

SAOA Historical Series No. 10

Rev. Philip P.C. Darke

From the correspondence, it would seem that Reverend Darke was an English clergyman who sailed to South Australia in 1929 to work with the Bush Brotherhood. He apparently returned to England in 1931, but must have come back to northern South Australia, as there are bird notes from him in the *Ornithologist* for 1936 and 1938. He was no longer listed as an SAOA member in 1941 (*SA Orn*, 16, pt 8, 131-32). This paper is based on 11 letters he sent to SAOA secretary, John Sutton (JS) between 1929 and 1931. His first surviving letter, dated 23/5/29, gives the address as Brotherhood House, Quorn. Philip Darke thanked him for his letter and a copy of "Birds of South Australia", also he expected to be in Adelaide in two month's time (July) and hoped to meet with Mr Sutton and tell him of the birds in the north-east that he had identified. JS must have queried a problem at Nackara but Philip could not help as it was one of the few places he did not see much of. Recently he had seen some parrots at Winninowie, a rail stop between Nectar Brook and Stirling North, but without field glasses he was unable to identify the species. He had tried without success to find the Adelaide Rosella in Leach's book. A local station owner told him of a bird, describing it as the shape of a robin but with a bright blue breast, it had not been seen just lately though (*or ever again!!*). If JS would like a bird list before July, he would try to send one.

Three days later on 26/5/29, Philip wrote again to say that he was sending the body of a Purple-crowned Lorikeet found that morning on the roof of Brotherhood House. He would like it as a memento of his visit to Australia if it could be suitably prepared, he himself having no ability in that field, but if it could be of any real use to the Museum, he would prefer that it entered their collection. Two eucalypti near the House had been alive with birds and he longed for an expert eye, the birds were so busy they were not shy. He identified the Musk Lorikeet, Regent Honeyeater, and the Yellow-plumed Honeyeater among many others he could not. He wondered about a bigger bird being a Grey Butcherbird, mentioned a harsh throat noise and also that it drove away the smaller birds. When a pair of ring-necks appeared, they seemed inclined to drive away this bigger bird. He could see even

with his indifferent sight that the pugnacious bird had white in the wing with a fan-shaped tail, but it was a dull day and he could not discern any definite colouring. Although he signed off in great haste, a PS said "have posted specimen to Museum". Also on further investigation with binoculars, he found a pair of Rainbow Lorikeets and decided that the pugnacious bird was a Red Wattlebird.

Philip's third letter, a hasty one, was headed Quorn and dated 30/9/29 and in it he apologized for not writing earlier but travelling first outback and then to Port Lincoln for a Synod meeting made for a very busy period, too busy to find time to write. He was grateful to hear of his election [he was elected a member of SAOA at the July 1929 meeting - *SA Orn*, 10, pt 4, p.123] and for which he enclosed a One Pound note [subscription for the year?] He had seen, a few weeks before at the Mutooroo homestead dam, an Orange Chat, a White-shouldered Caterpillar-eater (now the White-winged Triller) which appeared to have its brown coloured mate with it so he was reasonably sure of his diagnosis, especially because it came quite close to him. As well, he saw a number of Crimson Chats. At a dam north of Cockburn [on the S.A.-N.S.W. border and former rail gauge change] he saw what his friend called Maned Geese then queried if there were any little penguins on any of the islands near Port Lincoln and in what numbers they might be. Before signing off, he mentioned he had received a copy of the *SA Ornithologist*, April 1929 but none since.

The fourth letter is one page only, undated, and headed Brotherhood House in Quorn and tells JS that he is posting to him two birds shot at Oodla Wirra on the previous Saturday by a Mister Julian who is a member of the railway gang there and, if they are of use, requests that Mr Julian gets the credit. In a note in the margin, JS, in his small, incredibly neat hand writing has pencilled in - Mr Julian written to 12/12/29 and opposite the report of the two birds has written *Artamus melanops* with *cinereus* (both forms of the Black-faced Woodswallow) crossed out and *Mahurus assimilis* (Purple-backed form of the Variegated Wren). Philip describes Mr Julian as a real bird enthusiast, spending most of his spare time observing them. He thought the wren

