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NORMAN HILES PEARSE (1883-1966)

Norman Hiles Pearse, the second son of Thomas Henry Pearse and Emily Elizabeth Pearse (nee Hiles) was born at Hallett on 23 January 1883. There were six children in the family – the first five born to Emily Elizabeth, who died on 12 October 1891; the sixth was born to Charlotte Adeline Louise Pearse (nee Hiles), Thomas Henry's second wife and the younger sister of Emily Elizabeth. Charlotte died on 13 July



1895, a little over a year after the birth of a son, Tom Hiles Pearse, who predeceased her on 20 March 1895. Following the death of Charlotte, Thomas married again, this time to Eveline Mathilde Herminie Meinck, on 20 January 1897. There were no children from this marriage.

Emily Elizabeth's and Charlotte's father was George Hiles (1817-1902) who arrived in South Australia on the barque "John" from London on 5 February 1840. He was successively a farm labourer, a carter and a pastoralist. He lived at Hallett and Mt Bryan and also held the Munjibbie lease, some 70km north east of Burra. The Munjibbie lease carried some 6,000 sheep (Baillere's Gazetteer 1866). Hiles Lagoon near Terowie is named after George Hiles (Manning 1990).

The oldest child of Thomas and Emily, Bertram Wellesley Pearse, was born on 20 September 1881. Bertram served in the AIF 3rd Light Horse Regiment and was killed at Gallipoli on 20 May 1915, leaving a wife Irene Elphinstone Pearse (nee Sawers) and a 10 year old daughter Beryl Dorothy Elphinstone Pearse.

Norman, who always signed his name N. Hiles Pearse, gained a Roseworthy Diploma in Agriculture in 1902 (Honour Roll, Roseworthy Campus, University of Adelaide). On 10 October 1907 he married Ruth Olive Killicoat at St Mary's Church Koorunga (Burra). Ruth (born 10 June 1883) was the daughter of Philip Lauder Killicoat and Mary Killicoat (nee Cave). A daughter born to Ruth on 6 August 1909 lived only 36 hours. There are no records of any other children

born to Norman and Ruth. Ruth died on 17 August 1924 and Norman married her younger sister, Edna Langshaw Killicoat (born 17 May 1885) on 1 October 1925, and there are no records of any children. [In a letter to John Sutton of 18 July 1929 found after this paper was written, Norman mentions that his daughter is a keen student of nature, so we know that there was at least one child, presumably from his first marriage – P. Paton.]

At some time prior to 1930 the Pearse family moved to "The Gums" station at Florieton, some 40km south east of Burra on the main road to Morgan. They were connected to the telephone exchange at Koorunga, their mail address was Florieton, and goods were consigned by rail to Mt Mary, 30km south east of Florieton on the railway from Eudunda to Morgan.

Norman and Emily stayed at "The Gums" until about 1942 when they moved to 43 Harrow Road, East Adelaide (now St Peters). Finally by 1945 they had moved to 245 Payneham Road, Joslin, where they remained until Norman died on 31 October 1966. The lovely freestone house with brick quoins and wooden lattice-work still stands in good condition. The death notice in The Advertiser of 2 November 1966

simply read "Pearse – on 31st October, Norman Hiles, beloved husband of Edna". There was a private funeral on 1 November 1966 at the Centennial Park crematorium (The Advertiser 2 November 1966). The Sands and McDougall's Directory of 1968 still listed Norman at 245 Payneham Road, Joslin.

Norman joined the SAOA in 1929. Between 23 October 1930 and 23 April 1937 he corresponded with John Sutton, the Secretary of the SAOA for 16 years (Historical Series 1 & 2, SAOA Newsletter, June 2002) and there are 22 letters in the file. The first letter implies that there had been previous correspondence as he thanked Sutton for sending a copy of the Ornithologist. [There are 8 letters from N. H. Pearse to John Sutton in the chronological correspondence files held by the SAOA in bundle from 1929-32; they span the period from July 1929 to January 1930, are all typed and often include bird notes – P. Paton.] In this letter he mentioned financial difficulties which is not surprising as it was from the height of the Great Depression with severely depressed prices for primary produce.

