

## Book Review

# Passions in Ornithology: A Century of Australian Egg Collectors

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PFITZNER, 2020

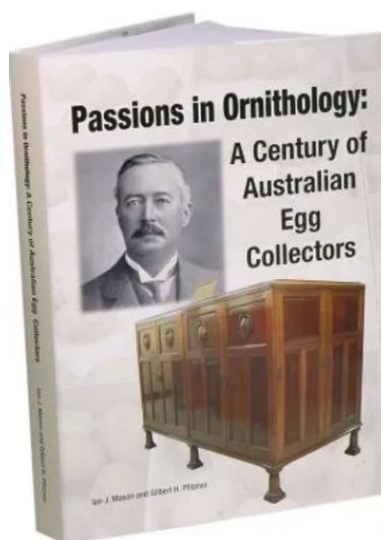
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*Numerous photographs*

*Website: <https://cameroncortes03.wixsite.com/oology-100-years>*

Collections of bird eggs in Australian museums consist almost entirely of formerly private collections that have been donated over the last hundred or so years. Documentation accompanying them is variable and many questions arise as to dates and localities of the clutches and, at times, even the identity of the collectors. Some 20 years ago, as they searched for information about the collections in their care at CSIRO's Australian National Wildlife Collection in Canberra, Mason and Pfitzner decided to address these problems in order to improve the quality of the collection data for research and conservation purposes. They explored the lives and field work of Australia's egg collectors and, even before the widespread electronic availability of historical documents, they amassed huge amounts of information by searching literature and library records, talking to collectors or their families and descendants, locating collectors' field notebooks, and obtaining collection information from other museums.



Mason and Pfitzner's intention was to publish their findings in a book, to which most collectors still living agreed. But the problem of finding a publisher or the funds to produce the book remained unsolved, and the project was shelved in 2008. Fortunately, an elderly benefactor recently provided funding in the hope of seeing the book in print, and within a short time the authors resurrected their work, added information now available online, and published *Passions in Ornithology* in May 2020.

Following the Preface outlining the authors' rationale for the project, the Introduction provides useful summaries of the development of ornithology in Australia, of the international trade in bird skins and eggs in the 19th and early 20th centuries, of the establishment of fauna regulations through the 20th century and its effect on egg collecting, and of the documentation of ecosystem declines by oologists and the scientific legacy provided by their collections.

Biographies of more than 300 egg collectors, in alphabetical order by surname, constitute the main part of the book. They range from a few sentences to several pages in length and include collectors of many clutches to those who took only small numbers. It is clear that egg collecting did not appeal to women or was considered an inappropriate activity, as the collectors were all men with only two exceptions. One was Clara Larcher née Sloan (1898-1988) who collected some 120 clutches in the Mackay district, Queensland, for E. M. Cornwall from 1909 to 1914. The other was the remarkable Jane Ada Fletcher (1870-1956), teacher, photographer, writer, natural historian and life member of the RAOU. Like Clara, Jane did not build her own egg collection, but collected for others from 1908 to 1919, including for Gregory Mathews.

Each biography provides dates and locations for where the collector lived, worked and travelled, as far as is known, as well as family background and other activities they were involved in. Many made collections of other objects, whether natural history such as insects, or inanimate, such as telephone pole insulators and whisky containers in the case of Charles Allen. The authors often provide information on the system of set marks used by the collector to identify individual clutches or sets (the same set mark being written on each egg within a clutch) and the current locations of their archived notebooks and correspondence.

Whittell's (1954) *The Literature of Australian Birds* similarly provided biographies of Australian ornithologists, but the overlap with *Passions in Ornithology* is not great and this new book complements Whittell's very well, particularly with regard to more recent collectors. Many collectors did not publish so were never included in Whittell, but, for those who did, Mason and Pfitzner direct the reader to Whittell's lists of their publications. The recent volumes of *Contributions to the History of Australasian Ornithology* (Memoirs of the Nuttall Ornithological Club) likewise include much biographical material, but these

focus more on institutions and only the more prominent private collectors. The sheer depth of Mason and Pfitzner's investigations also ensures that there is limited overlap. It is pleasing to see that for South Australian collectors the authors have made extensive use of Birds SA's *Historical Series* articles, mostly written by Penny Paton.

