

SAOA Historical Series No 61
Gregory Macalister Mathews
(1876-1949) and his
South Australian Connections
Part 1, by Penny Paton

Gregory Macalister Mathews was a giant of Australian ornithology, perhaps second only to Gould in terms of fame and contribution to knowledge about our birds in the early years. He was also one of the most controversial. The germ of this Historical Series article was research I am conducting for a book on Professor Sir John Cleland, during which I stumbled upon a group of letters held by the State Library written to Cleland by Gregory Mathews over the period 1908 to 1924.

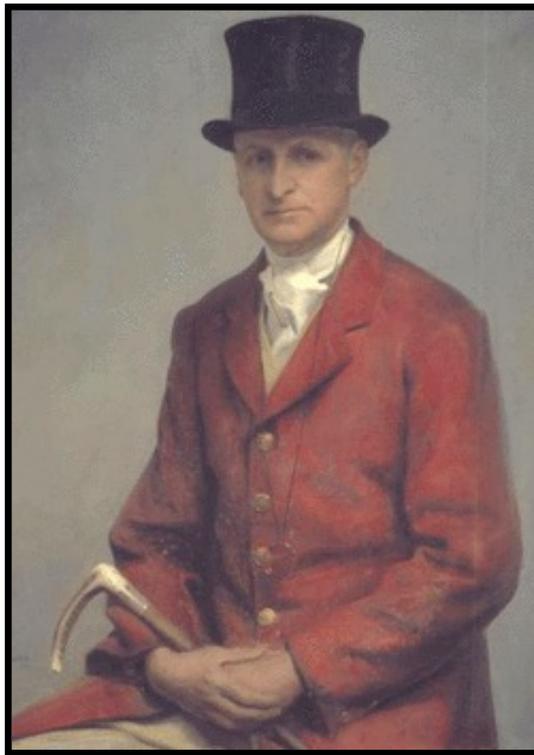
Mathews' Early Life

Belied by his appearance, as shown in the photo, of an English squire, he was born in country New South Wales, the second son of Robert Hamilton and Mary Sylvester (née Bartlett) Mathews. Robert, or RH as he was often known, was born in New South Wales in 1841 shortly after his parents emigrated from Derry, Ireland, where the Protestant family owned a paper mill. Despite the family's lack of money, the children were educated either by eccentric tutors or by their father and, tellingly given Robert's later interests, they had Aboriginal playmates. Robert became a licensed surveyor, which paid very well – for example he earned more than £2000 working for the Government in one year at a time when a

University lecturer's salary was £800. He bought several properties and made investments, some of which were disastrous, but he did well enough to take his wife on a European tour, and to educate his three sons at The King's School, Parramatta. Robert became a Justice of the Peace and was coroner at Singleton for a period.

At about the age of 50 and with an independent income, RH began investigations into Aboriginal societies that dominated the last 25 years of his life. With no formal training (not unusual at that time in the anthropological world in Australia), he prided himself on gaining his information from Aboriginal people and testing accepted theories against this information. He treated his informants in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland with courtesy and respect and gained their trust to a remarkable extent. RH Mathews fell out with

many of the giants of Australian anthropology, especially Baldwin Spencer and Alfred Howitt, such that their publications make no mention of his contributions, which ran to 171 papers covering 2200 pages. Indeed it is only in recent years with the publication of several books and



Gregory M. Mathews

From Kloot, T. 1986. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 10. MUP.
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mathews-gregory-macalister-7517>

access to RH's private papers, that his contribution to anthropology has been recognised.

Gregory Mathews was born on 10th September 1876 at Biambil on the Castlereagh River near Merrygoen, northeast of Dubbo, NSW. His childhood was no doubt influenced greatly by his rural boyhood, during which time he collected birds' eggs, and by his father's restless and curious spirit. The family later moved to Singleton and later still to Parramatta. It was in the 1880s at Singleton that Gregory and his brother Hamilton became interested in birds and more especially their eggs, until they had sets or individual eggs of every bird that occurred in their neighbourhood (Thomas 2011). At the King's School this passion was further developed with training in natural history collection and Gregory's introduction to bird skinning and, from this time, his interest in birds predominated over their eggs (Thomas 2011).

