

# Historical Series No. 81 Dr Alexander Matheson (Mat) Morgan (1867-1934) Part 1 by Penny Paton

## Family

Mat Morgan, as he was known to his friends, was the 7th of nine children born to William Morgan and his wife Harriett (née Matthews) on 11 February 1867 at the family home at Netherby. In the mid-1860s William purchased for £3000 the Netherby Estate, an 80 acre property east of Fullarton Road, which hosted many entertainments and dinner parties, attended by the cream of colonial society (www 1). William was a self-made man, arriving from England in 1849 as a nineteen-year old, and becoming a successful merchant and politician, attaining the Premiership of South Australia for three years in 1878. The town of Morgan on the River Murray was named after him. His resignation as Premier was due to failing mining and other business interests in New Caledonia, the extent of which he managed to keep from his family and friends (Morgan 2011). After being appointed KCMG in 1883, he departed for England where his health deteriorated and he died late in that year aged only about 55. He left his family in straitened circumstances and the Netherby Estate was sold in 1884:

“...the whole of the surplus elegant modern household furniture and effects, a full-size billiard table and furnishings; Handsome modern carriage in splendid order; hooded wagonette by Duncan and Fraser; Carriage Horses and harnesses, cows, poultry, implements, choice and rare plants.” (www 2).

An insight into the childhood of Mat Morgan comes from a family history, indicating that Mat and his elder brother, (Edward) Ranembe, were friendly with James Waite, their neighbour to the north. In 1877 when the Waites moved in, 10-year old James was an excellent playmate for exploring and roaming the substantial estates owned by their parents (Waite 2011). For their early schooling, Ran and Mat attended Prince Alfred College, driving themselves in a wagonette with Toby between the shafts, and later moved to Geelong Grammar School, where the Morgan brothers thrived (Waite 2011).

Mat was the only one of his siblings to attend university and he attained an M.B. and a B.Sc. Degree from the University of Adelaide (White 1934). Between 1893 and 1897 he practised medicine at Laura in the



**Figure 1.** Portrait of Mat Morgan, probably taken between 1890 and 1900 when Bond & Co was operating at 91 Rundle Street in Adelaide (<https://connect.adelaide.edu.au/nodes/view/6343>)

southern Flinders Ranges (Figure 1), returning to Adelaide to take up honorary appointments at the Adelaide Children’s Hospital (ACH) (Horton *et al.* 2018). After a trip to England in 1908, where Morgan completed post-graduate training in eye diseases, he specialised in ophthalmology, including holding the position of honorary ophthalmic visiting medical officer at the ACH from 1910 and the Charles Gosse lectureship in ophthalmology at the University of Adelaide from 1910 to 1925 (*ibid.*).

Marriage came late to Mat Morgan when, at the age of 38, he married Myrtle Ellen Green at Parkside on 11 October 1905. The couple had three children, William, Elizabeth and Thomas. William Matheson Morgan (1906-1972), a notable mining engineer, learnt both German and Japanese in part as an aid to

his business interests and restored antique furniture, an occupation he shared with his father.

Early meetings of the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA), formed in 1899, were usually held in Morgan's house, which probably doubled as his rooms, at 89 Angas Street in the city, now the site of the Nordic Honda Showrooms (Truran 2000). By 1905 meetings had moved to Morgan's home at 27 Angas Street (Truran 2000), at a later date occupied by the Returned and Services League. After 1908, when Morgan was overseas for an extended time, meetings were held at members' business premises in the city until 1911, when the rooms of the Royal Society of South Australia at the Institute Building hosted the monthly meetings (Truran 2000). Horton *et al.* (2018) surmise that Morgan moved into "St Helen" at 215 Brougham Place in North Adelaide in about 1915, but I believe that it was earlier than this, based on a note in the *South Australian Ornithologist* (SAO) from July 1914. This note (Morgan 1914) described the birds seen over the past two and a half years in his garden in Stanley Street, which is near the corner of Brougham Place. It seems that the boundary between Brougham Place and Stanley Street moved in about 1914. The move to North Adelaide was likely to have been in 1911 or 1912 and it was here that he died on 19 October 1934 (Figure 2).

As with Dr Angove (Historical Series No. 47, Paton 2014), I find it interesting that these busy professionals with young families, seemed to have so much free time for ornithology. Angove, a doctor, wine grape grower and vigneron and father of a large family had sufficient leisure to take walks several times a week

in his local area and also often ventured further afield on longer trips by sailing boat and motor vehicle. Similarly Morgan appeared to have much leisure; for example one of his earliest articles in the SAO was based on the month of August 1912 he spent with his wife observing the birds of Kallioota Station (Morgan 1914a). And in 1918, he and his wife spent a month touring and bird watching in the South East (Morgan 1919).

