

SAOA Historical Series No 59

The Cromptons of Stonyfell

by Penny Paton

The idea for this historical piece came from my vague memory of a letter in the SAOA Archives in which Robert Crompton resigned as Secretary of the Association because he had joined up for the First World War. Robert's family was a significant one in the early history of our state so I decided to expand the piece to include a brief history of the family and their business interests as well as their ornithological endeavours. So we will start with the family and then narrow it down to Robert and his brother, Alfred's, contributions to the SAOA and ornithology.

Joseph Crompton and Susan Mary Clark

Much of the information on Robert's parents, Joseph and Susan Mary (Photos 1 and 2), comes from the Australian Dictionary of Biography entry on Joseph and a Wikipedia entry on the South Australian Cromptons. Joseph (1840-1901) was born in Liverpool, the youngest of four sons of Woodhouse Crompton and his wife Lucy, daughter of Robert Fletcher of Rivington Hall in Lancashire. Both of Joseph's parents had died by the time he was six years old and he attended a preparatory boarding school run by Unitarians, spending holidays with his maiden aunts at Rivington Hall. Poor health and the opportunities in a new country prompted his emigration to Australia – he arrived in Melbourne in September 1860 and came to Adelaide with letters of introduction to the Unitarian family of Francis Clark of 'Hazelwood' (now Hazelwood Park).

Francis Clark, previously a silversmith in England, started an importing business which, on his death in 1853, passed to his son A. Sidney Clark. The Clarks with their eight surviving children had arrived in Adelaide on the *Fatima* in June 1850 (the ship that coincidentally carried my great great grandparents, Thomas and Ann Lawton and their four children along with Ann's mother, Susanna Mabey). The history of the Cromptons and Clarks is intermingled intimately with another Unitarian family, the Martins (Wikipedia). The Clark's fifth surviving son, M. Symonds Clark (a name familiar to readers of old *SA Ornithologists*) married Euphemia Martin and there were two other marriages between the two families (and an engagement, dramatically ended when Henry Clark died of tuberculosis on what would have been his wedding day to Annie Martin). This demonstrates how small the Adelaide community

was in the early days, particularly within the same religion affiliation.

In 1866 at the Unitarian Church in Adelaide, then in Wakefield Street, Joseph married 20-year old Susan Mary Clark, youngest child of Francis and Caroline Clark of 'Hazelwood'. She kept a diary on her honeymoon which included a tour of France, Spain and Portugal, in order for Joseph to study wine and oil making. When the couple returned to Adelaide, they lived at Tower House, overlooking the Beaumont Common, while additions were made at Stonyfell, from stone quarried locally.

Joseph and Susan had 12 children although an unnamed son died at two days old in 1877 and a daughter Dora died in 1881, aged about eight years. Of the 10 who survived to adulthood, there were three daughters, none of whom married, and seven sons. By the time John Crompton junior (grandson of Joseph and Susan Mary) was visiting Stonyfell House in the 1940s and early 1950s, only his three maiden aunts and Uncle Tom were living there. His aunts were strong and self-sufficient women, with Martha (known as Pat) a very good artist, who taught at an art school and exhibited her work (Crompton 2007). Stonyfell House remained in the family until 1978 (Warburton 1981). Several of Joseph and Susan's children were interested in ornithology and four published articles and notes in the *South Australian Ornithologist* on their bird observations and records.

In 1862 Joseph Crompton and Henry Clark formed a partnership with Henry's brother, A. Sidney Clark, trading as Clark & Crompton. The company developed a vineyard, that had originally been bought by Henry in 1858 and which his fiancée Annie named 'Stonyfell'. After Henry's early death in 1864, Joseph bought out the Clarks but continued trading under the name of Clark & Crompton until 1880. The business expanded from wine-making and distilling to include wool, sheepskins, fur, skins, hides and tallow. In 1874 the Stonyfell Olive Company was founded, also in association with A. Sidney Clark, and later he formed a soap company, originally at Port Pirie but later at Southwark near the River Torrens.



Photo 1 – Composite photo of Joseph Crompton Senior (centre), Henry Woodhouse Crompton (left; eldest son) and Owen Crompton (third son). From the collection of the State Library of South Australia (BRG 155/5/40)

In 1889 Joseph and Susan Mary's eldest son, Henry Woodhouse Crompton (Photo 1), became manager and secretary of the Olive Company and later he became managing director of the Bunyip Soap Company. At some stage Robert Crompton took over as works manager of the soap factory (Photo 2) and, in 1923 on his brother Owen's sudden death, he became manager of the olive mill. Joseph owned various properties, including a ten-acre farm at Woodville, used for drying and packing hides and skins for export, two acres at Footscray in Melbourne for a similar purpose, a dairy farm of 116 acres at Woodville and 500 acres he called Carrickalinga, near Myponga. He also leased about 500 sq. miles at Keith where he grazed sheep. The depression of 1884-85 caused Joseph some financial distress and he lost Carrickalinga and temporarily had to leave his premises in Freeman St (now Gawler Place). The Stonyfell vineyard was supervised by trustees until 1888 when the Bank of Adelaide transferred it to Henry Dunstan.

