

# AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

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**NSW FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS CLUB Inc.**

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## NSW FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS CLUB Inc

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*Front* : Alfred John North

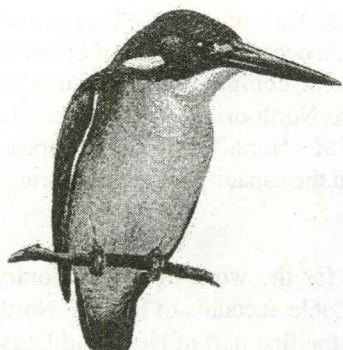
*Back* : Illustrations from North's *Nests & Eggs*, by Neville H.P. Cayley

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# AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

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## ALFRED JOHN NORTH: PORTRAIT OF AN ORNITHOLOGIST "IN JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS TO MYSELF"

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### INTRODUCTION

The debt owed by Australian ornithology to Alfred John North, Assistant in Ornithology at the Australian Museum from 1891 to 1917 and author of *Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, has passed largely unrecognised in the eighty years since his death. Apart from a short appreciation by the Australian ornithologist Gregory Mathews, an anonymous obituary published in the *Emu*, Walter Boles' foreword to a facsimile edition of *Nests and Eggs* and an article, probably by Alec Chisholm, in the *Australian Encyclopedia*, no general survey of North's work or memoir of his life has been published.

Fortunately, North's surviving manuscripts and publications contain sufficient material to provide a detailed account of his career and achievements. These sources include North's private notebooks and his correspondence, most of which consists of letters he received from other ornithologists. Of the letters written by North, only those to the Victorian biologist Walter Baldwin Spencer and preserved in his remaining letters books have survived. Additional information is provided by North's monographs, especially his *Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania* (abbreviated herein to *Nests and Eggs*) and his journal articles, including those published in the *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales*.

Although a prolific writer, North remains an elusive figure. He rarely engaged in personal reflection in his private notes and letters. While they contain occasional flashes of irritation, sarcasm and comments on his health, they are almost completely dominated by ornithological concerns. They provide few insights into North or his wife, Clara, who even in his private notebook is consistently referred to as 'Mrs North.' Although he appears to have been a somewhat dispassionate figure North had the capacity to provoke strong, generally negative, reactions in others.

These reactions, based on North's alleged disregard for the work of contemporary professional and amateur ornithologists, dominate available accounts of his life. North was first publicly criticised on this basis in a review of the first part of *Nests and Eggs*. Reproaching North for completely ignoring the work of contemporary authors, such as Archibald James Campbell and Dudley Le Souëf, the anonymous reviewer suggested North's omissions were 'likely to discount the high standards of his writing' (Review, 1901, pp. 28-30).

North's reasons for supposedly ignoring the work of his contemporaries have been attributed to his narrow-mindedness, 'intense jealousy' and 'jaundiced views' towards them (White, 1981, pp. 76 and 85; Hindwood, 1946, p. 197). In assessing these claims, the biographer must determine whether North would have allowed jealousy and prejudice to undermine his life's work. Although Mathews declared that by ignoring the work of others North militated against the completeness of his own labours,' it is difficult to believe North deliberately undermined his desire to produce a definitive monograph on the nests and eggs of Australia's birds by ignoring the records of creditable observers (Mathews, 1918, p. 131).

It is not difficult to find an element of North's character which may have provided grounds for these allegations. North's approach to ornithology was based on the rigid pursuit of technical accuracy and perfection. He had exceptionally high standards which he invariably expected others to share. The failure of some workers to measure up to North's standards and his consequent repudiation of their records appears to have prompted their criticisms.

This has resulted in North being misrepresented by his critics, who failed to consider this alternate reason for his omission of their records. In the short history of Australian ornithology contained in the introduction to his monograph, *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, Campbell, North's *bête noir*, wrote, 'of my own immediate contemporaries I have nothing to say. Time alone...will impartially judge us all' (Campbell, 1900, p. xvi).

But time has not proved an impartial judge of North, a situation which prompted my choice of title. North did not cut himself off from the work and opinions of others, but instead had cordial relations with the majority of his colleagues and maintained a wide

correspondence with professional and amateur ornithologists. He based his consideration of their records on their reliability and accuracy as observers and collectors. Only when he had clear evidence that they had misrepresented their discoveries did he repudiate them.

In these situations, North reacted in a manner similar to Jane Austin's Mr Darcy. His good opinion, once lost, was never regained. Unfortunately the loss of North's good opinion extended not only to the ornithologists he believed unreliable, but also their employers. North's approach in these circumstances occasionally had damaging consequences. For example, his animosity towards the collector Sidney William Jackson prevented the Australian Museum from acquiring the Henry White ornithological collection, now held by the Museum of Victoria.

Although his critics freely published their opinions of him, North preferred to keep his own council. Instead of publishing a general defence of his position, North confined his opinions of the observers he believed unreliable to his private note book and correspondence. It is only by reading this material that an accurate impression can be gained of North's opinions and motives. While a range of papers, articles and publications concerning North and his contemporaries have been consulted, I do not pretend to have produced a definitive biography. If it helps restore North's reputation, it will have achieved its purpose.

### **EARLY LIFE AND WORK**

Alfred John North, the second son of Henry North and Mary Tryphena Yalden, was born at North Melbourne on 11 June 1855. Educated at Melbourne Public and Grammar Schools, he served as an apprentice jeweller under Henry Young, whose business premises were located in Little Collins Street, Melbourne (Mathews, 1918, p. 129; Registrar General, No. 6249 of 1855). While it is uncertain what prompted North's interest in ornithology, he appears to have started collecting eggs while at school.

North was one of the original members of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, established in 1880. His early field trips 'were along the foreshore of the bay between Sandridge (now Port Melbourne) and St Kilda, where Red-capped Dotterels used to nest on the sand,' and to Albert Park (Obituary Notice, 1917, pp. 59-60; Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985, p. 96; Whittell, 1954, p. 552). In 1882, North married Clara Roberta Frean in Melbourne (Gibbney and Smith, p. 145; Registrar General, No. 3468 of 1882).

In 1878 North began corresponding and exchanging eggs with Dr Edward Pierson Ramsay, Curator of the Australian Museum. Ramsay privately employed North in September 1886 to curate his personal collection of eggs, then held at *Dobroyde*, Ramsay's house in Ashfield (Mathews, 1918, p. 130; Strahan, 1979, p. 42). Three months later North, recently elected

to the NSW Linnean Society, was employed by the Australian Museum as a cataloguer (Obituary Notice, 1917, p. 60; Notice, 1917, p. 202).

In this capacity, North assisted Ramsay in preparing and revising his catalogues of the Australian birds in the Museum's collections. In the introduction to his catalogue of the Psittaci in the Australian Museum, published in 1891, Ramsay concluded, 'I have much pleasure in acknowledging the assiduity and diligence of my assistant, Mr A J North, in the preparation of this work' (Ramsay, 1891). North also assisted Ramsay in the preparation of his catalogue of the Halcyones (Ramsay, 1894) and was responsible for revising Ramsay's works on the Accipitres and Striges (Mathews, 1918, p. 130).

North's connections with Ramsay were central to his appointment to the Museum. Ramsay had acquired the position of Curator in return for assisting the Museum's Trustees in deposing his predecessor, Gerard Krefft, whose support for Darwin's theory of evolution had enraged influential members of Sydney's scientific establishment (Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985, p. 146; Strahan, 1979, p. 30). Led by William Sharp Macleay, one of the founders of the Linnean Society of New South Wales, they succeeded in evicting Krefft from his rooms at the Museum and replacing him with Ramsay in 1874 (Strahan, 1979, pp. 37-38). It is probable that Ramsay was not North's only patron. He was also close to George Masters, the curator of Macleay's private natural history collection, later donated to the University of Sydney.

