

## SAOA HISTORICAL SERIES NUMBER 2

### HENRY B. BOSS-WALKER (PART II)

The next few papers in the historical series will focus on groups of letters exchanged between John Sutton, Secretary of the SAOA from 1922 – 1938 (himself the subject of Historical Series No. 1) and various correspondents. Some of the letters in the SAOA Correspondence Files are arranged in roughly chronological order, but there is a box containing letters grouped according to the correspondent and Henry B. Boss-Walker's file is in this box.

#### File of Henry B. Boss-Walker

##### *Letters from Henry:*

- 1 10 May 1930  
128 Carpenter St, Bendigo, Victoria  
20 May 1930 Answer from John Sutton
- 2 28 May 1930  
128 Carpenter St, Bendigo, Victoria  
7 October 1930 Letter from John Sutton
- 3 16 October 1930  
c/- Mrs A. S. Hird, Butzbach, Yandoit,  
Victoria  
8 January 1932 Letter from John Sutton (in  
answer to missing letter from Henry written  
29 December 1931)
- 4 25 January 1932  
c/- Mrs A. Green, Margaret St, Macedon  
Victoria  
(in answer to missing letter from John Sutton  
written 2 November 1930 (prob. 1931)
- 5 24 November 1932  
c/- Mrs F.R. Galbraith, Tyers, via Traralgon,  
Victoria (at back of file in wrong order)  
4 December 1932 Letter from John  
Sutton
- 6 29 December 1932  
c/- Mrs F. R. Galbraith, Tyers, via Traralgon,  
Victoria

#### Of Cuckoos and Calls

The first letter Henry Boss-Walker wrote to John Sutton, secretary of the SAOA, dated 10 May 1930 from the address — 128 Carpenter St, Bendigo, Vic — was inspired by Henry's reading in the *Emu* of John's report of a campout in the Coorong. The listed birds contained two heard records of bronze-cuckoos which led Henry to realise that John was able to distinguish between the calls of the two common species, known then as the narrow-billed and the golden. Henry carefully listed his own observations of two different calls and where he had heard them, as follows:

1. Balwyn, Vic (Melbourne suburb)  
spring & summer 1927
2. Hobart, Tas  
spring & summer 1928
3. Bendigo, Vic  
spring 1929
4. Upwey, Vic (Dandenong Ra.) summer  
1929
5. The Patch, Vic (Dandenong Ra.)  
summer 1929

Calls of the birds at 1, 3 and 5 were quite distinct from those of 2 and 4, so he concluded that they were from two different species. He attempted to verbalise the sounds of the calls, also noted the pitch variation and the time in seconds between the calls, 3 seconds for 1, 3 and 5, and 1 second for 2 and 4.

He told John that he had only been interested in birds for the past two and a half years but he realised that the calls were quite distinct although he could find no reference to the differences (in the calls) in any literature. Several RAOU members he approached could not help him. He queried John if he was correct in thinking the two different calls were from two distinct species and mentioned that a local friend Marc Cohn told him that all the eggs he had collected in the

Bendigo district had been of a pink-spotted variety (i.e. the narrow-billed, now the Horsfield's bronze-cuckoo). He concludes, "I should be very much interested to hear what your experience in the subject has been, if it is not troubling you too much".

In his reply dated 20 May 1930, John Sutton sent Henry his experiences of the cuckoos and under separate cover, he sent a copy of some parts of the *South Australian Ornithologist* (SA Orn) containing an article on bird calls by Mr Brewster-Jones, a teacher of music. John claimed to be ignorant of musical notation so had to rely on phonetic words or syllables when this was possible. He listed the 6 species of cuckoos seen in South Australia (SA) – the pallid, fan-tailed, black-eared, narrow-billed bronze-cuckoo, golden bronze-cuckoo and channel-billed, and added that in Victoria these occurred, except for the channel-billed as well as the brush or square-tailed, the shining bronze-cuckoo and the koel. He described the calls he had heard of the first five and the koel. The fan-tailed he found impossible to syllabilise but wrote that Mr Brewster-Jones described it as "a succession of falling tremolos", which he could imitate perfectly by using his uvula — also an occasional one-note call, long and low. His description of the black-eared cuckoo's call is amusing – 'feeu-u' repeated 4-6 times, low, then some quick sharp squeaks like a bird being choked when singing. The sharp squeak part is not often given. The call of the narrow-billed is quite different from the golden bronze-cuckoo, a plaintive long drawn-out double call, whistled fairly slowly and repeated 10 times or more and sounding as if one were calling up a dog but not loudly. John remarked "On one occasion I had an opportunity of observing one of these birds while calling on the ground, being well hidden from it by a bush. With head well thrown back, and widely distended mouth, it commenced to utter its plaintive notes and which to my mind more resembled the mewing of a cat than anything else".

