

# SAOA Historical Series No. 18

## F.L. Berney

Frederic Lee Berney was born at Croydon, England on 25 November 1865 and was educated at Whitgift Grammar School, Croydon. He came to Australia in about 1896 and spent his life on stations in Queensland (Whittell 1954). He was a lover of nature, in particular birds, and kept a nature diary that was acquired by C.E. Bryant, who presented it to Museum of Victoria, Melbourne in 1960 (Kloot 1995). Berney wrote many notes and articles for the *Emu* between 1902 and 1938 and was President of the RAOU in 1934-35. He died at Emu Park on March 8 1949, aged 83 (Whittell 1954).

This brief life history is fleshed out a little more by a delightful obituary written by Charles Bryant in the *Emu* (Bryant 1949) and the information in the following two paragraphs was obtained from this source. Berney's first job in Australia may have been as a jackaroo on Landsdown station out from Longreach. He also spent several years managing a property at Richmond in north Queensland and later had a dairy farm at Cawarral in the Yeppoon district. Berney enlisted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Horse at the age of either 52 or 53, becoming a Q.M Sergeant and seeing service in the Middle East in the First World War. Shortly after his war experience and in partnership, Berney purchased Barcarolle Station at Jundah near Longreach (which is where all the letters to John Sutton were written). He remained on the property for twenty years described as "heartbreaking" by Bryant due to drought, depression and dingoes. In 1939 with Berney aged 73, Barcarolle had to be sold and he wrote "I can easily start again; it's lucky I'm only a young fellow, I was born in 1865".

On leaving Barcarolle Berney visited Melbourne and friends in Tasmania and New South Wales, later becoming book-keeper on a station in western Queensland. His health deteriorated and, after an operation, he lived at Emu Park (near Rockhampton) until his death in 1949. He never married and, although he had friends around Australia, most agreed that he was a retiring and almost secretive man. What is clear is that he was a very keen naturalist, derived partly perhaps from his father's passion and early training in the Surrey woods. This love of nature comes out very forcefully in the letters described below – it is almost as if Berney took solace from nature to compensate for his single, and sometimes lonely, state. Berney was a founding

member of the RAOU and was later made an honorary member. Bryant's closing words are that he was "another of those gentle men of natural history who were indeed gentlemen in every way".

A little more information on Berney's early days in Australia comes from the Queensland Family History Society Inc CD of the 1903 and 1913 Electoral rolls of Queensland. In 1903 Berney was overseer at Wyangarie Selection and in 1913 he had risen to manager at Sylvania near Hughenden. According to the Gazetteer (Div. of National Mapping 1975) Wyangarie is just west-north-west of Richmond in central west Queensland, at about the same latitude as Mackay. Sylvania is not far away, as the Readers Digest Atlas (RDA) (Readers Digest Services P.L. 1977) shows this as a property about 100km to the east of Wyangarie just north of the Richmond to Hughenden railway line.

I do not have access to Berney's nature diaries which may shed some light on his personal life, but little is gained from the series of letters from Berney to John Sutton in the SAOA Archives. There are eleven letters from Berney to Sutton, the SAOA Secretary, spanning the period from April 1929 to May 1937. The SAOA holds copies or carbon copies of John Sutton's replies to all these letters, except for two – the last letter and one in which Berney simply sends his subscription for the *South Australian Ornithologist (SAOrn)*. It appears from this correspondence that Berney was a subscriber to the *SAOrn* but not an SAOA member and this is verified by the published list of members and subscribers in 1935 (Anon. 1935). I have searched the catalogues of SAOA Correspondence from the early 1920s to the late 1940s and have not located any other letters from or to F. L. Berney. There are two references to Berney in the *SAOrn*, the first in 1932 commenting on the extreme heat at Barcarolle and its effects on birds (*SAOrn* 1932) The second is a long letter written from Barcarolle on 13 June 1938 about the behaviour of a number of birds and Australian songsters (*SAOrn* 1938). Shortly after this he left the station that had been his home for 20 years.