The 22 letters in the file are painstakingly typed usually using a black ribbon, but two were typed with a red ribbon, all using letterhead paper with the caption - The Gums Station, Florieton, phone Kooringa 58, telegrams Kooringa, rail Mount Mary. They were written at irregular intervals from a few days apart to as long as 10 months. The letters are principally about his observations around the homestead (which is still in operation) but occasionally on the adjacent landholding. Sutton meticulously noted the received date of all the letters and as some were received the day after Pearse wrote them, the mail service between Florieton and Adelaide must have been excellent. Unfortunately Sutton's replies were all

handwritten and only occasionally did he keep a carbon copy in the file.

Despite his pessimism in the first letter, Pearse mentioned that it had been a good year for grass with thousands of Budgerigahs nesting in hollow mallees. He had seen a Stone Curlew (Bush Thick-knee) and a pair of Orange Chats. Sutton's response (31 October 1930) to Pearse's next letter commented about "a wave of pessimism in town" and suggested that country people "were more optimistic than the city folk". Would he make the same comment today – I doubt it.

Surprisingly there is little evidence that Pearse was in regular contact with Erhard Boehm who lived nearby at Mt Mary. His third letter to Sutton dated 30 June 1931 mentioned that Boehm had written asking him to collect specimens "of mammals and rodents etc". There is no other mention of Boehm.

Pearse mentioned several times that his red tecoma bushes (*Tecomaria capensis*) attracted many honeyeaters when flowering on numerous occasions. I find this observation interesting because I have not seen honeyeaters taking much interest in tecomas. [The tecomas in our garden at Gilberton are frequently visited by New Holland Honeyeaters and Red and Little Wattlebirds – P. Paton.]

During 1931 he provided Sutton with lists of birds seen including Restless Flycatchers, Hooded Robins, White-winged Trillers, Crimson Chats (very numerous) and a mystery bird with a "sinuous appearance" which was never identified. We have to assume that prior to 1932 Norman had a copy of Leach's "An Australian Bird Book" because in a letter dated 13 January 1932 he mentioned that he had bought himself a copy of Cayley's "What Bird is That?" for a "Christmas box" and found it "really excellent". [A letter dated 14 September 1929 mentions that he is getting a new Leach book, while an earlier letter mentioned that he had an old edition of Leach – P. Paton.] Without a field guide such as Leach or Cayley, he would have had great difficulty in

identifying many of the birds, especially as he seemed to be working in ornithological isolation. Those of us who originally only had access to Leach and Cayley can sympathise with Pearse. I can still remember the enthusiasm with which Peter Slater's first field guide was received in 1970, the forerunner of today's numerous first class field guides.

Pearse frequently asked Sutton for help in identifying birds he didn't recognize. Strangely he had considerable difficulty with Adelaide Rosella, especially immature birds. He had "field glasses" but gave no details of their specifications.

The first reply on file from Sutton is dated 6 November 1932 in which he commented on some of Pearse's observations and identifications. For example he pointed out that the Blue-breasted Fairy Wren occurred almost exclusively in WA, although we now know that its distribution extends to eastern Eyre Peninsula. He pointed out that Black-shouldered Kites do not take other birds as Norman had suggested.

On 18 July 1933 Sutton wrote to say that Pearse's bird notes would appear in the next *Ornithologist*, and they duly appeared in October (*SA Orn* vol 12, pt 2, 63-65). In all eight of Pearse's bird notes, abstracted from his letters to Sutton, appeared in volumes 12, 13 and 14 between October 1932 and October 1938. In the letter of 18 July 1933 Sutton recommended that Pearse take specimens for positive identification when he was in doubt.

Another excellent grass season occurred in 1932. On 25 October 1932 Pearse wrote that large flocks of White-browed Woodswallows had arrived and started nesting in sandalwoods (*Santalum spicatum*), boxthorns and hollow posts and then had inexplicably disappeared a few days later. There were numerous Rufous and Brown Songlarks, White-winged Trillers, White-browed Babblers and 14

Black-tailed Native Hens on the house dam. He found many nests of White-fronted, Orange and Crimson Chats – it was a very good year for birds.

