

## BOOK REVIEW

**NATURE'S PILGRIM** by Rob Linn. S.A. Government Printer 1989. 172 pages, 155 mm x 245 mm, 57 illustrations, including 5 maps — the rest mainly photographs dating from 1856. Price \$39.50.

This book, by South Australian historian Rob Linn, describes the life and work of Captain S. A. White (1870-1954). Chapter One is pre S. A. White and tells of his grandfather, John

White's arrival in the infant colony of South Australia in 1836 to take up land at the Reed-beds eventually to be called Fulham Farm. With his South East holding, John White began to build the family's pastoral and farming future.

The abundance and beauty of the wildlife at the Reed-beds fascinated John White's sons, Samuel and William. John White, however, forbade his sons preoccupation with natural

history. It was only after his father's death in 1860, that Samuel in particular became absorbed in bird observation and the preparation of specimens.

In 1863, Samuel White travelled north into relatively unknown country around Lake Blanche to record bird life. In the following year, he first corresponded with John Gould, sending him the first of the many bird specimens which would follow until Samuel White's death in 1880.

After his father's death, his son Samuel Albert White (S. A. White) was the male family leader at the age of ten years. He chose to complete his education at Christian Brothers College, adhering to the Roman Catholic faith throughout his life. Before he was sixteen years of age, he was meticulously recording and preparing bird specimens for future research.

Rob Linn writes that the memory of his father's work often influenced S. A. White, when for example, he examined 300 of the bird skins prepared by his father and lodged in the S.A. Museum. Reading his father's diaries and note books also stimulated White's passion for ornithological discovery. In 1895 collecting near Olary, S. A. White took a Black-faced Woodswallow and was reminded that his father had shot the type specimen for Gould 32 years previously.

In Chapter two the book documents the beginnings of White's ornithological career and the formation of important associations with other ornithologists. White very early recognized the need for conservation and he joined the Adelaide Branch of the "English Society for the protection of Birds". One of the Society's aims was to discourage the use of bird feathers for clothing and millinery.

The South Australian Ornithological Association (S.A.O.A.) was formed in 1899 and White attended early meetings with his cousin J. W. Mellor, a prominent S.A.O.A. member at that time. White's Boer War Service interrupted his enjoyment of this group's field trips and lectures, and his involvement in the strong conservation thrust of the Association.

In 1908 Dr. Morgan, an active influential member of the S.A.O.A., offered White's name to Gregory Mathews, as someone known to be a competent, fastidious field worker, who could be of great assistance to Mathews in the preparation of his "Big Work Coloured Figures

of the Birds of Australia". From his first letter to White (reproduced on pages 41 and 42 of the book), one feels that Mathews would demand much from this partnership.

Between 1908-1911 several short collecting trips to the Murray Mallee, Flinders Ranges, and Kangaroo Island yielded many specimens and copious notes on plants, birds, geography and geology. For example on page 43 one exciting specimen is described that was obtained in the Eastern Mallee; the Red-lored Whistler had not been seen since Gould secured the species in 1839.

White was a populariser of natural history, urging people to value the unspoiled environment and protect wildlife. He wrote numerous letters to the press, and spoke out on conservation issues of the day. He sought protection of pelican rookeries in the Coorong — an issue which the S.A.O.A. almost fifty years later was to champion successfully.

According to Rob Linn, for ten years from 1911, S. A. White drove himself collecting and preparing skins for Mathews, making detailed bird notes from various field trips, promoting the study and appreciation of natural history and evangelising the conservation cause. He was vice president of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (R.A.O.U.) Congress in Launceston in 1912, where the bitter controversial tri-nomial debate surfaced in earnest. White took Mathew's view, rather than the established R.A.O.U. view of the Gould nomenclature which dictated that there would be "no tri-nomial or third Latin descriptor". This view was held strongly by the powerful conservative Melbourne group of the R.A.O.U.

"Nature's Pilgrim" often provides interesting details of White's personal life and offers insights into his personal philosophies. After Captain White's wife Ethel recovered from a serious illness, she joined his arduous 1913 field trip to the McDonald Ranges. The type specimen of the Dusky Grasswren *Amytornis purnelli* was taken on this trip.

Like his father before him, White's northern expeditions often placed him in contact with aborigines. He saw more to the full blood aborigines than did his contemporaries. He strove for preservation of aboriginal culture and the right to maintain their identity on their own tribal lands. This attitude was much in advance of the general thinking of the time. He pushed this view

in his writings and lectures, connecting the changing land use after white settlement to environmental degradation and the decline of aboriginal culture and living standards. He deplored the often pitiful conditions in which he found the aborigines.

In his most productive active ten years, from 1911-1921 White served on many S.A. Government committees including the Flora and Fauna Advisory Board and the Advisory Board of Agriculture. He also served the Federal Government monitoring the westward spread of the sparrow along the East West railway line. It was while working there that White collected one of the very few S.A. specimens of the Masked Owl from a blow hole on the Nullarbor Plain. Mathews named it a sub species *Tyto novaehollandiae whitei*. He was a member of the final successful deputation to the S.A. Government which secured the huge Flinders Chase as a reserve after over ten years of campaigning.

Honours and congratulations from local, interstate and overseas ornithologists and natural history societies came White's way. At home he was a popular sought after lecturer who in today's language would no doubt be described as charismatic.

