

A Sketch of the Life of Samuel White— Ornithologist, Soldier, Sailor, and Explorer.

[By His Son, S. A. WHITE.]

VI. THE ORNITHOLOGIST.

Samuel White with his wife, returned to South Australia in the ship "Murray," landing on July 29th, 1876, after a most eventful and trying voyage. Fearfully rough weather accompanied the ship all the way. Taking the route around Cape Horn, the ship was three weeks in the ice, lost a mast, and was knocked about generally. From letters and rough notes I find that my father, in 1871, was on his way to Queensland, bent on an ornithological expedition. The records of this trip are meagre, simply a few scant notes stating that a large collection of birds and natural history specimens was taken.

In April, 1872, Samuel White again sailed for England, this time in one of the early steamships. This was a business trip in connection with estate matters, which required his presence in London. In some rough notes on the voyage, he speaks of the boat calling at Albany. "We had a great scramble to get on shore," he said, "there were few boats and the sea was running high, and the passengers and luggage were soaked by the seas. The chief hotel, which was a very poor place, was soon reached. The weather being stormy, I did not go out until after dinner. The harbour is a beautiful little basin of an inlet from the eastward. The town is scattered, and the houses small. It is one of the sleepiest places I have ever been in. In the afternoon I set out from the back of the town proceeding for about two miles, and found the country as far as I could see, covered with scrub—it put me much in mind of the black swamps in South Australia—but the eucalypti were stringy-bark and calophila. Upon my return I visited the naturalist of the town, a Mr. Maxwell, an old man of the last century. He knew how to ask for money for the few curios he had, wanted £1 per dozen for Buprestis beetles, many species being those I already have. Returning to the hotel ended my first ramble in Western Australia.

The land appears very poor, undulating white sand, covered with scrub, great boulders of granite cropping up in every direction. The scrub is very beautiful in itself. There is a greater variety of banksia here than I have ever seen before.

Some of them have large blossoms, a foot long, others were small, but exquisitely beautiful. I did not see any birds.

Next day, as the 'Bangalori' had not arrived, I made an excursion in the opposite direction to the route taken the previous day. Had not gone far when a magnificent caestemon was discovered in full bloom. It really looked beautiful, with its profusion of flame-coloured or orange-scarlet-blossoms. The country seemed of the same poor description. A few casuarina were seen about 20 feet high. I am told that this tree grows in good soil very tall, with straight boles four or five feet in diameter. No birds were seen. Getting wet through returned to the settlement. I find there is a brisk trade doing here in curiosities, such as cockatoos, rugs, skins, 'black-fellows' implements, quondong stones, anything for money without much trouble." Notes further on speak of sea-birds occasionally seen, and of many tropical birds of Ceylon, where the ship called, then he speaks of numerous kites at Aden, which were likened to our *Milvus affinis*, with a note stating that the call of both birds is similar. Passengers left the steamer at Suez in those days, and took train to Alexandria, to again board a steamer for Europe. In his notes Samuel White regrets taking the rail journey by night, for he only saw about thirty miles of the country after daylight, and speaks of a light grey bird with white tails; also of the crops of the surrounding country being taken off on camels, and square plots being flooded in for rice cultivation. He did not remain long in England, but while there, independent of his business, he spent some time with the bird men of the old country, and at the British Museum. After Samuel White returned a few years elapsed before he took another big trip, but we know that during that time, he was putting in much good ornithological work. He had always a yacht in commission, and if not making trips inland with a covered van, constructed for the purpose, he was cruising amongst the islands off the Australian coastline. In these trips his wife and family accompanied him. During all this time he was building up a wonderful collection of bird skins, and a knowledge of Australian birds not yet equalled by any field worker in the world. An ardent ornithologist in those days worked alone, for he was looked upon by the average man as being deficient in intellect. There was no assistance or encouragement from scientific bodies, but for all that the subject of this sketch was so engrossed with the wonderful science of ornithology that it was his one great aim in life, an ever absorbing hobby.

In 1878 North Queensland seems to have again called Samuel White, and he set out well equipped for a lengthy sojourn in the Cape York peninsula and the surrounding islands. In a letter to his wife headed, "Somerset, September 25, 1878," he says, "I have just returned from a cruise amongst the islands in Torres Straits. I am quite well, no fever yet, though many around me have it. I have my headquarters with Mr. Jardine still, he is really one of the nicest fellows I ever met, his kindness and hospitality is unceasing. I have been able to make a cruise of about 400 miles amongst the islands lately, and hope next week to be able to get away amongst another lot of islands. . . . I have been here some time, but will not leave until after December. It is a long way to this place (about 3,000 miles), and I came too early, as the season does not begin till late in October, I want to do all I can while here." Later he goes on to say, "I have been all this day putting away and labelling my specimens procured during the last trip among the islands. I have only been away fifteen days, and brought back a fine lot of skins, mostly sea-birds. Then I have sea and land shells, crabs, botanical specimens, and a thousand and one natural history specimens. I have not the space here to describe the lovely islands we called at, where cocoanuts and bananas grow wild, and the natives are yellow-skinned and straight-haired (New Guinea tribes). The weather has been very disagreeable, always blowing a gale, heavy squalls. The excessive skinning is making my fingernails part from the flesh into which the arsenic penetrates, causing a festering sore, and I suffer great pain, but there, I should bear it cheerfully when I am getting so many rare bird skins." . . . Of a later date still, a letter contained the following, "The weather now is very hot in the scrub, the wind has been blowing a gale ever since I have been here, never ceasing, always from the south-east. This is the south-east season, and when the north-east trades set in, then comes the birds and mosquitoes. The sand-flies here are very bad, wherever they bite me the place rises into a festering pimple. Insects never made a mark on me before. In a fortnight I will make another trip to the islands in Torres Straits. First to Moa and Bardo, where there are some shelling stations. Hope to be gone about a month, then return to Somerset. The right season is setting in now, and I hope to procure a great many bird skins, unless I am attacked by fever. Somerset is a pretty place, Mr. Jardine is sole proprietor, all other people here, principally blacks, are his servants. The scrub is very

thick hereabouts, and one has to be very careful not to get lost, the first few times of entering it. I had a letter from poor Broadbent who is at Port Moresby, he has had fever very badly, but is recovering. It is trying work walking about in the hot scrub all day, attacked by green ants and hornets. The grass grows higher than a fellow's head here."

