

# SAOA Historical Series No 65

## John White Mellor (1868-1931)

### Part 2, by Penny Paton

#### J W Mellor the Ornithologist

Turning to J.W. Mellor's ornithological contributions, he was present at the first formal meeting of the SAOA held at Dr A.M. Morgan's house in Angas Street on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1899. After this Morgan, Mellor and A.H.C. Zietz drew up a draft set of rules and they met again, along with S.A. White, one week later. At this meeting Morgan, Zietz and Mellor were asked to work on a list of Australian birds, which they did over the next year or so, meeting 18 times. The list was probably completed in October 1900 but regrettably the list cannot be found (Truran 2000).

Mellor was Secretary and Treasurer (a combined role at that time) from 1899 until 1905, was Vice-President in 1905-06, 1910-11 & 1913-14 and President in 1906-07 and 1914-15. Even when Mellor was not acting as Secretary, he seems to have acted as Executive Officer, continuing to do many administrative tasks and sometimes writing up the minutes when White was absent (Truran 2000).

J.W. Mellor was very active in bird conservation and was a member of the Field Naturalists' Native Fauna and Flora Committee from 1894 (Horton, Black and Blaylock in press). Mellor and Mr Symonds Clark (a fellow

aviculturist) worked for several years on the Birds' Protection Act of 1900, including providing advice on the appropriate closed seasons for game (Truran 2000) and drawing up a list of birds to be totally protected. The pair also lobbied the Chief Inspector of Fisheries when it was discovered that government officials were killing pelicans in the Coorong, no doubt due to their perceived conflict with fishermen (Truran 2000). Between 1896 and 1905 Mellor published articles in the *Adelaide Observer* and the *South Australian Register* under the pseudonym 'Naturalist' (Blaylock 2000).



Photo 7 — Captain S.A. White (L) and John White Mellor, leaders of the AOU Campout, Warunda, Eyre Peninsula, October 1909 (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, B58290)

Mellor represented South Australia at an interstate conference on bird protection held in Melbourne in November 1908 (Whittell 1954). Issues discussed included the legislative protection of useful insectivorous birds, the regulation of punt guns and other firearms, and the utility of bird sanctuaries. Mellor rather quaintly commented at this meeting that "it was remarkable how thoroughly birds understood the nature of sanctuaries for them. Birds have more than instinct; they have reason...at the

'Reed Beds', near Adelaide, where birds were closely protected, the tree martin could be handled on its nest, and the wagtail came down to pick grubs out of the hand."

The Australasian Ornithologists' Union (AOU and from 1910 onwards RAOU) was formed two years after the SAOA and Mellor was actively involved in this new national organisation from the outset. He was a foundation member, sat on the AOU's Checklist Committee, was the first South Australian President (1911-12), as well as being the Vice-President in 1906-11, the State Secretary in 1912-16 and a Council Member from 1913-14 and again from 1917-24 (Blaylock 2000). He and his cousin, S.A. White led the AOU Campout to Warunda Creek on Eyre Peninsula in October 1909, an account of which was published in the following year by White. Photo 7, (*on the previous page*) shows Mellor and White outside a tent at the campout.

Mellor's mother, Eliza née White, apparently accompanied her son and nephew, S.A. White, on such excursions, as evidenced by Photo 8, which shows her seated outside a tent in the bush

Truran (2000) believed that Mellor did much to maintain the SAOA's national influence: "He seems to have had the right blend of sufficient available time and money coupled with efficiency, tact and political insight." The taxonomic debate that dragged on for many years at the beginning of the twentieth century certainly required tact and the South Australians often found themselves at odds with their interstate colleagues. At the 1913 RAOU Congress in Adelaide White and Mellor moved that the *Emu* use the trinomial classification and, although this motion was unanimously accepted, the editors disregarded it (Truran 2000)! In 1913 the SAOA members decided to publish their own journal and the first part of the *South Australian Ornithologist* came out early in the next year. Mellor was in favour of the move although he was concerned that it might be used to score points in the taxonomic debate, but this fear proved ungrounded (Truran 2000).