He agreed that the sounds Henry suggested were correct for the narrow-billed bronze-cuckoo but was at a loss to understand the sound or word he suggested for the golden bronze-cuckoo and thought that the sounds from different localities of the same species calling varied and could be considered almost a dialect. Several people out in the bush together and hearing the same bird calling could and do describe the same sounds differently. He gave some examples of North's descriptions of the 2 common cuckoos Henry had enquired about. John concluded with: "I shall be happy to answer any other inquiries you may wish to make".

#### Of Sickness, Photography and Honeyeaters

Henry replied on 28 May 1930 to say that he had received John's letter and the copy of the SA Orn and was very grateful for the trouble taken on his behalf. He found the Brewster-Jones article of exceptional interest because as an invalid he was more able to study bird calls than other phases of bird-life. He was glad to know about the bird calls, but could not reconcile Mr Brewster-Jones' description of the call of the golden bronze-cuckoo with his own interpretation of it. He offered to pass on any information about Bendigo birds should John require any and thanked him again for his prompt reply.

On 7 October 1930 John Sutton again wrote to Henry re bird calls. Because of Henry's interest in the subject (and touched no doubt by his being an invalid) John sent some more parts of the SA Orn which contained Sutton's notes on bird calls, mainly from accounts of trips made by members of the SAOA in various localities in SA. He drew his attention to how the calls of the yellow-plumed honeyeater differed in NE Eyre Peninsula from each other, although the birds were separated by only a few miles.

Henry replied from Butzbach, Yandoit in Victoria on 16 October 1930, quite overcome by John's kind gesture in posting the copies of the SA Orn which had been sent on to him from Bendigo. He congratulated the SAOA

Unfortunately the following biographical information about Henry Boss-Walker, the subject of Historical Series 2 and 3 was inadvertently omitted from the December 2002 Newsletter.

## ***Henry B. Boss-Walker – Biographical information***

Henry Beavor Boss-Walker was born in Hobart, Tasmania in October 1903 and he was the eldest son of six boys – Harry (as Henry was known to his family), Ian, Geoff, Hubert, Eric and Ken - their parents being Tom and Maude. His grandparent's migrated from the north of England to Tasmania and began an import export business. Harry's grandfather left the proceeds of the entire estate to Harry with the complete understanding of his brothers because of his invalid state. After early schooling in Hobart, Harry went as a boarder to Caulfield Grammar in Melbourne, where in 1921 he graduated dux of his class in his final year. He wished to become a medical missionary and began medicine at Melbourne University. In 1927 in his final year Harry was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and had to give it up. It was after this and because of a growing interest in bird watching that his correspondence (1930-32) with John Sutton, Secretary of the SAOA, began. He remained in Victoria until 1941 (even though the correspondence ended in 1932) as he thought the climate was more beneficial than in Tasmania. He married a Victorian lass Marjorie Sproule in 1941 and the couple returned to the family home in Hobart where they lived with his parents for the remainder of the war years. In 1946, they bought a house "St Chads" in Ferntree a bushy suburb on the slopes of Mt Wellington.

Michael Boss-Walker (nephew of Harry and son of the youngest brother Ken) remembers visiting this house as a schoolboy and helping feed the birds with handfuls of sugar and a sugar solution and standing perfectly still as the birds ate from his hands. He found it hard not to giggle when the birds settled on his head or walked along his bare arms. His uncle remained devoted to the birds in the

bush around the home and continued with his photography. There were no children of the marriage and Michael remembers Harry as being a pasty-faced elderly man in a rocking chair — on the verandah in fine weather — always in a dressing gown and pyjamas. However, at some stage his forthright mother declared that one either died of T.B. or got better, so it was decided that he should undergo tests — these showed no trace of active disease. He forthwith gave up his invalid life, began to dress normally and, as he got stronger, began to do some work for his next brother Ian who owned a manufacturing agency.