Susan Mary lived a very full and active life, working with her sister Caroline Emily Clark on the boarding out system for destitute children and joining the committee of the State's Children Council in 1906. She worked hard on the committee, rarely missing meetings and visiting most of the homes under the auspices of the Council. She resigned in 1923, when her daughter Miss Patty Crompton took over her position. In World War One Susan Mary was made a Justice of the Peace, being one of the first women in South Australia to hold this position. She was an accomplished needlewoman, a keen reader and painter and loved her garden, which boasted a pepper tree grown from seed collected in Lisbon on her honeymoon.

Joseph died of a cerebral haemorrhage at Stonyfell

in 1901 while Susan Mary died aged 86 in 1932. Both are buried in the Magill Cemetery alongside many of their children.

Robert Crompton

Robert Crompton (known as Bob) was born in 1878, the fifth of eight sons, and, like his brothers, attended Prince Alfred College. As we saw above, he worked in the family businesses relating to soap-making and olive production as well as managing a Jersey stud and olive groves at Stonyfell. He joined the SAOA in 1906 at the same time as his older brother Alfred and became Secretary

(and Treasurer which in those days went with the position) in 1913, holding the position until 1920 (Reid 2000). He is also listed as a member of the Editorial Committee for the *South Australian Ornithologist* for the first edition of the journal, published in January 1914. On 9th June 1915 he hand wrote a letter to the SAOA resigning from the position of Secretary due to his decision to enlist and his positions on the committee were taken over by Frank Angel, until his return in 1920. At the AGM in March 1920 J.Neil McGilp was elected Secretary, Frank Angel became a member of the Editorial Committee in his own right and Mr Angel was thanked for his valuable services as Acting Secretary over the previous four years. I have little information on Robert's active service, except that he joined the 4th Light Horse Brigade and embarked on the same ship as his nephew, Joseph Crompton, son of Henry and Kate, on 24th November 1915.

Although the SAOA was formed in 1899, the journal did not begin until 1914 and Robert Crompton wrote the first article, entitled 'History of Ornithology in South Australia' (Crompton, R. 1914). It is brief but includes one of the few accounts of the formation of the Association and its work in the early years before the publication of the journal or extant correspondence is available.

In the next year a most enlightening article appeared in which Robert documented all the birds seen by his brothers and himself at Stonyfell over the preceding 35 years (i.e. ca 1880-1915), along with a description of the area covered by the observations (Crompton 1915). He described hundreds of acres of vineyards, olives, orchards and gardens set in a mosaic of stringybark scrub in the nearby ranges, hillsides of "peppermint gums" (no doubt grey box

Eucalyptus microcarpa) and patches of red and blue gums with an understorey of kangaroo thorn *Acacia paradoxa* and other shrubs. Even by this time the suburbs were encroaching, bushfires had removed much vegetation and the poorer land was being cleared for agriculture and he predicted the local extinction of many bird species. He recorded 105 native species and five species of introduced birds. A few birds were waterbirds that flew over and did not land (e.g. Black Swan) and a seabird blown inland was a vagrant.

Many of the birds had already disappeared by 1915 or were very rare, including Brown Quail, Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal, Spotted Harrier, Black Kite, Grey Falcon, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Red-rumped Parrot, Azure Kingfisher ("never common"), Little Raven and Grey Currawong. Amongst those birds that had increased in these 35 years are some that would be expected, like Crimson Rosella, Noisy Miner, Magpie-lark and Australian Magpie, but this category also includes species that surprised me: Peaceful Dove, Southern Stone-Curlew, Restless Flycatcher, Rufous Whistler and White-browed Babbler. Other birds that he describes as plentiful or regular visitors include species that are rare or extinct in the Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges now: Painted Quail, Little Lorikeet, Crested Shrike-tit, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Regent Honeyeater and Zebra Finch.

Crompton's comments on some species make for fascinating reading and show what a good observer he was and how meticulous the family was at recording their sightings; e.g. of the Plains-Wanderer, "came in countless numbers one season in the early eighties...This bird has never been seen since". And of the Rainbow Lorikeet, "Came in vast numbers in the autumn of 1878, then not seen for about thirty years". Speaking of the Red-capped Robin, Crompton says "Usually not at all common; very plentiful just now". Surprising to me he describes the Golden Whistler as "Not at all common" whereas the Rufous Whistler is "Quite common; nests freely. This bird has increased very much in the last ten years or so". He is quite garrulous about the Red Wattlebird: "Always common in the ranges. In the early autumn they come down to the plains to feed, always returning in flocks to the hills to roost. When going down in the morning they fly straight down, but on returning in the evening they follow one another from tree to tree, always taking exactly the same route". And of the Noisy Miner, now the bane of birdwatchers all over Adelaide, he says: "First few pairs arrived in 1902. These have increased and spread till now there are thousands". I think of their sudden increase as a relatively recent phenomenon but

clearly there have been several waves of expansion of this species.