Following the biographies of the main collectors is a list of nearly 2,000 incidental collectors of Australian bird eggs, with the number of clutches they collected and the years of collection. The majority collected only one or a few clutches, most likely found abandoned and donated to their local museum, as is the case with my mother, 'Horton, P.M.', who features in the list. A few collected larger numbers, such as 'Moore, S.W.' who is recorded as collecting 288 clutches in 1890-1902, and as the authors note some of these may have been serious collectors, but further information about them is lacking. Lists of acronyms and abbreviations and a gazetteer complete the text.

An outstanding feature of the book is the array of wonderful photographs of the collectors, their vehicles and campsites, and their collections. One of my favourites is of a young Bob (R. F.) Brown in his naval uniform; he may not have considered himself as an egg collector but is included because of his small, boyhood collection that he donated to the SA Museum in 1937 when he was still a teenager. The authors have been able to source images of the majority of collectors, including many of the earlier ones. A large proportion have been provided by family members and other private individuals, so probably have never been published before.

Included with the book is a CD containing further material. Firstly, there are appendices for most of the collectors, each PDF containing scanned examples of egg data cards, scanned correspondence as examples of handwriting, additional photographs, newspaper articles, anecdotes and other information about the collector or family of collectors. Secondly, there is

a Word document with genealogical information for most collectors, additional to that given in the book. All of this supplementary information can also be found on the book's website, and purchasers of the book will be supplied with a password to access the information.

The authors do not condone egg collecting but in recognising that it has occurred they have set out to enhance the quality of information that can be gained from its results, whether it had been undertaken legally or not. The inference is that much 20th century collecting was illegal. However, in the early days egg collecting was considered to be a worthy occupation and we cannot judge the activities of those collectors by the standards of today. The authors note that while there are some currently active collectors operating under permits in Western Australia, most of the more recent collections still in private hands in the eastern states are believed to be inactive. They state in the Introduction that their longer-term goal is for older collections still in private hands to eventually reside in natural history institutions where they will be accessible to future researchers.

Undoubtedly there were 'rogue' collectors, such as Raoul Sunday Bell (1882-1966) whose activities on Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands may have contributed to the demise of endemics there, but what is clear from the book is that many collectors became active conservationists. Dismayed by the decline of birds due to clearing or degradation of native habitats, they worked to protect what was left. Appendix 18 at the end of the Introduction lists a number of prominent examples of collector/conservationists and it is interesting to note that about two thirds of them were South Australian men, such as Erhard Boehm, Jack Hood and Allen Lashmar.

Because of the necessity to publish rapidly, it is inevitable that some of the collector biographies were not written to the authors' satisfaction, errors have been missed, and editing is not as rigorous as it may have been. For example,

basic genealogical information is given at the start of each biography and then repeated in its main text – a good idea for the long biographies but not needed for the short ones. In the near future the authors intend to publish a soft-cover supplement containing some 50 revised biographies and a list of errata. It will also feature several more egg collectors not included in the main book, as new information has continued to come to light. Meanwhile, there is a page on the book's website where updates and the list of errata are posted.

*Passions in Ornithology* will find readership among both historians and ornithologists. The biographies provide a fascinating social history of people whose otherwise disparate lives are drawn together because of their shared interest in oology. To the ornithologist the wealth of personal and family details may seem of questionable relevance but I applaud the authors for incorporating as much information as they have. Seemingly peripheral details may be significant, as illustrated by a recent enquiry to the SA Museum regarding a clutch of Black-fronted Dotterel eggs collected near Cairns in December 1944, purportedly by Allen Lashmar, a Kangaroo Island resident for most of his life. Was the clutch wrongly attributed? From *Passions in Ornithology* and its supplementary information we learn that Lashmar saw active service in World War II and was stationed for a time in North Queensland where he 'took a few sets', so he would indeed have been the collector.

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading Mason and Pfitzner's book and am certain that it will become an important reference work in Australian historical ornithology.

**Philippa Horton**