colouring might be the lovely wren and waited for JS's diagnosis. Although he addressed this letter from Quorn as that address would always find him, he was actually at Oodla Wirra, where a number of these wrens had been seen lately, although Leach says it is found in northern Australia. He hints that if JS had time to write to Mr Julian he is sure that it would be appreciated. His fifth letter was written from the Rectory at Orroroo on 25/9/30, a gap of many months, and he wondered if his scanty bird news was too belated to be of any use. On 17 March he reported seeing at Mutooroo 8 Wedge-tailed Eagles feeding on a sheep carcass, there were also Galahs, Little Corellas, Grey Teal, 2 Magpie Larks and 3 Crested Pigeons about while the next day March 18th he listed the black and white fantail (now Willie Wagtail), Yellow-throated Miner, chestnut-eared finches (now Zebra), 2 magpies and 2 Blue Bonnets. On April 7th, still on Mutooroo, he saw a number of White-breasted Woodswallows which had been around the homestead for some 6 weeks while he saw several White-fronted Chats in a nearby paddock. The next day, April 8th, he saw a number of Tree Martins resting on telephone wires. His next report was from Oodla Wirra on August 3rd, several Purple-backed Wrens near the railway line and a Red-tipped Pardalote (a form of the Striated) and a Yellow-plumed Honeyeater. He notes that Mr Julian secured a specimen of each. On August 30th at Eurelia there were 3 Red-backed Parrots (now Red-rumped) playing around the station buildings. At Mannahill on September 10th, he noted Eastern Whiteface (now Southern) while the Yellow-tailed Thornbills (now Yellow-rumped) were "singing with great zest and did not seem at all shy".

He wrote that he expected to be in Adelaide in October and hoped to look in at the Museum one afternoon. He had enjoyed a great holiday in Queensland and was lucky to see many lovely birds—Paradise Riflebird, Eastern Whipbird, White-breasted Sea-Eagle (now White-bellied), King Parrot and Scaly-breasted Lorikeet to name just a few at random. He heard a lyrebird giving a great rendition of his imitations up in the MacPherson Range and would have loved to stay camping with his friends for longer but had to return to work. He hoped while in Adelaide to have one day out bird watching and was hopeful of photographing pelicans and Crested Terns if he didn't have to go too far afield and would appreciate very much JS's help in the matter.

His next letter of Tuesday 25th from Orroroo reported on a trip with Mr Gray to the scrub near Pekina Creek on the previous Saturday. A list among the 6 lists he forwarded to JS gives the date 25/10/30 with another list from the same place dated 8/10/30. On that Saturday they saw 2 Diamond Firetails carrying straw in their bills and attempting to build a nest but were continually chased away by greenies (White-plumed Honeyeaters). Red Wattlebirds were seen close by and in the same area of scrub they saw birds, quite white underneath, black heads and dark greyish upper, they wondered whether they could be the young of the restless flycatcher. In the margin JS has written 2 suggestions—caterpillar eater (triller) and underneath Hooded Robin, so we will never know. A busy Jacky Winter, numbers of Budgerigars and Red-backed Parrots were about and 3 cormorants, thought to be Little Pied were sitting in a dead tree while close to the water's edge in a tobacco bush were some thornbills, not Yellow-tailed, so unidentified. On the Sunday near Tarcowie he had noted a White-throated Treecreeper, JS has in the margin by this report b.t.c. (Brown Treecreeper) and the letter finished abruptly "Great haste, Yours Philip P. Darke". Just reading the letter leaves one breathless.

His next letter of 3 _ pages written from the Rectory, Orroroo, dated 27/10/30 began by thanking JS for his letter, apologizes for not writing earlier and regrets that during his trip to Adelaide he couldn't find time to call at the Museum, "let alone arrange for anything else". He was touched by JS's offer to introduce him to the birds of the National Park [Belair] "I should very much value the opportunity of being able to go out with one who has such a knowledge of birds so I hope you will be able to take me out somewhere in the near future. So often I hear a bird call and am quite unable to place the bird which is rather exasperating. I have made friends here with a Mr Gray who is keen on Nature and is now taking up the observation of birds. Saturday Mr Gray and I spent 2 or 3 hours along the Pekina Creek in search of birds. The list enclosed and dated October 8th is his responsibility, the list dated October 25th is when we were out together". He continues with the report that the White-plumed Honeyeaters are in good numbers and the day before, he had seen quite a few in a garden at Tarcowie. The mobs of Budgerigars about at this time had not been seen in the recent dry years. Red-backed Parrots were

fairly plentiful and they noted 3 in a tree, they were very quiet as they approached so they thought they may have flown, but no, they were quietly sitting and didn't seem to mind their presence. They found large numbers of Yellow-tailed Thornbills and a male Red-capped Robin, quite the brightest that he had ever seen, which was very tame and came quite close, Rainbow birds [Bee-eaters] seen previously by Mr Gray near his home but couldn't identify, were definitely ticked off, a scolding Willie Wagtail made them think they were too close to its nest and Philip decided that one bird flitting about in bushes near the water was a Little Friarbird. There is no suggestion of JS's to dispute this. Philip and Mr Gray noted a small entrance in the hollow of a tree, they could hear the sounds of young birds and although they could look right in, they were unable to penetrate the darkness to identify the young.

