

*Historical Series No. 87*  
*Pulteney Malcolm Borthwick ('Malcolm') Murray*  
*(1860-1900).*

*Part 2 by Penny Paton*

**Malcolm's time at Wirrabara Station**

As we have seen, Malcolm was very unhappy about moving to Wirrabara, which he describes prophetically as 'a bleak cold place that savours of nothing but death' (letter to Maggie, 12 July 1885). However he did move, probably in 1886, although there is a long gap in letters from Malcolm to his family; we know that he married Rebecca in September 1888 in Norwood, following the birth of their first child in January 1887.

There are just two letters from Malcolm from Wirrabara, both to his brother George and about business, with the one from 7 July 1893 suggesting that, if the family does buy more land at Whyte Park (Wirrabara), their father should be persuaded to sell Coota and fetch the cattle down. Coota is his abbreviation for Cootanoorinna Station, which is 130 km north of William Creek on the Oodnadatta Track, west of Lake Eyre. I presume that this family holding was in drought, although the Federation drought did not begin until 1895. On a personal note, he asks George to send him £20 as he

could use it. His next letter of 27 August 1893 lets George know that the family property at Wirrabara is every year getting deeper and deeper into debt and soon they will have nothing.

'Avonmore', the homestead at Wirrabara Station, is a fine stone building (Figure 6), built in 1872 but extensively remodelled two years later by Alexander Scott Murray, Malcolm's half-brother (www4). The photo purports to be from about 1900 which would indicate that the woman and two small children might be Malcolm's wife and children; his daughter Margaret was born in 1897 and could be the three-four year old girl in the photo, but his sons were all older and could not be the two year old boy child.

Malcolm committed suicide on the Wirrabara property on 9 April 1900, but his body was not found until the following morning, in a dam, his throat having been slit. No reason was given for the suicide but, reading between the lines and from letters and invoices presented to his brother George in the months following



**Figure 6.** Avonmore House, the manager's residence, Wirrabara Station, ca 1900 (courtesy SLSA B54459)

his death, he was drinking heavily and frequenting horse races and hotels in several mid-north towns. He was given to irrational and erratic behaviour, probably enhanced when under the influence of alcohol, so may have had some mental health issues. We know from his letters to Maggie that he was very unhappy about the move to Wirrabara and this unhappiness may have been a factor too. In the two years leading up to his death he seemed to be spending a lot of time away from home, if the accounts presented by publicans at Booleroo Centre, Stone Hut, Laura and Wirrabara are a sign.

### Ornithology

Despite reading a number of letters penned by Malcolm Murray, references to ornithology and collecting are almost non-existent. This may be due to all the letters being to family members who did not share his interest in birds. The only reference I could find was an appeal to his sister Maggie to send him the two books that brother George obtained in Melbourne, namely *Gould's Birds of Australia* (letter, Mt Parry near Myrtle Springs Station, 11 January 1886). It is most likely that these books were the two volumes of Gould's Handbook to the *Birds of Australia*, published in 1865 as a revision and update of the text of his monumental seven volume *The Birds of Australia*, published between 1840 and 1848.

The fate of Murray's egg collection is a tale of serendipity, documented in some detail in Horton *et al.* 2018. It seems that it stayed in the family after his death, most likely in his widow's care and, after her death, in the hands of their daughter Margaret Isobel. In 1939 a Miss Murray donated nearly 1000 clutches of Australian birds' eggs in a valuable cabinet to SAMA. The collection was not registered by the Acting Ornithologist, Mr HT Condon, at this time but was found accidentally by the Curator of Birds, Shane Parker, in 1976. When Parker registered the collection in that year there were only 668 clutches and it is not known what became of the remaining 238 clutches.

In all there are 695 egg clutches in the Malcolm Murray Collection or collected by Murray in SAMA, with some Murray specimens being part of the SAOA and the William White collections (P. Horton pers. comm.). There are also four skin specimens taken by Murray, from northern South Australia between 1896 and 1899, and include a specimen of the Splendid Fairywren *Malurus splendens callainus* from Port Germein, which was the subject of a recent paper in the South Australian Ornithologist (Black *et al.* 2023). Another skin, the holotype of *Malurus melanotus germaini* Mathews, 1912, found its way to the Mathews collection by way of Edwin Ashby (Horton *et al.* 2018).

