

A Sketch of the Life of Samuel White— Ornithologist, Soldier, Sailor, and Explorer.

By His Son, S. A. White, C.M.B.O.U.

XXI. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

In a few notes evidently made at the termination of his last trip, my father says—"I regret that I had neither time nor opportunity to make a Botanical collection, but one man cannot do everything. A collector's life, even if he confines himself to a few things, is an active and harassing one if he puts his heart into the work, or so I have usually found it and having assistants does not always relieve one altogether. At times I have sat skinning and curing specimens for days, from early morn till late at night, and at others scouring the scrub for some particular specimens and have been induced by some of my hunters to take a long journey through thick scrub, over hills, plains, or swamps in quest of some information which is interesting to me. Many times I have been out several days then hurried back, tired and weary, to cure the specimens obtained which has often taken nearly all night; and I was so tired that it was impossible to write up my notes. Throwing myself on my bed (if I had one) I snatched a few minutes rest before rising again with the dawn to begin a fresh day with hardly time to wash or partake of food, and so it goes on for weeks and months, till frequently hard work and scanty living brings on some climatic fever, when one's labours suddenly cease for the time".

At times Samuel White seems to have jotted down his thoughts here and there. In some cases they were short, scrappy notes; some of these which are before me were written after his last voyage, and evidently he was musing over this for he says.—"I purchased a great deal from the natives while I was in the Aru Islands, and the birds they brought in would keep two men skinning, and hard at work at that, all day long, I induced them to persevere by liberal offers and payments. I made it a practice to make many presents to the natives and by treating liberally, induced them to bring hundreds of men and boys about me and most of them brought something they had collected, from a bird of paradise to a stone, or a broken shell. It was harvest time in the Arus during my visit, and these people had never seen anything like it before. During the time I was among these interesting natives I distributed

250 yards of calico, mostly coloured, hundreds of dozens of handkerchiefs, several hundreds of tomahawks, seventy dozen knives, 100 lbs. of beads, 10 cwt. of tobacco, twenty double barrel guns, 40 single barrel guns, 200 lbs. of powder, 20 bags of shot, 2,000 caps, ten dozen rugs, also tea, sugar, rice biscuits, and many other things besides 100 sovereigns. It can be well understood that some of these men said, 'Such times they had never seen before'."

It is greatly to be regretted that this great field Ornithologist should have left us before he had put into writing his great achievements in the science he loved so much, and for which he suffered so many hardships—hardships which eventually cost him his life. He was a man of such retiring nature that he avoided any notoriety that would be likely to follow many of his great achievements and made as little as possible of his work, but I know that he realized that he had much information which would be valuable to science, and I also know that if he had been spared, it was his intention to record much of his field work that it might be handed down to live after him. The subject of this brief sketch lived in those early days of a young colony when the wonderful pioneers required all the grit that a human being can possess, to make headway against those manifold difficulties which are always associated with pioneering. Consequently, my father's early tastes for natural history were much retarded, and in addition his parents, who did not realize the importance of their son's scientific research kept a check upon his hobby. In spite of all the obstacles thrown in his way Samuel White from his early childhood showed the greatest love for nature, especially birds, and during his boyhood days spent in a veritable bird paradise, at his old home at the Reedbeds, bird observation was always first in his mind. It was then he laid down the nucleus of a great collection and at the time of his death and long after, the earliest specimens collected were in a perfect state of preservation. Sad to say this great collection containing birds, which have now become extinct was scattered by the trustees to the four quarters of the Globe, a priceless collection which could never be assembled again, and this was done, of course against his express wishes and will. The great love for nature possessed by my father may have caused some who did not really know him, to think that he was eccentric; for instance he willed, that should he lose his life when upon one of his expeditions into the interior, no search should be made for his remains,

but to allow them to rest surrounded by nature which he loved so much. Apart from all this, this naturalist made many friends, and I have known ship's officers, travelling companions and others go to great trouble to find him years after they had met. He told a good after dinner story and charmed his friends with his natural courteous manners and the accounts of his many travels, and experiences, whenever they could prevail upon him to speak of them. He was naturally a fine horseman and there is no doubt he took much interest in the raising of stock during his station days, but ever uppermost in his mind were his beloved birds. It was a byword in the family that "Whatever Samuel took in hand he mastered", and this is well illustrated when I look back upon his proficiency in music, chemistry, photography, and entomology as well as ornithology, he was a navigator although he had not taken out a certificate; still his bringing back his yacht upon his last voyage through uncharted seas proved this. Samuel White was no mean artist and when quite a boy painted a number of the Native birds of his district, which are far more life-like in colour and contour than the illustrations in some ornithological works which have appeared since that time. My father had a wonderful influence over the aboriginies of both Australia and New Guinea. He travelled and lived amongst the wild tribes of both countries for years, but not once did he ever have trouble with them. There was an old full blooded aboriginal who knew my father as a boy, who travelled very many hundreds of miles to find him, and when told that my father was dead he wept and mourned his loss for days, this is but one of many striking marks of affection borne by the natives towards my father. I am afraid his good nature was often, very often imposed upon, but it gave him the greatest pleasure to do a good turn to another. During his sojourns in England (a trip which was a great undertaking in those days) he loved to meet his old army friends, and he spent many an evening before the fire chatting over military matters, for he had the true martial spirit of the Britisher. He was proud to be a Britisher, and proud of all that was British. Of course the meetings with such men as John Gould, A. R. Wallace and other Ornithologists were red letter days to my father, and every conversation with them was burnt deeply into his memory. Many a time have I heard him quote John Gould and others in the old country upon ornithological matters. I feel sure John Gould the Author of "The Birds of Australia" knew

that it was beyond dispute when he stated in his great work the credit due to my father for his discoveries in Ornithology and said, "I know of no one of my correspondents in Australia who is so keenly alive to the science of Ornithology", and he should have added, "done so much field work". When Samuel White died he left a widow, and young family to mourn their great loss, and since that fatal day, they have kept evergreen the memory of that wonderful pioneer, and great field Ornithologist. It is to be hoped that this very brief sketch of a life by far too short, but still full of great interest, may convey to my readers some idea of the work accomplished by a great pioneer of this State, and of Australian Ornithology.