Philip may have been expecting another placement as he suggested to JS that it might be useful for Mr Gray to send in bird lists of the area. Around 2nd October there had been 'a number of White-browed Woodswallows, it was thundery weather at the time, the male looked as if someone had taken a brush and painted a thick white line over the eye, to me it looked very striking'. Mr Gray and Philip were hoping to do more observing along the creek as well as in the scrub to the north of Orroroo and he ends with a series of questions about any other birdwatchers in the area who may be sending in bird reports and if there are any particular birds to be watching out for. He lamented the lack of time for photography and still hoped to photograph pelicans and Crested Terns 'one of these days'.

The next letter was probably written about 11/11/30 as 18/22 in JS's pencil print would refer to the date of arrival and the date of his answer. Philip, after thanking JS for reply, rushes on to say that Mr Gray would like to join the SAOA and also have a copy of the "Birds of S.A." He identifies the wren seen on 1/11/30 and says it was the Superb Blue Wren (now Fairy-wren). The two keen observers sat and watched both a pair of these and a pair of Purple-backed Wrens, they came to a thornbush, seemed quite tame and eventually came to a bush just at their feet. JS must have questioned the report of the friarbird because Philip next writes that with regard to the Little Friarbird and the other honeyeater, they will try and get other observations. The White-browed Woodswallows had disappeared about 10 days before and on the same 1/11/30 they had

also heard what they decided was an Australian Reed-Warbler and were struck by its wonderful song. They had a glimpse of it in the reeds of the Pekina Creek and it answered to its book description. However, regarding the North east, on the Friday before the letter, Mr Julian and Philip were out for a short time in the scrub near Oodla Wirra and got a specimen of an Owlet Nightjar and saw mobs of Budgerigars and several of their nests, White winged Triller, Dusky Woodswallows and heard a rather pleasing call [heard also at Orroroo] and wondered if it might be the Grey Shrike-thrush. They saw the parents feeding their baby but couldn't be certain of its colouring, but considered that the abdomen may have been slightly mottled, with the general colouring of the bird grey, seen in the fading light. On 4/11/30 on a dam at Koonamore station Philip saw 3 Red-necked Avocets, then excused his scrawl as he was hurrying to catch the post and polite and formal as ever, signed off with 'Kindest regards, Yours sincerely, Philip P. Darke'.

His next letter, although headed Orroroo 9/1/31, has on the left hand side at the top the mystifying c/o Lady Stirling, Mt. Lofty and begins with the bird list resulting from a visit to Hutton's Lagoon, 5 miles from Oodla Wirra on Saturday, 28/12/30. He found a great number of birds-coot, Hoary-headed Grebe, Whiskered Tern, Spur-winged Plover (now Masked Lapwing), Banded Plover, Black-fronted Dotterel, White-headed Stilts (now Black-winged), White-faced Heron, Black Swan, Grey Teal - all in good numbers. He noted the Marsh (ie Whiskered) Terns always on the move after insects, while the stilts rose with a harsh plover-like call as if giving warning of their presence[- he must have been with Mr Julian.] He thought there were ducks also but could not identify them. One added reference was to the former report of the white throated tree creeper which he had seen near Tarcowie, not Terowie - perhaps his writing was worse than usual but he thought he had had a good look at it and felt quite sure of his diagnosis. He expected to be in Adelaide the next week (perhaps he was staying with the Stirlings at St. Vigeans, their Mt. Lofty home for a short holiday and that might explain the above), en route to Port Lincoln for a few days and intended to call at the Museum one afternoon. He very much hoped to see some penguins on the islands near Pt. Lincoln and possibly be able to photograph them. He queried whether there were

any special birds to look for at that season. He sent his good wishes to JS for 1931.