From information supplied by Philippa Horton who has looked at some of the Murray clutches in the SAMA, it is likely that friends and family supplied him with the

occasional clutches, like B29989 Superb Fairywren and B30017 Scarlet Robin both from Magill 1896 collected by Doug Murray, and B30085 Singing Honeyeater, Henley Beach 1895 collected by Jessie Gall. As a Douglas Murray was born at Myrtle Springs Station in 1876, he was probably a cousin of Malcolm's. There are a number of interstate clutches and it is likely that these were obtained via Dr Morgan, William White and other South Australian oologists or directly from interstate collectors themselves.

There are a few egg clutches collected by Murray from Myrtle Springs Station in the Flinders Ranges from the early to mid-1880s, when he was managing the family property there. There are also a few from the late 1880s, suggesting that he visited Myrtle Springs once he had moved to Wirrabara. However the vast bulk of his egg collection comes from the mid to late 1890s after he had met Dr Morgan, who was practising medicine from 1893 till 1897 at Laura, about 18 km south of Wirrabara.

According to Cleland (1937), William White, the uncle of Captain SA White, visited Malcolm Murray at Wirrabara Station on a number of egg-collecting trips, as the locations on some of his clutches in SAMA attest. They were both collecting in the Stone Hut and Wirrabara areas in the spring of 1894 (Horton and Black 2006) and there are several of Murray's clutches in White's collection and at least one of White's (a Little Wattlebird) in Murray's collection. Some of Murray's clutches went to the SAOA Egg Collection, which was donated to SAMA in 1932 (Paton 2013).

Murray's Collection contains large numbers of clutches from a few localities, including Little Lake and Lake Watherston in the Lake Torrens district and Murray Town and Stone Hut in the southern Flinders Ranges. Most of the clutches from the Lake Torrens area were collected by W. Gigney, almost certainly William James Gigney, 4/9/1878-20/12/1964, a labourer at Wirrabara Station and one of the last people to see Murray alive (Horton *et al.* 2018). According to Walter Cain, a correspondent of John Sutton's, W. Gigney of Wirrabara collected eggs for Murray in a paid capacity (letter, 1/7/1938, SAOA Archives).

Of the Stone Hut specimens, Murray collected many of them either by himself or in the company of others, including W. Gigney and G. Pole, who was probably George Pole, born in 1880 and a Wirrabara resident and sportsman (Horton *et al.* 2018).

The Murray Collection is significant for SAMA as it represents the bulk of the Museum's specimens from the northern Flinders Ranges, particularly the clutches collected between the Ranges and Lake Torrens. For more than 20 species, the only specimens come from the Murray Collection, including the Black Swan, the Australian (Gull-billed) Tern, Crested Pigeon and Chestnut Quailthrush (*ibid.*). Moreover Murray's (and



William White's) Little Lorikeet clutches from the southern Flinders Ranges from 1895 and 1898 demonstrate that this was a breeding species in the region, which has only been fairly recently documented (Horton and Black 2006).

### Natural History

Malcolm was clearly well-educated, well-read and interested in evolution and branches of natural history other than ornithology. He defended Darwin against misinterpretation of his theories and debated with Johann Tepper of the South Australian Museum regarding the relationship between vegetation and climate (Horton *et al.* 2018). Murray also collected plant specimens, as evidenced by his collection of the type specimen of the Erect Crumbweed or Spiked Pigweed *Dysphania simulans* on Cootanoorinna Station (www5).

