

Historical Series No. 85
Dr Robert Peel (1835–1894)
By Philippa Horton

In the bird collection of the World Museum, Liverpool, there are about 85 bird specimens collected by 'Peele', with nothing further to enlighten the collector's identity. They were all collected in Australia and were part of a collection sold to the Liverpool Museum by Canon Henry Baker Tristram in 1896. Tristram (1822–1906) was an English clergyman, explorer and ornithologist, and in 1870 was appointed Canon of Durham Cathedral (Hale 2016). In 1844 he had begun a bird collection that by 1889 amounted to more than 17,000 specimens from around the world (Tristram 1889: iv). Originally there were some 130 Peele skins in Tristram's collection (Tristram 1889), but about a third have since been lost, probably most during the bombing raids on Liverpool in World War II; these losses include all the honeyeaters, apart from chats, and all the finches. Most of Peele's skins were listed from South Australia (SA), but several species, such as Spectacled Monarch, do not occur in SA as labelled. Does this cast doubt on the other SA specimens? Why are some from New South Wales (NSW)? Is the solitary Tasmanian specimen really from there? In order to determine how Peele's collection of Australian birds found its way to Tristram, and the likely provenance of the specimens, I have uncovered Peele's identity and explored his life, with the aid of genealogical websites and scanned newspapers on Trove.

On 3 June 1835 Robert Peele (Figure 1) was born in Durham, England, the second of eight children to Edward Peele and Ann Winter. At Robert's baptism, his father's occupation was described as 'Singing Man at the Cathedral'; he was a chorister at the Durham Cathedral, as were his sons in their youth, and in 1858 Edward became the cathedral's Chapter Clerk (*The Durham County Advertiser* 20/4/1883: 5). Upon their father's death in 1883, Robert's brother Richardson Peele, a solicitor, became Chapter Clerk. Robert entered the medical profession and trained at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. In August 1860, while in London, he married Mary Ann Blyth née Nash, a widow with a young son, George Herbert Blyth. After Robert qualified as M.R.C.S. in 1861, the family moved to Stockton-on-Tees (30 km SE of Durham) where Robert worked as a house-surgeon and municipal medical officer (*The London and Provincial Medical Directory*, UK, 1864: 532). All records I have located



Figure 1. Robert Peel c. 1875. Image State Library of SA B-3054

for Robert Peele in his adult life indicate that he spelt his surname without the final e, as I shall do hereafter.

In July 1864 Peel was employed as surgeon on the clipper ship *The Murray* from London to Adelaide, arriving 21 October; passengers in the first-class cabin included Mrs Peel and Master George Blyth. Peel commenced work as a surgeon at Koorunga (now Burra South) until accepting the post of Assistant Colonial Surgeon in late 1865, when the family moved to Adelaide. Mary Ann and George both returned to England soon after, departing on *The Murray* in January 1866. Peel worked at the Adelaide Hospital and in October 1866 showed representatives of the daily newspapers around the establishment. Innovations that he had introduced were artworks decorating the wards, donated by himself and others, and Divine Service on Sundays, read by himself, and he was held in high esteem by his patients (*SA Advertiser*

22/10/1866: 3). He soon moved on, however, as he had been appointed Assistant Colonial Surgeon for the Mount Gambier district, where he arrived in November 1866. There he remained for the next two years and quickly became an active member of the community, particularly in his support for the Mt Gambier Institute. He was a member of the Institute committee overseeing plans for a new building, the foundation stone being laid in January 1868 (Maslen 1981). With his tenor voice he sang at fundraising concerts for the Institute and other beneficiaries. He umpired cricket matches, and donated a font to the Church of England church, books to the Institute Library, and specimens to its museum, including a Musk Duck, a pair of 'swamp hawks' [Swamp Harrier?] and a 'blue crane' [White-faced Heron?], and copper ore, fossils and shells (*Border Watch* Mt Gambier 19/8/1868: 2, 5/9/1868: 2, 1/10/1868: 3).

