

Ornithological Nomenclature.

To the Editors, *S. A. Ornithologist.*

Sirs—As Mr. Gregory M. Mathews somewhat conspicuously does me the honour of referring to me, by direct inference in his article under the above heading, in your issue for January (p. 17), without desiring to enter into a lengthy controversy on the subject, I shall be glad, with your permission, to make a few brief remarks.

Mr. Mathews is to be commended for his well-written and lucid dissertation and his honest endeavour to enlighten us, and now is the time most opportune to ventilate the subject. To

begin, he says "The specialist must always surpass in his local study, the best endeavour of the general student." Precisely. Mr. Mathews would settle Ornithological Nomenclature (Special) by the rules of the Zoological Code (General). Ornithology is the most popular of the Natural Sciences. Think of the tens of thousands of young members of the Audubon Societies of America and the Gould Leagues of Australia. These are very important and should be carefully catered for. Does not *The Ibis* (1919, p. 771) hint that there is an "Ornithological Code," apart from the International one?

"The Law of Priority," Mr. Mathews proceeds to say, "is based on custom and on the custom of 160 years," to which he might truly add—*And we have not yet reached finality.* That there has been no practical finality to the law of priority, is to attack the foundation of the International code. And, if that code had worked well universally, why has it been found necessary to appoint the *Systema Avium* Committee to re-classify the birds of the world? The only real road to finality is to have *An Authoritative Name** (not necessarily bed-rock priority) declared by some competent commission, such as that proposed to deal with the *Systema Avium*, when many well-known and appropriate names will receive consideration.

To further quote Mr. Mathews—"A British Ornithologist endeavoured to select the best established name without recognising priority and dismally failed." If the late Henry Seebohm is referred to, that name has a halo of undying fame. He was by no means a "faddist," nor showed "ignorance of history" of ornithology, nor was "non-scientific." Mr. Mathews in his own "Birds of Australia," vol. VII., p. 465, states:—Seebohm was a "famous worker." Why does Mr. Mathews persist in putting the "cart before the horse"—Nomenclature always first: Ornithology, second? Seebohm "dismally failed," as a nomenclator, yet, was a "famous worker," as an ornithologist.

Mr. Mathews claims to have rescued from oblivion (according to the law of priority) John Cotton's † long-lost name for a variety of the Spiny-cheeked Honey-eater—*Acanthochaera rodorhyncha*. What iota of value would science lose if the name

*First suggested by Sir E. Ray Lankester, F.R.S., twenty-four years ago.—See *P. Z. S.*, 1896.

†John Cotton was the grandfather of the esteemed Hon. Secretary of the R.A.O.U. The late Mr. Cotton left valuable manuscripts, well-illustrated, on Australian birds, which documents, most unfortunately, unaccountably disappeared many years ago.

were never resuscitated? None whatever. Why then use obsolete names that are valueless? Seeing Mr. Mathews gives an "ornithological opening" here, I may say that his supposed sub-species for the Victorian bird as differing from that of New South Wales is extremely doubtful. From much material, no tangible difference ("darker colouration above and below, especially noticeable on the breast"—is too poor) can be discerned between the birds of New South Wales (type loc.), Victoria, and adjacent parts of South Australia. Therefore, the Mathewian name *cygnus* with Cotton's *odorhyncha* will both fall into the drag-net of Synonymy and Gould's time-honoured name *rufigularis* prevail for the South-east Australian bird, at least.

Mr. Mathews is deservedly solicitous for the rights of the original author, "irrespective of his greatness or the size of his work." "But many that are first shall be last," is an eternal truism. Moreover, if one consults the "History" of nomenclature he will find that the early American Committee has left on record "the rules to that end (uniformity of practice) should be formed with reference to principles and without regard to personality, and that therefore the matter of justice or injustice is, in this connection, without pertinence."

In a strictly technical sense there is nothing inconsistent with the history of the original law of priority and the use say, of Gouldian names (those, of course, that are ornithologically correct), for Australian forms, because the original definition of the law of priority did not say, or presume to say, when Australian Ornithology should begin—with Gould, or any other author. It merely, for the sake of convenience (and without regard for justice or injustice to anyone) stated, the law of priority was "not to extend to antecedent authors" to the Linnæus "Tenth Edition," which obviously does not affect Australian ornithology, the beginnings of which were a century later than Linnæus. The supposititious case *re* the same bird having been described in *The Victorian Naturalist*, then in the *The Ibis*, the latter description to prevail, because of the accompanying coloured plate, as being analagous to Gouldian names for Australian forms, cited by Mr. Mathews is evidently strained and altogether misleading. Neither is it excusable to say Gould's names should not be standardised, because his great folio work is "expensive and scarce." Instead of Gouldian, some names Mr. Mathews would have us use are absolutely unique, being wholly obsolete and references unobtainable.

Finally, in the pure technical matter of *Genus splitting* Mr. Mathews was a "lumper" in his "Reference List," in *Novitates Zoologicae* (1912), and turned a somersault and became a "splitter" in his "1913 List." Now, he states in the concluding lines of his article, "*when the split genera are re-assembled successfully*, I do not think there will be much to concern us, in ornithological nomenclature." Let us hope so, and like at the conclusion of some pleasant novel, the heroes of the plot or the contending parties shake hands and everyone is happy, for ever afterwards. I am, &c.,

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"Bul-ga-roo," Box Hill, Victoria, 21/1/20.

