

SAOA HISTORICAL SERIES NUMBER 5

MAX S. KUSS PART II

Since the publication of the last newsletter (March 2003) I have made contact with Brian Kuss, Max's second son, who has provided me with information about his father's life based on memories, family photographs and written material. Therefore Historical Series 5 will be devoted to biographical and additional ornithological information about Max Kuss.

Firstly I want to correct an assumption I made in the previous article, where on pii I surmised that Max had met John Sutton, based on a letter that mentions that Max had met the ornithologist at the museum in about January 1933. I now realise that this refers to Dr A.M.Morgan, who was Ornithologist at the SA Museum until his death in 1934, when Sutton took over.

Max Sigismund Kuss was born on 11th May 1905 at Mannum on the River Murray, where his father was the Lutheran minister. He was the youngest of Ludwig and Mathilde's (called Tilly) twelve children; however only 9 children – four boys and five girls, survived to adulthood. Ludwig (1859-1940) and Tilly (1860-1940) had both emigrated from Germany in their early twenties and were married in Tanunda. Ludwig trained as a Lutheran minister at Neuendettelsau in Germany but began his Australian church life as a Lutheran Minister at Hahndorf following in the footsteps of Fritche and Kavel. However, they lived most of their lives in the Riverland, where Ludwig was a pioneering Lutheran minister at Mannum and later at Waikerie (Lowbank) and Murray Bridge. At one time Ludwig regularly walked from Mannum to Lowbank for services! Tilly did not learn more than a few words of English, so the children would have been brought up in a household where German was spoken.

Max's parents died within a few weeks of each other and are buried in the Murray Bridge Cemetery.

Max attended schools at Mannum and high school at Gladstone where an uncle was headmaster, and later went to Unley High. He trained as a schoolteacher but became ill and did not graduate. Several of his siblings had tuberculosis (although none died thereof at an



Max at his wedding in 1938

early age) and his illness was also respiratory in nature. In his twenties, Max used horse teams for land clearing and also turned his hand to woodcutting, both in the Riverland of South Australia and in Western Australia where his father had financed him to buy land. Drought caused his farming demise in WA. By the time of the first letter to John Sutton in 1933 (aged 27) he was living at Lowbank, presumably with his

parents, and he spent a lot of the next few years observing birds and collecting eggs that he sent to J.N.McGill for his collection (some of these are still in the SA Museum collection). We learn this detail from an exercise book that Brian has in which Max wrote a couple of talks that he presented to the Young Peoples Society (YPS) of the Murray Bridge Lutheran Church. But more of this later.

As the letters to Sutton confirm, Max moved to Murray Bridge in October 1933 and worked very hard building up a poultry farm, which he kept for about 25 years. Max married Sarah Marjorie Durward on 4 July 1938 and during the war years two sons were born – Eric in 1940 and Brian in 1942. In about 1950 the family moved to Adelaide, where Max bought a grocers shop in Kensington Gardens (the corner Serv-Well

store!). This was sold in about 1965, just before supermarkets began impacting on the viability of the old-style grocery store, and Max worked for the SA Railways until his retirement in 1970. From 1965 until his death on Christmas Eve 1987, Max lived at St Marys, a southern suburb of Adelaide. Max's wife, Sarah, died on 27th May 2003.

Brian remembers that his father loved the river and the bush, and although it may seem anomalous that he was a land clearer and woodcutter for a time, this was an age with few opportunities for jobs involved with conservation. He continued in the family religious vein as a lay reader in the Lutheran church in Murray Bridge. Max was well read and a close student of anything that he was involved in, especially in the lengths he went to in recording his observations and activities.

As a poultry farmer, he observed all his fowls individually and kept meticulous records of their life history, health and egg-laying abilities so that he could develop a robust flock. We know this from Brian's early memories, but also from a talk that he delivered to the YPS on a system of egg-collecting called trapnesting. This involved making available a number of nests for fowls to lay in which the birds could not get themselves out of, so that it was obvious to the farmer which birds had laid which eggs. As birds were all marked with a numbered leg band on the first occasion of laying, records could be kept of the size, shape and condition of eggs, the overall health of birds and the reliability of laying or broodiness of individual birds. Max explains in his talk that he had:

"a note book with all the numbers written down one underneath the others and opposite the numbers I have date columns ruled, marked into weeks. When I take an egg from a nest, I note the number of the hen, and make a stroke in the correct date column opposite the number in the book."