It was from Ramsay that North inherited his rigid criteria for the authenticity of specimens. In the introduction to his catalogues, Ramsay consistently emphasised the need for absolute certainty concerning the authenticity and provenance of the specimens used. It was almost inevitable that these high standards would be adopted by North, whose close identification with Ramsay's work is reflected by his possession of four working copies of Ramsay's *Tabular List of Australian Birds* (Ramsay, 1888).

Three months after his initial appointment in 1886, North was assigned to write a description of the Museum's egg collection. These descriptions were published in North's first monograph, the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*. While the *Catalogue's* date of publication is given as 1889, although the work was completed and title page printed then, the receipt of additional specimens provided North with material for an appendix. This delayed publication of the work until 1890, with the title page printed the previous year being incorporated into it (Mathews, 1918, p. 130; Whittell, 1954, p. 554).

In the Preface to North's *Catalogue*, Ramsay described North's criteria for the acceptance of records and specimens, which so closely mirrored his own. Ramsay noted that the monograph 'contains a careful description of such authentic eggs of each species as have

been accessible to the author ... wherever there was any doubt as to the authenticity of the eggs of any species they have been discarded ... no egg is here described of which the history is unknown.' In his introduction North, having acknowledged the assistance of Ramsay, William Macleay and George Masters, noted that with the exception of descriptions of eggs taken from Gould's *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, 'I have personally examined those of every species, and need hardly state that [the descriptions] have been taken only from thoroughly authentic specimens' (North, 1889).

Unfortunately, apart from this brief statement, nowhere in his surviving papers does North reflect on the qualities he believed an ornithologist required. Although he published short biographies on John Lewin, author of the first ornithological work published in Australia, and Gould's collector, John Gilbert, North did not discuss the qualities those early ornithologists possessed which attracted his admiration of them (North, 1906). For the remainder of his career, North would rigidly adhere to Ramsay's standards and apply them to the records of others, often to the detriment of his professional reputation.

While North apparently benefited from his affiliation with Macleay's circle, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions on his attitude to contemporary scientific controversies due to the absence of documentary evidence. As North and Clara lived at Ramsay's house, Dobroyde and they worked together at the Museum, it is understandable that letters to or from North are absent from Ramsay's ornithological correspondence (ML MSS 2169).

North's only statement which appears to indicate his attitude towards evolution arises in the context of his contributions to amending the *Bird Protection Act (NSW) 1901*. North's main concern with the Act was its failure to afford complete protection to native species he believed were rapidly becoming endangered. As it stood, the Act only protected scheduled native birds during closed season from 1 August to 31 January (Section 5).

As a result, many thousands of Riflebird and Regent Bowerbird skins were legally exported to decorate ladies' hats and dresses. North also observed hundreds of Superb Lyrebirds' feathers being sold on George and Pitt Streets in Sydney, again having been legally taken during open season (North 1901, p. 17). North believed these species, among others, should be given complete protection. His efforts met with reasonable success. In 1905 the Act was amended to give them complete protection for ten years (North, 1909 p. 6; NSW Government Gazette No. 563, 31 Oct 1905).

While North's views on the protection of endangered species anticipate modern concepts of biodiversity conservation, they were qualified by his belief that their extinction as a result of human activity was natural and inevitable. The growth of cities and their suburbs, he argued was 'only a natural sequence.' It was simply 'part of nature's laws' that once their habitat was cleared, native birds were 'either destroyed or driven away.'

If it is accepted that this argument reflects North's perspective on evolution, it is perhaps best understood in the context of contemporary belief that 'survival of the fittest' meant survival of the strongest. This attitude is also reflected in North's generation's conviction that a similar fate awaited the Aborigines. Stripped of their land and children by the Europeans, they were regarded as a 'dying race' which would inevitably become extinct once its survivors were assimilated into European society (Elder, 170-72).

This incidental statement aside, nothing indicates North's views diverged from Ramsay's. Instead, the Norths' years at *Dobroyde* appear to have passed amicably. North accompanied Ramsay on field trips to Dubbo, Heathcote and along the Macquarie River (ML MSS B 1123, 9-15 Aug 1887). In Sydney, he and Clara would often look for nests in the native bush at Dobroyde, where a variety of species, including Yellow Robins and White-browed Scrubwrens, regularly nested (*ibid.*, 11 Aug and 7-8 Sept 1888). Living there, North could not understand how Gould could have described Australia's birds as silent, writing that even 'in the depths of winter, before the break of day, we have ... melodious notes resounding through the bush, rich, clear and clarion-like ... that the birds of Australia are without song is as erroneous as the impression that ... our flowers are without scent' (*ibid.*, 19 Aug 1889; 15 Sept 1895). At the Museum, North occasionally received visitors who brought specimens to add to Ramsay's collection or his own. Eggs were also regularly received in the mail from collectors in Norfolk Island, Victoria and Tasmania, sometimes arriving broken or incompletely blown and unwashed, stinking out his office (*ibid.*, 12 Oct 1887; 23 Feb, 10 May, 14 May and 6 Oct 1888 and 2 April 1895).

North's other interests included collecting native flowers and fossils. After an unsuccessful field trip to Botany, he consoled himself over the lack of nests by noting that there were 'plenty of wildflowers out.' A similar experience in Heathcote prompted him to return home with specimens of Gynea Lily, *Doryanthes excelsa*. These continued to flower for several weeks afterwards, with North including a watercolour of them in his note book (*ibid.*, 17 and 21 Aug, 19 Sept and 6 Oct 1889).

In October 1889, the Norths visited Gerringong. While Clara collected shells on the beach, North walked to Buchanans Point and along the Crooked River in pursuit of fossils, collecting many 'perfect' specimens. They then moved on to Wollongong, where it rained continuously and there were few fossils to be had. North was far from impressed and on their departure declared that 'without exception, Wollongong is the most miserable hole it has ever been my lot to enter ... we were not sorry to leave this wretched place by the first train' (*ibid.*, 9-15 Oct 1888).

These scathing reflections on Wollongong reflect the central element of North's character. North was a complete perfectionist, with all the flaws that accompany such a disposition. He was easily offended, being remarkably sensitive to slights, and pre-occupied with



avoiding departures from established scientific protocol. Many of his concerns were bound up in professional precedence, as he sought to protect his reputation and the integrity of his work.

In this context, it would be unjust to criticise North for acting to ensure he received credit for his work. The desire to claim priority in naming or describing new species continues to generate controversy among ornithologists. This pre-occupation was apparent in North's approach to his first major project after being appointed to the Museum, the ornithological report of the Horn Scientific Expedition.

### **THE HORN EXPEDITION**

Financed by the South Australian pastoralist and mining magnate William Austin Horn, the Horn Expedition was commissioned to examine the Aborigines, flora, fauna and geology of Central Australia. Members of the Expedition included Walter Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne, who had been recruited as biologist and photographer, and George Keartland, one of the Expedition's two taxidermists. The Expedition left Adelaide on 3 May 1894 and on 12 May arrived at Charlotte Waters. From there, several of its members were guided to Ayres Rock and Mt Olga by Charles Ernest Cowle, a local mounted police constable, who later became one of North's main informants on the ornithology of Central Australia (Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985, pp. 116-121 and 123).