The pages of the SAO are largely silent about Morgan for the early half of 1921 and this is explained by a reference at a monthly SAOA meeting on 26 August 1921, in which the Chairman announced that Dr Morgan had suffered a long illness, but was hoping to resume his professional duties in a short while (SAOA 1921a). This is further explained at a later meeting on 28 October 1921 (SAOA 1922), where Morgan gave an address on his trip to North-West Australia in June 1921, which had been the cause of his illness. For four weeks Dr Morgan and his wife travelled on the S.S. Minderoo from Fremantle to Derby, and spent two weeks on Meda Station and Kimberley Downs Station, before returning on S.S. Gorgon to Fremantle, where he developed malaria (Morgan 1921, 1922a).

### Ornithology

Morgan was well-regarded by his peers and made a deep impression on those he met. S.A. White first met him in 1898 after Morgan's return to Adelaide from Laura, and Morgan met Dr Chenery in 1902 and they became good friends despite being physically separated for most of their lives. Chenery's obituary in the SAO gives us one of the few portraits of Morgan's character, indicating that he "was intolerant of people



**Figure 2.** April 2022 view of "St Helen", the house on Brougham Place, North Adelaide where Morgan and his family lived from about 1911 or 1912 till at least his death in 1934 (Photo: P. Paton)

who talked or wrote inaccurately on any subject” and had a propensity for “ridiculing such people” (Chenery 1935). This trait is a reflection of his scientific attitude, which was evident in his ornithological work and writings, on such diverse topics as “avian anatomy, physiology, osteology, oology, diet (stomach contents), and taxonomy. His arguments on subjects of taxonomy and conservation were consistently well reasoned, supported by verifiable information and often complemented by his own research.” (Horton *et al.* 2018).

While based at Laura in the Mid North from 1893 to 1897, Morgan studied the birdlife in what was a little-known part of South Australia ornithologically-speaking, made his first collection of bird skins and published the results (Morgan 1897). He did this in concert with Malcolm Murray, the station manager at nearby Wirrabara Station, who will be the focus of a Historical Series at a later date. On his return to Adelaide, Morgan began to inspect the ornithological collections of the South Australian Museum (SAMA), then under the auspices of the Assistant Director Amandus (A.H.C.) Zietz, where he met other like-minded souls and began a public lecture series on birds, using the Museum’s collections as reference material (Horton *et al.* 2018).

It was from such informal meetings as these around a shared passion that the idea for the SAOA grew – the first such ornithological association in the country. Crompton (1914) assigned the germ of the idea of an association to A.H.C. Zietz. Nine men camped at Port Victor (now Victor Harbor) in January 1899 to plan their strategy but, although the camp reports are extant, the identities of the nine are shrouded in mystery by the use of nicknames that have baffled all attempts to identify them over one hundred years later (Truran 2000).

During his time at Laura Morgan made his first collection of bird skins, some that were later presented to the museum, and others that he forwarded to A. J. North in Sydney. While Laura is generally accepted as being in the Mid North of our state, it sits in the Flinders Ranges region for the purposes of denoting areas of South Australia for bird recording (Horton *et al.* 2020). Morgan’s (1897) paper on the birds he recorded near Laura is regrettably only a list with no annotations. However, I have reproduced it below because Morgan’s (1897) paper, in the Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia, is not easily accessible to most modern birdwatchers. Also, the list is an early one by a competent ornithologist resident

in the area for several years and, for the time, a fairly remote part of the state.

Table 1 presents the list of 113 bird species in modern taxonomic order along with any skin or egg clutches taken during his residence at Laura from 1893 to 1897 in the SAMA collection. As some SAMA specimens taken at Laura have no date, I have added these to the list in square brackets, as many of them may have been collected in this period. SAMA specimen data adds one species to the list in Table 1, the Elegant Parrot, a skin with no date from Laura. Of the 114 species recorded by Morgan from the Laura area, there is specimen evidence for 76 or nearly three-quarters of these.

Many of the clutches with no date collected at Laura or Stone Hut came via the SAOA Egg Collection (registered on 8 November 1932) and these may have had incomplete data slips with them. Morgan’s Egg Collection came to SAMA directly from Morgan in two batches (one registered on 3 February 1931 and the other on 1 May 1934). Other egg clutches of Morgan’s came to SAMA via the F.E. Parsons and J.N. McGilp collections (P. Horton pers. comm.). As Morgan personally donated his skins to SAMA, the lack of dates for some of the specimens is puzzling but probably results from their collection at the beginning of Morgan’s ornithological career; the importance of full collection data would soon have become evident to him.

References (including website references ‘www’) will be provided at the end of the last Part.

**Table 1.** List of birds recorded by A.M. Morgan in the Laura area 1893-1897 from Morgan (1897). EC – egg clutch. [ ] double brackets refer to skins and egg clutches with no dates.

