

SAOA Historical Series No.15

Walter Cain (Cont)

By now, I would hope that a clearer picture of Walter Cain's character has developed for you, and, especially of the world in which Walter and John Sutton communicated. I have become quite fond of these two gentlemen and found their later letters encapsulated quite dramatic turns in both the outside world and that of the Oological world, bringing insight into the practices of the day. To this end, I have become less specific about including all of the birds that Walter mentions having seen during this final series of letters in lieu of events unfolding, instead. In addition, to maintain fluency and consistency in dialogue, I have included the odd letter from Chris Cain with Walter's letters during these final years of correspondence.

If readers would like to know more about the specific birds sighted as mentioned in this correspondence, they should contact Penny Paton, the Historical Series Editor, for access to the letters and the particulars mentioned.

Thus, we begin the fifth and final chapter of this series of letters between John Sutton (JS) — Secretary of the SAOA from 1922-1938 and Walter Cain (WC) with a letter from Walter to John Sutton.

Letter 59 – 4 January 1935-from WC to JS

Walter thanks JS for his last letter and says he had a difficult holiday period with his wife getting ill before they even had a chance to leave Port Augusta. Walter says he was especially disappointed to miss out on his holiday as he had rented a furnished cottage at Bridgewater and was keen to visit JS at the Museum. He doesn't describe his wife's illness and, though frustrated at missing out on his holiday, never says anything disparaging about her or her condition, instead, appearing very supportive.

Walter comments that JS must have heard by now of some mystery eggs that Mr Veitch took from the West Coast near Cummins but he says he can't verify description or position as Veitch didn't record the details. He then goes on to highly commend the efforts of Mr Veitch to egg collecting and fears his experience at Venus Bay (see Letter 57), has damaged his enthusiasm for collecting, more's the pity. Walter believes that the person who accompanied Mr Veitch to Bird Island "secured some more eggs of the 'Crested' tern colony".

Walter mentions the misfortune of losing a part of a set of eggs of the Cinnamon Quail Thrush in "the big blow of Dec. 17th" as the hut housing the eggs blew down. He laments that they are hard to get. He says the same winds created "raging dust storms night & day at Farina" which have obliterated any benefit of recent rains.

Walter tells JS that Chris came home for the holidays and feels "a change of food will do him a lot of good". He concludes the letter by wishing JS a prosperous New Year.

Letter 60 – 9 January 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter writes that he is enclosing a male "Turquoise" by mail. He tells JS that it originally belonged to Mr Veitch who has decided to give up his

aviculture activities and has given his collection of birds to Mr Pearce. Walter then asks JS to enquire of Mr Harvey if he has a male "Turquoise" that he can sell to Mr Pearce. It is difficult to know if the latter bird should be alive or dead but the former bird is most certainly dead as Walter says "I injected some formalin but it had been dead some six hours before I got it so it may be a bit 'Ripe'".

Letter 61 – 11 January 1935 – from JS to WC

JS responds to both of Walter's letters. He says he is sorry that Walter was unable to get down over the holidays and had wondered what had happened.

He then tells Walter that Mr Veitch of Port Lincoln called into the Museum to see JS on the 3rd of Jan. Unfortunately, JS was not there at the time and a subsequent follow-up meeting arranged by Mr Veitch fell through as well. He hopes that Mr Veitch will take up the collecting again "as time goes on".

JS tells Walter he was sorry to hear of the Cinnamon Quail Thrush egg mishap and agrees that this species of egg is certainly very rare.

He informs Walter that the Turquoise arrived but because it was in such a poor state, the taxidermist could do nothing with it. As the weather had been very hot, JS says the bird "stunk badly when I got in at 1:30 pm". He then suggests that future bird parcels be addressed to the Director of the SA Museum so they can be opened immediately and not sit around until his availability.

JS closes the letter by returning season's greetings to Walter, Chris and Mr Pearce.

Letter 62 – 16 January 1935 – JS to WC

JS alerts Walter to the fact that Mr Harvey is moving from his current residence of Kensington Gardens to his old residence at Millswood "where he is building aviaries". He has been able to contact him via telephone and, unfortunately, no Turquoise Parrots are available for sale as "those he holds he requires for breeding purposes". JS tells Walter that, out of curiosity, he asked Mr Harvey the price of one of these birds and, due to their scarcity, his reply was "£4 a pair".

