

SAOA Historical Series No 71

Murderous Millinery:

*History of the Bird Plume Trade with
Special Reference to South Australia*

By Penny Paton



Figure 1 — 1910 black horsehair lace,
stretched over a wire frame decorated with a whole bird of paradise,
labelled James G. Johnson & Co. Newark. New Jersey
<http://blog.mdhs.org/costumes/the-bird-hat-murderous-millinery>

Introduction

Philippa Horton provided me with a brilliant segue for this Historical Series on the bird plume trade in South Australia at the end of her piece on the SAOA Silver Challenge Cup (Horton 2019). She mused on the influence of the School Bird Protection Clubs, active in our state from 1910 to the late 1930s, on general attitudes to bird conservation and protection.

Any attempt to gauge their influence from the distance of 100 years must be speculative and anecdotal, but she decided that their timing was important as their inauguration followed the worldwide outcry over the use of birds and their feathers in the millinery trade. Figure 1 (on the previous page) shows an example of this practice. Figure 2 shows another example of the use of birds for decorative purposes.

The battle over the plume industry has been described as “one of the first popular movements in defense [sic] of the environment and was indicative of changing public attitudes towards natural resources, a significant transformation after an era of major industrialization and urbanization” (Zhang, web reference). The debate over what was termed “murderous millinery” involved amongst others milliners, ornithologists, women and hunters, and was most hotly contested in the UK and the US. The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of the fashion for using birds and their feathers for trimmings, with skins of brightly plumaged birds

like hummingbirds and the plumes of egrets, birds of paradise and lyre birds being most highly prized. Such adornments had been recognised as an indication of high status and wealth, but what had been small-scale became a widespread practice amongst the growing middle classes (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plume_hunting accessed 21/1/2020).



Figure 2 — Victorian Taxidermied bird dome
<http://blog.mdhs.org/costumes/the-bird-hat-murderous-millinery>

The Americas

While many of the feathers were sold through auction houses in London, New York and Paris, large numbers of birds were sourced from the Americas, predominantly North America, Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil. Many species of birds were collected, but egrets and herons were the most highly prized for their ‘aigrettes’, or filamentous sprays of breeding feathers. Much of the collecting was carried out during the breeding season, as the birds could be readily targeted at

their nests. Of course this led to the death of the fledglings in the nests due to the killing of the parent birds. At first the environmental damage was unknown to the general public but, even when it became known, arguments raged over the continuation of the practice, due to the lucrative nature of the trade.

In the late nineteenth century conservative estimates were that five million birds were killed annually but the actual number is likely to be three or four times higher (Zhang, web

reference). In just one London auction room in 1902, 1,608 packets of heron plumes were sold and, each packet weighed about 30 ounces, making a total of 48,240 ounces (or 1,368kg). Estimates are that three or four birds were needed for an ounce of plumes, so over 192,000 birds were killed at their nests for that one auction house's annual sale. If we add in the two or three nestlings also left to die, then the number jumps to over half a million birds. Estimates vary but it seems that hunters targeted over 60 species of birds for the feather trade and 15 bird genera were involved. (https://web.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Plume_Trade.html accessed 22/1/20).

Coastal wetlands close to population centres were the first to be exploited and the Florida Everglades, with their extensive wetlands and large colonies of egrets, were particularly vulnerable. The Great Egret and its more common, delicate relative, the Snowy Egret, were most highly prized, and by the end of the nineteenth century there was concern that some species would be exterminated by the trade. When the cruel practices at egret colonies were widely publicised, public sentiment turned against the use of heron and egret feathers, but then other birds were targeted such as seabirds on the Atlantic coast, West Coast terns, grebes, White Pelicans and albatrosses (*ibid.*). In 1886 an article in the magazine *Good Housekeeping* noted that a single hunter had killed 40,000 terns in one season at Cape Cod (*ibid.*).

The trade was very lucrative and a huge employer in the US; hence the strength of the vested interests in its continuation. In 1903 hunters were paid \$32 per ounce for plumes, making them twice as expensive as gold at the time and, in later years, plumes would fetch \$80 per ounce (*ibid.*). The millinery trade in the US in 1900 employed 83,000 people, and this was from a population of only about 8 million. Many spurious claims were made by vested interests, claiming that feathers were artificial or were moulted feathers from birds on foreign farms (*ibid.*).