The Mellor family entertained the attendees of the first AOU Congress held in Adelaide in 1901 in an "At Home" (Truran 2000) and no doubt there were



Photo 8 - Eliza Mellor (John's mother) seated centre, with two women outside tent, ca. 1909 (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/6)

many such gatherings at 'Holmfirth' for family, colleagues and friends. Indeed the AOU was back there in 1909 with attendees grouped along with a spoonbill from the aviaries to prove it (Photo 9, *on the next page*). At the event in November 1901 Mellor was congratulated on being the first South Australian ornithologist to have 500 species of Australian birds' eggs (Blaylock 2000).

Mellor travelled overseas on several occasions (Horton, Black and Blaylock in press), the first being a collecting trip with his uncle William White to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1893. He and Maud spent nine months overseas in 1924-25, where Mellor visited museums in London, Tring, New York and Chicago, and met G. M. Mathews (the subject of Historical Series 61-63, Paton 2017a,b; 2018). He published an account of the sea birds seen on this trip around the world (Mellor 1925). Mellor published prolifically in both the *Emu* and the *South Australian Ornithologist*, although in later years his contributions to the latter were mostly in the form of monthly Bird Notes from Lockleys and Fulham, as well as the Reedbeds more generally.

He also wrote a few notes from a property of his called 'Glenburne' or 'Glenburnie' at Stirling West, where he and his young family spent time in February 1917, but the bird notes make it plain

that he had observed birds on the property for some years (Mellor 1917). Perhaps the Mellor family used the property in the Mt Lofty Ranges during the summer months to avoid the worst of the heat on the Adelaide plains. Bushfires were a hazard however and on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1914 a fire started on 'Glenburnie' and spread to two adjoining properties, and also threatened other properties nearby. The Mellors' house was saved but trees, shrubs and grasses were burnt.

Although apparently reticent in later years (see below) about his collecting activities, Mellor actively collected both bird skins and egg clutches. The earliest record of eggs being collected by Mellor was in 1888 (when he was 20) and the latest is 1921. One has to be wary of interpreting the data on his egg and skin collections as he appears to have included aviary birds in his collection and labelled them as 'Fulham', but of course these birds were not wild

According to Horton, Black and Blaylock (in press), although Mellor contributed fewer specimens to Mathews than S.A. White or Edwin Ashby, his field notes were extensively cited in the many volumes of *The Birds of Australia* (Mathews 1910-27).

According to a letter from John Sutton, Secretary of SAOA, to F.L. Berney in early 1937 (Paton 2006), Mellor rarely brought specimens to SAOA meetings and almost never talked of his collections. As Sutton only began attending SAOA meetings in 1919, he may have underestimated Mellor's contributions of specimens at earlier SAOA meetings. There is also another possible reason for Mellor's reticence that I discovered through trawling through early SAOA correspondence (SLSA, SRG 652/5). In 1917 when John Mellor applied to the relevant department to renew his collecting permit, his request was denied. The letter also stated that the



Photo 9 — AOU Congress attendees at 'Holmfirth' 1909; J.W. Mellor is at far right in the front row. (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/85).

birds. Like most egg collectors, we can be fairly sure that Mellor exchanged sets of eggs with other collectors and his sets appear in a number of other collections, including those of N.J. Favoloro, A.J. Campbell, Professor Harrison, A.F.B. Hull, J.N. McGilp, A.J. North, A.C. Stone and H.L. White. His egg clutches also appear in overseas collections, with two sets from the 1890s in The Natural History Museum, Tring. There are also over 40 skins in the G.M. Mathews' collection (now in the American Museum of Natural History).

department was not keen on specimens being added to private collections or being sent overseas, as it preferred them to go to a local museum. The point was also made that the department was not in favour of skin specimens being sold.

Mellor wrote to the SAOA Secretary in May 1917 obviously annoyed that the Association appeared to be working against his licence renewal and pointing out all the work he had done for

conservation and science, denying that he had ever sold skins and asking for evidence of his refusal to show birds at SAOA meetings (Figure 1 shows the first half of page 1 and page 4 with his signature, which serves as an example of his handwriting). A charge was made against him by an unknown member that he had refused to show two new birds at a meeting. Mellor's response did acknowledge that he had shown fewer specimens recently "as his home position has prevented it"

and that "he is spending a great part of time away at Mt Lofty". He went on to say that he has been at pains not to monopolise meetings by showing his own specimens, by letting others do so as well. He also quite rightly pointed out that, by asking that specimens go to the local museum, it would stop South Australian ornithologists contributing to Mathews' work and inhibit scientific enquiry.