Crompton's only other contribution to the *Ornithologist* was a note in 1936 about a pair of White-winged Trillers (not mentioned in the article above) which were apparently nesting about his house at Stonyfell Road, Burnside (Crompton 1936). The male was very territorial, taking on wattlebirds, Magpie-larks and even Australian Magpies.

Robert Crompton's small egg collection in the South Australian Museum (P. Horton pers. comm.) contains 119 clutches, mainly from South Australia, but with a few from Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory and includes 28 clutches from Stonyfell. There are no dates of collection with the clutches, but the collection was donated prior to 1947 and perhaps between 1938 and 1947 (P. Horton pers. comm.). Twenty-two bird species are represented from Stonyfell, with all but one bird species occurring on the list of birds recorded in Crompton (1915) from the Stonyfell area. The species not on the list is the Brown Treecreeper so possibly these eggs were collected after 1915. Of especial interest to modern-day birdwatchers are the two clutches of Southern Stone-Curlew eggs ("nested last year" (i.e. 1914) Crompton 1915) and Diamond Firetail ("a single pair seen occasionally", Crompton 1915). The collection also includes a clutch of eggs of the Hooded Robin taken at Tea Tree Gully ("only an occasional bird seen at Stonyfell", Crompton 1915).

Robert was elected an Honorary Member of the SAOA on 26th March 1954 (Reid 2000). He died on 9th January 1958 in a private hospital at Norwood (Kloot 1995), aged 80.

Alfred Crompton

Alfred (known as Alf) was born in 1872 at Stonyfell, the second son of Joseph and Susan. He shared his younger brother, Robert's, interest in birds and like him joined the SAOA in 1906. He was also a founding member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) and he was present at 'Holmfirth' the home of J.W. Mellor in November 1901 when locals entertained visiting RAOU members during the Annual Congress (Reid 2000). Alfred first published in *The Emu* and later in the *South Australian Ornithologist* between 1922 and 1937. He served as Vice President of the SAOA in 1925, 1931 and 1936, taking on the presidency in each of the following years (Reid 2000). He was elected an Honorary Member at the same time as his brother Robert – 26th March 1954 – and died at the age of 91 on 2nd July 1963 (Kloot 1995).

Caroline, Owen and John Crompton

At least three other siblings of Robert and Alfred were interested in birds, as Caroline Lucy Crompton submitted a short article to the *South Australian Ornithologist* (Crompton, C.L. 1914). Caroline was sitting on the veranda of their Stonyfell home with her sister when they saw a Laughing Kookaburra in a tree with a snake about 18-24 inches long. The bird proceeded to pass the length of the snake's body through its bill three times, smashing the snake against the tree branch and breaking every bone in its body. Then it tipped the head of the snake into its bill until only 6 inches of snake were left hanging outside; after several minutes and following a few chuckles, the snake was fully swallowed. The kookaburra wiped its bill on the branch and flew to a nearby tree to digest the meal.

Owen Crompton (Photo 1), the third son, also published a short article in the *South Australian Ornithologist*

(Crompton 1919). He related a story from Chris Dabovitch, the son of a former Inspector of Fisheries, sometime before 1919. The father and son were in Stansbury on official business and, while anchored there, a pair of Welcome Swallows built a nest in a cap in the cabin of their boat. When the boat sailed for Port Lincoln both adults accompanied their nest and eggs, one

bird apparently riding out a gale by roosting in an upturned dinghy on the deck. On the approach to Wedge Island, after 36 hours away from land, the adults became very excited and flew off to the island apparently to feed. They returned and all safely harboured at Port Lincoln, where the chicks hatched and successfully fledged.

The youngest son, John William Crompton, born in 1885, was the subject of a paper in the *South Australian Ornithologist* by his son, John and myself (Paton and Crompton 2013). John William studied at Roseworthy College before leasing (in 1909), and later purchasing, a property at Back Valley. He called the property 'Rivington' after the family estate in Lancashire (see above). He gave a list of the birds he observed in the area around 'Rivington' between 1909 and 1925 to John Cleland for the use of the

SAOA. There are so few bird records from this area in the early part of the twentieth century that we thought it worth publishing the list and commenting on changes that have occurred to the avifauna in the past 100 years. I am not going to say more about this paper as it is available in the *South Australian Ornithologist* and on line.

Many thanks to Philippa Horton for again agreeing to edit this piece and for the information on the R. Crompton egg collection in SAMA.

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Photo 2. Robert Crompton (5th from left) with factory staff of the Bunyip Soap Factory, Southwark, 1900 (Robert aged about 22). From the collection of the State Library of South Australia (BRG 155/5/2)

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