At the end of each week Max tallied the eggs laid per fowl and entered then in a permanent book and also tallied them on a monthly and annual basis. He even went to the extreme of weighing all eggs for a few months in the year to gain additional information on the size of eggs laid by his hens. His talk goes into the

advantages and disadvantages of trapnesting in great detail and in his opinion the former greatly outweighed the latter. He clearly was an excellent poultry farmer and this observation is reinforced by the fact that the egg-laying record he won at the Parafield Poultry Centre in the 1940s stood for decades. This was for a hen that laid well over 400 eggs in a year — more than one egg per day. Max continued his meticulous recording when in Adelaide, where he built a sparrow trap in the late 1950s and kept a tally of all captured sparrows well into the 1980s.

In terms of his ornithological observations and activities, the only records that the family have are a talk to the YPS on ornithology (not dated), a letter from J.N.McGilp and a small notebook in which Max detailed the sets of eggs that he collected. Much of this information is contained in the letters that he wrote to John Sutton in the 1930s, which were summarised in the three articles published in the *SA Orn* that I wrote about in Historical Series No. 4. However we learn from these documents that Max did collect eggs, which a reading of the letters to Sutton had not elucidated. The McGilp letter of 16 December 1933 thanks Max for his letter of 14 December and mentions previous donation of eggs to the J.N.McGilp Collection. He also refers to a list of birds that Max had sent him and offers sets of nine species of birds — all fairly common and found about Murray Bridge so he doubts that Max will be very interested in them. McGilp also refers to the fact that his collection is now in the SA Museum (it was donated in 1930, Reid 1999) and that, although this is the best place for it, he does miss having it at home for easy reference. Max was also believed to be the first person in Australia to observe and document the interbreeding of a White-backed and a Black-backed Magpie.

The egg collection notebook contains information on sets of eggs taken in the Riverland. The data recorded includes bird species, number of eggs, date, locality, measurements of nest, stage of incubation and collector. Many of Max's sets were donated to the McGilp collection but what became of his own eggs is unknown. The YPS address tells us much about the reasons for Max's

interest in birds and how this was manifested, as well as reinforcing his reputation for meticulous documentation. The address begins with a description of the spiritual aspect of birdwatching – that joy we get from watching wild birds going about their business. In Max's case there was a religious element, as he saw the hand of God at work, which he describes in a Wordsworthian style: "Witness this, and then try to deny the thrill, the spiritual uplift that comes, and the realization that an Almighty and Invisible Being is present, pervading the whole atmosphere, watching over, and providing for their needs... Observe how unconcernedly, and without conscious effort, each species performs just those acts peculiar to it; how each individual of a species understands the movements and twitterings of another individual of the same species."

He goes on to answer unspoken criticism that collectors might be seen as destructive by claiming that getting a permit is very difficult and that authorized collectors are not indiscriminate in their collecting, but seek only to collect if they can add to scientific knowledge. For example, he says that he has less than 100 sets in his collection, but he would have examined several thousand sets without disturbing them. He also points out that most birds will relay if they lose a clutch of eggs. This leads Max on to a discussion of egg pigmentation and that, if consecutive clutches are taken, the amount of pigment in the eggs gradually reduces. He took six clutches from the same Starling hen and by the fourth clutch the loss of colour was apparent and the final set was pure white rather than the normal sky blue colour. Max acknowledges that collecting of birds for skins is more harmful, but justifies this by the small number of authorized collectors in the State and the fact that making a skin is sufficiently time consuming and arduous to prevent unnecessary collecting. Collective wisdom supports this view of the effects of collecting on bird conservation, as it is well known that clearance of habitat has been the most important factor in bird decline.

Observations on the information collected during bird skinning, including the stomach, crop and gizzard contents, lead on to the

benefits of birds to agriculture and man in general. He does acknowledge, however, that birds can be beneficial in one place and/or time but destructive in another situation. He gives the example of Starlings again, where in the orchards of the Upper Murray Irrigation Settlements, flocks of up to one or two thousand are pests of fruit. But set against this he mentions the grasshopper plague of last year (as the talk is undated I do not know which year this refers to), during which it was common to see flocks of several hundred Starlings pursuing the hoppers. Max goes on to describe the experience of Dr C. Ryan and Mr Le Souef who found a breeding colony of Straw-necked Ibis in the Riverina. They estimated the flock to be 240,000 birds and, on taking some specimens, found that on average each bird contained 2,000 young grasshoppers. He concludes that each day the ibis colony would be consuming 480 million hoppers.

