

Historical Series No. 88

John Neil McGilp (1881-1963)

Part 1 by Penny Paton

Personal Life

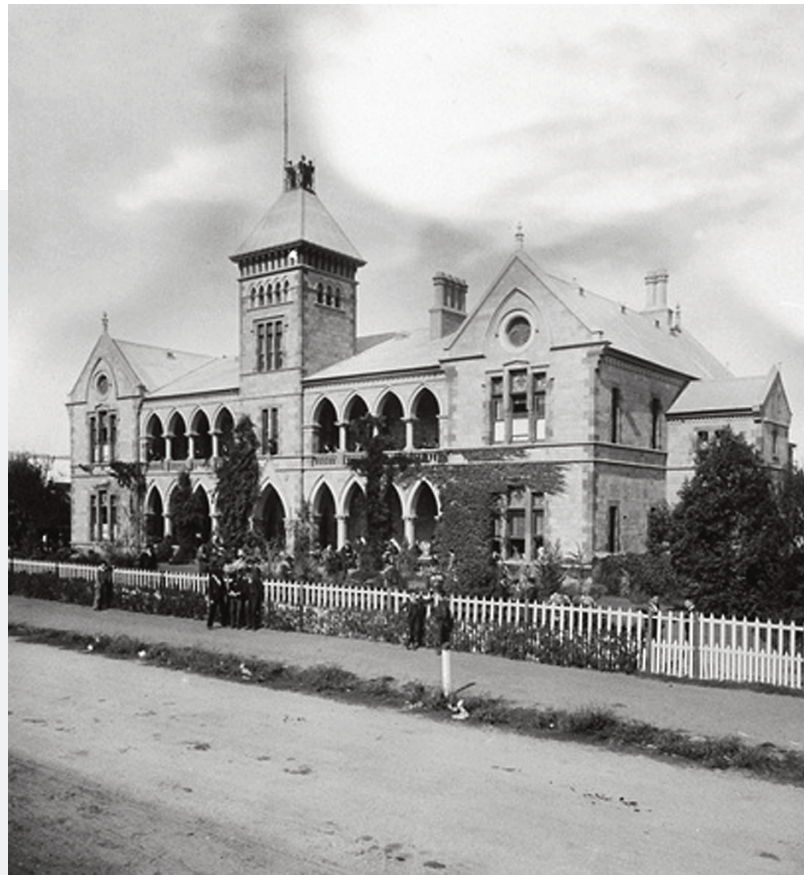
J. N. McGilp, always known as J. Neil McGilp in ornithological circles, was born on Carrierloo Station west of Port Augusta (Figure 1) on 30 October 1881 to Neil McGilp and Florence Arabella née Tapley. He was the oldest child in a large family of four boys and five girls. From his early years Neil was a bird lover and amassed considerable knowledge of birds and their habits, and particularly their nests and eggs (Harris and Hone 2009). He was educated in Adelaide at Way College and may have begun there in 1891 (McGilp 1937), even though some authorities say that Way College opened in 1892. On 4 September 1912 Neil married Maude Constance Lindsay, who was born in Birdsville (Cleland 1964) in 1883 (www1). They had two daughters – Florence in 1914 and Mary in 1916. Florence married Dr Claude Anderson and subsequently moved to Perth, while Mary married Dr JE Barker of Adelaide (Cleland 1964).



Figure 1. Carrierloo Station Homestead ca 1890 (Courtesy of SLSA B857)

Way College opened in 1892 in a building that began life as Dr Joyce's eye hospital on Park Terrace (later renamed Greenhill Road). The College was initially opened for boys and young men from the Bible Christian and Primitive Methodist Churches, but the appointment of Dr William George Torr as principal saw the school embrace very progressive views and include an agricultural component in the syllabus (www2). The site became the Methodist Ladies College in 1904 after the union of the Methodist Churches in 1900 and Prince Alfred College taking over the work of Way College. The building is now the Annesley College Junior School.]

Right: Way College, 1890s (Courtesy of SLSA B 56557)



McGilp worked on several pastoral properties belonging to the Hawker family, including Carriewerloo, Bungaree and North Bungaree, near Clare in the Mid North, and Moonaree in the Gawler Ranges (Mason and Pfitzner 2020). From 1907 till 1920 he managed his father's property Moolawatana in the far north-east of the Flinders Ranges district, 208 km northeast of Copley (*ibid*). The lease of Moolawatana was held by Neil McGilp and Sons for 55 years, being sold in 1935 (Cleland 1964).

J. Neil McGilp retired to the suburb of King's Park in Adelaide in 1920 (Cleland 1964) but, despite the move to the city, he retained an interest in the South Australian pastoral areas and properties, making many trips there and continuing his research into bird populations and their breeding. For example in 1920 he camped for three months on bore streams east of Moolawatana as drought forced the family to destock the property and move stock to the sandhill country towards the New South Wales border (McGilp 1921). And in 1930 he spent six months travelling in the interior of South Australia, including a visit to the deserted Coongy (now Coongie) Station on Coopers Creek, where he was impressed with the number and diversity of birds he saw (McGilp 1931a).