All of Berney's letters to John Sutton are on letterhead paper:

Telegrams  
and Telephone:

"Jundah" BARCAROLLE  
L9C LONGREACH  
QUEENSLAND

Barcarolle does not appear on maps that I can access but the Australian Government: Geoscience Australia puts Barcarolle Homestead at 24° 46' 143<sup>0</sup> 06', close to the town of Jundah, which is on the Thomson River north-east of Windorah. From the letters we find out that Mr Reece is his nearest ornithological neighbour (280 miles away) and C.A. Barnard his next nearest (450 miles away). This Mr Reece is actually Mr L.R. Reese of Minnie Downs, a station 200 miles north-north-east from Marree (Whittell 1954). Reese also corresponded with John Sutton in the 1920s and 1930s. Barcarolle is a musical term and is best known for its appearance in the Tales of Hoffman. All letters are in long hand and at times Berney had trouble writing as the air was so hot that the ink was drying before he could finish words. For example, Berney wrote his letter of 16/12/35 beneath an open veranda with a wooden shingle roof when the maximum had been 111<sup>0</sup> in the shade. Again in January 1936, he apologises to Sutton for the badly written letter and notes that the temperature is 114<sup>0</sup> as he writes.

There are comments in several letters about the intense heat combined with lack of rain causing problems for birds and other animals. In his first letter to Sutton, Berney notes that only the common bird species are seen (e.g., "magpies, galah, crested pigeon, etc"). He was obviously intrigued by Volume 11 Part 6 of the *SAOrn* which gave accounts of birds in distress due to a heat wave and asks if he could have extra copies to send home [i.e. to England]. Barcarolle experienced the same heat wave with many birds dying about the buildings but it was not as bad as incidents described in the *SAOrn*, perhaps due to the country being well shaded with timber. Another heat wave in 1936 leads Berney to send Sutton the maxima and minima for 23 to 28 January – the former all over 110<sup>0</sup> and the latter over 80<sup>0</sup>. Birds and bats were very distressed, and he found two dead bats.

One of the common refrains in many of the letters is the lack of rainfall in most of his years at Barcarolle. In the first letter of April 1929 he says that after the very severe drought, 3 inches of rain were most welcome, although the wet season should have provided more like 11 inches. In this same letter he indicates that until 1921, the average annual rainfall was 16 inches, but between 1921 and 1929 they were short 5 feet of rain. In 1935 in another letter he comments that the outlook is droughty and that in the last 14 years there have been only 3 years of fair

rainfall. The extreme dryness was made worse in 1931 by poor prices for wool. On several occasions he apologises to JS for being behind hand in his payment of subscription to the *SAOrn* due to his dire economic straits.

Another common refrain, often mentioned after noting lack of rain or high temperatures, was the solace that he gained from his interest in natural history. The letter of 19/4/32 gives an insight into his lonely state on Barcarolle:

"Imagine looking after 20,000 acres of country with its sheep, cattle and horses and the necessary wells, troughs and fencing, and all entirely on your own; cooking and house keeping are included in above for I am 'batching', and you will realise that brains and hand are kept pretty busy."

He goes on to say that he hasn't seen a person for a week but reiterates his delight in nature. And again in January 1931:

"Eight years drought ending with a ruinous condition in the wool market & this general financial depression makes life scarcely worth living (to the sheep man) unless you have a hobby apart from business. I am always so thankful that I am a naturalist. I pity the man on the land, or off the land, who takes no interest in some branch of nature, how much they miss."

John Sutton agrees with Berney, writing: "ornithology is a wonderful livener-up, I took it up just 14 years ago, after having to retire from a Bank through ill-health. I consider it has added years to my life and given me at the same time an infinite amount of pleasure".

Berney does mention birds in some of his letters but he was obviously a very competent observer and had less cause to ask for Sutton's help with identification than some other of JS's correspondents. His first letter does describe his difficulty in separating the Spotted and White-throated Nightjars on call, as there is not much difference in their plumage. Sutton replies that he and Dr Morgan are equally confused by the Nightjars and thinks that some of the skins in the SA Museum are misidentified.