He then emphasises to Walter that it "is no bother for me" to contact other dealers to help in the matter and awaits his instruction.

In closing, he says he hopes that Walter's wife's health is improving.

Letter 63 – 30 January 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter thanks JS for his letters and efforts on the Turquoise Parrot, and relays the information that none of the other Adelaide dealers carry Turquoise, only Mr. Harvey.

He regrets that JS missed a visit with Mr Veitch and reiterates what "a very fine chap" he is.

Walter tells JS that he almost didn't send him the Turquoise as "I only got it at 10 at night & by the time I made a coffin, I was fooling around till nearing midnight". However, his promise to send any rare species collected to the museum outweighed the possibility of

potential stench or degradation of the specimen, so, he sent it anyway.

He admits he'll have to try skinning, though he is hesitant to do so: "I have your specifications here but gosh its too rigid for me".

Walter tells JS that they are still having trouble with the post office up there regarding sending oological specimens as he has his boxes marked "Sealed against Inspection" and they claim they are only charging him "Letter rate" on the egg boxes. It appears to be serious enough to go before the "GPO in Adelaide for a decision".

He then tells JS about the death of a lot of aviary birds up their way from some mysterious illness thought to have originated with birds brought from the Southeast, though Mr Pearce's birds have, so far, been unaffected.

Apparently, Walter has heard Mr Veitch and Mr Collins discussing the "Mystery Eggs" alluded to in Letter 59 with Mr Veitch saying that "I don't think any one would take Scrub Robins eggs at Cummins from what I remember of the locality". He adds that Collins is always appreciative of any new sets of eggs that anyone can give him to add to his collection.

Walter tells JS that nothing much else is happening with the birds in his area and then describes the antics of what he refers to as "field wrens" but not "Malurus". He describes their behaviour but says he hasn't had a chance to take a closer look. He closes the letter by mentioning that Chris has gone back to the station as they had good rains over Christmas.

Letter 64 – 31 January 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter gives instructions to JS about thanking a Mr Comeen for sending Walter a "Princess" Parrot to be made into a specimen but which couldn't be done due to a missing tail. He softens his directive by providing details of difficult times for Mr Comeen and indicates that a word of sympathy may elicit future treasures. Walter gives Mr Comeen's address as Stirling Rd., Port Augusta.

Letter 65 – 6 February 1935 – from JS to WC

JS tells Walter that he didn't know Mr Harvey was the only person in SA with a Turquoise Parrot and suspects there is a "cornering of the market" going on. He says that "the instructions for skinning are too wordy" and will try another way in which to simplify the process of communicating these skills. JS comments on locations established for "Scrub Robins" around the Eyre Peninsula and tells Walter that the antics he described of wrens in a previous letter leads JS to believe they are "Field Wrens". He also tells Walter that he has written to Mr Comeen. A copy of the letter sent to Mr Comeen forms part of this correspondence.

Letter 66 – 26 February 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter thanks JS for his letter of 6 January and comments that "Veitch was the only other South Australian" who had the Turquoise Parrot species. He mentions writing to "Cuthill & Bush Sydney for two males . . . at £1 each".

Walter encloses a sketch of the bird that he calls the "Winking Owl" and says his sketch "has no link with Cayley's description . . . still that don't matter". On the day that he saw the bird, it was 102°F and no firearms

were allowed on workshop property so he couldn't shoot the bird. He mentions that Pearce and another man, Barber, saw more at 290 Mile Camp "killed by flying into the Telegraph wires".

Otherwise, said Walter, nothing much was happening with the bird life there. He lists the latest series of eggs to make it into the collection and says they now have well over 300 specimens represented. WC closes the letter by thanking JS for the extra copy of "last month's quarterly, Chrises (sic) contribution is good".

Note: attached to this letter is a piece of brown paper labelling a bird specimen thought to be a Pallid Cuckoo from Forrest Railway Stn. 23-9-34.

Letter 67 – 20 March 1935 – from JS to Chris Cain

JS apologises to Chris for not replying sooner (unclear whether to letters or about the owl which Chris must have played a part in) but says that due to the heat wave he couldn't work at the Museum. He tells Chris that based on the descriptions provided by the Cains of the "Winking Owl", Mr Condon and JS have concluded that it is, in fact, a Boobook Owl. He admits that little work has been done on the species but says the call is the same between the Boobook and Winking so "is no help" in trying to conclusively identify the two. Additionally, the "winking" is caused by a transparent but slightly whitish membrane found in many birds and animals.