After leaving school, Gregory worked for six years on a cattle property near Charters Towers in Queensland, where he combined his two loves, horses and birds. On his return to New South Wales, having established himself as an orchardist, on 6th May 1902 he married a widow, Marion Wynne, with two children, (Dulcie) Marian and Richard Owen. Marion Wynne, whose name is spelt in two ways, with an 'o' and an 'a', was nearly ten years older than Gregory. Robin (2001) asserts that Mathews was "personally wealthy from his rural activities and gold-mining shares, and his wife's fortune". Marion was the daughter of Henry Charles White of the famous pastoralist family, and a cousin of H.L. White, another giant of Australian ornithology. The family sailed for England and there in 1907 their only child, Alister William Mathews, was born.

Once established in England, Mathews threw himself into the horse world, attending horse shows and races, and hunting, until a visit to the British Museum, where he met Dr R. Bowdler Sharpe, keeper of the bird collection. Bowdler Sharpe rekindled his interest in birds and was an enormous influence on his dedication to his future enterprises and the work ethic required to carry them out. In about 1908 Mathews began correspondence with experts all over the world including Australia aimed at collecting information for his *magnum opus*, *The Birds of Australia*, the first volume of which was published in 1910. In 1911 Tom Iredale became Mathews' secretary and work proceeded on amassing his collection of

40,000 bird skins and a vast library of 5,000 books.

Tom Iredale and Lilian Medland

English-born Tom Iredale (1880-1972) was an accomplished malacologist and ornithologist, despite limited formal education, and met Mathews in the British Museum in about 1909, after spending time in New Zealand, Australia and the Kermadec Islands. Iredale worked for Mathews from this time until 1923, collaborating on the production of *The Birds of Australia* and the first volume of a *Manual of the Birds of Australia*. They also started work on a handbook of New Zealand birds which was never published. Iredale was not given credit for much of the work he did with Mathews (Kloot 1983). While working for Mathews, Iredale also came under the patronage of Charles Rothschild and collected bird fleas in Hungary, amongst other natural history endeavours.

Iredale's private life was unorthodox for the time. In New Zealand in 1906 he married Alice Atkinson by whom he had one child, Ida. As far as I can tell his wife and daughter did not accompany him when he went exploring in Queensland or the Kermadecs, nor on his return to England. At a Rothschild soiree in 1910 he met a concert singer, Jane Davies, by whom Ireland had four daughters and a son before 1917, but they never married. In 1911 Ireland met Lilian Marguerite Medland, an accomplished bird artist, while they were both working at the British Museum, and in 1923 they were married. That same year Ireland, his wife Lilian and their two children, moved to Sydney where he joined the staff of the Australian Museum as a conchologist in 1924. He retired in 1944, having published over 400 papers on a variety of natural history subjects and named many new animals. A fellow of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales and its President in 1937-38, he was awarded the Clarke Medal of the Royal Society of New South Wales in 1959.

Lilian Medland (1880-1955) was born into a well-to-do family of North Finchley, London, and was educated at home by a governess. Her father was interested in trophy hunting and from one trip he brought back two lion cubs, which Lilian raised until they were handed over to the London Zoo. She was an outdoorsy type, enjoying mountain climbing, skiing and skating in Switzerland and Austria, and sketching (Mattingley 2014). While nursing at Guy's Hospital, London, Lilian met Charles Stonham, surgeon and naturalist, and he

encouraged her artistic pursuits. Later she illustrated Stonham's *The Birds of the British Islands*, issued in 20 parts between 1906 and 1911.