In September 1868, Peel travelled to Adelaide where he shipped a case of 'specimens' to London. He also raised funds and sought subscribers and donations for the Mt Gambier Institute, as well as donating snakes, lizards, a 'porcupine' [Spiny Anteater?] and two Magpie Geese to the Zoological department of the Adelaide Botanic Garden. His return to Mt Gambier in October was brief, as he had been appointed surgeon to the Northern Territory (NT) Survey Expedition, to be led by Surveyor-General George Goyder. At his farewell dinner Peel was praised for his professional and personal contributions to Mt Gambier: 'Every public work in the township had been more or less aided by [Peel] ... if anything was to be done, and funds were required, Dr. Peel invariably came forward' (*Border Watch* 7/11/1868: 2). One of his final philanthropic activities was to acquire a shipment of carp, from the Torrens River in Adelaide, to stock Mt Gambier's Valley Lake; environmental consequences of exotic species introductions were not considered at the time.

Peel returned to Adelaide and on Christmas Eve 1868 joined the survey party on the *Moonta*, to sail for Port Darwin. During the voyage Peel conducted Sunday services and organised, and performed in, concerts of the 'Northern Territory Philharmonic Society' (Kerr 1971). The party arrived at Port Darwin 5 February 1869 and, having been chosen by Goyder as deputy leader, Peel's duties were many besides medical. He was responsible for taking meteorological observations (Murphy 1984). He also collected numerous natural history specimens, including plants (Kerr 1971), but may have spent excessive time doing so, as there were rumblings among the men: 'The doctor has a large number of patients suffering from

various complaints, and yet he goes away ... for several days together ... shooting and exploring' (*South Australian Register* 26/4/1869: 2). Goyder, now in poor health, returned to Adelaide in November 1869, leaving Peel in charge of those who had volunteered to stay until the arrival of a Government Resident. Again there was discontent with Peel's conduct but, according to a correspondent from *The Argus* (Melbourne 26/3/1870: 1), the conditions were trying, including poor rations and an extended delay in the arrival of ships to take the men home. Peel and the survey's naturalist, Frederick Schultze, made the most of the delay by continuing to explore and discovering new plant species only a day or two before the relief ships arrived (Millner 1870).

After a journey of more than two months, the *Kohinoor* reached Adelaide on 5 April 1870, carrying Peel and most of the remaining survey party. Peel brought with him 'some rare plants in excellent condition, several species of pigeons and doves, two kinds of quail, and some very handsome parrots' (*SA Advertiser* 12/4/1870: 2). In May, Peel made a brief visit to Mt Gambier, having already forwarded a large number of NT specimens for the Institute's museum (shells, geological specimens and Aboriginal artefacts), as well as 8 guineas that his sister had raised in England for the Institute, and his own donation of £28. He also arranged for FG Waterhouse, curator of the SA Institute Museum in Adelaide, to send duplicate NT material to the Mt Gambier museum in August 1870; among these were 101 specimens of 58 bird species including Crimson Finch, Bar-breasted Honeyeater and Shining Flycatcher. By 1874, however, space at the Mt Gambier Institute was at a premium and its museum was broken up, and 'the destruction of all of the collection of birds, kangaroos and tiger cats which had not been cured properly was ordered in July 1875' (Maslen 1981). Whether all the NT birds were destroyed we cannot know but it seems likely that none survived.