Efforts to publicise and stop the killing of birds for the millinery trade began as early as the

1870s but gathered force in the next decade with the establishment of the first Audubon Society in 1886 by George Grinnell, the publisher of *Forest and Stream*, a sportsman magazine (Zhang, web reference). Grinnell condemned the hunting and use of birds for the millinery trade and was concerned that unregulated hunting would lead to the extinction of some species (Zhang, web reference). He believed that by publicising the cruelty of the trade, women would stop buying and wearing such headgear and, while this did prove to be true, it was to take 10 years for this to come to fruition. As conservation activities gained ground and legislation was enacted, the hunting fraternity became more desperate, with poaching and illegal hunting taking place in the first decade of the 1900s.

The story of Guy Bradley is instructive in the light of the battle between hunters and conservationists. In 1885 Guy, at 15 years old, and his older brother Louis, were scouts for noted French plume hunter Jean Chevalier on his trip to the Everglades. Their expedition of several weeks killed 1,397 birds of 36 species and they were paid more than \$20 per ounce (equivalent to \$500 in 2011) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plume_hunting accessed 22/1/20). Later Guy became a warden protecting birds from plume hunters, but was shot and killed in the Everglades in July 1905 while arresting poachers who were hunting egrets. The shooter was acquitted but this event, and another murder three years later, caused huge public outrage and inspired support for the Audubon Society (Zhang, web reference).

The Pacific and Australasia

While New York and London were the biggest markets for birds and feathers for millinery, Paris was also important and birds were collected all over the world, including in the Pacific and Australasia. For example, Japanese hunters killed over 300,000 albatross, gulls, terns and other birds on Laysan Island in the North Pacific by in 1909. More would have been taken if officers of the US government had not arrested the hunters. The birds and feathers were destined for the Paris market (<https://open.sydneyuniversitypress.com.au/file>

s/9781743325452.pdf accessed 22/1/20). Bird of paradise feathers were highly prized and fetched the highest prices of any plumed bird. In 1913, one of the peak years for trade in birds of paradise, 80,000 skins were exported from New Guinea and, although World War I interrupted the trade from 1914-18, it was resumed after the war. However, by the early 1920s the European market for plumes had ceased (*ibid.*).

While collecting feathers and birds for the millinery trade occurred on a lesser scale in Australia than in some other parts of the world, some species were collected for this purpose. One source noted that fears were expressed for the Emu due to the large number killed for their feathers

(<https://fashioningfeathers.info/murderous-millinery/> accessed 21/1/20) and male lyrebirds were targeted due to their extraordinary tail feathers. The feathers were used as hat decorations, as patriotic home decorations and for curio hunters from other countries (<http://www.birdlife.org.au/australian-birdlife/detail/fashion-feathers-and-the-birth-of-the-conservation-movement> accessed 22/1/20). In 1910 two Sydney dealers sold 1,298 lyrebird tails, and 3,000 tails were exported in a three year period (*ibid.*). There was some collecting of egret feathers in Australia but I cannot find out how widespread this practice was. However, feathers were being imported for the local fashion industry. In 1912 for example, imports to the value of £92,000 were recorded (Newland 1923).

Opposition to the trade in the UK and the US

In Great Britain protests against the plume trade began as early as 1868, when Professor Alfred Newton addressed the British Association on the destruction of birds for the millinery trade (Reid 1974). The outcry against the cruel hunting practices and the decimation of bird populations led in 1889 to the formation of the Society for the Protection of Birds (SPB), from 1903 to become the Royal Society (RSPB). Destruction of British birds like the Great Crested Grebe and the Kittiwake to decorate fancy hats and ruffs had led to earlier legislation like the Sea Birds Preservation Act of

1869 and the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1880 (<https://fashioningfeathers.info/murderous-millinery/> accessed 21/1/20). The RSPB called for the end to the use of birds and their feathers for fashion and for women to refuse to wear such items. Most of the RSPB members were women and they were moved by the emotional appeal of stories and photographs of egret colonies full of dead and dying adult and young birds.

