

SAOA Historical Series No.13

Howard (Horrie) Simpson

This paper summarises the correspondence between Howard (Horrie) Simpson and John Sutton (JS), Secretary of SAOA from 1922-38 and the subject of Historical Series No. 1. There are some tantalising aspects to these letters, as there are only snippets of information about Horrie and his life. Fortunately there are some biographical details in recent publications (Marcus 2001; Simpson and Dallwitz 1990) and the information in the following three paragraphs is taken from them.

Horrie was born in 1905 in Kapunda to Tom and Mary Simpson. His father was a team driver and outback contractor, and while he was working on Oodnadatta's bore in 1910, Mary, Dorothy (Horrie's older sister) and Horrie moved there. At that stage Oodnadatta was the terminus for the railway and a vibrant town with its mix of races and roving populations. The Simpsons remained there for 25 years, spending most in the small whitewashed galvanised house that Mary bought for 20 pounds. Horrie attended the school for nine years, so must have left school at thirteen or fourteen. His first job was as a letter boy for the district foreman in the maintenance department of the railways. It is unclear what other positions he held but we know that he was at Edwards Creek in the loco department when he was retrenched in November 1930 when the great depression began. The letters below tell us more of his sometimes intermittent employment with the railways after that. Inspired by the diaries that his father kept on the 1911 expedition of Captain Barclay to map a cattle track to Queensland, Horrie began his diary, or "log" as he preferred to call it, in 1919. This daily record was kept for the next 71 years, illustrated with drawings, watercolours and photographs.

Marcus (2001) describes how Horrie met Miss Olive Pink in 1930, when she was on her first journey of investigation into the ways that Aboriginal people in the Far North were being affected by European law and settlement. Her visit to Edwards Creek caused great excitement in the railway depot which was home to only 14 people at that time. Edwards Creek is between Marree and Oodnadatta and boasted only a few cottages and houses apart from the railway buildings. Horrie was given the task of meeting Miss Pink from the Ghan and they remained friends until her death 45 years later. Olive Pink camped at Edwards Creek for three weeks, spending her time sketching wildflowers and talking to the men about their lives and ambitions. She also encouraged Horrie with his sketching.

I have listed the letters in chronological order at the end of this piece together with the address that Horrie

gives for his letters, as he moved around quite a lot in these years. Many of the letters are from Edwards Creek, where he was stationed from November 1929, when the depot for the railways moved from Oodnadatta. However during times of unemployment, Horrie returned to the family home in Oodnadatta. Later in life he resided in Quorn. We know from Simpson and Dallwitz (1990) that Horrie married Tillie, but I can find no information on their married life or any children.

The only other piece of correspondence held by the SAOA about Horrie is in the group of letters from 1929-32 now held by the Mortlock Library of South Australia ("the Archives"). This handwritten note from J B Cleland states "Horace Simpson, fireman and pumper, Edward Creek, N. of Marree on railway line. Age about 25. Keeps notes in diary form on the birds (identified from Leach's book) and the plants. Probably has had little education but a born naturalist. Information supplied by Miss Pink of Tasmania who has been painting flowers in this neighbourhood". JS has also written on this note in pencil: "Written to 19/9/1930 and part 7 sent". Part 7 of Volume 10 of the *SA Ornithologist (SAO)* was published in July 1930 so, presumably, JS wrote to Horrie and enclosed this part of the journal. Indeed, the first extant letter we have from Horrie (6/10/30) confirms this as he thanks JS for his letter and magazine received on 27th September 1930.

This first letter adds to Cleland's information, namely, that Horrie was raised in the Far North, had a life long interest in natural history, especially birds, and kept a diary about birds and other animals over the previous 12 years. Horrie then lists some of the birds he is familiar with and those that he knows have nested. JS has annotated the letter with scientific names and queries where the common name is unknown to him or ambiguous. As with most of the letters that JS received, he wrote on the top the date that he received the letter and sometimes, but not on this one, the date that he replied. A carbon copy of his undated reply is extant but we know from Horrie's next letter that it was written on the 13th of October. JS asks about some of the birds that he was uncertain of, as well as sending some extra back issues of the *SAO*. Horrie is obviously well pleased with the back issues and the thoughtfulness of the gift and replies to the queries (letter of 29/10/30). He does not mention binoculars, so presumably has made all his identifications only with Leach's bird book, so his accuracy is remarkable. A note on the end is of interest - he tells JS that "in this camp the men have these birds for pets. 6 Shellparrots (Budgerygahs). 2 Cockatoo parrots (Cockatiels). 2 White cockatoos (presumably Little

Corellas), 1 Ringneck and 2 Princess Parrots the last named are beautiful birds and are a fair number of years old." JS's reply merely gives more information on a couple of difficult species – corvids and fairy-wrens.