Although being so isolated on Barcarolle, Berney appears to have maintained a wide circle of friends, pursued mainly through correspondence. He often asks after people that he knows Sutton might see or write to; in 1931 he tells Sutton that he has received a photo of JS from his good friend Dr Chenery, although they have never met. In the next year he asks to be remembered to Captain White- they are old friends even though they don't see much of each other. JS replies that he rarely sees Captain White now as he dropped out of birds to take up boy scouting, which JS reports he subsequently left

through differences with the Governor of the State and some of the Board.

As noted in the introductory paragraphs, Berney kept a nature diary for many years and in January 1936 he writes to Sutton:

"For many years, since /98, I have kept a nature diary, which I hope in years to come will be valuable as a record. It contains, inter alia, such snap-shots as I can obtain of people, places & things connected with my hobby, and among these I am pleased to think that I have two photos of your good self sent me by my old friend Dr Chenery, you are one of a group of four or five, the others being Parsons, Morgan, Lendon (?) and Chenery taken in Dec 1930."

The nature diary in Museum Victoria is in 17 volumes and spans the years from 1898 to 1949 – surely a rich resource for an ornithologist who is interested in gaining insight into conditions 100 years ago in various parts of Queensland. Moreover the State Library of Victoria holds a diary of Berney's from 1918-19 as well as a station journal and ledger for Barcarolle between 1920 and 1922.

Some of Berney's later letters include references to the collecting debate that was raging in Australian ornithology at the time, as well as the raids that New South Wales and Victorian police were making on egg collections in those states. Berney was the President of the RAOU in 1934-35 at the height of the debate, but his Presidential Address (Berney 1935) makes only a passing reference to this, when he says:

"There have been a couple of occasions during the past twelve months giving cause for some unpleasantness, but I am glad to think that tact and firmness by the Council closed both incidents."

It seems that the incidents referred to arose from egg collecting that took place at RAOU Campouts, either without permits, or where the need for collecting may not have been justifiable on scientific grounds (Robin 2001).

Collecting is an issue that has long divided the ornithological world and the RAOU in the 1930s was no different. Robin (2001) wrongly construes that Berney was a serious collector (see pages 19 and 100). Thus Berney's avoidance of the subject in his address, which may have been due to his natural diffidence, is seen as an attempt to deflect attention away from the debate. In his letter of 1936 Berney says:

"Though I am not a collector of either eggs or skins I am no wowser on the subject, but am very keen about bird protection, a far more important matter than cabinets of specimens."

Ian Mason of CSIRO who is researching Australian egg collectors confirms what Berney himself said as he has come across only a few clutches of eggs collected by F.L. Berney, mainly from the early 1900s (I. Mason pers. comm.). Berney appears to have collected a few clutches when in the company of C.A. Barnard, mentioned earlier as a 'near' neighbour. In a paper in *Emu* Berney discusses several clutches he presumably collected as he measured the eggs and knew the incubation state of other clutches.

The correspondence with JS does show that Berney was interested in the matter, although Sutton is the first to mention it and Berney merely wonders in February 1937 what impact the raids in NSW and Victoria had in South Australia. He goes on to ask what became of Mellor's collection on his death and who the collectors are in SA, guessing that they are Captain White and McGilp.

He writes of the collecting versus anti-collecting debate, saying that he has no problems with the collection of plentiful species but once something becomes rarer, collectors take many clutches and don't give it a chance.

Sutton's reply is long and interesting. He notes that the seizure of egg collections interstate caused very little interest in SA and newspaper accounts in SA and the eastern states were conflicting and vague. Nor did the *Emu* enlighten SAOA members. Sutton goes on to recount a tale circulating in SA that discrimination existed and that two of the Victorian collectors were **not** interfered with. SA has nine permit holders, of which two cover the SA Museum and Zoo; Edwin Ashby and Captain White have not collected for some time. Those that JS knows of are D.J. Brummitt, McGilp, Professor Cleland and F.E. Parsons. Three or four of these collect eggs but only in a small way.

