

*SAOA Historical Series No 63*  
*Gregory Macalister Mathews*  
*(1876-1949) and his*  
*South Australian Connections*  
*Part 3, by Penny Paton*

**The Birds of Australia**

This monumental work, of 12 volumes published between 1910 and 1927, was limited to 225 copies. In a letter of January 1909 from Mathews to Cleland he told him that it would cost subscribers about £60, with each part costing £1/1/0. The volumes contain about 7,000 pages and almost 600 coloured plates. Despite his controversial taxonomic opinions, Mathews' *The Birds of Australia* was the most comprehensive summary of knowledge on our birds at the beginning of the twentieth century and the illustrations on the whole are accurate and aesthetically pleasing. At this time, apart from Gould's *Birds of Australia*, there was only one identification book on Australian birds — Leach's *An Australian Bird Book* (first published in 1911). Despite being accessible to all, which Mathews' and Gould's productions were not, the illustrations were not to scale and not every bird was illustrated, detracting from its usefulness.

Five artists produced the lithographs from which the Mathews' plates were taken: J.G. Keulemans, H. Grönvold, R. Green, H. Goodchild and G.E. Lodge. The illustrations in Volumes 1-3 by John Gerrard

Keulemans, a Dutch artist, are particularly fine in the detail of birds' plumage and colouration. The predominant artist, who contributed to the remaining nine volumes, was Henrik Grönvold, a Danish artist and naturalist. By good fortune, on emigration to the United States, he stopped in London in 1892, finding employment preparing specimens for the British Museum of Natural History. A skilled taxidermist, he became one of the foremost natural history artists over the next forty years, contributing illustrations to many books and journal articles. Grönvold was one of the few artists to paint eggs. He also illustrated mammals, including use of oil paints. He was one of the last natural history artists to publish lithographs; and the last volumes of *The Birds of Australia* and the supplementary *The Birds of Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands* (1928) were some of the last publications containing hand-coloured plates.

Considering that many birds were drawn from skins, most illustrations are very life-like in their posture and appearance. Obviously with birds that were kept in aviculture, like parrots, doves and finches, artists had the opportunity to see live birds and to observe their mannerisms and postures, and this would have helped in the

depiction of these groups of birds. Photos 5 and 6 depict two plates by Grönvold, one showing the detail of the tails of Bronze Cuckoos as an aid to identification and the other a lovely portrait of the Noisy Pitta.

Apart from the 12 Volumes of *The Birds of Australia*, there were various supplements to the work, including a *Checklist of the Birds of Australia*, bound into Volume 7 of the copy that I have been fortunate to see. At the end of Volume 12 is a Bibliography, but this is not a list of references so much as a list of notable people involved in Australian

ornithology, with a brief synopsis of their contribution. In December 1917 Mathews wrote to Cleland asking for a life history and a photo, which Cleland provided. Mathews sought biographical information and photos from all his Australian correspondents and collectors, probably with a view to publishing these in the *Austral Avian Record*. Some were published there (P. Horton pers. comm.) and the photos form part of the Mathews' collection in the National Library of Australia. The unpublished biographies would be an important resource if they can

be located (P. Horton pers. comm.). Mathews probably used this information as the basis of the Bibliography.

### Mathews' Personality

Mathews was described as "tall, bronzed, with silvery hair, blue eyes aided by a monocle, and a thin, prominent nose. He spoke rapidly in a high-pitched voice." (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mathews-gregory-macalister-7517>). He was considered arrogant by many and he was certainly demanding of his correspondents and collectors, but no more demanding of those who worked

for him than he was of himself. He is said to have worked 16 hours a day (and night!) over the nearly 20 years of his grand endeavour. Linn (1989) considered that the tone of some of his letters to S. A. White was arrogant, both in his demands about which birds to collect in which region of Australia and in his obvious desire to acquire White's skin collection. On the other side of the ledger, he was also quick to offer praise, for example writing to White about his recent trip to the Gawler Ranges in 1912 (Linn 1989), he says, "You are



Photo 5 : Illustration of the tails of Bronze Cuckoos  
by H. Grönvold from Mathews' *The Birds of Australia*, Vol 7

doing giants' work, so Don't repine. You stand out quite alone, from all the others in Australia."

The tone of his letters to Cleland (pers. obs.) is different; he comes across as considerate and almost humble in his requests for skins and information on birds and, when some skins arrived in poor condition early in their interaction, he is painstakingly careful not to give offence in his suggestions as to how this might be rectified in future shipments. Judy White, a relative of H.L. White by marriage, says that it is well-known that Mathews was "a tactless, dictatorial sort of man" (White 1981). She describes the long relationship between the two men as one of

ups and downs, at one time H.L. White being so angry with Mathews that he refused to let him enter his house. Not long after however, White hosted Mathews at his home "Belltrees", showing him his egg collection. Mathews wrote most flatteringly of the extent of this collection and its inestimable value in furthering knowledge on Australian birds (White 1981). Even later still, when Mathews was forced to sell his skin collection, H.L. White was devastated that it was not to come to Australia. White

wrote to the Mitchell Library in Sydney advising them to purchase Mathews' book collection, so that this too would not be lost to the Australian nation (White 1981). This did not occur, but through Mathew's generosity the book collection was gifted to the nation in the 1940s.

Many thanks to Philippa Horton for editing this piece and for drawing my attention to references that I had not found, particularly the Tony Howard manuscript, which is a wonderful synopsis of G.M. Mathews, his endeavours and his legacy.

### More Reading

If you are interested in knowing more of Robert Hamilton Mathews (GMM's father) there is a podcast (see below) and at least two books have

been written about him:

Thomas, Martin (ed). 2007. *Culture in Translation. The Anthropological Legacy of R.H. Mathews*. ANU E Press and Aboriginal History Inc.

Thomas, Martin. 2011/2012. *The Many Worlds of R H Mathews*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

[http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/la\\_tenightlive/rh-mathews-anthropologist/3012132](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/la_tenightlive/rh-mathews-anthropologist/3012132)  
(acc 14 June 2017)

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**Photo 6: The Noisy Pitta**

illustrated by H.Gronvold, from Mathews' *The Birds of Australia*

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- <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/rh-mathews-anthropologist/3012132> (acc 14 June 2017)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.\\_H.\\_Mathews](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._H._Mathews) (acc 14 June 2017)
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- <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/iredale-tom-6797> (acc 30 June 2017)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom\\_Iredale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Iredale) (acc 30 June 2017)
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