

# ***SAOA Historical Series No 25***

## ***Walter J Harvey Part II***

Harvey and Sutton appear to have met on at least one occasion, as Walter's letter of March 31<sup>st</sup> 1929 thanks Sutton for his kindness to him at the Museum, but offers no clue as to what they talked about or what specimens they looked at. Sutton asked all his correspondents to write a list of the birds of their area, having provided them with a copy of his Checklist of the Birds of South Australia. This no doubt allowed Sutton to ascertain how competent the observer was and to begin the process of sorting out the incorrect records. This was a comparatively simple process with Walter, as his first article appeared in Volume 9, Part 8 of the *Ornithologist* published in October 1928 and the list was only sent to Sutton in July of that year. The article simply listed the birds seen in the district that he was sure of. Quite a few more notes appeared in the *SAOrn* over the next eight years covering new records, breeding observations and interesting anecdotes about birds. Walter was a very keen observer and diligent about writing down what he saw and his interest in the natural world had begun when he was a child. For example he documents in the letter of 18<sup>th</sup> October 1929 that a hawk he has seen flying at Coombe was familiar to him from his boyhood at Salisbury.

The correspondence begins by chance almost as Walter had written several times to "The Australasian", the last time mentioning that a parrot he had seen at Coombe was identified by Mr McDonald as a Bourke Parrot. This led John Sutton to write to "The Australasian" pointing out that from the description given the bird could not be that species. Presumably he used his home address in the letter to the paper, as Walter's first letter is addressed to Sutton at his Mitcham residence. There is no address on the subsequent letters which simply begin 'Dear Sir' or 'Dear Mr Sutton' and probably went to Sutton at the South Australian Museum where he was Assistant Honorary Curator. He signs himself WJ

Harvey or Walter J Harvey. All Walter's letters are written in ink on lined paper, in a very legible hand, and with excellent spelling. He appears to have had a good education and to be well read, as he makes several references to literary or mythical characters. There is also a shrewdness in his character, as for example when he knows that Sutton is doubtful about a few of his records early in their correspondence and he defends his record of a Scarlet Honeyeater. He says: "I know that at present you think me a bit of a Tom Pepper to put it mildly but if it was what I think quite likely some day it will appear in our State again, if it does I will be pleased & you can wipe off a black mark from my name."

This reference had me googling Tom Pepper to find out who he was although I had a fair idea what Walter meant. My investigations came up with a phrase. 'a bigger liar than Tom Pepper', apparently still in use in South Yorkshire and Wales. There was also a suggestion that Tom may have been a character in a Mark Twain novel.

On another occasion Walter is describing an encounter with a snake, which he thought he had killed. However, when he opened the safe where the 'dead' body was held, "I was startled to find that instead of being dead Joe Blake was quite willing to settle accounts!" — a lovely example of rhyming slang. During a visit to Buck's Camp his party encountered a flock of tens of thousands of Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos, which he described as "a fine sight that would have been appreciated a lot more if our ears had been treated in the manner of Jason's galley-rowers, the noise was deafening". In the margin Sutton has written in pencil, 'Ulysses?' — obviously Greek legend was not Sutton's specialty. After the experience described in Part I, where Walter's financial situation was a little rocky, he told Sutton that he had ordered Newton's 'Dictionary of Birds' from Preece, but that he had ended up with a second hand edition that he paid more for than he would have liked (24/-). About the same time he had purchased Cayley's 'What Bird is That?' for 11/6 and uncharacteristically does not tell us how he liked it. He had a copy of Leach's book that must

have been well-thumbed as he often refers to checking the details of birds he saw with the description therein.

Walter's family appeared to have at least a passing acquaintance with some other ornithologists, as one of the early letters refers to Dr Morgan telling his parents some years before that Walter would not need glasses before the age of 45. This suggests that Morgan was impressed with his eyesight. The same letter recommends that Sutton could check about certain birds that Walter is unsure of with Mr Alfred Crompton, one time President of the SAOA and manager of Elder Smith & Co. He had visited with Walter's father in 1914 or 1915. Apart from this and the correspondence with Sutton, Walter appears to have had little contact with other birdwatchers. The mention of Dr Morgan and Mr Crompton may indicate that his father was interested in birds, although Walter does not confirm this in any of the letters, despite several references to his father.

The correspondence between Harvey and Sutton is unusual in one way, in that we appear to have all the letters from Harvey to Sutton, but only four of Sutton's carbon copy replies are extant. A check of the catalogues of the SAOA Correspondence for the period did bring to light an extra three letters and a Christmas card from Walter to John Sutton but no replies from Sutton. So we can only surmise from the few pencilled notes in the margins of Walter's letters and Walter's responses what Sutton's letters contained. The letters from 1928 mainly focus on settling the correct identification of birds for the list to be published, with three species giving Sutton the most cause for concern — the Winking Owl (now Barking), Little Cuckoo-shrike (now White-bellied) and Striated Field-wren. Walter is familiar with the Boobook Owl and has recently shot an owl that he did not think was this species; in the letter of 28<sup>th</sup> July he offers to send the carcass which is not too smelly if Sutton wants it. His description of the bird would be enough to put most people off:

"I did not skin it but put it into an old safe in case I should ever want to refer to it again,

today I had a look at it & it had fallen & was doubled up but if you like I will send it along, it would do for identification purposes & although not fresh, does not smell as high as might be expected."