The Expedition returned to Adelaide on 16 August, having collected some 180 new species of plants, insects, birds and reptiles and valuable anthropological information on the region's Aboriginal inhabitants. By October 1895 Horn, anxious to secure a knighthood in recognition of his philanthropy, had become concerned over the delays in publishing an account of the Expedition. Spencer agreed to edit a report and in May 1895 consulted with the Expedition's former members, several of whom were extremely reluctant to contribute to a publication intended to enhance Horn's social status (*ibid.*, pp. 123 and 131-133).

North was among those approached by Spencer to work on the report. Spencer probably first met North at the inaugural meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science at Sydney in 1888. His biographers note the contacts Spencer established there later 'proved vital for his researches and editorial work for the Horn Expedition, when he approached various experts for advice and specimen identification' (*ibid.*, p. 108). Spencer may also have met North through the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, which Spencer had been influential in establishing.

That Horn expected to receive 'some especial mark of Royal favour' did not concern North (ML MSS 29/9, 14 Oct 1895, p. 147). Between October 1894 and February 1895

he prepared descriptions of the ornithological specimens collected by the Expedition, which included four new species. In addition to these species, North also distinguished a new genus among the specimens collected. It was these specimens which gave rise to the concerns over priority North expressed in his letters to Spencer. North was anxious to ensure that his descriptions of the new species and genus were the first published and he sought an assurance from Spencer that his descriptions of the Expedition's specimens would be clearly distinguished from the field notes of their collector, George Keartland.

While North sought to ensure Keartland received credit for his efforts, he also sought to preserve the integrity of his own work. Reluctant to have his report and Keartland's field notes published as one, North requested Spencer to separate their work, explaining that it would be 'impossible for me to share the credit of any of his [Keartland's] observations in the field, and rightly so, but it would be equally unjust to deprive me of the result of my labours of every evening for the past six weeks [preparing] remarks and descriptions of the new species ... In the description of any new species of birds, there can be no joint authorship, they are entirely my own, as much as are the field notes [of] Mr Keartland' (ibid., 14 Dec 1894, pp. 175-176).

North's solution to the problem was based on the plan adopted by the British Ornithological Union to cover situations where the descriptive notes of professional ornithologists and field notes of collectors were published together. North's description of each species preceded Keartland's field notes, which appeared in square brackets, clearly distinguishing the two contributions (ibid., p. 174; North, 1895b, pp. 53 -54).

This is not to suggest that any ill-will existed between North and Keartland. On the contrary, they corresponded regularly and lengthy extracts from Keartland's letters are included by North in *Nests and Eggs*. North named the new species of honeyeater collected by Keartland during the Expedition after him, noting in his letter to Spencer that 'no-one is more anxious than myself that Mr Keartland should secure all the recognition possible and it was for this reason I proposed publishing a diagnosis so as to secure the perpetuation of his name with one of the species.' Aware that the official report of the Expedition would not be published for some time, North repeated this proposal in a subsequent letter to Spencer, suggesting that 'it would perhaps be advisable to publish in the Proceedings of one of the Societies a short description of each of the new species' (ibid., 10 Dec 1894, pp. 169-170).

North was so occupied with his work on the Report that he was unable to add any records to his private notebook from October to December 1894. On 12 February 1895 the Report was complete, with North confiding to his private notebook that he was 'glad to get it finished.' (ML MSS B1123, 26 Dec 1894 and 12 Feb 1895) Sending it to Spencer in May

1895 North noted that he had made 'original descriptions of two species' and 'remarks only upon the plumage where necessary to do so.'

However, he remained anxious to secure his descriptions of the new species and requested Spencer not to 'divulge to any one the existence of new species or genus, especially the latter, until I have forwarded you a published preliminary description from the Editor of the Ibis. I ask this in justice and fairness to myself for the work has taken up a lot of my very limited spare time and I should not care to be forestalled by letting any person know what was new among them' (ML MSS 29/9, 23 May 1895, pp. 178-179; ML MSS B 1123, 4 Apr and 23 May 1895).

To promote his new species and genus, North proposed that colour plates of them be included in the report. Facilitating this, he secured the services of Neville H P Cayley, who later provided the black and white illustrations for and hand coloured the plates of eggs in the coloured copies of North's *Nests and Eggs*. North had a high regard for Cayley's work and noted in his letters to Spencer regarding the production of the plates to illustrate the Expedition's report that 'as far as the drawing is concerned no-one can touch Cayley' (ML MSS 29/9, 1 Oct 1895, p. 190). Ever vigilant for artistic error, North spent two days supervising Cayley's work before sending the plates to Spencer, enthusiastically declaring that 'as you can see he [Cayley] has done them first class, in fact there is no-one in Australia that can come within co-ee of him' (ibid., 12 Oct 1895, p. 195).

Preliminary descriptions of the new genus and species were published in the July 1895 edition of Ibis. North noted he had named the new honeyeater after Keartland, 'whose assiduity and perseverance as [an] ornithological collector contributed so much to the success of the expedition' (North, 1895, p. 341). But even this did not set North's mind at ease. In September, he sought Spencer's permission to exhibit specimens of them at the NSW Linnean Society 'just for the purpose of recording that they have been shown to the members of a scientific society' (ML MSS 29/9, 14 Sept 1895, p. 188). Spencer apparently gave North his permission, as the type specimens of the new species and genus were exhibited at the Linnean Society in July 1896 (Notes and Exhibits, 1896, p. 88).

For all the trouble North took to secure priority in naming the new genus, he had doubts about its validity. The Italian ornithologist Tomaso Salvadori, to whom North had sent a copy of the Horn Expedition report in 1896, sought to reassure North his concerns were groundless, noting 'it appears to me that your genus *Spathoperus* has right to stand as much as many other genera of the Psittaci ... perhaps the name *Spathoperus* gives an exaggerated idea of the wing feature, the third primary is not exactly spatulated, but this is of no consequence (ML MSS 227, Salvadori to North, 9 Aug 1896 and 8 Mar 1904).'

North's meticulous contribution to the Horn Expedition report has been overlooked by later writers. It was virtually ignored by Morton and Mulvaney in their volume commemorating the Expedition's centenary and by the approximately two hundred participants of the Expedition's centenary symposium held at Alice Springs in September 1994 (Morton and Mulvaney, 1996).

While this report demonstrates the standards North applied to his work, his adherence to them was later used as a basis for criticism of his later monographs.

## THE VICTORIANS

On 4 August 1891 North was appointed Assistant in Ornithology to the Australian Museum, a position he retained until his death in 1917. The main criticism levelled at North during his tenure concerned his stubborn refusal to incorporate the work of some ornithologists, especially those from Victoria, into his publications. This resulted in the impression that North was a jealous, arrogant figure dominating accounts of his character. A closer examination shows that this view is difficult to sustain.

North never joined the Melbourne-based Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, with an obituary notice in the *Emu* stating his ill-health prevented his involvement. North, its anonymous author explained, 'did not associate himself with the Australasian Union, probably because for many years his health was extremely delicate, and he had not strength to attend meetings at his Museum, or to do much work' (Obituary Notice, 1917, p. 60). Although North occasionally suffered ill-health, it never prevented him from actively engaging in field-work, as the trips described in his note book to areas ranging from Adelaide and Gabo Island to Ourimbah and Coonamble clearly illustrate.