In the next few pages Max talks about bird predators like the fox, currawongs and birds of prey, and the activities of cuckoos — nest parasites. He then ranges on to the great variety of birds found in Australia and gives some details about the moundbuilders, which leads on to a discussion of the connection between egg size and the stage of development of the young bird at hatching. We know from Max the poultry farmer how interested he is in eggs, so it is no wonder that he is intrigued by the differences between the relatively well-developed Malleefowl and domestic fowl chicks compared with naked, blind and helpless pigeon chicks.

The YPS address concludes with Max pondering why the great wealth of birds in Australia is not better known amongst the populace generally. He speculates that it is partly to do with Australia being a young country, peopled largely by folk whose parents or grandparents were emigrants. Nature in Australia seemed foreign, different and inferior to those who harked back to the old countries and even our schoolbooks were written in Great Britain for British boys and girls. Most of the poetry taught to Australian children was English and immortalized the skylark, thrush and nightingale, while Australia has songsters like the lyrebird and

magpie that equal if not outclass them. He then quotes from a curious Australian poem — ‘Love’s Young Dream’, using this as an argument as to the difficulties in the way of native poets. I have a different view that it is a very poor poem, but I shall let you be the judge of that:

“Sweetheart, we watched the evening sky
grow pale,
And drowsy sweetness stole away our senses,
While ran adown the swamp the Pectoral
Rail,
The shy *Hypotaemidia philippinensis*.

How sweet a thing is love! Sweet as the rose,
Fragrant as flowers, fair as the sunlight
beaming!

Only the Sooty Oystercatcher knows
How sweet to us, as there we lingered
dreaming.

Dear, all the secret’s ours. The Sharp-tailed
Stint
Spied, but he will not tell — though you and I
Paid Cupid’s debts from Love’s own golden
mint,
While Yellow-bellied Shrike-Tits fluttered
nigh.

The Honey-eaters heard; the Fuscous-yea,
The Warty-faced, the Lunulated, too;
But this kind of feathered tribe will never say
What words you said to me, or I to you.

The golden bloom was glorious in the furze,
And gentle twittering came from the copses;
It was the Carinated Flycatchers,
Or else the black *Monarcha melanopsis*.

That day our troth we plighted — blissful hour,
Beginning of a joy a whole life long!
And while the wide world seemed to be in
flower,
The Chestnut-rumped Ground-Wren burst
forth in song.”

The YPS address ends with Max pointing out that our “cultural cringe” (my words) is changing, that nature education in schools is improving, Field Naturalists Clubs are being

formed and ornithological organizations are always keen to help. He goes on to say:

“The Association is a suspicious body, and takes no one’s word for granted. Data and proof must be given before they are satisfied, and arguments are common. This is an advantage because it promotes keenness and enthusiasm even amongst those who find themselves in the wrong”.

Little has changed in this respect in the past 70 years, as I reflect on the debate that occurred a few years ago in the SAOA Newsletter between those who thought we were too critical and those who believed that judicious and sensitive questioning was essential to maintain the credibility of an organization.

In a list of members published in the *SA Orn* of April 1935 (Vol 13, Pt 2, pp 67-68), Max Kuss is listed with a joining date of 1933, when his correspondence with John Sutton appears to have begun. I do not know how long he remained a member, but his name does not appear in a list published in April 1941 (Vol 15, Pt 6, pp131-132), the first such list published since 1935. As the correspondence with Sutton appears to have stopped in mid-1936 it may be that Max was becoming less keen at that time and ceased his membership then. There is no mention of Max Kuss in the general correspondence of the SAOA during the 1930s. It is probable that the intense effort he put in to establish the poultry farm, helping to look after his ailing parents at Murray Bridge and the courting of his future wife took his energy and time away from formal aspects of ornithology. There is little doubt he maintained it as an interest all his life.

References

Reid, M. 1999. Honorary Members, in Collier, R., Hatch, J., Matheson, B. & Russell, T. (eds) *Birds, Birders and Birdwatching 1899-1999*. SAOA, Adelaide.

Penny Paton, May 2003