In July 1870, Peel sailed for England. It appears that he visited his wife and stepson, as on Census Night, 2 April 1871, he was staying at a hotel in Grantham, a short train journey from East Bridgford, Nottingham, where Mary and George were boarding. He left England in July 1871 on the *William Duthie*, arriving in Sydney early November and returning to Adelaide in mid-December. The following month he established a new medical practice on North Terrace opposite the SA Institute, in which he continued to work for the next seven years. He soon became involved in community activities, singing at charitable concerts, fundraising for worthy causes, serving on numerous

committees (often as chairman) of sporting clubs and horticultural and musical societies. He donated prizes for athletics competitions and horticultural shows, judged at agricultural shows and horse races, was on the medical committee to establish the Adelaide Children's Hospital, and acted as surgeon to the Adelaide Artillery. He was a frequent guest at levees held at Government House. He was a member of the Freemasons and other fraternal and friendly societies and surgeon to several. Milanese composer Paolo Giorza, who had moved to Adelaide in 1877 (Maguire 2001), dedicated a piece of music to him, *The Fizz Galop* (*The Evening Journal* Adelaide 28/8/1878: 2).

Peel was in frequent demand to assist at accident scenes, conduct post-mortems, and give evidence at inquests. In 1877 he strongly advocated compulsory smallpox vaccination regardless of age and recommended revaccination in adulthood as immunity waned; he had been vaccinating many people at the time and doing so free of charge if they could not pay (*The Express and Telegraph* Adelaide 17/5/1877: 1). In the municipal elections of October 1875, Peel was elected as a councillor for the Hindmarsh Ward and he served in that role for two years. Throughout the 1870s Peel donated specimens of natural history to the SA Institute Museum, as listed by Waterhouse in his monthly reports (SA State Records GRG19-168). A donation in January 1877 was of 'ruby tin' [= cassiterite, a tin oxide] samples from mines in Tasmania, following a trip he made there. Other donations included several ducks and in 1873 a series of Red-rumped Parrot eggs, suggesting he kept that species as aviary birds. He did keep domestic fowl, as he was awarded a certificate for his silver-grey Dorkings at the SA Poultry Society show in 1876.

Wishing to see his family, Peel sailed for England on the *RMS Tanjore* in April 1879. Prior to leaving, he was entertained at farewell dinners and presented with a silver casket containing 200 sovereigns, and a printed address expressing the gratitude of his friends and fellow citizens for his contributions to the colony (*SA Register* 19/4/1879: 7). In late June Peel travelled to Dublin with his friend Dr James G Beaney, senior surgeon at the Melbourne Hospital (*The Irish Times* Dublin 15/7/1879: 4), where he reunited with his brother Dr Edward Peel who was a medical practitioner there. At the end of July, Peel passed an exam for a medical degree at the King and Queen's College of Physicians, Ireland (*SA Register* 26/9/1879: 5). He returned to Australia in the *Tanjore*, arriving in Adelaide in December 1879.

After a few months, Peel moved to Melbourne

where he established a new medical practice in April 1880. Again, he threw himself into community, agricultural, musical and sporting societies and activities. Periodically, he visited Sydney, Adelaide, Mt Gambier and Tasmania. Late in 1886 he got into financial difficulties with a moneylender (*The Advocate* Melbourne 30/10/1886: 11) and moved to Sydney. On his return to Melbourne in July 1888 on the steamer *Rodondo*, the passenger list included 'Dr. and Mrs. Peel' (*The Evening News* Sydney 24/7/1888: 4). It seems unlikely that Mrs Peel was Mary Ann, however, for she died in England in October 1888. On the deaths of his grandfather William in 1873 and father Edward in 1883, both in England, Robert Peel had placed notices in the Adelaide and Melbourne newspapers, but he did not place any notices for Mary Ann's death.