The excuse offered on North's behalf by the obituary politely conceals the true reason for his avoiding the Union. As Boles notes, North's 'intense personal feud' with Archibald James Campbell, an ornithologist associated with the National Museum of Victoria who had prompted the Union's establishment, precluded any co-operation between them. This resulted in the descriptions of species, nests and eggs published by Campbell and his associates being 'conveniently ignored' by North (North, 1984; AOU Origins, 1901, pp. 1-2).

North's reasons for omitting any mention of Campbell's work appear to have resulted from Campbell's uncritical acceptance of the reports of amateur ornithologists, whose work failed to meet North's high standards of accuracy. Where his publications were concerned, North left nothing to chance. He employed the best artists and used photographs of only the highest quality to illustrate his work. Even minor errors in punctuation attracted lengthy criticism (ML MSS 29/9, 12 Oct 1895, pp. 193-196). There was simply no room for error.

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In addition to Campbell, North also appears to have found fault with the work of Dudley Le Souëf, who assisted in the RAOU's establishment and worked for the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society in Melbourne (Mathews, 1918, p. 131; AOU Origins, 1901, pp. 1-2). North had secured Le Souëf's 'unwilling consent' to re-describe eggs that Le Souëf had already formally described in the *Ibis*. In advising North that he had reconsidered, Le Souëf noted 'I would not care to have it done' and attached a list of his published descriptions 'which you can easily look up if necessary. Such a few eggs out of so many can't make any difference' (ML MSS 227, Le Souëf to North 10 Mar 1899).

North's doubts about Le Souëf's ornithological capabilities were confirmed by one of Le Souëf's collectors, Robert Hislop. In a letter to North, Hislop remarked 'between ourselves, I am not satisfied with the loose way he [Le Souëf] has of identifying ... eggs and birds (ML Q 598.2901/13A4, Hislop to North 26 Jun 1900).

His suspicions aroused, North promptly ditched Campbell and Le Souëf's work to ensure the integrity of his own. As his encounter with Le Souëf indicates, North was not reluctant to imply the work of others fell below his standards. Although Mathews argues the major reason for the antagonism between them was North's somewhat sensitive attitude to criticism, he notes that North felt the Victorians were responsible for their poor relations and that he had deplored their constant attacks on him in a letter to Mathews in September 1908 (Mathews, 1918, pp. 129 and 131-132).

Whether North's ill-health affected his disposition remains uncertain. While he often suffered severe influenza and occasionally considered taking a leave of absence from the Museum, determination to continue with his work and physical sufferings may have combined to produce a crabby or brittle element to his character.

As North's deliberate omission of the work of other ornithologists became the central criticism of *Nests and Eggs*, some assessment must be made of how North compiled the monograph which represented the culmination of his life's work.

## NESTS AND EGGS

North's monograph, *Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, was originally intended to be the second edition of his earlier *Descriptive Catalogue of the Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, published under Ramsay's supervision in 1890. What began as North's revision of his earlier work resulted in a complete rewrite of the *Descriptive Catalogue* and the protracted birth of an Australian ornithological classic.

While compiling this monograph North collected an extensive amount of information, not only from amateur and professional ornithologists, but during a series of field trips

and visits to museums. The perfectionist in him demanded that he personally measure and inspect all the principal specimens to which he had access, resulting in him filling pages of his note book with detailed descriptions of skins, nests and eggs.

In December 1900 North visited W J Melvin's property, *Reedbeds*, near Adelaide, to observe Tree Martins nesting. At the South Australian Museum, North examined specimens of gerygones and sittellas and collected information on megapodes. Keartland's collection in Melbourne was also examined, allowing North to sketch and describe the eggs of a Scrub Robin (ML MSS 1173, 4 Dec 1900). Accompanied by Dean Swift of Kingsgrove, North made two field trips to Ourimbah in November 1901, where they collected and photographed the nests of the Yellow-throated Scrubwren, Rose Robin, Western Gerygone and Rufous Fantail (*ibid.*, 9-28 Nov 1901).

Other trips recorded in North's field notes included those to the Coonamble District in October 1905 and to Gabo Island and Mount Wellington in December 1906. Shortly afterwards, North visited the Tasmania Museum to consult its egg collection, although he noted that many of its specimens were 'broken and without data' (*ibid.*, 11-19 Oct 1905 and 8, 12 and 22 Dec 1906). In November and December 1907, he made trips to the north coast of New South Wales and Brisbane. North also inspected Malcolm Harris' collection in Hobart and that of A P Thomas during his trip to Cobborah in October 1909 (*ibid.*, 8 Dec 1906 to 5 Jan 1907, 12 Nov 1907 and 21 Oct 1909).

North's photographic plates provide additional evidence of his pursuit of technical perfection. Often exposed in difficult conditions, they demonstrate the high standard of photography he achieved. North reflected on the difficulties involved after attempting to photograph the nest of a Fuscous Honeyeater in the field at Ourimbah, observing 'with what results, I know not, the exposure being almost guess work' (*ibid.*, 24 Nov 1901). The originals of North's plates are now held in the Australian Museum Archives (Buddin, 1988, p. 57). Additional photographs for the monograph were taken by the Australian Museum's photographer, H Barnes.

The first part of *Nests and Eggs*, published in June 1901, received laudatory reviews. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described it as the beginning 'of a work which should rank among the standard works on the subject of ornithology' (Australian Ornithology, 20 Jul 1901, p. 4). The *Emu*'s review was also generous, considering North's attitude towards prominent members of the RAOU, declaring that the work was 'really [more] a life history of our birds than a work on Nests and Eggs' which promised, when completed, 'to be the greatest publication on Australian birds since Gould's ... volumes.'

But the *Emu* review also stressed North's failure to acknowledge or refer to the prior work of other ornithologists. While its anonymous author admitted that North 'frankly

acknowledges notes and specimens received from various correspondents' the review concluded that North 'entirely ignores the work of contemporary authors.' As an example of a previous work ignored by North, the reviewer cited descriptions made by Campbell and Le Souëf of various Riflebird eggs. These omissions, the reviewer suggested, were 'all the more remarkable' considering the type egg of the Victoria Riflebird, co-discovered by Le Souëf, was held by the Australian Museum (Review, 1901, pp. 28-30).

Unfortunately, in selecting this supposed omission as a basis for criticising North, the reviewer was unaware of North's genuine reservations over the authenticity of the Victoria Riflebird's egg collected by Le Souëf. Although North confined these doubts to his private note book, they again reflect the high standards he imposed on other workers.

In February 1894 North received a letter from J Boyd, one of his collectors in Queensland. Boyd claimed that the egg had not been collected by Le Souëf, but by one of the women who lived with Pluto, a local Aboriginal. Boyd enclosed an extract from a letter written by Robert Hislop, who had accompanied Le Souëf when he supposedly collected the egg.

Hislop noted the Riflebird's nest 'was got by one of Pluto's gins when she was clearing a place for a humpy on the Mt George Creek and she brought it over and gave it to the girls, as Le Souëf ... and I were out at the time, so if he [Le Souëf] said he saw that bird on that nest it is not true. He and I saw another Riflebird building another nest which I got after he left when the bird had laid in it. I found a number of other Riflebird nests, but I had a bad foot for a week and could not get out to them, in the meantime the eggs had hatched so I only have one pair' (ML MSS B1123, 30 Dec 1893 and 10 Feb 1894). North, whose previous dealings with Le Souëf led him to suspect the required standards of accuracy had not been met, apparently felt justified in ignoring this record.