There is a gap in the correspondence explained by Horrie's letter of 9th August 1931, written from Oodnadatta, in which he explains that he has been retrenched due to curtailment in traffic on the North South Line. He talks of birds roosting in "our trees" in his bird notes indicating that in Oodnadatta he probably lived in the family home. Sutton's reply thanks Horrie for the very informative bird notes and asks that he send monthly or quarterly reports from Oodnadatta and any additions he can make to his list of birds from Edwards Creek published in the *SAO*. As always he answers queries about birds and assures Horrie that he is pleased to do this at any time. At about this time JS wrote a short letter to Horrie asking him about three places in Central Australia that he has been unable to locate for an article that he is writing. There is nothing in the SAOA correspondence to suggest that he received a reply.

By early November Horrie was back in Edwards Creek in his old job owing to some ballasting operations on the East West Railway. While he had been unemployed in Oodnadatta he had used the time to explore the stations out to the west via the mail car. He lists the birds he saw on these trips and JS has annotated these as he usually did. JS replies very promptly with two letters written a day apart, asking that Horrie be specific with the location of records from Oodnadatta and encloses a map with place names that may help him in this. A gap of a few months in the correspondence is explained in Horrie's letter of 19 April 1932 – he has been retrenched again as the ballasting work has ceased and he is back home in Oodnadatta. He describes the country as looking very good after recent rains and birds are in numbers and some are breeding. He requests that JS give him the name of an up-to-date bird book, he doesn't say that he is frustrated with Leach, but that is the message one gets. The mail service seems to have been better then than now – JS received this letter on 22 April and replied that day! He answers bird queries and gives details on Leach's 1923 edition (7/6) and Calyley's of 1931 and advises that the former would be better than the latter "because you can pick out a bird from his notes."

Horrie's letter of 22 July thanks JS for the "Birds and Blossom" magazine and talks of being retrenched again from the Commonwealth Railways (perhaps he had forgotten that he had already told JS this), but he has had some casual work at Abminga Siding while the stock specials were running. In his spare time he walked along the Abminga Creek and observed birds. He describes two nests that he found there and the bird

associated with them, as well as listing birds seen around Oodnadatta. He enjoyed a trip of 500 miles with Mr Hayball to Henbury Station on the banks of the Finke River where birds abounded around the waterholes. They apparently visited Todmorden Station, where Miss Hayball had aviaries containing many parrots, including Scarlet-chested, and an opossum (presumably a Brush-tailed Possum). The reply from JS answers the query about the nest (a Red-capped Robin) and requests that Horrie note the arrival date of migrants and which species are resident and queries the identification of a few birds.

Horrie spent much of the winter travelling, firstly to Ernabella at the foot of the Musgrave Ranges, when he accompanied a friend who was transporting a truck load of supplies to Mr Ferguson. The differential on the truck was damaged crossing the Indulkana Creek on the homeward run so they camped there for 3 days while waiting for rescue. Simpson and Dallwitz (1990) give a long description of this hair-raising adventure. Horrie also had 3 days in Alice Springs as he was able to catch the train there and come back on a cattle special. The rest of the letter is an annotated list of birds seen on these trips as well as at Oodnadatta. As usual, JS replies within the week, answering bird queries and questioning a few species. He adds that a feather or a wing from an unknown bird would help with identification.

The tone of Horrie's reply is a little different – he is still grateful for Sutton's help with difficult species but assures him that he is certain that he saw a Scarlet Robin (it would have been the Red-capped, as JS suggested) and that Masked Woodswallows are in these parts all year round (Sutton had suggested this would have been the Black-faced which Horrie does not mention. These are resident rather than the Masked which are migratory). It is no wonder that he made these errors as he would not have had binoculars and Leach was difficult to use compared with the excellent field guides that we use today. Sutton's reply of 12 October is very diplomatic – he says that the Adelaide ornithologists are confused by his account and he includes sketches of the heads of both the Black-faced and the Masked, showing the extent of black on the face.