Harry joined the Field Naturalists Club in Hobart and became well known for his interest in and knowledge of birds, his photography and his ability to tame the birds in the bush surrounding his home. He was so successful that at one time the Governor of Tasmania, Lord Rowallan (Chief Scout) paid him a visit. [Lord Rowallan was Governor of Tasmania from November 1959 to March 1963.] One delightful story Michael related was the purchase of a small Austin car by Harry and Marjorie. Harry's sole function was to sit in the passenger seat and pull out the choke for Marjorie to hang her handbag there. In 1967 and just before the tragic bushfires around Hobart, which destroyed "St Chads", Harry and Marjorie sold their home in Ferntree and moved to Sandy Bay where they lived until their death, both in the 1970s.

I am indebted to Michael for supplying the information about Henry. He lives in Somerset near Burnie where he is the Harbour Master.

**Muriel Reid, November 2002**

on the quality of the SA Orn, which he hadn't seen before his receipt earlier in the year of the first part sent by John Sutton. Unemployed at that time, he hoped that some day he could subscribe to it, then went on to say that three years before he was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis, just as he was about to complete his medical course at Melbourne University, subsequently he had had to go carefully. Less than three years before he had begun the study of birds, before that his ignorance was only matched by his indifference. In Hobart, Robert Hall, an RAOU member, proved a good and helpful friend as did Marc Cohn, who often took him bird watching around Bendigo in his car. Stimulated by Marc, he began to try bird photography, derived great pleasure from it and sent to John Sutton some of his efforts. One was of the nest of the black honeyeater, breeding around Bendigo for some years and with a magnifying glass could be seen one young bird, well fledged. He described the nest as like a small version of a woodswallows, about 2'9" from the ground in a small acacia. He described the male bird's call — a single drawn-out plaintive whistle almost a squeak usually when perched on the topmost twig of a shrub, the usual attitude being with the bill pointed skyward. On the wing the bird "makes a sort of twitter". He noted a great difference between male and female, the young something like the female.

Henry assured John that honeyeaters were in good numbers around Bendigo, including the painted and blue-faced. Henry had seen 17 species while Marc Cohn had added the yellow-plumed and striped honeyeaters. The commonest honeyeater was the yellow-tufted, the regent honeyeater was common for most of the year but, with the fuscous, seemed markedly nomadic. Hearing as well as seeing a reed warbler on 6<sup>th</sup> July surprised Henry with no sightings on subsequent visits to the reedbeds until September 7<sup>th</sup>. He wondered what John's experience of reed warblers might be, and further questions he asked were about pardalotes — he was unable

to discern the "tip" or red spot at the tip of the white wing streak, nor could he see it at Yandoit where he was hearing and seeing them daily. He described the call and wanted to know how to tell the difference between the red-tipped and the striated when he couldn't see the tip — and also the way to distinguish between fairy and tree martins on the wing.

#### Of Swifts and More Honeyeaters

The reply to the above is missing, as is the next letter from Henry to John written on 29 December 1931 and answered by John Sutton on 8 January 1932, thanking Henry for his notes on fork-tailed and spine-tailed swifts (nowadays the latter is the white-throated needletail). Henry must have asked about the call of the whistling eagle (kite), which John sought to describe although claiming to know nothing of music. By whistling through his teeth, he sometimes could start the Zoo birds calling but warned Henry that a starling could imitate the call very well indeed. On the subject of Deniliquin birds John had no knowledge or experience, as for yellow-throated miners he thought the calls were similar to noisy miners. John had heard the dusky miner (presumably the black-eared miner) only once but thought the call quite unlike the other miners. The brush (now little) wattlebird's call can be identified quickly and around Robe in SA can be heard most of the day. John had not seen or heard a little friarbird, but he had seen and heard the chestnut-crowned babbler in the Murray mallee near Loxton. He went on to write that "one of the calls sounded to me like the beginning of the laughing kookaburra's call heard at a distance", while the pied butcherbird he knew along the Murray before he began bird-watching and thought it a more beautiful singer than the grey. The broad-billed roller (now the dollar-bird) - John had heard an adult bird calling 'kerrip' several times repeated while a young bird in the same tree called 'kurrip kurrip'. There was a PS to this letter, which must have answered a large variety of questions — "I am always pleased to help you in any bird questions".