The similarity in names between North's monograph and *Campbell's Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, privately published in 1900, resulted in a dispute over who had priority in using the title. In drawing attention to North's use of the title *Nests and Eggs*, the *Emu* noted 'surely it is an inadvertence that *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* has been printed on some of the plates, that title having previously been used by another author, who had announced his appropriation of it long before his book actually appeared' (Review, 1901, p.28).

Campbell had expressed concern over the similarity in names in August 1899. Writing to North about reports in the Sydney newspapers 'probably inspired by yourself' which stated that North's publication would be entitled *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, Campbell asserted it was 'a title already pre-occupied by my work.' Having expressed similar concerns to the Trustees of the Australian Museum, Campbell was advised by them that although it was not intended to use this title for publication, it would 'no doubt

[be] similar' to the secondary title of *North's Descriptive Catalogue: Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*. Campbell asked North to 'keep to your own title,' a request with which North complied (ML MSS 227, Campbell to North 9 Aug 1899).

These criticisms did not distract North. His careful management of the press ensured that similar favourable reviews, copies of which he meticulously pasted in his private notebook, accompanied the publication of Part 2 of the first volume of *Nests and Eggs* in May 1902. The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted 'it can only be said that this second part is equal to the first in abundance of information, in simplicity of description and in clearness and conciseness of style' (Review, 3 May 1902). In a previous article, the *Herald* drew attention to Cayley's contribution, noting that 'Mr Cayley has most delicately coloured the plates showing the various eggs ... and we are assured by Mr North, who has dedicated his life to the study of the subject, that all these paintings, when compared with the originals, will be found exceedingly faithful and accurate' (Review, 1 May 1902).

Other reviews glowed with praise. *The Evening News* described the work as 'an exhaustive chronicle of the life histories and habits of the birds' (Review, 2 May 1902) while the *Melbourne Leader* declared that the 'author has produced a book which eclipses all previous efforts in furnishing a standard reference on Australian ornithology.' Interestingly, the *Leader* also drew attention to North's wide correspondence, noting that 'the author gives, in addition to his own observations, many interesting field notes from correspondents in different parts of the continent ... the assistance thus obtained is generously acknowledged' (Review, 10 May 1902).

In November 1908, with less than half of *Nests and Eggs* having been published, North issued a prospectus for a *Handbook of Australian Birds*. In his author's note, North argued that 'owing to the many new discoveries made since the publication of Gould's *Handbook* ... the want of a similar work on a similar subject is more keenly felt year by year.' North intended to include in this *Handbook* 'descriptions of all species of birds inhabiting Australia and Tasmania, and an appendix including the birds of Norfolk Island. Their distributions will be shown as well as a description of their nests and eggs, where known to the author and general remarks on the ... habits of every species referred to in the work' (North, 1908, p. 4).

The projected work was to consist of two volumes, each of around 500 pages. North asserted that 'the manuscript of the proposed work was commenced as far back as 1896,' shortly after he had received a letter from Professor Alfred Newton of Cambridge University in May 1896. North had sent Newton a copy of the Horn Expedition report and in thanking North for it, Newton stressed the general need for a new handbook on Australia's birds. Gould's *Handbook*, Newton noted, had been produced sixty years ago

and remained 'with little modification and comparatively few additions.' In using it, Newton felt he 'may be repeating that which is obsolete' and encouraged North to produce a revised work, noting it 'need be neither expensive or pretentious, indeed it would be all the better if it were not, for it will get into more hands and make ornithology really popular' (ibid).

As Hindwood notes, several factors appear to have intervened to prevent the *Handbook's* publication. North was probably too busy with *Nests and Eggs* to prepare the text and permission may not have been granted by the Trustees of the Australian Museum for him to publish a work which closely resembled the Museum's official catalogue (Hindwood, 1946, p. 195). Although North claims to have worked on it for twelve years, no manuscript of such a handbook remains among his papers in the Mitchell Library or the Australian Museum Archives.

The prospectus makes no mention of Campbell's monograph, prompting Hindwood to suggest this is the reason North stressed that he had first contemplated producing his Handbook in 1896, five years before Campbell's work was published. It provided further evidence, Hindwood concluded, of North's 'neglect of his contemporaries in Australia, whose work he largely ignored, apparently because of a jaundiced outlook' (ibid., p. 197).

A similar comment on North's supposedly poor attitude towards contemporary workers was published in the *Australian Encyclopedia* which noted that 'rather than acknowledge their results, he would often ignore important and accredited discoveries' (Chisholm, 1963, p. 354). That this opinion is entirely unjustified is reflected in North's methods of collecting information for his monograph.

## THE AMATEURS

North's unwillingness to incorporate into his publications contributions received from amateur ornithologists constitutes the major criticism of his work. According to the *Emu*, North had 'a dread of amateur writers and rather than incorporate anything he deemed doubtful, ignored the authors altogether' (Obituary Notice, 1917, p. 60). The clearest evidence that this opinion is incorrect are the four volumes of *Nests and Eggs*, which liberally incorporate lengthy excerpts of letters from amateurs, in whom North apparently had sufficient faith to accept the validity of their records.

One family North found particularly helpful were the Swifts, who lived at Kingsgrove in the western part of the Wollie Creek Valley in Sydney. One of the most interesting specimens North described, the nest of a Brown Thornbill parasitised by three different species of cuckoo, was collected there by Dean Swift in August 1893. Swift's sisters



delivered the eggs to North's house in Chatswood on 10 September. Three days later North visited Kingsgrove to find that the unfortunate Thornbill had built a new nest, which had already been parasitised.

North displayed the eggs at the Linnean Society meeting on 27 September and included the record in *Nests and Eggs*. Nowhere does he express the slightest doubt about the authenticity of the Swift discovery. Instead, he incorporated it without qualification in his work and exhibited the eggs at the NSW Linnean Society (North, 1901-14, vol.I, p. 270; Notes and Exhibits, 1893).

North's reliance on the notes of amateurs was imposed on him by necessity. The breadth of his project which, in addition to their nests and eggs, included descriptions of the distribution and general habits of Australia's birds compelled him to rely on others for accounts of species he could not observe personally. Some went to great lengths to provide North with material, enclosing photographs and, in one case, specimens of the apple flowers and ferns used by New Guinea's Golden Bowerbirds to construct their bowers, with their correspondence (ML MSS 227, Day to North 20 May 1898).

Working with amateurs required a degree of tact. North had to ensure any advice or encouragement he offered avoided giving offence or creating jealousy. These considerations had to be carefully balanced against North's desire for accuracy. Those amateurs close to North were aware of his high standards and appreciated the difficulties he faced. In explaining why he had not been able to send North any material recently, Cowle noted 'my collectors would bring me a confused batch of eggs and an occasional nest which they would point out as belonging to such and such eggs. Well I knew positively that they were wrong and recognising that any notes for your work should sort of be guaranteed, I could not say much' (ibid., Cowle to North 31 Jul 1901).

It follows that North was naturally reluctant to rely on amateurs who proved unreliable or whose standards of accuracy did not match his own. This was a central factor in North's rejection of Campbell's work, which he was convinced had been undermined by the uncritical acceptance of information from amateurs, especially that of the New South Wales collector Sidney William Jackson, whom North believed unreliable.