Unfortunately, Horrie makes no mention of this matter in his next letter of 23 February 1933, perhaps because he has a new job and has moved again. In fact pinned to this letter is a small newspaper clipping headed Oodnadatta, giving weather conditions (very dry) and details of employment on the railways from the area, noting that Mr Horry (sic.) Simpson has taken over the southern pumping. Horrie tells JS that he is pumping water for engines at Finke and also at Bundooma for the railways and that he has been at Finke for three months. His pumping section is nearly 100 miles from Abminga to Bundooma and he has little leisure for

birdwatching as there is trouble with quicksand rising in the bores. He does say that apart from a few thunderstorms the country is looking very dry and birds are scarce. However Bundooma is on the Alice Creek and nearby is Alice Well (89 miles south of Alice Springs). Birds are more common along the creek and around the troughs at Alice Well and he lists these for JS. The Masked Woodswallow once more occurs on the list and not the Black-faced. Horrie mentions birds in distress from the heat and lists species that come in to drink at a drum that they put out for this purpose.

The reply to this letter was written on 4 April and Sutton apologizes for the delay – he has had sciatica, possibly from travelling in a Baby Austin in an awkward position. He encourages Horrie to send in reports of birds in his new area and tells him that he owes him nothing for the Sun Books that he previously sent (Horrie had wanted to pay for them). JS ends with a comment that the summer has been cool in Adelaide and “we did not have a heat spell lasting over three or four days”. Horrie’s letter of 27 August again has a newspaper clipping attached giving snippets of information about the season, stock movements, an anthropological party at Ernabella, a corroboree at Abminga and social life. Horrie has been back at Edwards Creek in his old job for 3 months after spending 3 months at Wire Creek, which suited him as he could live at home in Oodnadatta. He sends fairly detailed notes of birds seen at Edwards Creek, once again listing the Masked Woodswallow! Also a Plains-wanderer walked into their cottage but he was unable to catch it. Sutton’s reply thanks him for the list, answers queries and does not mention woodswallows.

Horrie’s letter of 14 April 1934 is brief. He encloses 15 shillings for subscription, lets JS know that he has received some books that were sent and admits that he was in Adelaide on holiday for two months. He had intended to drop in and see Sutton but thought he might intrude, so didn’t. Horrie was in Quorn for a time, as well, which explains the absence of any bird notes. JS apparently replied to this letter on 20 April, the day that he received it, but this letter has not survived. The next piece of correspondence is a letter from Horrie from Abminga on 28 April 1935, in which he reports that he arrived yesterday, having been transferred for a few months, and that good rains have fallen, leaving the country “quite green and fresh. If the birds are as thick as the flies and mosquitoes about here it will be a ornithologist’s paradise.” This is one of the few traces of humour in Horrie’s letters. JS had obviously been concerned by the gap of a year in the correspondence and is especially effusive in hoping that Horrie will continue to send in his observations, which are valued very much.

This praise may have encouraged Horrie as his letter of 7 June contains a long annotated list of the birds he has seen mainly along Abminga Creek since April. In his reply of 16 June, JS once again returns to the vexed question of the woodswallow (perhaps thinking that enough time has passed since his last foray). He also questions which species of owl and diver (presumably grebe) Horrie is referring to. There must have been new gold discoveries at this time as Sutton wonders if the new goldfields in central Australia will increase the work on the railways. Horrie is delighted with the interest JS showed in his list and answers the queries about owls (he means all owls including nightjars), grebes (he will get one of the men to secure a specimen) and woodswallows (he will get a specimen and paint it and send this to JS). He also has some new birds to add to his list – the Red-tipped Diamond Bird (now Striated Pardalote) and Restless Flycatcher, both seen on the Ilbunga Waterhole on the Ross Creek. He mentions another bird, seen on previous occasions at Edwards Creek which he is unsure of, and from his description, JS has written in the margin – *P. rubricatus* Red-browed Pardalote.