Bird Species	Specimen in SAMA
Stubble Quail	[Skin Laura]
Chestnut Teal	
Pacific Black Duck	
Maned Duck	
Tawny Frogmouth	[Skin Laura]
Australian Owlet-nightjar	[Skin Laura]
Pacific Swift	Skin 21/2/1896 Laura
Australian Bustard	
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	
Pallid Cuckoo	[Skin Laura]
Horsfield’s Bronze Cuckoo	[Skin Laura]
Shining Bronze Cuckoo	
Black-eared Cuckoo	

Bird Species	Specimen in SAMA	Bird Species	Specimen in SAMA
Diamond Dove	[Skin Laura]	Crimson Chat	Skin 7/1894 Laura
Peaceful Dove		Tawny-crowned Honeyeater	Skin 8/9/1895 Laura
Common Bronzewing	[Skin Laura]	Yellow-throated Miner	Skin 1894 Laura
Buff-banded Rail	[Skin Laura]	Brown-headed Honeyeater	[Skin Laura]
Black-tailed Nativehen	[Skin Laura]	Black-chinned Honeyeater	Skin 1894 Laura
Little Buttonquail		New Holland Honeyeater	Skin 1894 Laura
Bush Stonecurlew	[Skin Laura]	White-plumed Honeyeater	Skin 1894 Laura
Pied Stilt		White-fronted Honeyeater	Skin 5/10/1895 Laura
Black-fronted Dotterel	[Skin Laura]	Black Honeyeater	Skin 14/10/1895 Laura
Masked Lapwing		Spotted (Yellow-rumped) Pardalote	Skin 23/11/1895 Laura
Banded Lapwing	EC 7/7/1896 Laura	Striated Pardalote	Skin 1894 Laura
Great Cormorant		Yellow-rumped Thornbill	Skin 1894 Laura
Pied Cormorant		Yellow Thornbill	Skin 30/10/1895 Laura
Straw-necked Ibis		Chestnut-rumped Thornbill	
White-necked Heron	[Skin Laura]	Southern Whiteface	[Skin Laura]
White-faced Heron		Weebill	[EC Stone Hut] [Skin Laura]
Nankeen Night Heron	[Skin Laura]	White-browed Babbler	EC 25/7/1896 Laura; Skin 1894 Laura
Collared Sparrowhawk	Skin 15/10/1895 Wirrabara	Dusky Woodswallow	EC 9/1895 Stone Hut [Skin Laura]
Wedge-tailed Eagle		Masked Woodswallow	Skin 8/9/1895 Stone Hut
Spotted Harrier		White-browed Woodswallow	EC 11/1897 Laura; Skin 2/12/1894 Laura
Whistling Kite		Australian Magpie	
Eastern Barn Owl	[Skin Laura]	Grey Currawong	[EC Stone Hut] [Skin Laura]
Australian Boobook	[Skin Laura]	Black-faced Cuckooshrike	[Skin Laura]
Laughing Kookaburra	[Skin Laura]	White-winged Triller	Skin 30/9/1894 Laura [EC 2/11/1890 Laura]
Red-backed Kingfisher	Skin 16/10/1895 Laura [EC Laura]	Crested Bellbird	[Skin Laura]
Rainbow Bee-eater	Skin 10/1896 Laura [EC Laura]	Crested Shriketit	Skin 1894 Laura
Brown Falcon		Grey Shrikethrush	[Skin Laura]
Nankeen Kestrel	[Skin Laura]	Rufous Whistler	Skin 1894 Laura [EC Stone Hut]
Grey Falcon	Skin 10/1896 Laura	Grey Fantail	[Skin Laura]
Australian Hobby		Willie Wagtail	[Skin Laura]
Peregrine Falcon	Skin 8/6/1896 Laura	Magpielark	EC 1895 Laura
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo		Restless Flycatcher	Skin 1894 Laura
Cockatiel		Australian Raven	
Australian Ringneck	[Skin Laura]	Hooded Robin	[Skin Laura]
Musk Lorikeet	[Skin Laura]	Jacky Winter	[Skin Laura]
Budgerigar	[EC Laura] [Skin Laura]	Scarlet Robin	
Blue-winged Parrot		Red-capped Robin	Skin 1894 Laura
Purple-crowned Lorikeet	[Skin Laura]	Horsfield's Bush Lark	[Skin Laura]
Little Lorikeet		White-backed Swallow	[Skin Laura]
Crimson (Flinders) Rosella		Welcome Swallow	
Red-rumped Parrot		Fairy Martin	
Rainbow Lorikeet	Skin 1896 Laura	Tree Martin	Skin 1894 Laura
Brown Treecreeper		Australian Reed Warbler	
Purple-backed Fairywren	Skin 1894 Laura	Brown Songlark	Skin 5/10/1895 Laura
White-winged Fairywren	Skin 8/10/1895 Port Germein	Rufous Songlark	[Skin Laura]
Splendid Fairywren		Silvereye	Skin 1894 Laura
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	[Skin Laura]	Mistletoebird	[Skin Laura]
Red Wattlebird	[Skin Laura]	Diamond Firetail	EC 26/10/1895 Stone hut
White-fronted Chat		Zebra Finch	Skin 1894 Laura
Orange Chat		Australian Pipit	