Jackson, a commercial traveller and ardent egg collector, lived in the Grafton District, near the Clarence River. He started corresponding with North in November 1891, asking him for assistance in identifying eggs and how he could acquire a coloured copy of North's *Descriptive Catalogue* (ibid., Jackson to North 7 Nov 1891 to 4 Oct 1892). North promptly answered his frequent inquiries and mailed him several books. Jackson acknowledged North's assistance in a letter to Ramsay, asking him to thank North 'for all the information he has forwarded to me by writing ... There is nothing I take such a great interest in as

birds and their eggs, nests and habits' (ibid., Jackson to Ramsay 17 Feb 1892). North and Jackson continued to correspond and exchange eggs for several years (ML MSS B1123, 19 Oct 1892 to 15 Feb 1895). However, it gradually became clear to North that Jackson had made unsolicited offers to sell rare eggs, usually those of the Jacana, to several amateurs who had subscribed to his *Descriptive Catalogue*. North gently reprimanded Jackson, who apologised, noting he was unaware there had been 'a breach of etiquette' (ML MSS 227, Jackson to North 13 Dec 1892 and 26 Feb 1893). Yet North continued to receive letters from colleagues to whom Jackson had offered to sell eggs, which he suspected were not always accurately labelled or original sets, but 'odd eggs made up into sets' (ibid., Jackson to North 2 May 1894; Anon to North 18 Feb 1894; Kemp to North 31 Mar 1897).

In December 1894 Jackson proudly announced he had found an especially rare egg, that of a Koel. Sending it to North for description, Jackson noted 'I hope that it ... will add to the advancement of your new work.' Anxious for professional recognition, he declared 'I have worked very hard among the birds and eggs of this [the Clarence] river and I have at last found an egg which will I hope report my name' (ibid., Jackson to North 15 Dec 1894).

The Koel's egg was of particular interest to North, as an intact egg of that species had not been previously described. Jackson had acquired it after observing a Koel settle on an Olive-backed Oriole's nest. North acknowledged Jackson's work when he described the egg at the Linnean Society (Notes and Exhibits, 1895). Yet North's increasing suspicions concerning Jackson would later result in him repudiating this record.

In his attempts to establish himself as a professional ornithologist Jackson, whose love of 'publicity and attention' was noted by his future employer, Henry White, embarked on a campaign of self promotion in which he employed photos of reconstructions of native birds' nests (White, 1981, p. 83). North was quick to perceive the inaccuracies in the photos, copies of which Jackson had proudly sent him as examples of his work. North tried to offer advice and apologised for his remarks, noting that he had to view such material with 'a cold scientific eye' (ML MSS 227, Jackson to North 23 Apr and 24 May 1897).

But Jackson persisted, damaging the credibility he was anxious to establish as others picked up on his errors. On seeing an article about Jackson illustrated with his photographs in the *Sydney Mail* in July 1899 Kemp, a collector who corresponded regularly with North, remarked 'I cannot stand to see in print what I know to be different simply by looking at the picture' (ibid., Kemp to North 10 Jul 1899; Jackson, 1899).

As Jackson's disillusionment at North's failure to answer his correspondence increased, North came to the view that Jackson was a 'lunatic' and believed he had collected sufficient evidence concerning his egg selling, which Jackson consistently denied, to prove he was a 'liar' (ML MSS 227, North's annotations on Jackson to North 14 Jul 1899). He broke off correspondence with Jackson, provoking a bitter response from the amateur.

Rejecting North's claims that the eggs he supplied were not 'true and authentic specimens' Jackson declared he 'declined to be lowered as an egg taker.' In attacking North for not answering his increasingly pretentious letters, he accused him of 'forgetting my many previous kindnesses shown to you' and casting him 'aside as a person unfit to know or write to.' To make North regret his failure to extend him the courtesies due to a fellow ornithologist, Jackson noted he would now place all his specimens 'at the disposal of A J Campbell Esq of Melbourne and any rare or new species I always sent and now send to him for description I also send him all my nest photos and many of which no-one else possesses [as] they are purely original' (ibid., Jackson to North 14 July 1899).

This was to have a significant impact on North's approach to Campbell's work. North, the uncompromising perfectionist, suspected Campbell was less than critical where the claims of amateurs were concerned and now had reason to believe he had incorporated some of Jackson's suspect notes and specimens in his work.

North was not alone in his doubts. After the publication of Campbell's monograph in 1901 Elvery, a collector with whom North corresponded, noted that while the pictures it contained were generally good, some of the information in it apparently had been obtained from unreliable sources (ibid., Foster to North 10 April 1902). Dr A M Morgan, another of North's collectors agreed, declaring that a 'perusal of Campbell's book shows that the printed matter is absolutely unreliable from cover to cover...The absolute errors and unsupported statements make about half the book' (ibid., Morgan to North 10 May 1901). Others noted the 'uncalled for remarks' concerning North made by Campbell, with Cowle noting he 'could only sympathise and put it down to jealousy' (ibid., Cowle to North 31 Jul 1901).

Jackson continued to send North unsolicited copies of his self described 'scientific papers,' usually the illustrated articles he had managed to get published in newspapers or magazines, such as *Pearson's London Magazine*. In 1901 Jackson, having been rejected for a position at the Australian Museum, wrote to North of his disappointment. Noting that he was 'proud to think my scientific works have been noticed by the London and Glasgow papers' Jackson boasted 'I could get a petition signed tomorrow by over 12,000 persons in this colony alone and another 5000 in Brisbane who wish to see me in a position in a museum which I am quite capable of filling and as they all say and know' (ibid., Jackson to North 3 Oct 1901).

North obviously thought otherwise and his description of the Koel egg Jackson had found was carefully omitted from his accounts of the Olive-backed Oriole and Koel in *Nests and Eggs* (vol. I, pp. 75-79; vol. III, pp. 28-31). A description of the egg was included in Jackson's own catalogue, *Egg Collecting and Bird Life of Australia* (Jackson, 1907, p.100). Jackson offered copies of this work for sale to collectors, who were promptly advised of its inaccuracies by North (ML MSS 227, Jackson to North 19 Sept 1901 and 27 Oct 1902; Anon to North, 20 Oct 1908).

In the final analysis, North and his circle were a probably a little hard on Jackson. There is no doubt that he was a capable collector and some of them admitted as much, although it appears that in his earlier years Jackson was prone to jumping to conclusions in his identification, especially where the egg was possibly from a rare species (White, 1981, p. 188). Perhaps North was not as generous in extending his patronage as was Ramsay when he raised North from being a mere 'egg taker' to his position at the Museum.

North continued to snub Jackson and his family when they moved to Chatswood. Living in the same suburb, North obviously did not relish the possibility of being 'halloed' by Jackson every morning at the local railway station. Jackson survived North's contempt and later became a professional collector. He sold his personal collection to Henry White, a wealthy Hunter River pastoralist, amateur ornithologist and supporter of the RAOU, who had established Australia's largest private collection of birds, skins and eggs, which Jackson was appointed to curate (Pescott, 1954, p. 114-115). White also financed Jackson's expeditions to Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia to collect specimens for this museum. Jackson finally achieved the recognition he craved, with his articles on these trips being published in the *Emu* (O'Reilly, 1963, pp. 135-136; White, 1981, pp. 76, 83 and 184).

Unfortunately, North's refusal to assist White in identifying the specimens in his growing collection was to have serious consequences. As Spencer's biographers note, it resulted in the Australian Museum's failure to acquire White's ornithological collection, which included some 8500 skins (Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985, pp. 252-253). White's biographer argues that North, although 'a brilliant ornithologist' was 'an intensely jealous man' who refused to assist White as he was working on his own book.

Although the date of the correspondence between White and the Trustees of the Australian Museum indicates that White's complaints concerning North were made in 1911 and 1912, when North published the third volume of *Nests and Eggs*, White's biographer offers no evidence that this motivation lay behind North's refusal to assist him (White, 1981, p. 85).