We do not know what John Sutton replied to this kind offer but the bird was not posted to the Museum as Walter's next letter of 4<sup>th</sup> September makes plain:

"In regards to the owl in question I have been out of luck. I thought that it would be safe to hang out in the sun to finish drying but the flies got to it & under the circumstances I don't think it is worth sending up as I am going up to Salisbury at the end of the week to stop with my people for Show week & whilst in Town I will go in to the Museum & if a Winking Owl is in one of the show-cases I can compare it with the Boobook then."

Regarding the Cuckoo-shrike, Sutton was obviously suspicious of this record due to the species' rarity. However, he must have been convinced of his suspicions by Walter's description of it as being the finest songster in his parts. In the letter following this claim, Walter tells Sutton that he had shot a bird that he thought was the Cuckoo-shrike, made a very bad skin and sent it to the Museum. He now thinks that it is the Grey Shrike-thrush. Sutton has written a 'yes' in the margin of this letter. Regarding the Field-wren, Walter is fairly sure in the letter of 28<sup>th</sup> July that he is right with this identification, as he found a nest on the ground once containing two eggs and he still has one of them. However in the next letter he confesses that he was wrong and that he has found similar eggs in a covered nest on the ground which he believes belong to the Chestnut-rumped Thornbill.

Walter was clearly not averse to shooting birds if he thought that he needed a closer look to identify them or needed a specimen to send to the Museum for verification. Because we do not have most of Sutton's replies, we do not know how much Sutton influenced him in this pursuit. He may have encouraged Walter to skin birds as he did with some other of his correspondents who sent him decomposing and no doubt very smelly birds. Walter did attempt to make some skins, but several times admits that he is a very bad shot and at one stage one of his guns was out of order so that birds he did shoot were often in too poor a

condition to make a skin. He does not seem to have been interested in egg collecting as such, although as we see from his experience with the questionable Field-wren eggs, he did on occasions collect eggs for reference. He also mentions that he had taken some eggs to blow, but his cat had eaten them before he had the chance to do so. On the question of a permit to collect birds, the only mention is in an early letter of 14<sup>th</sup> June 1929 in which Walter tells Sutton that he has been granted a permit to collect for the Museum until 31<sup>st</sup> December of the same year in the Counties of Cardwell and Buckingham. He adds that he would like to get that extended next year to include also the Counties of Chandos and Buccleuch and to be able to keep some specimens as a reference collection.

Several letters suggest that Walter was not keen on shooting birds, except where he was unsure of the identification or Sutton was keen to have a specimen for the Museum. For example, on 1 November 1928 he relates how when mustering for drafting after shearing he came across a family of Variegated Wrens, a male, female and four young able to fly only a few yards. "...the male bird tried the crippled bird stunt & repeatedly I nearly got my hat over him. I think that I could have shot him with the pistol that I had only I did not like to as I don't [sic] think that the hen could feed them yet but I did have a splendid view of him often within two feet...Tomorrow I intend to go out & try to secure a photo of him as I think he was the most beautiful bird that I have seen..."

Several years later, after commenting that he had seen an article on songsters in *The Advertiser* by Sutton and Captain White, Walter is surprised that neither mentioned the Silvereye, the song of which he likes the "best of all... very sweet & well sustained with plenty of variety. Makes me think of a glorified Black-Bird's song". So while having to make a living off the land and working extremely hard and for long hours, he was still able to appreciate the beauty of birds, both their appearance and their song. Mention is often made of travel by horseback around the farm and, while this would have been

troublesome in terms of looking after and feeding horses, it would also have been a wonderful way to see the natural world up close. Many times in letters to Sutton he regrets that he does not have more time for the pursuit of his ornithological interests.

Cars were clearly a luxury and car travel is only mentioned occasionally. Walter travelled to New South Wales on two occasions in 1930, travelling with Mr Bennett the second time. He mentions seeing a cuckoo (probably a Fan-tailed) when motoring through Coomandook with a friend and in June 1929 saw a similar bird at Kumorna halfway between Coombe and Tintinara, but does not indicate how he got there. His father had a car which Walter was hoping he would bring to Coombe for the shearing in 1929, as this might allow him to attend a day or two of the RAOU Campout at Salt Creek. However his father was loath to drive that far so he did not attend the Campout. In a letter of July 1932 he tells Sutton that he attended a meeting in Tintinara on Saturday night, getting back to Coombe at 3am. No mention is made of the mode of transport, but the late hour of return suggests horseback.

