

BOOK REVIEWS

THE FLIGHT OF THE EMU: A HUNDRED YEARS OF AUSTRALIAN ORNITHOLOGY 1901–2001 by Libby Robin. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2001. 464 pp., 351 illustrations (incl. colour), hardback, \$69rrp.

Libby Robin's Preface tells us that Dr Norman Wettenhall, on approaching her to write a history of Australian ornithology to celebrate the centenary of the RAOU (Birds Australia), advised her, 'to write a history of the discipline and not of the

Union'. These wise words, as Libby acknowledges, have enabled her to write a monumental work that tells the history of one organisation and so much more. The quirkiness of the title is revealing in itself. The Emu—a flightless bird—which flies? It's a paradox which suggests a miraculous achievement, and this accolade may be applied not only to the RAOU's distinguished history, but also to this book which is a fitting tribute to Australian ornithology in the 20th century.

The book is a handsome volume, richly illustrat-

ed with rare and revealing photos, reproductions of historical documents such as the first Gould League cover pages and certificates, diagrams, cartoons, bookplates, and even musical scores. It also has a selection of stunning colour plates. Almost every page has some visual interest, a feature sure to bring the book to life for the members of the visual generations who will be its 21st century readers.

Libby Robin has created a pleasing structure for the book, which is divided into four sections, each one representing a period of 25 years of history and roughly chronological although each chapter has a theme. Between each section is what Libby calls a 'brief interlude' of short essays on three 'miracle' or 'mystery' Australian birds: the Night Parrot, Superb Lyrebird, and Noisy Scrub-bird. I suspect for many readers the book would be worth reading for the essays alone, which tell the most fascinating, stranger than fiction, almost mythological stories about these iconic birds. To choose one example, the charming 'Living with Lyrebirds' captures the author's childhood memories of searching the fern gullies of the Dandenongs with her father for lyrebirds to observe:

Usually we would find [the lyrebird] in a clearing, foraging in deep leaf-mould with his long feet. If we were really lucky he would throw his long tail over his head and dance.
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Of the four main sections of the text the first covers the period 1900–1926. Themes for the chapters in this section include the debate raging at the time over the classification and taxonomy of Australian birds. It's a scholarly account of a seminal debate in Australian ornithological history. In the next section, covering 1920s–1950s the author has no difficulty in finding similar themes and controversies. Chapter 4 deals with the controversy over collecting as the conservation movement developed impetus. During this period practices such as the collection of feathers for the millinery trade, and later the collection of skins and eggs, came under question and ultimately legislation was enacted to ensure protection of native birds. A permit system was eventually introduced to regulate any collection which was not for scientific purposes. The account given here is well judged and supported by a wealth of primary source material.

The third section continues with interesting

accounts of the bird trafficking debate of the 1950s and 1960s, including the serious effects this had on the SAOA, with the famous (or infamous) split in the organisation. Again, the account is written as an engaging narrative with no loss of scholarly reference. It is perhaps timely now, after almost half a century, to revisit these painful events for the association and see them in perspective as part of the larger movement in ornithology towards conservation values. A chapter is also devoted to the globalisation of ornithological issues during the 1970s, a period when international congresses and symposia saw Australian ornithologists take their part on a world stage. This helped to bring Australian avifauna to the notice of the international arena, and also enlightened Australian ornithologists about international issues and concerns.

The final section covers the development of contemporary 'birding' issues over the last 25 years. There is a chapter on resources for bird observing, including the development of field guides, binoculars and other field equipment, bird observatories, national parks and sanctuaries, not forgetting the jewel in the crown which is Gluepot Reserve. The author also writes about the development of participatory projects, such as the Atlas of Australian Birds and the bird banding exercises that have given many bird lovers and amateur ornithologists a means of contributing towards scientific knowledge and the welfare of birds.

The book is completed with several very useful appendices. I mention in particular Appendix 1 – People of Australian Ornithology, compiled by Rosanne Walker, which is a timely and accessible list of about 200 names. This list could perhaps have included some of the filmmakers who have become prominent in recent years, such as Roger Whittaker and John and Junelle Young.

Libby Robin's Epilogue discusses the relationship between the professional and amateur ornithologist. She concludes that 'the distinction is invidious' and what we have now is an ornithological community made up of professional and amateur together, reliant on each other to keep the science and practice of bird study dynamic. The author, herself not a practising ornithologist, has demonstrated the truth of that statement. She has written a book that is certain to be a seminal work for ornithologists and environmental historians alike.

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