

SAOA HISTORICAL SERIES NUMBER 1

JOHN SUTTON (1866 - 1938)

This is the first of what I hope will be a regular series of short historical articles, stapled into the middle of the SAOA Newsletter so that they can be pulled out and bound if members so wish. I have been inspired to begin this series by the self-imposed task of cataloguing the huge amount of correspondence held by the Association from 1913 to the present day. This task has in turn come about through the move from the AMF building, where we had ample storage and library space, to our current meeting room at the Waite Campus of the University of Adelaide, where we currently have two library bookcases. The Committee of Management has decided to retain some material, offer some to the Mortlock Library of South Australia (the "Archives"), pay to have some more important material archived privately and to discard other material. Thus the cataloguing exercise will serve as a summary of all the correspondence and conservation files held by the Association in 2002, despite not being able to keep all the items.

I have chosen John Sutton as the subject of the first of the series as one could not fail to be impressed by him in a reading of the correspondence files from the 1920s and 1930s, when he was Secretary for 16 years (1922-38). Only two other members have come close in terms of years of service as Secretary: Bob Brown who was in office from July 1962 to 1976 (a period of 13 years) and J.W.Mellor who held the position of Secretary from 1899-1905 and then again from 1907-1913 (a total of 12 years). But it is not just the length of service that makes John Sutton stand out in a reading of the correspondence and the *South Australian Ornithologist* for the 1920s and 30s. The qualities that are obvious from all his dealings include: attention to detail, fairness, humanity, kindness, honesty and zeal. I hope that the



JOHN SUTTON

Born 25th March, 1866

Died 22nd November, 1938

reader is able to glean something of these qualities from the next few pages.

For a comprehensive account of his life, it would be hard to go past the Obituary and Bibliography written by Herb Condon in the *Ornithologist* (Vol 15 Pt 1, 1939, pp 3-7) and many of the facts given below have been taken from this reference and from the entry in "The Literature of Australian Birds" (Whittell 1954). John Sutton was born in Castlemaine, Victoria on 25 March 1866 and his early years were spent in Bendigo. He joined the National Bank in Victoria as a junior and, after a period in western Victoria, was at various times Acting Manager of the bank in Adelaide and Inspector in Melbourne. Sutton

returned to South Australia on his retirement in 1917 and lectured in banking at the University of Adelaide. At the age of 53 he took up ornithology, travelling widely in South Australia and also to Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and publishing numerous articles. In 1923, following the death of F.R.Zietz and the appointment of Dr A.M.Morgan as Honorary Ornithologist at the Museum, Sutton was appointed Assistant to Dr Morgan. On Dr Morgan's death in 1934, he became Honorary Ornithologist and held that position until his own death four years later.

From 1923 until just a month before his death, Sutton visited the Museum every afternoon. From 1923 to 1934, when Morgan died, the two ornithologists worked on the bird collection, sorting, identifying, labelling and cataloguing 15,000 bird skins, both Australian and foreign. Condon comments:

"Painstaking and diligent to a degree, he was also a gifted penman, and his labellings and records at the Museum will long remain as a model for others to follow as well as a monument to his thoroughness and zeal."

At a time when many of the chief ornithologists were collectors, Sutton was not a collector, having come to the discipline later in life; but he stressed the importance of accuracy in bird observations and was intolerant of those who wrote inaccurately or imprecisely. In this regard he had a scientific outlook, despite not having been trained professionally.

Sutton was a member of Editorial Committee of the *SA Ornithologist* for 11 years and perusal of the correspondence for this period leads one to speculate that he was probably the most active member in preparing works for publication. He also wrote prolifically and Condon's paper lists 45 notes and papers from the *SA Orn*, as well as several from the *Emu* and the *SA Naturalist*. Probably Sutton's most

important publication was the list of 'The Birds of South Australia' first published in 1923, with a second edition in 1927.

Sutton maintained a wide correspondence through his work at the Museum, as well as through his position as Secretary for the SAOA. The following account of Sutton as a correspondent is based on a reading of the correspondence of the SAOA from 1922 to 1938. Also it should be remembered that in the early years of the Association the Secretary also acted as Treasurer. There are about 1,000 items of SAOA correspondence from this period still extant and in our possession, so this gives some idea of the amount of time and energy that Sutton devoted to this task. A perusal of the dates that letters were received by the Association and the date of Sutton's answer show that he was diligent in replying promptly to enquiries and concerns, except obviously when matters had to go before the general meeting first.

The correspondence in the 1920s and 1930s falls neatly into categories, many of which were administrative in nature. These include:

- The Bird Club essay competition
- Notes and articles for the *SA Ornithologist*
- The printing and binding of the *SA Ornithologist*
- Subscriptions and exchanges to the *SA Ornithologist*
- Reminders re subscriptions
- Condolence letters
- Correspondence with other organizations, eg the RAOU
- Correspondence re Miscellaneous Lease 662 for islands in the Coorong
- Lists of members and subscribers

- Summaries of postage costs for each year
- Nominations for Committee positions

More interesting reading is provided by the letters that deal with lobbying the government on conservation issues and the debate that arose at this time between the supporters and opponents of the collecting of skins and eggs for scientific purposes. This latter issue was a worldwide phenomenon and was taken very seriously by members of the SAOA, with the end result that a whole issue of the *Ornithologist* was devoted to it (*SAOrn*, vol 7, pt 8, 1924). The well-known NSW collector H.L.White was so keen to see some public debate on (and presumably support for) collecting that he paid half of the printing costs of this edition.