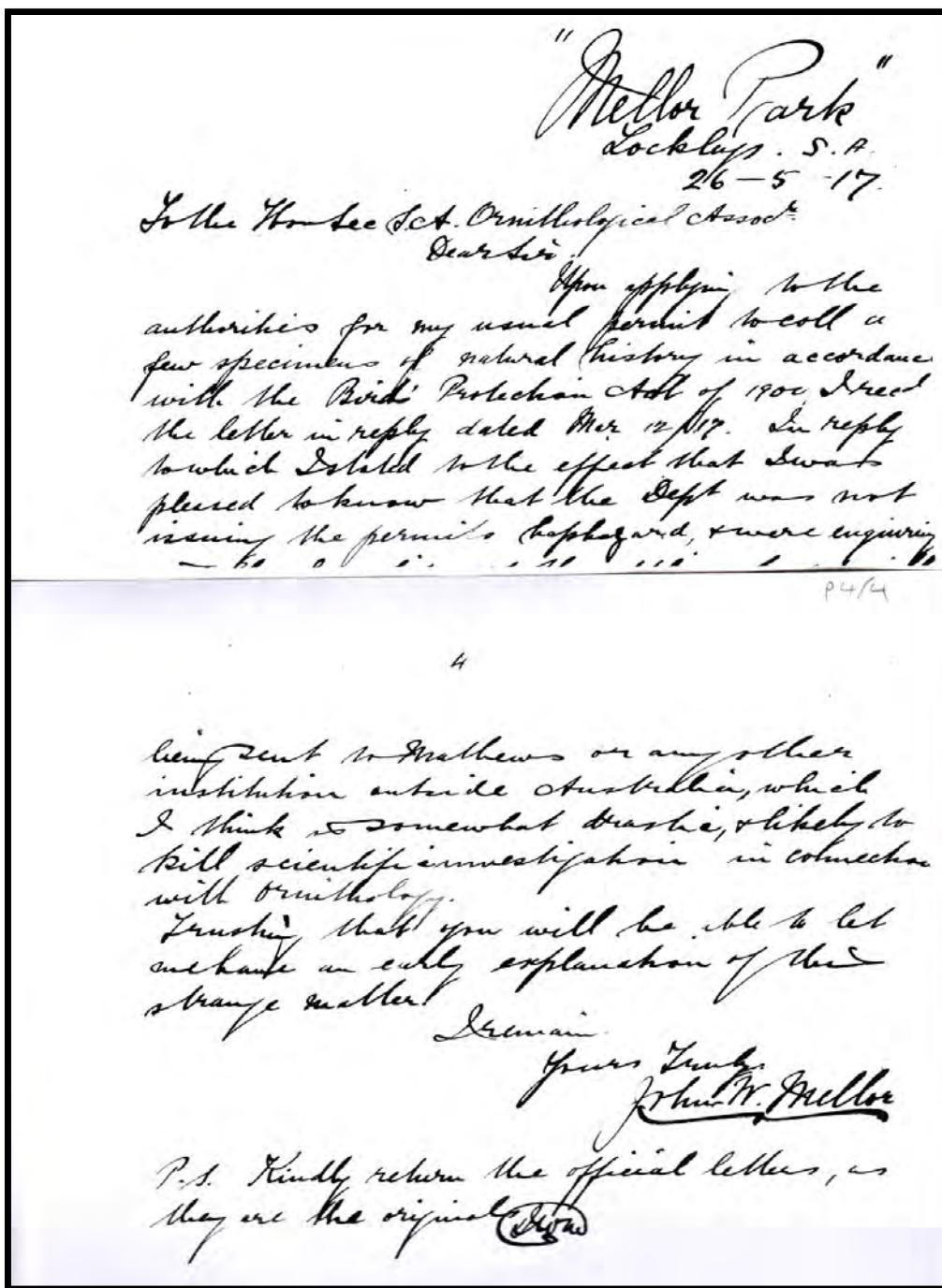


Figure 1. Scanned copy of top half of page 1 and page 4 of letter from J. W. Mellor to the SAOA dated 26<sup>th</sup> May 1917 re collecting permit from the South Australian government for 1917 (SLSA, SRG 652/5/1).