White had originally intended to donate his collection to the RAOU, but realising that it did not have the requisite facilities, he instead sought to present it to an Australian museum. By May 1911, he had decided the Australian Museum was not getting it 'while the present management is in office' as 'some of the leading officials are the most narrow minded, jealous individuals it is possible to find ... they've absolutely refused to give me any further help in identifying species' (ibid., p. 76).

In May 1912, White appealed to the Secretary of the Australian Museum, asking 'whether I am still under the boycott as imposed by your Curator...the farce has been continued quite long enough and if I am still refused information by a public institution, such as yours is, I shall appeal to the Government.' White's appeals were ignored. In 1916, at the suggestion of Baldwin Spencer, White donated his collection to the then National Museum in Melbourne, noting that as a result of North's conduct, the Australian Museum had lost 'all chance of securing about £10,000 worth of stuff from me' (ibid., p. 85).

North's relations with other amateurs were more amicable. Charles Gibson, the Assistant Government Geologist in Western Australia, provided North with information on the nests and eggs of the White-quilled Rock Pigeon, which he had observed while working in the Kimberley region. In September 1904, he sent specimens of their eggs to North, with a request for information about his book, as 'they don't seem to know much about it over here.' North acknowledged Gibson's assistance by generously presenting him with one of 'my own author's copies' of *Nests and Eggs* in July 1907 (ML MSS 227, Gibson to North 23 Feb 1904, 27 Mar 1904 and 15 Sept 1904).

As his correspondence with Cowle and Gibson indicates, North's network of correspondents extended across Australia and its outlying islands. P Herbert Metcalfe, Resident Medical Officer of Norfolk Island, occasionally sent him eggs, skins and notes as did Dr Macgillivray of north-west Queensland. North was particularly interested in a Riflebird skin Macgillivray had collected and at North's request he donated it to the Australian Museum (ibid., Macgillivray to North 4 Sept 1898 to 12 May 1902; Metcalf to North 16 Aug 1904). Photographs and notes of seabirds, including petrels and muttonbirds, were received from B L Jardine of Thursday Island and W Whiting and H A Payten, both of Lord Howe Island (ibid., Jardine to North 21 Oct 1906 and 12 Jan 1907; ML A W64; Whiting to North 21 Mar and 21 Apr 1916; Payten to North 24 Aug and 22 Sept 1915).

That North relied heavily on correspondence with these amateurs is placed beyond doubt by his surviving letterbooks, held in the Australian Museum Archives. North's letters show that as he prepared to draft the section of *Nests and Eggs* dealing with a particular order of birds, he would send out requests to his correspondents for their records and notes, many of which he reproduced verbatim. North's requests, as the following letter to Macgillivray indicates, usually went straight to the point: 'Dear Dr Macgillivray, I should

be extremely obliged if you would kindly let me have at your earliest convenience ... your full notes on the Striges and Accipitus, as I am engaged on those Orders' (AMA, Curator's Private Letter Book, vol.8, p. 26, North to Macgillivray 6 Jun 1909).

Only one letter received by North from an amateur and used in *Nests and Eggs* appears to have survived. Written by John Waterhouse, Headmaster of Newington College, it describes a Blue Wrens' nest he observed between October and November 1875. The nest, like that found by Dean Swift at Kingsgrove, had been parasitised by three different species of cuckoo (AMA, AN 95/34; North, 1901-14, vol. III, pp. 14 and 24).

## THE PROFESSIONALS

In addition to the notes and specimens from amateur ornithologists, North also received material from professional collectors and curators throughout Australia. Among those who assisted North in this capacity was George Masters, curator of the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney. As noted above, North's associations with Masters and the Macleay circle were probably central to his appointment to the Australian Museum in 1891.

Masters had acquired his position at the Museum the same way as North, through the patronage of the wealthy and influential. He had been employed by William Sharp Macleay in 1862 as a part time collector. From 1864 to 1874, he served as Assistant Curator of the Australian Museum and embarked on several extensive collecting expeditions, the notes of which he made available to North (Moyal, 1986, pp. 91 and 94). Resigning from the Museum in January 1874, Masters was appointed by Macleay as curator of his personal natural history collection at Elizabeth Bay House. Macleay, having donated this collection to the University of Sydney in 1888, allocated £6000 to provide for the salary of a Curator on the condition that Masters be appointed to this position, which he held until his death in 1912 (Sydney University Archives, File 15823, William Macleay to the Registrar, University of Sydney 28 Sept 1888; Stanbury and Holland, 1988, pp. 75-76).

North visited the Macleay Museum on at least seven occasions between 1883 and 1887 and donated ornithological specimens from Australia and Tasmania to its collections in 1890. The Museum holds several of North's egg boxes, labelled in his handwriting (Macleay Museum, Visitor's Book; Tilbrook, 1992, p. 88). In *Nests and Eggs* North often incorporated extracts from Master's expedition notes, including those made during the *Chevert* Expedition to Cape York between 1867 and 1868, led by Macleay.

North also received specimens on loan from other Museums. C W De Vis, Curator of the Queensland Museum and A Zeitz, Assistant Director of the South Australian Museum both responded to North's requests for skins and eggs from their collections. In addition to his Museum's holdings, which included birds from Kangaroo Island, Zeitz also had

access to the private collection of E. Ashby of Adelaide, specimens from which were lent to North. (ML MSS 227 De Vis to North 12 Oct 1895 to 5 Oct 1901; Zietz to North 3 Jan 1900 to 2 May 1906)

As noted above professional collectors, such as Keartland, regularly provided North with specimens and field notes. Occasionally, these notes provide an element of humour. North recounted that while Masters was working at his table near a window in the Macleay Museum, a Rufous Fantail found its way inside and 'after flying several times backwards and forwards ... finally selected as a resting place the top of his head, and there it remained for some time until he attempted to put his hand near it' (North, 1901-14, vol. I, p.126).

Keartland recalled visiting a farm at Clayton to investigate reports of a strange bird described 'as being all crimson.' Arriving at the farm he saw the bird approaching 'from the direction of a neighbouring orchard, and struck by its peculiar colour, I determined to secure it.' After an hour's chasing Keartland secured an Olive-backed Oriole which had 'the whole of its plumage stained with mulberry juice' (North, 1901-14, vol. I, p. 76).

North's reliance on his correspondents for material greatly undermines the argument that he ignored amateur ornithologists and their records. It appears the only records North was inclined to reject were those of Campbell, Jackson and Le Souëf. North had evidence that they were careless in their identification of specimens or uncritical in accepting the records of others. As even his critics admitted, North was generous in his acknowledgment of his correspondents, many of whom received free copies of his monographs in appreciation for their assistance. In short, there is no firm evidence of the narrow-mindedness or jealousy they assert North directed towards his contemporary workers.

## LATER LIFE

Over the last few years of his life, North's declining health caused him to cancel field trips and pass on his work to others he believed were less qualified than himself. In some respects, his life had come full circle, as he incorporated Ramsay's ornithological collection into that of the Australian Museum in 1912 (Hindwood, 1970, p.231-232). It was his appointment as curator of this collection which raised North from apprentice jeweller and amateur egg collector to professional ornithologist.

One project North was especially reluctant to give up involved describing the birds collected from the Antarctic by the Mawson Expedition. In June 1914 Etheridge, a director of the Australian Museum, wrote to North, reassuring him that if he 'did not feel up to the work' involved a junior ornithologist, Hamilton, was capable of taking it on. North was concerned that if the work passed out of his hands 'it would gravitate to those of certain other parties.' Etheridge assured him it would not, declaring he had 'ascertained this definitely. It will be done either by yourself or Hamilton' (ML MSS 227, Etheridge to North 2 Jun 1914).