Every now and then when time could be found away from farming Walter went birdwatching further afield, for example he made several trips to the lagoons at Mt Charles (12 miles south-west of Coombe) and on one occasion at least visited Buck's Camp Well (now in Ngarkat Conservation Park). During 1930 Harvey stayed on Willotia Station on the Darling in NSW for a month early in the year and then made a second trip with Mr W.E. Bennett four months later. On the latter trip they were helping with the shearing on Dramore Station and minding flocks of lambing ewes on Willotia. Substantial rain had fallen in the intervening months and continued during their stay, breaking the drought of 1927-29.

The trips to western NSW are puzzling. The first mention of the NSW station country is in a letter of 8<sup>th</sup> April 1930 in the general SAOA correspondence. In this letter Walter states that he has enclosed a list of birds observed on a trip to Willotia Station owned by Messrs W. A. Bennett and Sons and that the three year drought there has just broken. This list of birds seen between 26<sup>th</sup> February and 17<sup>th</sup> March 1930 is attached to the bundle of letters that form the basis of this series

of articles. The next mention of NSW comes from a letter of 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1930 in which Walter tells Sutton that he has accepted a position on a station there and is leaving in July. He has been at Coombe for eight years already and feels that his brother is now old enough to look after the property. Moreover he confides to Sutton that he is hoping that his health will benefit from the drier climate as the Coombe winters increasingly aggravate his "catarrh" [a respiratory disorder].

Harvey writes to Sutton again on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1930 mentioning that he has been back from his trip to the western district of NSW for some weeks and goes on to describe some of the activities and birds from the trip. However he makes no mention of the job nor why he has decided to return to Coombe. He travelled to NSW with Mr W.E. Bennett and certainly gives no indication that he had a falling out with him. Perhaps the job was only ever for a few months. He notes that the country is in much better heart than in his trip of four months ago. The two men spent two weeks at Willotia before moving to Dramore Station, 140 miles away, where they were shearing. On weekends or when it was too wet for shearing they returned to Willotia to check up on the sheep as the blowflies were very bad and the ewes were lambing. It is surprising that an article based on the list of birds from NSW was not published in the *SAOrn*, as most of Walter's observations from Coombe and surrounds were published and he and Sutton corresponded about the identity of several species from the trip. One of these was the White-browed Treecreeper that Walter saw along the Darling on Willotia Station in a eucalypt and, on Sutton's enquiry, stated that there were no black oaks in the vicinity.

As was usual with country correspondents, Sutton published snippets from their letters where they were directly relevant to birds. Harvey's publications in the *SAOrn* begin in 1928 with an article on the terrestrial birds seen in a 6 mile radius of Coombe and waterbirds from near Mt Charles. This is simply a list with a few notes on breeding. A note in 1929 adds a few species to the list as

well as talking about the damage to crops done by emus and 'crows'. This theme is elaborated on in subsequent letters and notes. By late October 1928 there were 200 to 300 crows daily on the oat crop as well as emus, with Walter counting up to 30 on crops in some years. Further afield near Keith, flocks of up to 200 emus had been recorded on crops. Walter adds that the emus begin to arrive in the district in spring, with the larger numbers and breeding occurring when the crops come into ear. In June and August 1929 Walter chased parties of emus and managed to secure a bird. The first, an immature bird, had a stomach full of wheat — some just planted and others germinated. The second was an adult female whose stomach was full of the stamens of the broad-leaved banksia. Pieces of charcoal were often found in their stomachs — presumably these were used to help grind their food.

An Advertiser article in 1924 indicated that farmers lost 600 pounds from emu damage to crops and Walter thought this was an underestimate. Some landowners put a bonus on every emu killed. As people worry them off one property they congregate in greater numbers in another place. Walter's letter of 24 January 1930 indicates that emus had not been such a problem in the harvest of 1929, although his brother who was there on holidays (presumably his youngest brother, John then aged 15) had shot one and the dogs had got another. Both were immature birds and feeding on the stubble. However, writing in 1932, Walter mentions that there are between 20 and 36 on the crop every day. Some of the settlers were using poisoned wheat to deal with them; Walter bemoans the loss of his staghound and until they get another, he has to rely on shooting to scare them off.

The crows (later named as Australian Ravens by Walter, but more likely Little Ravens) were a constant nuisance to him, through their depredations on the fowls' eggs. In 1929 Walter observes that they often collected a dozen eggs a day when they were shearing and about the homestead all day. He managed to shoot a couple and the others gave the place a wide berth for a while. His youngest brother had caught five in an hour in the summer by lying under a trough and catching them by the legs when they came into drink. Late in 1928 several hundred crows were proving a nuisance in the crops so Walter was planning to make a trap for them as they were elusive when he had his gun with him.

*To be continued.*