

BOOK REVIEWS

FEATHERS AND BRUSH: THREE CENTURIES OF AUSTRALIAN BIRD ART by Penny Olsen. CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., 2001; www.publish.csiro.au, 227 pp., 220 mm x 230 mm, 236 illustrations, hard cover, \$69.95 rrp.

This book outlines the known history of Australian bird art commencing with drawings and paintings of Western Australian birds by illustrators with Dutch expeditions in the 1600s and also by draftsmen on William Dampier's ship *Roebuck* in 1699-1700.

Seventy years later the first of James Cook's three visits to Australia produced a surge of interest in the natural history of the Botany Bay country. On board the *Endeavour* was an able artist named Sydney Parkinson who painted many fine watercolours such as the Australasian Gannet and Red-tailed Tropicbird shown on page 12. Cook's second voyage produced more paintings by the expedition's illustrator Johann Georg Forster (e.g. Blue Petrel on page 14). Even before the century was out untrained naval personnel, governors, doctors, convicts and others were painting usually crude depictions of local birds at times. These are now referred to collectively as 'The Port Jackson Painter'. A young very able naval man named George Raper arrived on the first fleet and spent five years painting in New South Wales, and on Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. His watercolour of the now extinct Lord Howe Island White Gallinule is included in the book.

John William Lewin, the colony's first free natural history artist, was an accomplished painter. Three of his paintings of honeyeaters and a polished watercolour of a White-winged Triller are included in the book. In 1813 he published *The Birds of New South Wales with their Natural History*. This was the first illustrated colour-plated book printed in Australia.

Of interest to South Australians is Lesueur's painting of the now extinct Kangaroo Island Emu made while voyaging with Baudin at the beginning of the 19th century.

Bird specimens and paintings were continually shipped to England as were birds to stock private zoos. More realistic paintings appeared with artists now using live models from the menageries

of the wealthy. Edward Lear was one artist who benefited from such contact to produce his fine paintings. Lear also produced *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* in 1832.

Australian bird art from 1837 to 1881 belonged to John Gould. His energy and power to delegate gathered together information on 681 Australian species enabling him to publish *The Birds of Australia*. The task was made possible using paintings by Henry Constantine Richter, Edward Lear and others. His wife Elizabeth's staggering contribution was paramount. Gould goaded on his collectors, feverishly seeking new species. One of the most able was the ill-fated John Gilbert whose contribution of almost 50 new species was thanklessly received. The mid-19th century saw many female colonial illustrators and artists at work—the Scott sisters, Harriet and Helena, Caroline Pounds, Caroline Louisa Atkinson and others. Diggles' *The Ornithology of Australia* appeared in 1866–1870 in 21 parts with a total of 126 plates, each prepared by his niece Rowena Birkett and himself. Gracius Broinowski was another to attempt *The Birds of Australia* in an already saturated market.

North's *Nests and Eggs of Birds found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, completed in 1914, is still a standard reference book.

Olsen points out that the first half of the 20th century was a lean time for bird art with photographic reproduction now possible. Gregory Mathews' 1936 publication of hand-coloured lithographs in yet another 'Birds of Australia' was the swan song for this technique.

John Albert Leach's *An Australian Bird Book: a Pocket Book for Field Use*, first published in 1911, was reprinted many times.

The popular *What Bird is That?*, written and illustrated by Neville Cayley in 1931, was the text book field guide until the 1970s.

A rush of books of bird illustrations followed the end of World War II. Robin Hill produced a very successful *Australian Birds* in 1967. Betty Temple-Watts illustrated many books including *Birds in the Australian High Country*, edited by Harry Frith. Prominent artists of the 70s and 80s include Richard Weatherly, Raymond Harris-Ching, Frank Morris, William Cooper, Gladys O'Grady, and Peter Trusler.

The launching in the 1980s of Peter Slater's *A Field Guide to Australian Birds* gave us a vastly improved, portable, more sophisticated field guide. Graham Pizzey's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* illustrated by Roy Doyle, and Simpson and Day's similarly titled field guide, were released at about the same time.

In Olsen's last chapter she presents some of the works of 34 contemporary bird artists. They range from the didactic drawings of Rob Freeman to Glenys Buzza's impressionist treatment of her subject set on abstract background.

Between these two approaches are realist painters depicting birds as part of the ecosystem. This demands a talent for creating landscapes, seascapes, rainforest and many other habitats. Also beyond pure illustrations are William Cooper's brilliant light effects in his 'Southern Cassowary' on page 126 and clever handling of light in Frank Knight's 'Australian Magpies' on page 135. These are real mainstream artists far

removed from the stilted illustrations of the past.

The book gives us a history of Australian bird art providing also a different slant on the history of Australian ornithology and ornithologists. It shows also the evolution of an increased awareness of the value of our bird populations.

Reflect upon the subject painted by Jacob Halley in 1871 of a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo chained to a wooden perch in a 19th century drawing room (page 76), and two paintings by Neville Cayley on page 80—one of a pair of dead shelduck, the other of shotgun pellets hitting a rising Latham's Snipe. These subjects would have minimal appeal to today's artists or art collectors.

Penny Olsen has written of Australian bird art, giving us a selection of paintings and illustrations to complement her text. This beautiful worthwhile book has filled a huge gap in Australian ornithological literature.

DAVID VINCENT