Lilian continued her studies, gaining experience nursing injured soldiers from the Boer War and in 1901 she gained first prize in an examination at the West Ham Hospital. At the age of 27 she contracted diphtheria and lost her hearing, which caused much frustration as she could no longer attend lectures at the Zoological Society where she was a member in her own right (Mattingley 2014). A position with the Duchess of Bedford as a private nurse allowed Lilian to continue her profession as well as to paint. She was unlucky in several of her publishing ventures as she illustrated or part illustrated a number of books that were never published for one reason or another. These included Yarrell's *A History of British Birds* (stymied by the First World War), a handbook on New Zealand birds, the last three volumes of Mathews' *A Manual of the Birds of Australia* (Volume I was published in 1921), a handbook of Australian birds (stymied by the Second World War) and Iredale's *Australasian Kingfishers*. The plates for these publications are extant and they allow us to acknowledge that she was a most accomplished bird artist, if not in the top echelon.

She was more fortunate in other pursuits. Lilian painted 30 bird species for the Australian Museum that were issues as postcards in 1925 and she collaborated with her husband, Tom Iredale, on *Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds*, published in 1950. She also completed the illustrations for his *Birds of New Guinea* but died before it was published in 1956 (Mattingley 2014). The illustrations that Mathews commissioned from Lilian Medland for the never-to-be-published handbook of Australian birds form part of the Mathews' Collection in the National Library of Australia.

Mathews – the Productive Period

Gregory Mathews' first endeavour before Volume I of *The Birds of Australia* was a *Handlist of Birds of Australasia* published as a supplement to the *Emu* in 1908, with an introductory letter by Bowdler Sharpe. Following the *Handlist*, Mathews became a member of the controversial checklist committee of the AOU, set up in 1903. Debate raged for years, with the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) supporting the use of trinomials while others wanted just a binomial system. The first Royal Australasian

Ornithologists' Union (RAOU) Checklist was endorsed in 1912 but it did not scotch the controversy. A different Checklist that included vernacular names appeared for discussion at the Adelaide Congress in October 1922. The 1926 Checklist, based on binomials, was in place until the 1970s. Mathews produced eight checklists over a period of forty years, reflecting his (and Iredale's) changing taxonomic views and often as a prelude to a new publication (Howard in press).

The means by which Mathews gained information for his *magnum opus* were many and expensive. He had access to the skin collections of Lord Rothschild and the British Museum, as well as sponsoring individual collectors to visit remote parts of Australia. 'His' collectors included J.P. Rogers and W.R. McLennan (the latter collecting mainly for W.D.K. MacGillivray of Broken Hill at the time). Other bird skins were purchased outright, or received on loan or in exchange for a discount on the purchase of the volumes of *The Birds of Australia*. Many Australian ornithologists provided field notes on bird species that were quoted *verbatim* in the publication. They are too numerous to list here but in Volume I they included Tom Carter, Mr Bennett of NSW, Frank E. Howe, Miss A. Fletcher of Tasmania, Dr Ramsay and E.D. Barnard.

The Preface to Volume I also pays tribute to Dr Morgan, Captain S.A. White and Miss Fletcher for sending bird nests and to all those who contributed skins, especially to A.J. Campbell who was the first to send him skins, in fact his entire skin collection. This Preface also points out that Mathews' nomenclature has been adopted by the British Museum, and therefore is the standard worldwide, which obviously gave him much satisfaction. He is less generous to his old mentor, Dr Bowdler Sharpe, when he says that: "the British Museum authorities have decided to discard the many useless generic names included by the late Bowdler Sharpe in the *Handlist of Birds*." Mathews made a habit of criticising people, especially when it came to his adherence to his (ever-changing) views on taxonomy and nomenclature.

In 1914 Mathews embarked on a world tour, with the aims of meeting people, examining skins and drumming up support for subscriptions to *The Birds of Australia* publication. Linn (1989) states that Mathews came to Australia with his family and with the intention of healing rifts that had developed during the nomenclature debate.