In a letter dated 17 November 1934 Pearse expressed regret at the death of Dr A M Morgan, foundation President of the Association. He had seen "winking owls *Ninox connivens*", Owllet Nightjars, numerous Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes and White-winged Fairy Wrens on the saltbush plains. From a nesting hollow low down in a black oak (*Casuarina pauper*) he had taken five young Bluebonnets for a friend's aviary. Floods in April 1934 had filled the "lagoons" and thousands of ducks and other aquatic birds soon appeared.

On 3 December 1934 John Sutton replied to Pearse's letter of 17 November to say that his bird notes were read at the last meeting and that his "winking owl" was in fact a Boobook.

On 22 January 1935 Pearse sent three pages of bird notes adding that "I do not for a moment expect you to publish this lengthy screed in the *Ornithologist*". He had some magpies using thermals to reach a height of two miles (c. 3,000m!) before swooping back to earth! A Striped Honeyeater was seen bathing in a pool and Striped Honeyeaters were very partial to apricots in the garden. He reported that his brother who lived nearby had seen a Crested Bellbird – Sutton replied that the call was "reap the wheat with a wheat hook".

Everyone talks about the weather and Pearse complained on 18 October 1935 about "this damnable weather ... nearly 90° (35°C) in the shade and frosts at night".

In response to a suggestion from Sutton he had taken a light into his garden at night "but did not see any bird fly out of the top compartment of the Yellow-tailed Thornbill's nest" (letter of 4 December 1936). He complained about fruit damage by Mallee Ringnecks, Bluebonnets, Red-backed Parrots and "red chested parrots" (Adelaide Rosellas?). A specimen of a green parrot he sent to Adelaide on 13 December

1936 proved to be an immature Adelaide Rosella. Unfortunately the bird was too far gone to be made into a specimen by the time it arrived in the museum.

Pearse had hoped to get to the museum and meet Sutton and look at the bird collection over a weekend while he was in Adelaide. In the event however he did not get to the museum because he spent the weekend "having a set of teeth fitted" (letter of 21 December 1936).

On 13 April 1937 he sent a cheque for his subscription and mentioned that he had seen a pair of what he thought were White-cheeked Honeyeaters for the first time. They were of course New Holland Honeyeaters, formerly called Yellow-winged Honeyeaters. At the time the lagoons north of The Gums were filled by summer rains and were alive with waterfowl including Freckled Duck, Blue-billed Duck, Chestnut Teal, Blue-winged Duck [now Australasian Shoveler], Chestnut-breasted [now Australian] Shelduck and thousands of waders.

The last letter in the file, dated 23 April 1937, reported that the "garden (is) a mass of flowers ... consequently (there is) a welter of bird noise in the early morning", including Restless Flycatchers, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters, New Holland Honeyeaters, Noisy Miners, Peaceful Doves, Yellow-tailed Pardalotes, White-backed and Black-backed Magpies and, nearby, two Kookaburras. Galahs were "still do(ing) their early morning antics on the (radio) aerial antennae" and sliding down the guy wires. Thus the correspondence ends on a very positive note.

I do not know if Pearse attended meetings of the SAOA after he moved to Adelaide.

References

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SA Orn 12:63-65, 102-103.
SA Orn 13 23-25,56-58, 179, 240.
SA Orn 14:69,163-165.

Bill Matheson

Below are details of the eight letters that were found after this paper was written in the chronological correspondence files held by the SAOA in a bundle from 1929-32 (JS is John Sutton).

- 4/7/29 Typed letter from N H Pearse to JS joining SAOA & enclosing notes on local birds
 18/7/29 Typed letter from N Pearse to JS with bird notes & also a list of Birds Always to be found on the Gums Station and one on Good Season Birds on Gums Station
 23/7/29 Typed letter from N Pearse to JS re bird notes - there is a photo of Mr Pearse from a newspaper pinned to the 2nd page of this letter 'Chairman of the Eudunda Club'
 9/8/29 Typed letter from N Pearse to JS in answer to queries
 29/8/29 Typed letter from N Pearse to JS re bird notes
 14/9/29 Typed letter from N. Pearse to JS with bird notes/answers to queries
 24/9/29 Typed letter from N. Pearse to JS enclosing sparrow body with white in tail
 10/1/30 Typed letter from N Pearse of The Gums Station Florieta to JS with a few bird notes & lamenting drought (although rain has just fallen)