He joined the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) in April 1919 and held the positions of Secretary (1920-22), Vice President (1923-24, 1929-30, 1934-35, 1947-48), President (1924-25, 1930-31, 1935-36, 1948-49), Librarian (1953-54) and Egg Curator (1924, the only year in which the position was filled) (Blaylock 2000). McGilp was a foundation member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union and served as President in 1938-39 (Cleland 1964). In January 1951 he was appointed a Commissioner of the National Park, later enlarged to the National Park and Wild-Life Reserves, until retirement in 1962 (*ibid.*).

McGilp contributed to other organisations as evidenced by his membership of the Pastoral Board from January 1930 till December 1956, a period of twenty-six years (Horton *et al.* 2018). He joined the Land Board in November 1936 and served as Chairman for eight years, retiring in 1946. He also served as President of the South Australian Stockowners' Association (1927-29), Chairman of the Dog Fence Board of South Australia (1950-57), a Council member of the Royal Zoological Society of South Australia, a member of the Flora and Fauna Committee (S.A.) and in 1940 was appointed to the Marginal Lands Committee and the Advisory Committee on Soil Conservation (Cleland 1964). The regard in which he was held led to his joining the Board of the State Bank of South Australia in 1940 and he held this position and at times the Deputy Chair position, for 22 years. For his public services he was awarded an O.B.E in 1944.

McGilp and his association with Walter and Chris Cain

The SAOA Archives contain many letters between Secretary John Sutton and Walter Cain and his son Chris from 1931 to 1937. They lived in the pastoral zone of South Australia and began an egg collection which they named the Flinders Collection (Bradley 2003, 2004a,b, 2005a,b, 2006). A letter from Chris, aged 15, written from Myrtle Springs Station on the western side of the northern Flinders Ranges, mentioned that McGilp had seen his fledgling egg collection (Bradley 2003). Bradley (2004a) documented the first tranche of letters between Sutton and Walter Cain, who clearly had already met Sutton, Dr Morgan and McGilp, probably at the Museum. These letters demonstrate the esteem that McGilp was held in for his knowledge of birds of northern South Australia and his willingness to help and mentor fledgling ornithologists.

Walter Cain was employed for many years as a carpenter, specifically a carriage builder for the railways, based in Port Augusta (Mason and Pfitzner 2020), and collected timber from a range of native trees as well as being most proficient in wood working and marquetry (Bradley 2004b). He made three cases for his son Chris to house his egg collection and told Sutton that he had made egg boxes for Mr McGilp and other egg collectors. Bradley (2005a) recounted that Walter made Sutton an inkstand to contain his different coloured inks used for drawing maps of bird distributions. Letters in the general SAOA Archives related that McGilp collected specimens of timber for Walter probably from the Musgrave Ranges and that Walter sent Sutton a marquetry cabinet in 1935, suggesting that it be raffled and the proceeds devoted to providing prizes for an essay on birds by school children. According to Mason & Pfitzner (2020) from information they found in a letter from Ernest Hyem, Walter Cain acquired part, if not all, of McGilp's ornithological library which he in turn passed on to Hyem.

Some years after the Historical Series pieces on the Cains mentioned above, a series of letters between Walter Cain and John Sutton came to light. They were separated from the earlier letters as they had been given by McGilp to Gordon Ragless, another prominent South Australian egg collector and naturalist. Gordon's son John lent the letters to the Collection Manager at the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (SAMA) for copying (Paton 2015). This series of letters dates from 1937 and 1938, during which time Cain made several visits to Seepage Swamp on his way to Lake Salmon at the bottom end of Lake Torrens and to Pernatty and South Gap Stations.

Walter documented his sightings and egg collections and once again Sutton was very tactful in his replies in

Dear Mr. Sutton,

I feel that I owe you an apology for interfering with the McGillp Collection, I really thought that I could help you by arranging it so that additional sets could be placed in the cabinet without trouble - I quite overlooked the fact that the alterations would affect your card index system and I can now see that instead of helping you I have given you more work which I very much regret.

In the circumstances I think I had better not go on with the job but leave my alterations you think necessary to you. You will surely understand that I only offered to arrange the sets to assist you and had not any desire to interfere in any way or any intention to give you more work.

Lane Dept
Adelaide
31.10.34.

