

SAOA Historical Series No 62
Gregory Macalister Mathews
(1876-1949) and his
South Australian Connections
Part 2, by Penny Paton

Mathews' letters to Cleland

Photo 1 shows J.B. Cleland at the Adelaide Railway Station in 1934, awaiting departure on one of his many field trips into the interior.

In the correspondence from Mathews to Cleland held in the State Library, there are about 20 letters, the first one dated 8th April 1908, in which Mathews tells Cleland that Dr Morgan, a prominent South Australian ornithologist, is staying with him in England. He asks Cleland to contribute field notes and specimens on loan, and says he is willing to buy them, but asks Cleland to name his price. Of course I only have Mathews' letters and not Cleland's, but we can guess from what Mathews says, what the responses were. By November Mathews had received one box of skins but the moth

balls had disintegrated and dirtied the specimens. This is a most informative letter as Mathews offers either to pay cash for the specimens or to take them as part payment towards the book. He also asks for names

of others who may be able to help him and gives a long list of the information he wants on birds.

In early December 1908 three cases of bird skins sent by J. B. Cleland's father, William Lennox Cleland, from South Australia had arrived but regrettably they had been eaten by moths and had to be destroyed. At this time J.B. Cleland was in the process of moving from Perth to Sydney for work, but he was born in South Australia and his parents lived there. This same letter urges Cleland "to put

the sex, locality **and** date on every bird you get, not the name only." On 5th January 1909 Mathews tells Cleland that the book



Photo 1: Professor J. B. Cleland departing Adelaide Railway Station for a collecting trip
Photo courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, 833263

will cost about £60 and will be issued at £1/1/- per part and further that what he has been sent so far will cover the cost of the first one or two volumes. In the next letter from March Mathews sends labels that he would like Cleland to use for his skins and acknowledges that Cleland is sending him stomach contents. By early 1909 parasites were also being sent to Mathews by Cleland.

There is a hiatus in the correspondence in the Cleland archive until 1917 when several letters were received by Cleland acknowledging parcels of skins and asking for a photo of Cleland, but not giving the reason for this request. Later, in June 1918, Mathews thanks him for sending his photo and life history. In 1920 Cleland moved back to Adelaide to take up the first Marks Professorship in Pathology at the University of Adelaide. On 1st March 1920 Mathews wrote to Cleland thanking him for skins and congratulating him on his Chair in Pathology. He goes on to say how grateful he is to Cleland and to Captain White for their support of his project and comes across as very human and humble, not at all the character normally attributed to him.

In September 1920 Mathews thanks Cleland for the money he sent (presumably for the book) and in January 1921 is appreciative of Cleland's letter telling him how much he liked Volume 8, Parts 2 and 3. Mathews is sounding weary and writes

that he shall have "rest 'ere now". In fact there were still four more volumes to go. A letter from March 1922 thanks Cleland for sending £6/6/- and records that he thinks the SAO Union (sic) is the most alive of any in Australia and that the South Australians are not so hide-bound as the Victorians. A year later Mathews is writing to Cleland asking why the manuscript he sent to Captain White has not been published in

the *South Australian Ornithologist* or returned to him. In fact a letter from White to John Sutton in the SAOA Correspondence archive shows that White did not receive this paper. By June 1924 Mathews has found that his paper on Type Designations will appear in the next *South Australian Ornithologist*. This is the last letter in the correspondence in the Cleland papers and Mathews is obviously feeling aggrieved by some of the comments received on his *magnum opus*: "You always say such nice

things about my work **and** it helps me to bear the hard kicks some of your country men give me."

Mathews and S.A. White

The other strong connection to South Australia that Mathews had was with Captain S.A. White. Anyone interested in White is recommended to read Rob Linn's book, published in 1989. Photo 2 is a portrait of the young White in his 20s. As with Cleland the first letter from Mathews was written in April 1908 in which he pleads with White to provide him with skins on loan



Photo2 : S.A. White, ca 1890 – 1900 (in his 20s)
Photo courtesy of the State Library of South
Australia. PRG 335/28/12

and also detailed field notes on every aspect of the birds' biology and breeding. According to Linn (1989) helping Mathews became S.A. White's "overwhelming obsession for nearly a decade". White undertook a number of major field trips through the far-flung parts of South Australia and what is now the Northern Territory, accompanied by his indomitable first wife, Ethel. White continued to receive letters from Mathews, in vein both encouraging and demanding (Linn 1989). He is unstinting in his praise of White and the help he gave him. On the trip that Mathews made to Adelaide in February 1914, it was White who organised for him to meet the Lieutenant-Governor, the press and members of the Adelaide scientific community (Linn 1989).

Their relationship had cooled a little by 1918, with White turning his attention more and more to the conservation of flora and fauna and spending less time on field trips and collecting for Mathews. In March 1918 Mathews wrote to White, complaining about the lack of letters and bird skins (Linn 1989). This coincided with a time of financial hardship for Mathews brought on by the war and, to raise money, he offered to sell his collection of 25,000 Australian

bird skins to the Australian nation for £6,000. This offer was not accepted and Mathews' collection was eventually bought by Lord Rothschild for his museum at Tring, ending up in the American Museum of Natural History in New York in the early 1930s. White's last major contribution for



Photo 3 John and Wanda White with Gregory Mathews and Muriel White, probably September 1940

Photo courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/82/19

Mathews was securing £300 from government and private individuals in 1919 to allow work on *The Birds of Australia* to continue (Linn 1989).

Mathews kept in contact with SA White despite the cooling in relations between the two men and the inevitable slowing down

in correspondence after finalisation of *The Birds of Australia* in 1927. Cleland records in his diary that he went down to meet the Melbourne Express on 24th August 1940 to meet Mathews, who was staying with Captain White. Several photos from September 1940 show Mathews and the White family (S.A. White, his second wife Muriel and their two children) in the countryside on this visit (e.g. Photos 3 and 4). In 1939 Mathews presented his extensive library to the National Library in Canberra and he supervised its housing there between 1940 and 1945, so this trip to South Australia occurred during this period of residency in Australia. Mathews died at Winchester, UK, on 27th March 1949.



**Photo 4: Wanda, S.A. White, Muriel, G.M. Mathews and John picknicking, September 1940.
Photo Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 335/82/22**

Mathews' Taxonomy

Fraser and Gray (2013) give a well-balanced summary of Mathews' impact on Australian bird taxonomy. His greatest contribution was his early insistence on the importance of subspecies, which recognise geographical variation within species, and which is increasingly recognised as the level at which conservation of bird taxa should be based. On the negative side, he named many species and subspecies on inadequate grounds, many of which have since disappeared into synonymy. Mathews named about 4,000 taxa, which number has been whittled down to about 1200-1300 by modern-day taxonomists

(Olsen 2001). Leo Joseph (2008) presents the modern day assessment of "the chaos he [Mathews] engendered by naming so many subspecies and species ... on flimsy evidence." He quotes a researcher from 1914 who lamented the "chaos into which Mathews plunged [Australian ornithology]" and admits that taxonomists have not managed fully to extricate themselves from this chaos. Mathews' other major irregularities were his constant chopping and changing regarding taxonomy and the suggestion that he created taxa sometimes solely to honour family members or those who had helped him in some way (Fraser and Gray 2013).

The references for parts 1 and 2 will be included in the final part of this series, to be printed in February 2018.