Peel resumed medical practice in Melbourne at the beginning of September, 1888, whereupon the committee of the Victorian Poultry and Dog Society made him an honorary life member for services rendered while he had been president (*The Leader* Melbourne 11/8/1888: 14). On 25 February 1889, Robert Peel, widower of Balaclava, aged 53, married Mysie Wrixon, spinster of Balaclava, aged 36, in Fitzroy, Melbourne; was Mysie the 'Mrs Peel' on the *Rodondo*? Two years in Melbourne was enough for Peel however, and in September 1890 he moved back to Adelaide, apparently alone. He attempted to establish a medical practice in the west end of the city but with no great success as his health was failing, exacerbated by a fall from the back of the Hindmarsh tram when it ran off the tracks in January 1891. Despite his ill-health, he travelled to England on the clipper ship *Torrens* in June 1891, probably to see his brother Richardson Peele who was also unwell. Richardson died in August 1892 aged 47 (*The Northern Guardian* Hartlepool 23/8/1892: 3) and the following February Robert returned to Australia in the steamer *Tainui*, as a third-class passenger, his finances probably now dwindling. He arrived in Hobart in March 1893 and, after a short stay in Melbourne, returned to Adelaide.

In August 1893 Peel was appointed surgeon to the steamer *Woolloomooloo*, bound for South Africa, but he bailed out at Albany, WA, and returned to Adelaide. Having become prone to fits, he died during one on 11 January 1894 at the General Havelock Hotel in Hutt Street (*The Adelaide Observer* 13/1/1894: 29), where he was residing at the time. The cause of death was

given as 'Disease of Heart'; he was aged 58. Obituaries were published in newspapers around Australia, describing him as a skilled physician, immensely kind even to the poorest patients, a *bon vivant*, a rover, a Bohemian. It appears that he left no children from either marriage, and the papers seemed unaware that he left a widow. Mysie Peel died in Melbourne in 1906, described in her death notice as 'relict of the late Dr. Robert Peel.'

From these biographical details we can see that Robert Peel must have known Canon Tristram. His father then brother worked with Tristram at Durham Cathedral for 22 years. Robert visited England and undoubtedly Durham in 1870–71, 1879, and 1891–93, providing opportunities to meet Tristram and bring him bird specimens. The case of specimens Peel shipped to England in 1868 was most likely for the Durham University Museum, established in 1833 (Hale 2016). Waterhouse at the SA Institute Museum, undoubtedly at the request of Peel, had sent 96 Australian bird skins in April 1866 and 146 more in February 1868 to the Durham University Museum in exchange for British bird skins (Curator's Monthly Reports, SA State Records GRG19-168). Waterhouse's list of contacts and addresses included 'Richardson Peele Esq Durham College Solr.' (Museum Diary October 1867 to April 1868, SA Museum Archives AA298/14/1/2). It appears that Tristram obtained some of his 'Peele' specimens via the Durham Museum, because on his label for the Barking Owl LIV T364 he wrote 'Recd. from W. Proctor from Peele, So Australia'; William Proctor was curator at the Durham Museum 1833–1877 (Hale 2016). Nevertheless, I think it likely that Peel donated most of his bird skins directly to Tristram, particularly as among the 56 specimens I examined at the Liverpool Museum in October 2019, the Barking Owl was the only one annotated as received via Proctor.

The stated provenance of most Peel(e) specimens in Tristram's collection is probably correct. While in Australia, Peel lived in SA for the longest time and so most specimens could be expected to be from SA, including the rarest, a Ground Parrot. Peel also lived in NSW and visited Tasmania, hence some specimens being from those states. A few specimens were from Queensland and, while I did not find any trips Peel made there, it is possible that he did visit Queensland, given his propensity for travel. Alternatively, he may have obtained those specimens from a Queensland collector. It is also possible that Peel retained a few bird specimens from the NT survey. Among the

surviving Tristram material, the Pheasant Coucal and the Magpielark appear to be northern Australian subspecies, but their origins in far north Queensland cannot be ruled out. The eight species labelled from SA that do not occur in SA could be a result of mislabelling. Peel's specimen of Superb Parrot (Figure 2), an eastern Australian species, bears a Tristram label with 'South Australia' crossed out and replaced with 'NS Wales'. Not one of Peel's skins is dated, but they are all likely to have been collected between 1864 and 1893.



Figure 2. Superb Parrot LIV T1053, NSW, coll. Peele (Tristram Collection). Image P Horton

Acknowledgements

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