Several Plumage Bills were put before the Parliament in the early 1900s, with the last unsuccessful attempt made in 1920, when a Bill failed to pass the House of Commons (*ibid.*). A member of that Parliament denounced women for the failure to pass the Bill, pointing to the continued use of feathers in women's headgear. Virginia Woolf came to the defence of her sex in her essay *The Plumage Bill*, in which she admitted that it was mainly women who bought and wore the decorated hats, but that it was men, as hunters and merchants, who turned killing into a commodity and a male parliament which had failed to pass the Plumage Bill. What she failed to concede though was that it was mainly women who were employed in the millinery business (*ibid.*). The Plumage Act was passed in 1921, but whether this was due to the humanitarian arguments, conservation arguments, falling numbers of plumes or the awkwardness of wearing over-sized and constraining hats for newly-emancipated women is unclear. Most likely all these factors played a part in the elimination of the bird plume trade.

In the US the formation of branches of the Audubon Society in 12 states, the crusading efforts of two women, Boston socialites Harriet Hemenway and her cousin Minna Hall, and the public outcry over the cruel practices of hunters, led to the passage of the Lacey Act in 1900. This prohibited transport between states of birds taken in violation of state laws (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-two-women-ended-the-deadly-feather-trade-23187277/> accessed 22/1/20). This law was poorly enforced and did little to stem the trade in bird plumes and it was not until the Weeks-McLean Law (or Migratory Bird Act) of 1913 that the hunting of birds for markets and the interstate transport of birds

were outlawed (*ibid.*). Several court challenges to Weeks-McLean led to the Supreme Court upholding a subsequent piece of legislation, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which effectively ended the plume trade in the US.

The Australian Experience

While the hunting of wild birds for their feathers took place on a much smaller scale in Australia than in other parts of the world, the wearing of birds and their feathers for fashion was as much practised here from the mid-1870s as it was in the Northern Hemisphere. Birds and plumes were used as hat decorations and feathers were also used in fans (Fletcher 1984). Ostrich feathers were commonly used in combination with tortoiseshell or ivory sticks, but, as shown in Figure 3, black cockatoo tail feathers made for very eye-catching fans too (*ibid.*) In the 1880s an unsuccessful attempt

was made to farm ostriches in South Australia, but the venture was unable to compete with enterprises in South Africa, where the birds were native (*ibid.*).

In South Australia, a branch of the SPB was established in 1894, primarily to lobby against the fashion of using birds' feathers and skins for adornment, but it was interested in bird protection more generally and used the arguments of the more scientific and practical societies for its ends (Reid 1974). The South Australian branch included some prominent men and women among its associates, executive and members. Membership was 85 in 1895 but had grown to 525 by 1898 and 1,311 by 1909. Lady Victoria Buxton and Lady Tennyson, the wives of successive Governors, were Patronesses of the organisation and the associates included some of the cream of South



**Figure 3 — Fan of Black Cockatoo tail feathers and ivory, ca 1880 (Plate 152 in Fletcher 1984)
Made in Darwin by Chinese settlers (photo P. Paton)**

Australian society — Mr and Mrs Robert Barr Smith, Right Hon. Samuel and Lady Way, Sir John Langdon and Lady Bonython — as well as members of parliament, clergymen and well-known scientists, including Captain White, J.G.O. Tepper, A.C. Minchin and John W. Mellor (Reid 1974). The scientists, together with M. Symonds Clark, who was a committee member, provided valuable links between the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA), the RSPB and a third organisation dealing with bird protection — the Fauna and Flora Protection Committee (FFPC) of the Field Naturalists' Section of the Royal Society of South Australia.

Women predominated in the SPB and Mrs Emily Playford, the Secretary from the Society's inception, was the driving force behind the formation of the local branch. She made speeches in favour of bird protection to groups like the Teachers' Association and women's groups, corresponded with the parent society and wrote letters to the newspapers publicising the movement. The RSPB played a most important role in bird protection in South Australia. Many non-scientists who would otherwise not have taken part in the movement were attracted to the SPB for emotional rather than scientific reasons. It is significant that the FFPC's attempt to introduce a Game Act Amendment Bill should fail but that the Bird Protection Bill sponsored by the SPB became law in 1900 (Reid 1974). The SPB was valuable for its connection to an international society with vast resources.