But it is the letters from other ornithologists that make the most interesting reading. Sutton maintained an extensive correspondence with bird-watchers in the country, including E.F.Boehm (Sutherlands), T.G.Souter (via Maitland), H.H.Newell (Hindmarsh Island), M.Robertson (central Qld), F.L.Berney (Longreach), H.B.Boss-Walker (Bendigo & Traralgon), T. Brandon (Wilmington), Chris and Walter Cain (via Port Augusta), P.P.Darke (Orroroo), J.T.Gray (Orroroo), W.J.Harvey (Coombe), J.B.Hood (Bool Lagoon), H.H.Howard (via Streaky Bay), W.C.Johnston (Riverton), M.S.Kuss (Murray Bridge), A.F.C.Lashmar (Antechamber Bay), N.H.Pearse (Florierton), L.R.Reese (Minnie Downs) and H.Simpson (Oodnadatta).

Sutton's correspondence with Charles Sullivan is typical and a summary will give some insight into the mentoring role that Sutton played for so many budding ornithologists, particularly those in the country. The first record is of a letter from Sullivan dated 26 April 1927 written from Ceduna, West Coast, in which he thanks Mr Sutton for the ornithological publications

and asks to join the SAOA. Sullivan was obviously a doctor, as he refers to his patients keeping him from having much time to pursue his favourite pursuit of birdwatching. He gives descriptions of two birds that he wanted help identifying. There are a couple of marks in pencil on the letter: '3/5/27' (the date when Sutton presumably replied to the letter) and '*M. virescens*' (the Singing Honeyeater, confirming Sullivan's cautious identification) and 'chestnut red' (referring to a patch of colour on the Mulga Parrot that Sullivan could not equate with the description in Leach's Bird Book). Often these pencil marks on the letters are the only indication of Sutton's replies. In other cases, he wrote a copy of his reply on the bottom or back of the letter.

This was the first of many letters that Sullivan wrote to Sutton. There are several more from Ceduna, that indicate that Sutton also helped him with the purchase of a pair of field glasses and sent him a copy of the Checklist (presumably the 1926 RAOU Checklist or possibly the list of SA birds prepared by Sutton). As well as sending bird lists and notes from the Ceduna area, Sullivan compiled a list of the native names for about 40 birds in the Weerung language as spoken about Denial Bay on the West Coast. These names were mainly obtained from an Aboriginal man from the Gawler Ranges, with a few added by another Aboriginal man from out Tarcoola way. Sullivan's bird observations from the West Coast were published in the *Ornithologist* (Vol 9, Pt 5, pp 164-169) along with the Aboriginal names (minus the accents!). Sullivan further expanded on the derivation of the names in this article:

... the present natives at Denial Bay belong to the Kukata tribe, the old coastal tribe, the Weerung, being almost extinct. The natives claim, however, that they speak a dialect comprising portion of the vocabulary of both. Only in a few cases did I ascertain which language the names belonged to.

A book on the natural sciences in SA (Twidale, Tyler & Davies 1986) mentions an anthropological expedition to the Denial Bay area in 1928 led by John B. Cleland. Here it is stated that the two Aboriginal groups were the Wirangu and the Kokata, which are presumably the same two mentioned above but with slightly different spellings.

Sullivan left Ceduna in October 1927, moving back to Melbourne before his next job took him to Warrnambool. He continued to write to Sutton, sending him bird notes, many of which were published in the *Ornithologist*. Some of his other letters were from Moree (NSW, 9/30), Ganman (NSW, 9/31) and Quambatook (Vic 12/33), showing that the life of a country doctor could be a peripatetic one.

Very little personal detail about John Sutton comes out of the correspondence; in fact the only personal reference that I can remember is a mention on one occasion of his wife's ill health & therefore his non-attendance at an SAOA function. Regarding his personality I have quoted verbatim from Condon, as I can think of no better source than one who knew the man:

"Regarded with sincere affection by all those he knew intimately, his kindly nature was ordinarily hidden behind a dignified and impersonal manner. Nevertheless, the genuine student, however humble, always received every attention, and he spared no pains to help in every way all who asked assistance of him, while he never failed to command the admiration and respect of all with whom he came into contact. Physically a big man he was always an outstanding figure at any gathering in spite of his retiring nature and dislike of the 'limelight'".

References

Twidale, C.R., Tyler, M.J. & Davies, M. (eds), 1986, *Ideas and endeavours – the natural sciences in South Australia*, Royal Society of South Australia Inc., Adelaide.

Whittell, H.M., 1954, *The literature of Australian birds*, Paterson Brokensha Pty Ltd, Perth.

Penny Paton, May 2002