JS concludes the letter by congratulating Chris on his Flinders collection: "You have done wonderfully in the matter and have several very good clutches".

Letter 68 – 14 April 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter thanks JS for his letter of the 20th and says they were up at Lake Salmon duck shooting with poor results "13 guns = 21 ducks". He laments that everything was right for a collection of Freckled Duck but none appeared even though "there was 40 to 50 there a fortnight before". Walter tells JS that the floodwater between Kallioota and Salmon yield lots of wrens and he feels includes a likely spot for the Turquoise Wren (Walter calls it *M. callianous* (sic)). Walter describes other birds seen. He tells JS they will probably camp up there at Easter and hopes to find the Turquoise Wren amongst "the blue bush & cotton bush" as they are "dense in growth". However, he is hesitant to think they will actually be successful as they only received 40 points of rain in that area when Port Augusta received an inch.

Again, Walter mentions the great numbers of Galahs and Little Corellas being an indicator "of an adverse season". He tells JS that Farina Station (where Chris is now located) is very dry and they are having "a very poor lambing". He also tells JS that Mr Pearce has a pair of Hooded Parrots "sitting on a 1/3 clutch".

Letter 69 – 22 April 1935 – from JS to WC

JS tells Walter he has received his letter from the 14th and remarks on the birds that Walter saw. He asks Walter to "take particulars of the colour of the iris, the bill, legs and feet" of any Freckled Ducks Walters secures for the museum; as well as, instructing Walter in how to measure the duck for specification. JS tells Walter that "The colours require to be taken immediately after death as in many instances, the colours fade very quickly".

JS remarks that the recent rains around Adelaide have eased the water situation with his final comments referring to Mr Pearce's success with the Hooded Parrots. He says, "I have heard that a number of Hooded were traded off as Golden-shouldered by a dealer here".

Letter 70 – 8 May 1935 – from E. Robertson to JS re: WC parcel

This was just a short note to ask JS to pick up a parcel Walter had delivered to the above person (E. Robertson). JS has inscribed in pencil that he picked it upon the morning of the 10th.

Letter 71 – 10 May 1935 – from JS to WC

JS thanks Walter for "the very handsome rack" that was in the parcel at E. Robertson's. He apologises for the efforts that Miss/Mrs Robertson had to undergo in locating JS' address as "She had come out by tram-car to the terminus but no one could tell her where I lived (unknown — such is fame!)". He also lets Walter know that, though delayed, the April edition of the SAO will be posted to him shortly.

Letter 72 – 19 May 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter thanks JS for his two previous letters and alludes to the fact that the rack sent in the previous parcel is a pipe rack. Walter says he "wasn't too sure if you were a 'Smoker' but I fancy I recall your chewing a pipe the only time we met". He mentions receiving the SAO plus an additional article on Pacific Gulls.

Walter then comments on his observations of Pacific Gulls and feels the mature ones, especially, are very shy, not coming "near a boat for scraps" with Veitch noting their colouration as black and white when observed at Venus Bay. Walter then records other birds he has seen during this time. He comments on how he finds the Register of Members (presumably in the SAO) very useful and laments the loss of J.B. Hood's (Historical Series No. 14) name on the Register.

Walter talks about his trip to Kallioota and Lake Salmon at Easter saying there wasn't much there and they only secured 3 teal eggs. They also picked up a dead, baited cat and got a "fragmentary specimen" of what Mr McGilp identified as a Spotted Nightjar. At this time, Walter says no wrens were seen and definitely no Turquoise Wrens even though they had 50 points of rain in the area. Walter then mentions cutting through to the Lake Torrens Tablelands where the only bird life seen was an Australian Dotterel. The group camped on Saturday and Sunday at South Gap seeing "a bit of everything", but, especially, larger numbers of Woodswallows. The only nesting seen was a "half-built nest in a Mistletoe on a Whitewood tree". Eating during this trip wasn't bad, Walter says, as: "We got four teal on Wongamoodla dam & that, bronzing pigeons and Roo steak kept the camp over busy". He mentions not seeing many birds of prey but "That specimen you failed to identify was taken at 'Four Mile' on 'Whittiter'" — a part of the South Gap property [Editor's Note: Peter Langdon informs us that this should be Whittata — an outstation of South Gap on the road from Bookaloo to South Gap and Pernatty (about 5 miles from the end of the Beda ARM at approx. 31°45', 137°19')].