Horrie is being transferred to Quorn towards the end of July, with the possibility of being sent back to Edwards Creek when the cattle season is over. He laments leaving Abminga as he has had unlimited time for nature study and painting. Apropos painting, he tells JS that he has written to Sands and McDougall asking about the price of a book containing paper suitable for water colours and ordinary writing paper. Horrie wants to make up a book, with paintings of birds opposite their description, locations of sightings, nests and eggs.

Sutton’s short reply of 10 July 1935 answers queries re pardalotes and wishes him well with his painting venture. He adds a postscript to the effect that any records from the Quorn district are most eagerly sought as there are none from there so far. JS wrote again on 28 April 1936 seeking information on the exact location of Abminga and querying the Masked Woodswallow again. He includes sketches done by his assistant, Mr Condon (Herb Condon, later Curator of Birds at the SA Museum), of three species that are rather similar (the Masked, White-breasted and Black-faced) and hopes that this will resolve the confusion. JS closes with another plea for bird records from Quorn. Possibly prompted by Sutton’s April letter, Horrie writes from Quorn on 26 May, explaining the long gap in the correspondence. He spent 2 months at Rawlinna on the East-West line and after that had some time in Oodnadatta. Most of his trips were on the Nullarbor Plain where birdlife was scarce, but he did manage a trip to Kalgoorlie for a few days. He locates Abminga on the SA side of the border and on the Abminga Creek – he will check the exact mileage when he travels to Alice at the end of the week. He finally admits that it is the Black-faced Woodswallow

at Edwards Creek and Abminga, but that the Masked is common in the mulga scrubs west of Oodnadatta. Horrie lists a few birds he has noted at Quorn but admits that he has not been about there much.

Horrie writes again from Quorn on 14 August, telling Sutton that Abminga is 3 miles south of the NT border. He has been to the Alice a few times and is going again that evening on "The Indian Runner" that runs fortnightly on the opposite week to the Mixed train. He notes that the country in the north is looking good with lots of wildflowers, especially between Alice and Rumbalara. A rough painting of a rosella done from a caged bird is enclosed which he hopes JS will identify. Horrie adds a few more birds to his Quorn list and trusts that he will get out more in the warmer weather and add even more. JS replies to this letter on 23 August with the news that the weather in Adelaide has been cold, wet and generally miserable for the past two months. He identifies the bird in the painting as the Yellow Rosella.

The last extant letter from Horrie is from Parkeston on 7 July 1937 and with it he encloses his subscription. He is based at Parkeston, 2 miles from Kalgoorlie "firing on the East-west expresses permanently" which is a step up from the work he did previously. However, he sometimes wishes he was back in Central Australia where he had more spare time for nature study. Also, things are unsettled with the Pirie line opening and an expected faster timetable which may see him back in South Australia. He ends wishing JS well. Sutton replied speedily on 11 July thanking him for his support of the SAOA and his observations from 'out of the way' places and trusting that he will send in more records as he is able.

J Sutton to H Simpson

Not dated – possibly Oct 13 1930; 16/8/31; 16/10/31 – original copy; not dated –presumably Nov 1930; 8/11/31 – original copy; 9/11/31 – original copy; 22/4/32; not dated reply to 22/7/32 – sometime in July 1932; 19/9/32; 12/10/32; 4/4/33; 13/9/33; 9/5/35; 10/7/35; 16/6/35; 28/4/36; 23/8/36; 11/7/37

H Simpson to J Sutton

Edward's Creek unless otherwise indicated
6/10/30; 29/10/30; 9/8/31 – Oodnadatta; 1/11/31;
19/4/32 – Oodnadatta; 22/7/32 Oodnadatta; 10/9/32
Oodnadatta; 30/9/32 Oodnadatta; 23/2/33 Finke;
27/8/33; 28/4/34; 28/4/35 Abminga; 22/6/35 Abminga
via Marree; 7/6/35 Abminga via Marree; 26/5/36
Quom; 14/8/36 Quorn; 7/7/37 Parkeston Kalgoorlie

References

Marcus, J. 2001. The indomitable Miss Pink: a life in anthropology. UNSW, Sydney.

Simpson, H. and Dallwitz, J. 1990. Horrie Simpson's Oodnadatta. Oodnadatta Progress Association, Oodnadatta.

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