JOURNEY OF THE HEART
THE INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S HEART FOUNDATION
Birds, Beasts & Relatives

How Memphian Lee McGeorge Durrell married into one of Britain’s literary first families and along the way became a zookeeper in the Channel Islands.

by ANNE CUNNINGHAM O’NEILL

Native Memphian Lee Durrell, formerly Lee McGeorge, is currently the Honorary Director of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, an international charity with the global mission of saving species from extinction. This organization is based on the island of Jersey, a British Crown Dependency in the Atlantic Ocean located 100 miles south of mainland Britain and 14 miles from the French coast.

How McGeorge got so well placed all the way “across the pond” is an inspiring story. After graduating from St. Mary’s School here, and then Bryn Mawr College, she went to Duke University in 1971 for a graduate program to study animal behavior. It was there that she met the much older (and world-renowned) English naturalist and author, Gerald Durrell (1925-1993), who was traveling in the States on a lecture tour. A trans-Atlantic romance blossomed, and McGeorge married him in her family’s garden here in Memphis in 1979 “on a carpet of wild strawberries and violets,” as her husband Gerry later described the nuptials. With this union an extraordinary partnership was born.

The facts of Gerald Durrell’s life are easy to come by. Born in India in 1925 (his father was a British engineer), he moved with his widowed mother and siblings in 1928 to Corfu, where as a young boy he spent many happy hours studying the Greek island’s fascinating wildlife. He memorably describes these adventures in his uproarious, laugh-out-loud classic memoir, My Family and Other Animals. It should be noted, too, that his older brother, Lawrence Durrell, was the author of the Alexandria Quartet, the four books of which are considered among the greatest novels of the twentieth century.

Once grown and on the path of becoming one of the world’s foremost naturalists, as well as a best-selling author on the subject — his autobiographical bestsellers include The Drunken Forest (1956), A Zoo in My Luggage (1960), and Birds, Beasts and Relatives (1969) — Gerry set up the Jersey Zoological Park (now Durrell Wildlife Park) in 1959. Forward thinking for his time, Durrell intended his park to be “a
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Durrell earlier this year while she was on one of her highly anticipated annual visits to Memphis. Her enthusiasm is “wildly” catching as she speaks of all the exciting things to see at the WildLife Park — from gorillas, bears, and orangutans to tamarins, marmosets, and lemurs to frogs, snakes, and lizards. In this special place, she says, “many of the most endangered animal species in the world find sanctuary.”

Beginning in 1976, the Durrell Trust’s first long-term field work was conducted on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. In fact, the extinct flightless bird from Mauritius — the dodo — is the symbol of the Trust. The breeding program on Jersey has increased the number of Mauritius kestrels in the wild from only four to more than 500. Durrell’s largest conservation program, which has been in existence for 25 years, now with 40 paid staff members, is in Madagascar off the southeast coast of Africa. It is a place with amazing biodiversity and very dear to Lee’s heart due to the fact she wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on animal behavior there. In certain areas of
the island, she is fondly called "Grandmother Tortoise," due to her work with the endangered ploughshare tortoise. On the island of Jersey itself, the Durrell Conservation Academy was set up with headquarters adjacent to the Wildlife Park; over 3,350 conservationists from 135 countries have been trained to date in this mini-university.

The 25th anniversary of the Wildlife Park in 1984 was the banner year of "first releases," meaning that animals bred at the zoo were turned back into the wild. The Durrell Trust has also mounted a major rescue operation in the tiny Caribbean nation of Montserrat, home of the mountain chicken, which is not a bird but one of the largest frogs in the world and is critically endangered. There is not room here to list all the amazing successes of the Durrell Trust, but clearly they are many.

Lee Durrell herself is also an accomplished author, having written several books, including A Practical Guide for the Amateur Naturalist (with Gerald Durrell), Durrell in Russia (with Gerald Durrell), and State of the Ark: An Atlas of Conservation in Action. Though she modestly did not tell me, I also happen to know that for her many achievements, she was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) by Queen Elizabeth II in the 2011 Birthday Honors. And speaking of the royal family, Princess Anne has been the Durrell Trust's patron for some 40 years.

But times have changed, and Lee is now a woman with a new and essential mission right here in the United States. Tourism on Jersey is not what it used to be, and as a result, declining revenues from the Wildlife Park have caused the Durrell Trust to suffer as well. In order to continue the organization's vital work, Lee is in the process of setting up a Memphis-based foundation that will be a sister organization, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, its mission will be to promote and support the work of the conservation organization established by Gerald Durrell. She plans to travel around the country to raise funds for what will be called the American Friends of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust — American Friends of Durrell for short.

At the outset, this new entity will have a small board composed of Memphians, including Lee's sister, Harriet McGeorge Thompson, an outstanding landscape...
"Grandmother Tortoise" with grandchild in pre-release enclosure, Bay Bay National Park, Madagascar, 2011.

Lee with her Piper Navajo plane on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, 2005.

".... architect, along with Memphians Wendy Shea and Milner Stanton. Much work is yet to be done, since Lee says American Friends of Durrell must be registered in every state where fundraising takes place, although it is already incorporated in Memphis.

Sir David Attenborough, the BBC's world-famous natural-history filmmaker, has characterized Gerry Durrell's work as "magic, and at a gala in 2009 celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Park foundation, Attenborough also famously said, "The world needs Durrell." In this context, Lee says quite simply, "And Durrell needs American friends."

I recently caught up again with Lee by phone at her seventeenth-century manor house in Jersey for an update on what she is up to. She is particularly excited about the recent opening of a permanent exhibition on the grounds of the Wildlife Park which is titled, "The Gerald Durrell Story," a project which she has been working on for nearly two years. She also plans to be a guest lecturer on an exotic wildlife voyage organized by The Ultimate Travel Company in October of next year billed as a "Durrell Expedition Cruise to Borneo, Bali and Beyond."

Lest you think Lee is confined to land and sea, it so happens she also takes to the air. She and her
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BOTTOM: Colin Stevenson, Lee Durrell, Harriet McGeorge Thompson, and Bill Thompson at Buckingham Palace in 2011, when Lee was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

Charming companion, Colin Stevenson, whom I met when they were last in Memphis, are both pilots — a necessity when you travel as much as Lee does. In particular, they are often moving animals to breeding zoos around the world as part of Durrell’s exchange breeding programs for endangered animals.

I don’t know about you, but I am already dreaming about a trip to the Channel Islands to visit the Durrell Wildlife Park. Lee has told me she will welcome visitors from her hometown with open arms. For more information about the Park and the Trust’s many programs, go to www.durrell.org. While you’re at it, keep an eye out for news about the American Friends of Durrell and become one of that group’s early supporters.

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