JW Mellor's collection was willed firstly to his eldest son, next to his second son and thirdly to his daughter. Each had two years to decide if they wanted it if the previous one declined. The SAOA knew nothing about his collection, as Mellor never mentioned it and only occasionally bought specimens to meetings. However it was generally considered that he had a good collection of skins and eggs. At this time it is in the custody of Captain White who was a relative (they were cousins, Linn 1989). McGilp gave his egg collection to the SA Museum and still adds to it. Edwin Ashby's house was destroyed by fire and all his collections were burnt save a couple of hundred birds. Captain White stated years ago that he had willed his collection to the SA Museum but the Museum has nothing to confirm this.

Conservation was clearly a driving force arising from Berney's love of nature and particularly birds. He argued for more nature education in schools, spear-headed a campaign to give year-round protection to Bustards and in their 1935-36 correspondence the two men discuss the various bird protection laws in different states, noting their inadequacies. Berney thought the Queensland example of 'honorary rangers' was valuable not because they actually enforced the act but due to their influence on the public and the information they provided to the authorities.

Having said that there is little of a personal nature in the letters, glimpses of personalities and attitudes do shine through occasionally. As yet another example, in Berney's penultimate letter in 1937 he compliments Sutton on his handwriting, telling him that he has one or two well-educated correspondents whose writing is a "mixture of shorthand & morse code, most trying to decipher." Having read a great number of Sutton's letters – either as carbon copies, originals or hand-written copies, I concur with Berney – as in his attitude to bird-watching in general, JS was most fastidious.

There is a little light-hearted banter in some of the letters as depicted in one of his many letters. In his letter dated 30/5/32 Berney closes with the line "I expect you eat no other brand but SAO biscuits." JS replies that he enjoys 'SAO' biscuits and that he used to take some out with him when on trips to the mallee. On a more serious note JS ponders the future of scientific societies, and specifically the SAOA:

"Old members are dying out and very few younger men are coming forward to continue the work. Sport and excitement seem to be the main objects nowadays."

Berney agrees with him, making the point that present day sport is being ruined by professionalism and gate money and that younger people prefer to pay to see others play. And all this in 1937; it could have been written in 2006!

The last letters they exchanged concern erroneous information about Cassowary behaviour in South Australia printed in the "Overseas" magazine that JS had come across. Berney confirms that they do not act in this manner and that their southern limit is about Cardwell. He goes on if Dr Morey "said that he had been told what he described one could have forgiven him on account of his having had his leg pulled but when he says he saw the Cassowary in South Australia and describes a most extraordinary incident, action of this bird, one can only imagine he is trying to outdo de Roughmont. The whole statement is pure fairy tale, imagination." Unfortunately they do not disclose what the

behaviour was. And this is the end of the correspondence. The last letter from Barcarolle is dated 24 May 1937; John Sutton died in the next year and in the year after Berney left Barcarolle.

#### Dates of correspondence:

Letter 1 FLB to JS 4/4/1929, Letter 2 FLB to JS 31/1/31, Letter 3 FLB to JS 14/4/31, Letter 4 FLB to JS 19/4/32, Letter 5 FLB to JS 30/5/32, Letter 6 FLB to JS 16/12/35, Letter 7 FLB to JS 28 Jan (obviously 1936), Letter 8 FLB to JS 12/2/37, Letter 9 FLB to JS 16/2/37, Letter 10 FLB to JS 14/5/37, Letter 11 FLB to JS 24/5/37

Copy reply from JS to FLB 28/4/29. Carbon copy reply from JS to FLB 8/6/32. Handwritten note in JS' hand (obviously a reply to FLB's letter of 19/4/32 (letter 4)). Carbon copy reply from JS: 4/1/36. Carbon copy letter from JS: 12/1/36. Carbon copy reply from JS: 29/2/36. Carbon copy reply from JS: 23/2/37 Carbon copy reply from JS: 10/5/37

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