In his tenth letter from Orroroo, dated 8/2/31, Philip thanked JS for his letter about Mr Gray's list of birds, then sounded disappointed when he wrote there was not a great deal to be said about his trip to Port Lincoln. On 19/1/31 he went to Coffin's [sic] Bay and on the way saw a Grey Butcherbird, several Spur-winged Plovers, 3 White-fronted Herons (ie White-faced), some large hawks [unidentified], while at the Bay Crested Terns were fishing. On a sandy spit were Pied Cormorants, Silver Gulls and young Pacific Gulls. On the way back, he saw a solitary Caspian Tern, Red Wattlebirds in abundance and 3 Port Lincoln Parrots.

On Tuesday 20/1/30 he went on a motorboat trip to Round Island and, although nesting evidence of mutton birds abounded, no birds were found. Rock Parrots, Silver Gulls, Crested Terns, Pied Cormorants and one solitary dotterel-unidentified- were the only other birds seen. On 21/1/31 on the beach at Port Lincoln, the usual flock of Silver Gulls, 6 young Pacific Gulls, four being in adult plumage, 3 Sooty Oystercatchers, a single Caspian Tern, Pied Cormorants and the occasional Crested Tern were noted. A mass of birds could be seen and their screams heard above the sound of the steamer's motor when they were passing a small island some few miles from Port Lincoln but it was too dark to distinguish the species, he supposed they were Silver Gulls. He asked JS for information about the Caspian Tern, he had seen but 2 solitary birds. Also in Saturday's Advertiser he had been interested in the mention of Arctic Terns and wanted more information about these too, their size, markings etc. and finished abruptly "Yours sincerely, Philip P. Darke".

Philip's eleventh and last letter dated 22/10/31, 8 months later, gives the address as S.S. Allen, Fremantle and told JS how sorry he was not to get to the Museum to say "Goodbye, but the last few days I hardly knew which way to turn." JS must have offered to take him on a visit to Outer Harbour "which would have been pleasant and instructive but not possible to accomplish". They had wonderful weather through the Bight but with the usual southerly swell, he had been pleased to see a few Wandering Albatross following the ship with the occasional Cape Petrel. The ship had docked in Fremantle that morning and they were due to leave on the following Friday. Philip thanked JS for his help in the matter of Australian birds, hoped one day

to renew acquaintance with them and sent his kindest regards and all good wishes, signing off "Yours Philip P. Darke".

Below I have listed the items in the correspondence between John Sutton and Rev. Philip Darke held by the SAOA and upon which this paper was based. JS = John Sutton and PD = Philip Darke. There is another letter from Rev. Darke to JS in the general SAOA Correspondence Files of 1930-32 (now in the Mortlock Library) dated 22/4/30 from 'The Rectory, Orroroo' saying that he'll call into the Museum on 6 May to pay his subscription.

1. 23/5/29 letter from PD to JS, Brotherhood House, Quorn
2. 26/5/29 letter from PD to JS, Brotherhood House, Quorn
3. 30/9/29 letter from PD to JS, The Rectory, Orroroo
4. Undated, letter from PD to JS, The Rectory, Orroroo (answered 11/12/29)
5. 25/9/30 letter from PD to JS, The Rectory, Orroroo
6. Tuesday 25th (presumably 25/10/30), letter from PD to JS
7. 27/10/30 letter from PD to JS, The Rectory Orroroo
8. November 1930 letter from PD to JS, (probably recd by JS on 18/11 and replied to 22/11)
9. 9/1/31 letter from PD to JS, headed Orroroo, but has on the left hand side at the top - c/o Lady Stirling, Mt. Lofty
10. 8/2/31 letter from PD to JS, Orroroo
11. 22/10/31 letter from PD to JS, S.S. Allen, Fremantle

References

- Darke, Rev. P.P. 1929. Birds noted in the Districts between Peterborough and Cockburn, S.A. *SA Orn* 10, pt 4, 134-35.
- Darke, Rev. P.P. 1930. Bird Notes *SA Orn* 10, pt 5, 170-1.
- Darke, Rev. P.P. 1936. Bird Notes *SA Orn* 13, pt 6, 175.
- Darke, Rev. P.P. 1938 Bird Notes *SA Orn* 14, pt 5, 133.
- Whittell, H.M. 1954. The Literature of Australian Birds. Paterson Brokensha Pty Ltd, Perth.

Muriel Reid, August 2004

Biographical Information on Walter Cain

Since the publication of SAOA Historical Series No. 8 on Walter Cain, Josephine Prescott has supplied the SAOA with biographical information on Walter, who was a friend of her father's. We are very grateful for this information and a full report will be included with Historical Series No. 11 (which will continue the Cain theme).

Penny Paton, Editor, Historical Series