He visited South Australia as part of the world tour, attending the SAOA meeting on 27th February 1914, and being farewelled at a 'special' meeting on 6th March. Prior to this visit Captain S.A. White penned a note to the Committee, countersigned by Edwin Ashby, proposing an addition to Rule 7, allowing the SAOA to elect one Honorary Member: "Such honorary member shall be a prominent ornithologist to whose work it is desired to do honour." Mathews was the first Honorary Member and the occasion was represented thus in the SAOA's Minutes: "Mr Mathews entertained some of the members at a dinner at Jackman's Café, King William St. An enjoyable hour was spent at the conclusion of which the President Mr F.R. Zietz on behalf of those present presented Mr Mathews a case of pipes suitably inscribed." (Reid 2000). On the same visit, Mathews attended the 100th meeting of the RAOU in Melbourne in March 1914 (Linn 1989).

Back home, Mathews continued with the production of his epic *The Birds of Australia*, made more difficult by the First World War and its repercussions on everyone's lives and pursuits. Some of Mathews' attention was diverted to the war effort, materials and labour became more expensive, and financing the project became more difficult (Linn 1989). In the Preface to Volume 7 (1918-1919), Mathews points out that printing costs rose more than 100% from 1914-1918. He had hoped that the entire project might take just a few years, but in the end it spanned nearly two decades. At this time Mathews and Iredale were also working on *A Manual of the Birds of Australia*, designed as a four volume publication. Volume I was published in 1921, illustrated by Lilian Medland, but the other volumes did not eventuate.

Another controversy raged in the early 1920s between those who supported collecting birds for scientific study and those who opposed it or wanted it to be severely restricted. This debate was spurred by a series of resolutions put to the RAOU Council in 1921 (Ashby 1923). These sought to restrict collecting to a few who were engaged in specific research on a particular bird species and to limit private collections. Edwin Ashby as a member of the Council did not support these resolutions and was asked to open a more general discussion on the issue.

At the RAOU Congress in Adelaide in 1922, Ashby presented a paper, entitled 'Private Collections and Permits', which was subsequently

published in *The Emu* in the next year. To continue the discussion, the SAOA set aside a part of the *South Australian Ornithologist* for 18 papers on the subject from Australia, England and the USA (*SAOrn* Vol 7, Part 8, 1924). Seventeen of the papers supported Ashby's position while John Sutton's summarised the position regarding permits in the Australian States. All make the point that private collections have been crucial to the acquisition of knowledge on birds and their conservation and most state that other factors, like land clearance and feral pests, are the major factors involved in declines in bird numbers. This same issue is still being debated today. A corollary to this story is that Edwin Ashby was voted off his Vice-Presidential position on the RAOU Council in 1924 for his pro-collecting stance (SAOA Correspondence).

Between 1912 and 1927 Mathews and Iredale published *Austral Avian Record*, an in-house journal, published irregularly, with about four parts per year (Howard in press). Topics covered in the journal included taxonomy, nomenclature, revision of what had been published in *The Birds of Australia* and the description of new forms. Another contribution that Mathews made to Australian ornithology was to represent Australia at five international congresses. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and was appointed C.B.E. in 1939 and received many other honours over his lifetime.

I know of three residences for the Mathews family in England. When J. B. Cleland spent several years in the UK in 1903-05, he scribbled an address for Mathews into a notebook— 'Meadway, St Cross Winchester, Hants.' However there is no mention in Cleland's diaries that the two men met during this period. At the time that Cleland was first corresponding with Mathews in 1908, his address was Langley Mount, Watford, Hertfordshire, chosen so he could easily access the bird collections at the Tring Museum and the British Museum (Howard in press). Just before the outbreak of World War I Mathews purchased Foulis Court, Fair Oak, Hampshire, where he grew vegetables for the war effort, carried out the duties of an English squire for the village of Fisher's Pond and continued with his ornithological work. Linn (1989) refers to the mammoth task of moving 25,000 skins and his library weighing 4.8 tonnes, for the move from Hertfordshire to Hampshire. White (1981) refers to Mathews being forced to sell Foulis Court in 1925, but does not advise where the family resided after this.

The references for part 1 are included in the final part of this series, to be printed in February 2018.