

Preface

It is surprising that Gurney's *The Gannet* has stood for over 60 years as the standard account of the gannet* *Sula bassana*, which, and not only in my biased eyes, is our most spectacular seabird. This deficiency, however, is partly a historical accident, for the late and lamented James Fisher wanted to write a monograph on the gannet and indeed, I believe, harboured plans for joint authorship with me more than ten years ago.

Writing the book has given me a deal of pleasure for the simple reason that much fascinating material begged to be integrated. There was, for example, the uniquely complete information on the world population of gannets; the many years' records of breeding biology and behaviour on Bass Rock; exciting comparative data from Bempton Cliffs, Ailsa Craig and Bonaventure Island; recent research on the closely related African and Australasian gannets and a detailed treatment of the whole family, to say nothing of several seminal studies of other seabirds. The time, therefore, was right. This was in part, also, because I had recently completed a much larger work on the entire family, *The Sulidae*, from which, may I assure the reader, the present volume is not an extract; neither book is any substitute for the other. This one, *The Gannet*, has been written afresh and with a different approach. The larger volume is unsuitable for the general ornithologist and bird-watcher in Britain because most of its content (boobies) is peripheral to his interests, and because it is too expensive to find its way onto his shelves, and too large to be carried around. I have tried to make this monograph on the gannet as complete as anybody but the specialist could want, yet without cluttering it with too much detail, and I hope many copies will even see a gannetry in the flesh.

Throughout, the emphasis is equally on fact, integration and interpretation, because I am sure that a book like this should leave the reader feeling that (s)he understands the subject; knows why, for instance, the gannet's breeding strategy is what it is and why it displays as it does. It is as important to ask why gannets do not feed their free-flying young as it is to describe the plumage of a two-year-old, even though the one cannot be answered as fully and factually as the other can be described. I hope that those who read this book will find their understanding and enjoyment of the lovely 'white bird of the herring' greatly enhanced.

* This perhaps unfairly excludes Reinsch's excellent little account in German.