North appears to have selected the latter option with W A Haswell, Challis Professor of Biology at the University of Sydney, noting in a letter to North that Etheridge had advised him 'you do not feel equal to doing the Birds of the Mawson Expedition.' Haswell advised North that the work would now go to Hamilton, although he regretted that 'he has not your special qualifications' (ibid., Haswell to North 10 Jun 1914).

North had no intentions of letting ill-health get in the way of his field work. In September 1916, he embarked on his last trip, arranged by A W Mullen, a surveyor and inspector for the Western Land Board. It included a general tour of the Brewarrina District and of the Bogan and Marra Rivers in northern NSW (ibid., Mullen to North 30 Apr, 7 May and 22 May 1916). North had postponed the trip due to poor health in May, but Mullen's promise that since 'the drought has broken here at last ... you should be able to see and secure plenty of small birds in August and September' appears to have encouraged North to press on (ibid., Mullen to North 11 Jun and 18 Jul 1916). North's article on this trip was published five months before his death.

On 6 May 1917 North died suddenly from heart failure at his home, Hillcrest, in Darling Street, Chatswood and was buried the next day. His health had been indifferent since at least May 1914, but he had continued working at the Museum up until around December 1916 (Death Notices, 7 May 1917; Obituary, 1917). His passing attracted short notices in the journals of the organisations to which he had belonged. The Linnean Society of New South Wales passed a motion of condolence and sent a letter of sympathy to Clara (Notice, 1917). Although a founding member of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club and a regular contributor to its proceedings, the Club did not publish an obituary on North, but simply noted 'the recent announcement' of his death under general business during its committee meeting in May 1917 (General Business, 1917).

North was honoured with membership of several major ornithological institutions. In addition to his Fellowship of the New South Wales Linnean Society, he was elected as a Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists Union in 1902 and as a Colonial Member of the British Ornithologists Union in 1903. Fellowship of the latter Union was an honour which could 'only be held by ten persons at one time in the British Overseas Dominions.' He was also a Corresponding Member of the Zoological Society of London (Obituary Notice, 1917, p. 60; Mathews, 1918, p. 132; Whittell, 1954, p. 552).

In November 1905 North visited the vault of John Lewin at La Perouse and copied out its laudatory inscription in his note book (ML MSS 1173, 10 Nov 1905). If North expected a memorial similar to that of the ornithologist whose biography he had written, he was to be disappointed. Today, he lies beneath a rather drab headstone at Gore Hill. Yet North left something more enduring than Lewin's marble vault or his rare and scattered works. The four volumes of *Nests and Eggs* constitute a permanent reminder of his dedication to



ornithology and pursuit of perfection. As North's current successor, Walter Boles, observed 'most of North's information is still valid; it has been supplemented, but rarely replaced' (North, 1984). If his reputation has suffered, it is because others did not share his standards or misunderstood his motives. After eighty years of neglect, it is time he was restored to the position he earned among the pioneers of Australian ornithology.

AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM, SYDNEY.

SPECIAL CATALOGUE, No. I.

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# NESTS AND EGGS OF BIRDS

FOUND BREEDING

IN

AUSTRALIA AND TASMANIA,

BY

ALFRED J. NORTH, C.M.Z.S.,

*Colonial Member of the British Ornithologists' Union, Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union.*

ORNITHOLOGIST, AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM.

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(SECOND EDITION OF CATALOGUE No. XII, ENTIRELY RE-WRITTEN,  
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VOLUME I.

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Permission to quote from North's manuscripts was generously provided free of charge by the Mitchell Library and Australian Museum Archives.

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### About the Author:

**Justin Cahill** is in his final year of a law degree at Sydney University. He is currently writing a history of the protection of native birds in New South Wales

## A NOTE ON CHANNEL-BILLED CUCKOOS

S. G. LANE

66 Fairview Road, Moonee via Coffs Harbour 2450

Channel-billed Cuckoos *Scythrops novaehollandiae* visit our area north of Coffs Harbour each spring, usually arriving in September. In eight years the latest arrival noted has been 2 October, the earliest 10 September.

On one occasion my attention was attracted by a single rather loud squawking note repeated a few times, then a pause before more repeats. The call appeared to be coming from some distance away, and when eventually I located the perpetrator it turned out to be a very recently fledged young Channel-bill. It was begging for food from its foster parents, a pair of Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina*. The young bird was able to fly with some difficulty but was very unsure of its landing technique, overbalancing on its perch whenever it tried to change position.

Some weeks later, in the same area, three Channel-billed Cuckoos were regularly seen flying and usually calling too, over our property or nearby. With the aid of binoculars, one bird could be identified as being in immature plumage, with buff ends to the feathers on the wing coverts and back. Apparently, the adults take over some of the immature birds from their adopted parents some time after fledging. During two or three seasons since the one referred to I have seen three of these Cuckoos flying together and calling, with one of the three being a juvenile bird.

On 20 January 1998, at about 1030 hours, my wife and I heard a call which sounded like a young Channel-bill. We went quickly outside and found the bird in a large ironbark *Eucalyptus sideroxylon* (c. 45 m high) in the front garden. I had seen some movement in another tree and from it flew a second bird, an adult, which alighted a few metres from the juvenile. Shortly afterwards another adult flew into the same ironbark. A few minutes later the young bird flew off, followed by both the adults, and was lost to sight.

I have no record of my earliest sighting of two adults with a young bird in attendance but I am certain it was in February, the earliest I have recorded this 'habit'.

Channel-billed Cuckoos usually depart from this district during February or March, although in 1989 none was seen or heard after the end of January. In four seasons they departed in February, and in the other four by the end of March.

These are fascinating birds with their raucous calls, sometimes uttered at night, eliciting not very complimentary comments from some of our neighbours!

## Advice to contributors

Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and wide margins at top and sides, and submitted initially as an original and two duplicates. Tables and figures must be in the form of reproducible hard copy, having due regard to the journal page size and format. If extensive re-typing or drafting is required publication may be delayed or prevented. Photographs should be submitted as glossy black and white prints of size and contrast suitable for reproduction.

Upon acceptance, it is most helpful if the final manuscripts of substantial articles can be submitted in word processor format. The editor will advise details of acceptable formats.

Contributions are considered on the understanding that they are not being offered for publication elsewhere.

Authors are advised to consult a current issue of *Australian Birds* as a guide to style and punctuation, which conform in general to the Commonwealth *Style Manual*. Spelling follows the Macquarie Dictionary. In particular:

**dates** are written as '1 January 1990', but may be abbreviated in tables and figures; the **24 hour clock** is used with Eastern Standard Time, e.g.

0630 for 6.30 am and 1830 for 6.30 pm. Daylight Saving time should be corrected to EST;

in the text, single-digit numbers are spelt out; 10 000 and larger numbers are printed with a space (not a comma) separating the thousands;

**English names** of bird species (but not group names) are written with an initial capital for each separate word.

**Scientific names** of bird species and their classification should follow Christidis & Boles 1994, *The Taxonomy and Species of Birds of Australia and its Territories*, RAOU Monograph 2.

**References to books** appear in the form :

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Morris, A.K., Tyler, V., Tyler, M., Mannes, H. & Dalby, J. 1990, 'A waterbird survey of the Parramatter River wetlands, Sydney', *Aust Birds*, **23**:3, pp. 44-64.

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