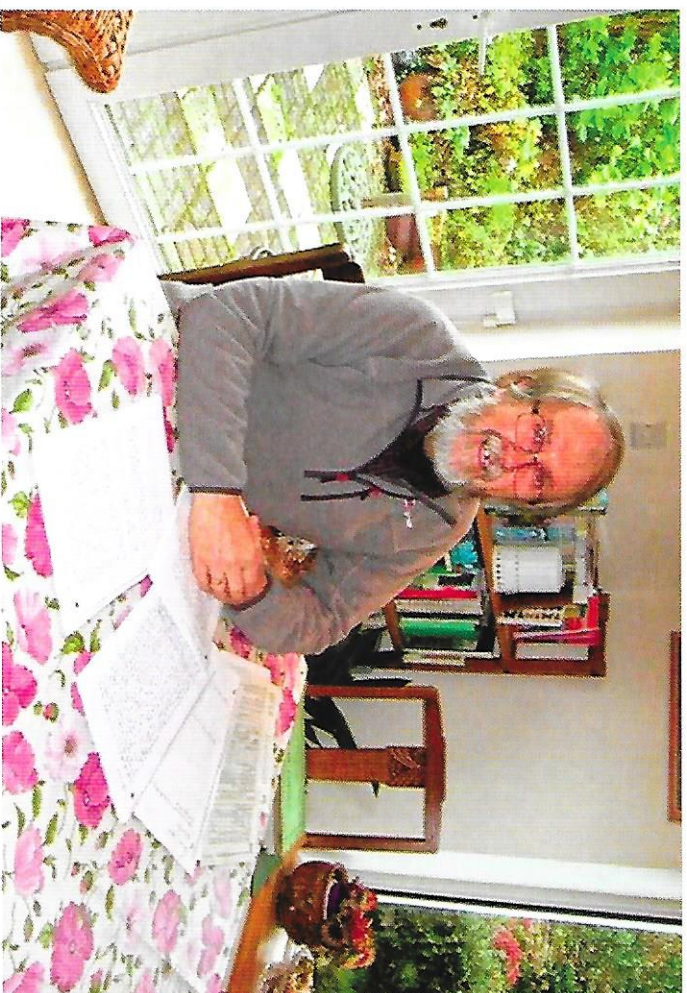
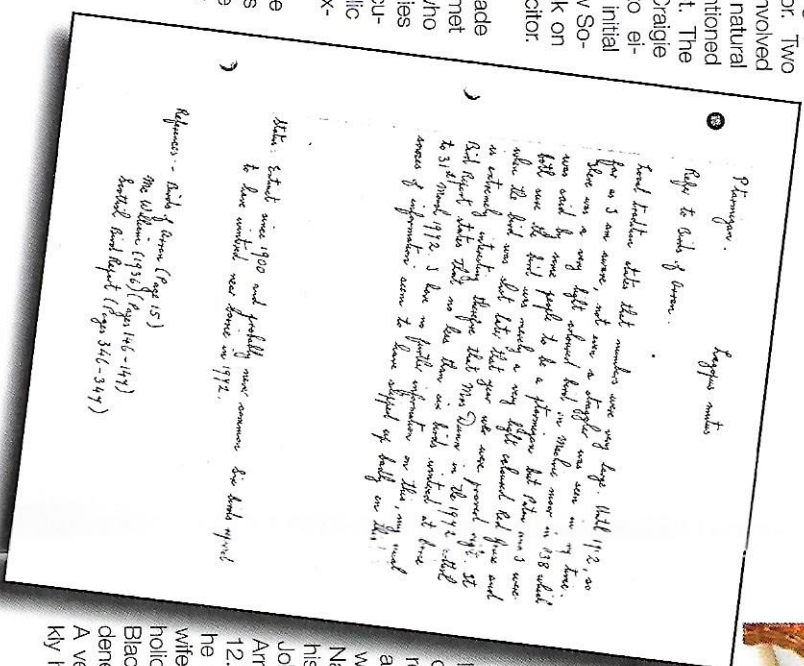
uscript from a friend whose Auntie Nan's house was being cleared.

He gave me the name of the author as John Craigie, an Edinburgh solicitor. Two local people still involved in the island's natural history were mentioned in the manuscript. The name John Craigie meant nothing to either of them. An initial enquiry to the Law Society drew a blank on John Craigie, solicitor.

A mystery. Progress was made when I eventually met local people who knew the Craigies and when documents in the public domain were examined.

The author of the manuscript was John Lawrence Craige, a law clerk from Edinburgh, who was born in 1918, married in 1952 and died of bronchopne-

Below: A page from the manuscript with details of the famous Arran ptarmigan.



Jim Cassels, Arran's bird recorder, was left baffled by the manuscript which had no introduction to indicate who or even when it had been written.

monia in 1976 aged 59. John Lawrence Craige married Annie Isobel Herkes also known as Nan in 1952. He was 34 years old. She was 26 years old.

His occupation is given as law clerk; he was an only child; and his father Lawrence John Craige who was a witness of the marriage, was a Writer to the Signet. Nan worked as a secretary for his father. She had two sisters.

John L Craige first came to Arran in 1929 when he was 12. He was on his own and he camped. Later, he and his wife, when they had their annual holiday on Arran, stayed in the Black Rock, and latterly Cliffdene, all in Corrie.

A very tall, thin man with crinkly hair he was a familiar figure

round Corrie, often wearing the kilt. He did not drive but he seemed to have a bicycle on Arran.

The impression that I was left with was that John L Craige was a quiet man with a sense of humour, devoted to his wife. He had a range of interests not just Arran and its birds, but also photography, gardening including miniature plants and, to a lesser extent, painting. From his manuscript and other interests he was meticulous in all that he did.

His wife Nan died in 2004. Presumably Nan kept the manuscript between John's death in 1976 and her own death in 2004 and presumably some member of the family kept the manuscript between 2004 and it being given to the museum in 2014.

I would be interested in hearing from anyone who could add to my understanding of the man who wrote the manuscript. I would be particularly interested in finding out what his intentions were for the manuscript. Ideally I would like to find out the firm that John L Craige worked for and if possible get a photograph of the man.

My intention would be to write up the story of John L Craige and his connection with Arran to go along with the manuscript in the Arran Heritage Museum.

With the permission of the museum and his family I would consider scanning the document and making it more widely available on the worldwide web. At the moment it can be seen in the archivist section of the museum.