Final comments in this letter centre on the lack of rain and poor prospects for a productive bird season. Walter mentions Pearce getting 3 Hooded Parrots from his clutch and also seeing Veitch whom he hopes will become more enthusiastic with the oological activities. He closes the letter by saying that "Things are simply awful at Farina, I haven't had a line from Chris for a month away in the back blocks I suppose nursing some starving stock."

Letter 73 – 19 May 1935 – CC to JS

Chris writes from Witchelina Station via Farina. He tells JS how pleased he was to see his bird notes in print in the January SAO. He apologises for not answering JS's queries on the woodswallow but alludes to having misfiled this correspondence and provides the information requested in this letter. Chris feels the White-browed Woodswallow only enters the area during exceedingly good weather and is rarely seen during the dry times. He reckons foxes are the worst prey for ground birds and mentions the station people poisoning them due to the destruction they are doing to the lambs.

Chris then includes his bird notes, discussing the lack of rain, the effect on nesting conditions and the scarcity of birds. He mentions seeing several Grey Falcons residing in a large gum (tree) near a well but feels they are "very rare in this country".

Letter 74 – 16 June 1935 – from JS to WC

JS tells Walter he received his letter of 10th May but had "'teething' troubles, I had 5 pulled out" and apologises for the delay in response. JS mentions receiving Chris' letter and sympathises with the bad state the country is in. He says "We down here have not had much rain and three of the reservoirs that I have motored near are very low yet we are getting some hocus-pocus news emanating from the Government to lull us to sleep".

JS tells Walter that he is very interested in his Easter trip and comments on the Pacific Gull issue as "in a great many cases very little is known about our birds life histories". He also discusses Cayley and Leach and prefers Leach's book over Cayley's as "he gives a short description". JS seems bemused by the amount of high praise that Cayley's book receives when he obviously thinks Leach's is better.

His final comments are about J. B. Hood and the fact that JS sends him a copy of SAO without Mr Hood being a subscriber.

Letter 75 – 16 June 1935 – JS to CC

JS tells Chris that he is sorry to hear of the dry conditions prevailing across the pastoral areas and hopes Chris gets rain before long. He confirms Chris' suspicions that the White-browed Woodswallow is migratory and that, in Adelaide, they usually arrive with the Masked Woodswallow.

JS closes this letter by commiserating with Chris on the weather conditions and says "it must be heartrending to have no rain when a chance comes along".

Letter 76 – 20 July 1935 – from WC to JS

Walter says "the bright hopes we had of a good season with the early rains have completely vanished". He lists birds seen, noting a party of seven Diamond Doves that he hasn't seen before in the parklands. He says they are

normally seen only in the hills and at Kallioota. Walter says he picked up what he thinks is a Crested Tern that choked itself to death by "trying to swallow a 'Tommy Rough' 4^{1/2} inches long". He says the "whiting were plentiful the fisherman here described such as 'Rough'". He has kept the skin of the bird to give to Mr McGilp whom he expected to see at some time.

Walter says Farina station scored 75 points of rain but not nearly enough. He comments on Woolland (sic) Station closing down with people being sacked "as most of the pastoral Holding in the North & Northwest-Warrikumbo & Marachowie (sic) are scenes of destruction".

Walter then recounts recent additions to the Flinders Collection of seabirds given to him by Archer (Victoria) and from someone named Tristan D. He comments on how Mr Archer is "a generous benefactor to the 'Flinders' - very modest too - he will send you along the rarest of eggs without singing a song as to there (sic) value".

Walter also describes Chris' hopes of getting a Letter-winged Kite from a driver of the Innamincka Mail and that all of the Oystercatcher sets collected by Veitch have come from sand nests.

Sadly, he tells JS that Mr Pearce lost his clutch of Hooded Parrots when they died from the cold after becoming fully feathered.