As well as using material from overseas in its arguments against the plume trade, Australia provided the rest of the world with ammunition to use against the cruelty of this endeavour. An Australian ornithologist and bird photographer, Arthur Mattingley, visited a heronry on the River Murray at Mathoura in New South Wales in early November 1906 (Mattingley 1907a). Among other species of heron and egret, Mattingley found a colony of about 150 White Egrets (now the Great Egret), which reportedly had been much larger before the plume-hunters had decimated the breeding birds there. On a return visit a month or so later to obtain photos of egrets feeding their young, Mattingley (1907b) was horrified to discover

“at least 50 carcasses of large White and smaller Plumed Egrets – nearly one-third of the rookery, perhaps more- the birds having been shot off their nests containing young. What a holocaust! Plundered for their plumes. What a monument of human callousness! There were 50 birds ruthlessly destroyed, besides their young (about 200) left to die of starvation!”

Mattingley (1907b) took a series of photographs of a nest of emaciated young egrets progressively becoming weaker and weaker through starvation. This series of photos is shown in figure 4, on the opposite page (*see end of article if you are unable to read the captions below the photographs*). It was his account and these photographs that were published around the world that helped to end the trade in bird plumes. They sent shockwaves through the bird communities of not only Australia but also the rest of the world. In London Mattingley's photos were published in a detailed supplement to the RSPB's quarterly magazine *Bird Notes and News*, which reached Paris, Amsterdam and Audubon Societies in the US, and they were displayed in towns and local newspapers. They were even used on sandwich boards and paraded around London (<http://www.artinsociety.com/feathers-fashion-and-animal-rights.html> accessed 22/1/20). The RSPB also republished seven of Mattingley's photographs in a booklet, *The Story of the Egret* (Robin 2001). His work galvanized the Australian Ornithologists' Union to take up the issue of the plume trade, leading to an interstate conference on bird protection in 1908 in Melbourne (*ibid.*).

The RSPB branch in South Australia operated at least until 1912 (Reid 1974). The SAOA holds material relating to the SPB/RSPB in its archives in the State Library of South Australia (SRG 652/14). These include reports and reprints from the parent society in Britain and most are stamped “Mrs. J. Playford “The Willows” Mitcham, Hon. Sec. for S. Australian Branch”. The hand-written note from Bob Brown accompanying the collection states that it was donated by Mrs Muriel White from her husband, Captain S.A. White's holdings via Gordon Ragless.

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PLATE VIII.



Starveling Egrets (Parents Shot for their Plumes).
Young (*plumifera*) Calling to Passing Herons for Food, Waiting for the End.
Young (*tineriensis*) All But Dead.

FROM PHOTOS BY A. H. E. MATTINGLEY.

Figure 4 — The page that shook the world!

Source: *Emu* (1907, Vol 7, between pages 72 and 73)

Long-term Effects of the Bird Plume Trade

While most bird populations recovered from the depredations of hunters for the plume trade, there were some casualties of the industry. The Carolina Parakeet, which was considered a serious agricultural pest, was killed in large numbers by farmers. This, combined with the destruction of forests and hunting for its bright feathers for the millinery trade, caused the Carolina Parakeet to begin declining in the 1800s; it was rarely reported outside Florida after 1860 and was extinct by the 1920s (<https://fashioningfeathers.info/murderous-millinery/> accessed 21/1/20). The Huia of New Zealand was likewise hunted for its feathers and was extinct by 1907 (*ibid.*). Its extinction was due to hunting, deforestation and the introduction of mammalian predators (<https://www.beautyofbirds.com/huia.html> accessed 24/1/20).

The debate over the balance between conservation of the natural environment and the needs of an industrial society, epitomised by the plume trade, is ongoing, although it takes different forms in the early years of the twenty first century.

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Captions for the photographs in figure 4

Starveling Egrets (parents shot for their plumes)

Young calling to passing herons for food.

Waiting for the end

Young all but dead