In "Nature's Pilgrim" Rob Linn does not dwell on White's detractors but there must have been many. Some considered it their right to continue exploiting land for personal gain. Did White express views on evolution and how did people react? Some people would have been alarmed at Captain White's continued prodding of the public conscience on aboriginal issues. Although not stated clearly in this book, it was not altogether acceptable to be a pioneer conservationist in the early twentieth century in South Australia.

In 1922, White was a member of a three motor car expedition that was to cover 8,800 km, from Adelaide via Alice Springs to Darwin returning through Cloncurry and western New South Wales to Adelaide. The book details this epic journey, often over trackless country. White did the bird collecting, preparation of skins, took ornithological notes and organized the stores. Public interest was so intense that he was forced to fulfil many lecturing engagements after his return.

The book discusses why, after a year of lecturing, Captain White turned his back almost completely on ornithology, the author suggests it could be that the long motor adventure had been a pinnacle of success and the aftermath was an exhaustive anti-climax which sapped his zeal. Mathews' actions may have contributed also. Many unpaid field workers like White had voluntarily, at considerable personal effort and expense, collected bird skins for Mathews. In financial trouble Mathews eventually sold the collection to the highest bidder. Although White, unlike some others, did not express disgust, it may be that Mathews' action together with his continuous almost bullying demands for specimens over ten years, finally saw White cease field work and correspondence with Mathews. It seems as he grew older, White sought bushland as a place of beauty for solitude and spiritual renewal, rather than as a place for the collection of scientific specimens.

In July, 1923 White became Commissioner of Scouting in South Australia for three years. He then faded into relative obscurity with his withdrawal from public life and the death of his first wife Ethel. In 1941, the S.A.O.A. belatedly conferred on S. A. White a Life Membership of the Association. It was only the second Life Membership awarded by the S.A.O.A.; the first being granted to Gregory Mathews in 1914 at the instigation of Captain White.

Because he was a successful explorer, naturalist, photographer, and interesting speaker, Captain White was able to attract and influence many Adelaide people. He taught people the value of natural areas as places of great beauty, interest and diversity; places that should be preserved intact. With people's changing attitudes to native flora and fauna, political action to protect these assets began to be more successful.

Captain S. A. White was a perceptive, tireless conservationist, in early twentieth century South Australia, and a naturalist of great importance to Australian science. His accomplishments were many and his biography is long overdue. Rob Linn has fulfilled this need with "Nature's Pilgrim" which makes fascinating reading.

**DAVID VINCENT**

**A GARDEN OF BIRDS: AUSTRALIAN BIRDS IN AUSTRALIAN GARDENS** by Graham Pizzey, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1988. 342 pages, 18 line drawings, 32 colour photographs, 50 black-and-white photographs. Price \$49.

Graham Pizzey writes about Australian gardens and their birds with a great deal of thought and experience, but the overwhelming feeling is one of empathy and affection. His writing style is entertaining and evocative; hence even his accounts of the scientific literature are easy to read. The book is generously illustrated with the author's magnificent photographs of birds, mammals, frogs and insects, both in colour and black-and-white. In addition each chapter is marked by delicately composed and executed drawings by Richard Weatherley.

Pizzey's main messages are the changes European man has wrought on the Australian landscape and their effects on our native birds. His book details why we should redress some of these effects and how. He begins with some introductory chapters on the British gardening tradition, the origins of the native Australian flora and the first attempts by early settlers to grow exotics in the new colony. Having changed the natural Australian environment, the next step was the introduction of exotic animals. The author describes how 14 of the most successful introduced bird species use this changed environment.

The middle sections of "A Garden of Birds" demonstrate the pathways along which the energy and nutrients manufactured by plants move via insects and other fauna. Other chapters document the food sources of some of the major groups of Australian birds in woodland habitats.

Pizzey begins with the thesis that a good bird garden should provide a variety of vegetative structures and levels, but that every garden is unique. He returns to this theme in describing his own garden at Mt Martha, south-east of Melbourne, in terms of how birds used the different elements. He also visited many bird-gardens in coastal south-eastern Australia and

reports some of the useful plants for each specific area. The diversity of birds species in a garden relies not only on the character of the garden itself, but also on the surrounding habitat. For example, some gardens in outer suburban areas are losing native bird species due to suburban encroachment on native vegetation and gardens in sterile inner suburbs tend to support low numbers of native birds.

The book ends with a warning about the dangers garden escapees pose to remnant native vegetation. Pizzey uses this as another argument in favour of planting native gardens in Australia.

For those interested in reading more widely, there are comprehensive references for each chapter and a brief list of books for further reading. There are also useful lists of societies for birdwatchers and native plant enthusiasts and three unusual but very helpful lists: common and scientific names for birds, native plants and exotic plants mentioned in the text.

In summary, this is a fascinating book packed with information on birds in Australian gardens presented in a lively and poetic manner. Where else could one read this description of one of our more common birds:

"The striated thornbills move like animated shrimps through high foliage"?

Pizzey has synthesized the development of Australian gardens over the past 200 years and looks towards the future. He notes that some species of birds, like the Brush Bronzewing pigeon, Scaly Thrush and Beautiful Firetail, to name a few, cannot adapt to suburban gardens or to the disturbance associated with human occupation. However the diversity of native birds in cities in general will depend on our perception and understanding of the interrelationships between plants, animals and insects and our ability to act on these.

*A Garden of Birds* represents a valuable contribution in developing our skills in this regard.

**PENNY PATON**