

Dr. Geoffrey Alton Craig Herklots

The Hong Kong Rotarian Botanist

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

15 April 2015



Dr. Geoffrey Alton Craig Herklots (香樂思), PhD (*Cambridge*), MSc (*Leeds*) (10 August 1902 – 14 January 1986), was British botanist, ornithologist, and author who made significant contributions to the understanding of the natural history and agriculture of Hong Kong and the Caribbean. He was an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) in the 1930-40s holding the Classification “Education – Science” when he was Reader in Biology (生物學教授) of the University of Hong Kong (香港大學) from 1928 until 1945. During this time, he was a key figure in local natural history circles, notably as an editor of 《The Hong Kong Naturalist》 journal.

Herklots was renowned for his studies of the flora and avifauna of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Born on 10 August 1902 in Naini Tal, India, to missionary parents Reverend Bernard Herklots and Emily Frances, he received his early education at Trent College in Derbyshire, England, before pursuing higher studies, earning a Master of Science (M.Sc.) degree from the University of Leeds and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree from Trinity Hall, Cambridge. His family’s surname traces to Dutch origins in the Netherlands, reflecting a heritage of migration and scholarly pursuits.

In 1928, Herklots joined the University of Hong Kong as Reader in Biology, a position he held until 1945, during which he established biology as a core discipline for pre-medical students and founded the 《Hong Kong Naturalist》 journal in 1930 to disseminate knowledge on local biodiversity. His work emphasized classifying Hong Kong’s flora and connecting it to global scientific networks, including sending specimens to institutions like Kew Gardens.

In ornithology, Herklots documented species such as the grey wagtail, blue magpie, and black-faced babbler through field observations in areas like the Lam Tsuen Valley (林村谷), collaborating with amateur naturalists.

Herklots was captured when the British Crown Colony Hong Kong surrendered to the

Imperial Japan during the Pacific War (1941–1945), and he was held as a Prisoner of War at Stanley Internment Camp (赤柱拘留營). His expertise in agriculture proved vital in the Camp where he organized vegetable cultivation using locally produced compost to help sustain the internees, yielding over 140 cucumbers in 1942 alone.

After the War, Herklots was appointed Secretary for Development in the government from 1946 to 1948. This post was specially created by Governor Sir Mark Aitchison Young (香港總督楊慕琦爵士) to spearhead the Colony's post-War economic rehabilitation by advocating for planned agricultural and fisheries reforms.

Following his departure from Hong Kong, Herklots advanced to Secretary for Colonial Agricultural Research at the Colonial Office in London (1948–1953), then became Principal and Director of Research at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad from 1953 to 1960. He retired in 1961 and returned to the United Kingdom where he continued writing on natural history, including serving as Colombo Plan Botanical Adviser to Nepal (1961–1963). Herklots was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society, recognizing his high-impact work in tropical natural history. He passed away on 14 January 1986 in England.

Key post-Hong Kong works include the revised《Hong Kong Bird》(1953), which provided field identification guides for over 200 species; 《The Hong Kong Countryside》 (1951), a comprehensive overview of the territory's ecosystems; and 《Birds of Trinidad and Tobago》 (1961), extending his ornithological contributions to the Caribbean. Later publications like 《Vegetable Cultivation in South-East Asia》 (1973) and 《Flowering Tropical Climbers》 (1976) underscored his enduring focus on practical botany.

Herklots' legacy is commemorated in the names of several species, including the orchid “*Eria herklotsii* Crib”, the longfin catshark “*Apristurus herklotsi*”, and the genus of fish “*Herklotsichthys*”.

Bibliography

Crook, A.H. & Herklots, G.A.C. (eds) (1930) *The Hong Kong Naturalist*. A quarterly illustrated journal principally for Hong Kong and South China. Vol 1. Newspaper Enterprise Limited: Hong Kong.

Herklots, G.A.C. (1940) *Common Marine-Food Fishes of Hong Kong*. University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. (2nd edition).

Herklots, G.A.C. (1941) *Vegetable cultivation in Hong Kong*. *South China Morning Post*

Herklots, G.A.C. (1951) *The Hong Kong Countryside*. *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong.

Herklots, G.A.C. (1953) *Hong Kong Birds*. *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong.

Herklots, G.A.C. (1961) *The Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Collins, London.

Herklots, G.A.C. (1967) *Hong Kong Birds*. *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong. (2nd edition).

Herklots, G.A.C. (1972) *Vegetables in South-East Asia*. George Allen and Unwin, London.