Yours sincerely
Michael Gilp

Figure 2. Handwritten letter from JN McGilp to John Sutton 31 October 1934 (Courtesy of P. Horton)

which he questioned several of Cain's identification of birds and eggs. Sutton also passed on information about McGilp in late 1937, telling him that McGilp had been unwell and not been able to accompany Frank Parsons in the search for the Mallee Whipbird, so that the trip did not eventuate. The other mention of McGilp was in reference to his viewing of the Flinders Egg Collection, when McGilp had admired his Ground Cuckooshrike sets and Cain asked Sutton if he should

offer one set to McGilp. Apparently this occurred as there is a set of this species in the McGilp Collection in SAMA, collected by Walter Cain in October 1932 from Barton in the Great Victoria Desert.

The other reference to McGilp in Paton's (2015) piece on Cain was a letter from Sutton to McGilp and McGilp's reply, both written in October 1938. Sutton asked McGilp's advice on a duck egg found in a canegrass swamp by a donkey team boy in August/September

1937, and also Cain's description of a duck nest found in a canegrass swamp. Sutton thought that both might belong to the Blue-billed Duck. Sutton also raised the Mallee Whipbird saga playing out in the press, particularly the urging by the Victorian Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game to his South Australian counterpart not to issue any permits for specimens of whipbirds. McGilp replied that the Blue-billed Duck was the most likely candidate, but that the nest seemed a little small for that species. He also commented that a few whipbird specimens taken for scientific purposes was unlikely to make much difference to the survival of the species. Hindsight would support this opinion, as we know that habitat clearance and fragmentation are greater threats for most species' survival than collection of museum specimens.

There are nine egg sets in the McGilp Collection in SAMA collected by the Cain family. Three sets were collected by Walter Cain, three sets by Chris Cain, one set by Walter and Chris and two by Walter and George Pearce. George Pearce, who drove the delivery truck for the Commonwealth Railways, accompanied Walter Cain on his birding trips and was noted for his fox-shooting prowess, removing over 2000 foxes from the Gap and Pernatty Stations in one year (Paton 2015). Chris Cain's egg specimens come from Myrtle Springs (1932), where he worked as a storeman (Bradley 2004a), and Witchelina Station (1933 and 1934), where he was employed for a short time (Bradley 2005a).

McGilp's association with John Sutton

Sutton and McGilp probably met in 1919, as McGilp joined the SAOA in April 1919 and Sutton later that year. Sutton was very much a beginner at this stage as he took up birdwatching on his retirement at the age of 53 after a move from Victoria to South Australia (Horton 2013). In contrast, McGilp was one of the South Australian 'ornithological elite' (*ibid.*), but Sutton learned quickly through associating with the elite and his dogged determination to master a new obsession. He kept a daily diary of observations around his home at Netherby, rarely missed a meeting of the SAOA and began contributing observations to the *South Australian Ornithologist* (SAO). As a mark of respect for his abilities and dedication he was elected Honorary Secretary in March 1922, only two and a half years after joining the SAOA, replacing McGilp. He retained this position until March 1938 shortly before his death in November. Sutton became Honorary Assistant Curator of Ornithology at SAMA in November 1922, joining Dr Morgan who had accepted the post of Honorary Ornithologist in June 1922.

Sutton was diligent in his association with the Museum, registering and labelling the entire "Old Collection" of birds and setting up a card index system by species, with a code linking specimens with their cabinet (Horton 2013). As we have seen he also began a wide-reaching correspondence with country members, encouraging them to publish in the SAO, made easier by his membership of the Editorial Committee with JB Cleland and FM Angel from 1927 until 1938 (*ibid.*).

A letter in the Bird Section of SAMA throws light on the relationship between McGilp and Sutton and their personalities. McGilp wrote to Sutton on 31 October 1934 apologising for his actions at the Museum. He had obviously added in some sets to the McGilp Egg Collection (which he began donating to SAMA in 1930-31) thinking that it would save Sutton time. However as the letter explains, he had not realized that it would affect Sutton's card index system and entail more work for him (Figure 2). The tone of the letter is friendly and apologetic and fits well with the personality of McGilp gleaned from other sources.

The obituary written by Gordon Ragless (1968) is enlightening as he knew McGilp well and was often in the field with him, sharing an interest in birds and their breeding and both having extensive egg collections. He quoted Francis Ratcliffe's opinion of McGilp from his 1938 book *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*:

I have been extraordinarily lucky in my travelling companions in the outback, and none has been more pleasant than Mr. Neil McGilp of the South Australian Pastoral Board. Even without our common interest in birds, I should have been delighted in his company. What I liked about him was his unpatronizing nature. He merely set out to help me as much as he possibly could, putting his knowledge at the disposal of my inexperience, and never ramming his opinions down my throat as many others in his position would have done...

Gordon concurred with this opinion of McGilp. They met first in 1938 when Gordon was staying on a station and McGilp was visiting on Pastoral Board business. However, Gordon's passion for oology did not crystallise until after the Second World War and in 1951, with encouragement from Tom Brandon and McGilp, he applied for a collecting permit from the Fisheries and Game Department (Mason and Pfitzner 2020).

(To be continued)

References will appear in Part II.