### Personality

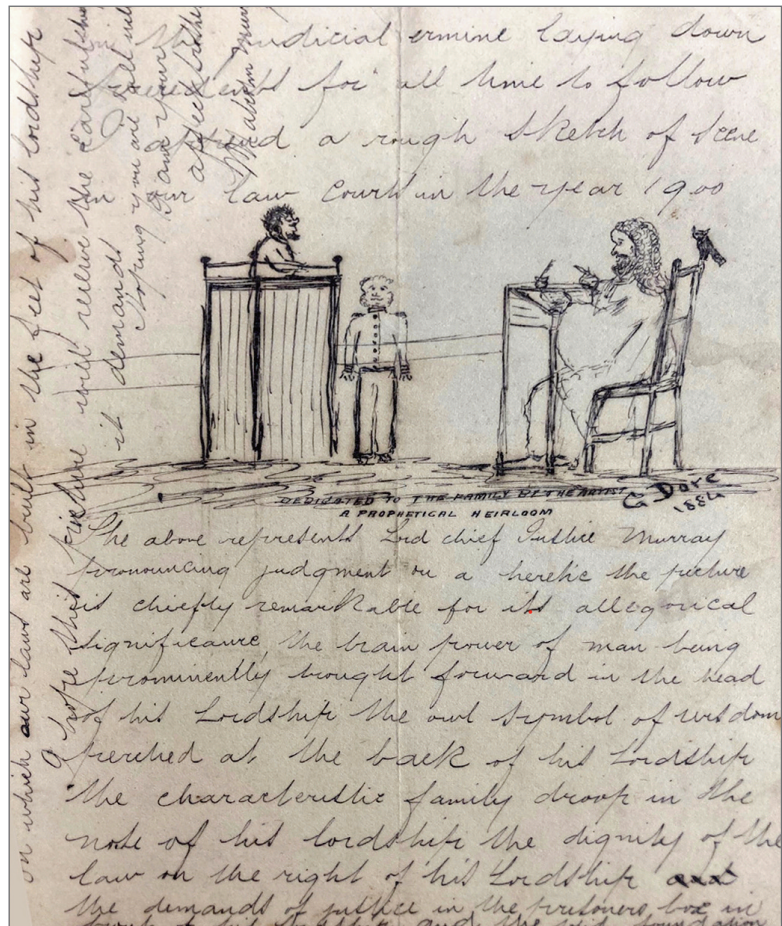
Malcolm was a Justice of the Peace and his death came as 'as a severe blow to the local community; he was described as having a kind and generous disposition, "one of the most brainy men in the province", a brilliant conversationalist with a keen satire, and "no-one's enemy but his own"' (Horton *et al.* 2018).

His satiric prowess was also evident in his letters, where he demonstrated a flamboyant, fluent and acerbic writing style. At just 19, he wrote to his mother describing his experience as a shearer, noting that they worked hard

'That Mrs A.B. Murray and family may dash about the streets of Adelaide in a delicately fashioned barouche drawn by a pair of milk white Arabs displaying an Oriental finery worthy of the Great Mogul and creating a sensation little inferior to that which would naturally expect him to be the author of.'

He seemed to have a difficult relationship with his younger brother George, and in 1884 sent an ironic letter with humorous sketch, attributed to G. Dare and captioned: "A Prophetic Heirloom" (Figure 7). It shows George as a judge passing sentence on a heretic in the dock, with what seems like a scathing description of his brother "the brain power of man being prominently brought forward in the head of his Lordship, the owl symbol of wisdom perched at the back of his Lordship, the characteristic family droop in the nose of his Lordship...".

I can find no photos of Malcolm Murray but we can assume that he had the family's drooping nose. He is



**Figure 7.** Page from a letter from Malcolm Murray to his brother George, 1900, showing Malcolm's handwriting and satirical sketch (SLSA PRG 259 Series 67)

buried in the Wirrabara Cemetery alongside his wife, Rebecca, his infant son Roy, his daughter Margaret (who died in 1966), his half-brothers Alexander and John who both died in their 30s, and John's infant son Malcolm, aged 14 months.

Malcolm's sister Maggie and brother George are buried in St George's Church of England graveyard at Magill. On Maggie's death in 1936 she left a considerable estate of £92,425, mostly to her brother George, but with a smaller bequest to her nephew John Tinline, Malcolm's son. During George's lifetime he gave generously to the University of Adelaide and from 1907 endowed the Tinline scholarship in history to commemorate his mother's family. He left £83,000 to the University on his death in 1942 (www6) and the University awards the George Murray Travel Scholarship to postgraduates for overseas study.

I would like to thank Philippa Horton for providing information on Murray's collections in SAMA and for reading and improving on a draft. I also thank Angela Dawes for providing a photo album compiled by her grandmother, Chrissie Ferguson who lived on North Moolooloo, a neighbouring property to Myrtle Springs, in the early years of the twentieth century.

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- www4: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/82134796@N03/48900219056> (accessed 15 January 2024)
- www5: [Dysphania simulans - Wikispecies \(wikimedia.org\)](https://www.wikispecies.org/species/Dysphania_simulans) (accessed 20 January 2024)
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