Walter's closing remarks centre around Chris trying to identify Grey Falcons and commenting on "young Condon" gathering a good harvest from the storm.

Letter 77 - 8 August 1935 - from JS to WC

JS congratulates Walter and Chris on their "zeal" in exchanging and increasing their egg collection. He relates that he has never seen a Grey Falcon and doesn't know its call but that Dr Morgan has come across one via his brother whom JS quotes: "My brother, E.R. Morgan took a clutch of two eggs on 31 July 1899 about 140 miles north-west of Port Augusta. The bird cannot be common there, as I did not meet with it on my visit to that district in 1900".

JS then also tells Walter that in the "SAO, Vol. 1, 1914", Dr Morgan describes "A single bird seen in the pine scrub at Mt Merryfield, obtained a clutch of 2 eggs". He then encloses a description of the Grey Falcon by North, a copy of which accompanies this letter, and hopes that Walter's district has benefited from the rainfall of the previous six weeks.

Poor JS. He lets Walter know that he has been laid low with influenza and is getting better slowly.

In a postscript, JS forwards the news that Mr Condon "got another haul of Albatrosses last Sunday at Sellick's Beach".

Letter 78 - 7 September 1935 - from WC to JS

Walter's response is a long letter that begins with a thank you for JS's enclosures on the Grey Falcon. He then tells JS that the season there "is a complete wash-out and things could hardly be worse". Early rains did not follow through making "the adverse season all the more disappointing". He reports that Kallioota, Warrikumbo & Marachowie "were never worse" and "are practically barren of their normal bird life".

Walter reports only seeing a "1/4 of L Crow" from over a 140-mile survey and thinks the bird is this species based on a comparison "of Campbell's data". He comments on the nest design and particulars where he found the eggs and that another was nearby but "as youngsters were squeaking, the nest was not investigated".

Walter remarks that Veitch saw him with a nest and a clutch of eggs of "*S Intermediae* . . . (a Typical Magpies nest)" but thinks that due to similar looking eggs he has seen before that "*B Currawong* commences the sitting with the laying of the 1st egg". [Editor's Note: presumably this refers to currawongs whose genus is *Strepera*.] He also tells JS that Veitch thinks the birds "down Lincoln way are 'hanging back' and very little nesting so far".

He then lets JS know that he doesn't have enough knowledge about the terns to differentiate them but hopes that when Mr McGilp arrives during the following week, he'll be able to look "at the pelt" and confirm the identity.

Walter discusses other bird eggs found and a particular set given to him by 'someone called Hyem whose work "would pass 'Honours' under the most exacting Oological adjudication". He also comments on the departure of the Elegant Parrots from his area after "a big wind we had in late July" and that he notices many birds depart after favourable winds as they (the winds) mean "Miles to the Gallon".

Walter then lets JS know that he and Pearce haven't seen any falcons for a while and that Pearce's Scarlet Parrots are nesting but there were no results from the Hooded Parrots nesting attempt.

Finally, Walter tells JS that "Things deadly at Farina & no hope of anything nesting up there", though an old friend who turned up recently led him to believe that "things are fair from the Finke to the Alice".

Letter 79 - 23 Sept 1935 - from WC to JS

Just a short script with particulars of the Tern pelt mentioned in the previous letter.

Letter 80 - 30 Sept 1935 - from JS to WC

JS lets Walter know that Mr McGilp injured his coccyx (tailbone) in Port Augusta that delayed his departure, with Mr Parsons, to Pinnaroo until 24 Sept. He thanks and encourages Walter to report wind direction and speed for the events described in Letter 78, saying they are "very appropriate".

He then tells Walter that he will supply him with the articles from the SAO on hawks to direct to Mr Hyem and suggests the Brown Currawong eggs mentioned previously will be "valuable ones for swapping". The tern discussed earlier reached JS through Mr McGilp and is identified as a Crested Tern and valuable as "it has the immature plumage" and will become part of the Museum collection.

JS asks Walter to catch up with a "Mr H. Simpson" (Historical Series No. 13) who "is employed on the Commonwealth railways". He tells Walter that the gentleman was previously stationed at Oodnadatta, Edwards Creek and Abminga but is currently being transferred to Quorn. JS needs to ask Mr Simpson about a bird matter but can only get in contact with him via the Port Augusta rail system so asks for Walter's help in this matter.