

SAOA Historical Series No. 9

Tom Brandon

Tom Brandon of Wilmington was an egg collector and a long-term member of the SAOA – he appears to have joined in about March 1937. Curiously though some later correspondence between Bob Brown and Brandon in the early 1970s infers that he joined in 1945 (with a continuous membership at least until 1973) so perhaps there was a hiatus in his membership prior to 1945. He corresponded with John Sutton regularly from 1936 to 1938, the year that Sutton died and there are 19 letters and assorted bird notes and lists from Brandon during this period. In his usual fashion John Sutton appears to have diligently replied to all these letters, answering queries and helping with bird identifications. The letters from Brandon are all in ink and usually handwritten, with the exception of a few typed letters. All have the day and month but not the year on them, so in the list below I have added the year as it is obvious from the context & Sutton's replies. Tom Brandon always addressed Sutton as 'Dear Sir', and John Sutton replied to 'Mr Brandon'.

The address of the letters from Wilmington is (post) Box 80 but the letter of 6/1/37 mentions that he lived 7 miles out from Wilmington. From information kindly supplied by Tom's son, Lynne, we know that the farm, which was east of the town, had been in the family since the old Mt Brown Station was cut up in 1876. Lynne also supplied a biography from which the following three paragraphs are taken. Thomas Brandon was born on 26th February 1913, having two brothers and a sister. The children walked across paddocks and along the Willochra Creek two miles to school, which had about 12 students. After seven years at school, Tom travelled to Langhorne Creek, initially working on a farm, looking after dairy cows, pigs and draft horses. During the vintage season, he joined the grape picking and pruning teams. Later Tom and a few others from this region went to Berri for grape-picking, with Tom riding his pushbike, which was his only means of transport.

Tom taught himself to play the piano accordion and was in demand for local dances and other events. In the mid-1930s a brother and sister came to live on a neighbouring farm and over a period of four years, Tom courted this young lady, again travelling many miles on pushbike. Shortly after the wedding and after a very dry period, nine inches of rain fell in one day, flooding the Willochra Creek. When they went down to see this sight, a five foot wall of water came down, flooding another water course behind them and they had great difficulty in getting home. For some years the main work on the farm was milking up to 20 Red Illawarra cows and feeding pigs and calves. These

were mainly sent to market by taking them to Wilmington by horse and a trolley, which Tom had made from old Chev car axles. The stock, later fat lambs, were loaded on to the goods train and taken to the Gepps Cross market.

In 1949-50 more land was bought, some to the east and some to the west, the latter with a good stone house. After refurbishment, the family with three children moved to the new home. Another daughter was born after the move. Soon after an Armstrong Siddley twin cabin ute replaced the old 1923 Dodge 4 Tourer. Lucerne hay and later oaten hay were grown along the Willochra Creek; reaping was initially by horse, but in later years this was replaced by a 1924 Fordson tractor and much later by a 1954 Oliver 88 tractor.

There are references to farming life in the letters, for example, one refers to his bagging wheat and there are references to lambing in regard to Wedge-tailed Eagles. A letter of 5/12/37 says:

"I sewed 101 bags of wheat on Thurs. drove to town 200 miles Thurs. night in town Friday and drove home Fri. night so didn't do too bad for one day."

In another part of this letter he refers to the "big chap that was with me on Friday" [in Adelaide who John Sutton obviously met] – this big chap also helped him with his egg collecting, as an anchor on the rope!

Even before receiving the information from Lynn, I guessed that Brandon's family had been in the district for some time as a letter of 22 November 1936 comments that Tom's dad indicated that Rainbow Bee-eaters used to come and breed in their hundreds. I had also guessed that Tom had had some years at school, as his writing and spelling are good. His letter of 22/4/37, after reading a few parts of the *SA Orn*, indicates that he knew he was an inexperienced ornithologist and writer, as he says:

"No doubt my notes look a bit queer alongside those of more experienced writers, but I hope to learn in time."

It did not take Tom long to publish in the *SA Orn* – his first paper appeared in Volume 13 in October 1936 (Brandon 1936). The paper lists the birds recorded in his district, with an asterisk marking those that he had found nesting. He remarked that 1931 was the only good season since he became interested in birds. A later letter indicated that the 1936-37 season was also better for birds.

As mentioned earlier, at least from 1933-1937 Brandon took another job in Langhorne Creek,

boarding there and working in the vineyards for a few months – it appears to have been about March/April to July. The correspondence with John Sutton seems to have started as a result of a meeting in Adelaide in mid-April 1936 when Tom may have been en route to the southern Fleurieu for work. His letter of 16 May of that year is from Langhorne Creek, and the letter of 5 August mentions seeing Cape Barren Geese in May 1935, pruning with the ganger in June 1936, currant picking for H.M.Natt in March 1933 and Mr Natt shooting a Fork-tailed Swift early in April 1934. Natt is apparently an old family in the Langhorne Creek district, as there is mention of a Tammar Wallaby drive on their property and this species was already uncommon by the early twentieth century (Strathalbyn Naturalists Club Inc., 2000). Brandon published a short account of the birds of the Langhorne Creek district as a result of his time there (Brandon 1937).

Instead of the Langhorne Creek district, Tom headed for the Riverland in 1938 - his letter of 19 January indicated that he had a job grape-picking at Berri, that he might be going through Adelaide about February 10th and he wanted to meet egg collectors to see their collections. According to John Sutton's reply, he gave him the names of 2 egg collectors in Adelaide – J.N. McGilp & D.W. Brummitt. This is the last of Tom's letters from this period so we do not know if any contact was made.

Tom went on several birding trips with other people; eg in about September/October 1936 (letter of 22/11/36) he & a mate went along the Coorong to Mt Gambier and Edenhope, visiting Bool Lagoon and Millicent on the way. They were in a motor caravan and the chief object was to add to his egg collection, in which he was successful. He met Jack Hood on this trip and they must have hit it off as they seem to have combined on a trip to Kimba in August 1937. Brandon and a friend went to Carrierloo on Friday 24th & Saturday 25th September of the same year, took 20 sets of eggs and saw Mr Cain (presumably Walter, who was the subject of Historical Series No. 8) on the way back. However this was not the trip that he wrote up and sent to Sutton (that appeared in the *SA Orn*, Vol. 14, Part 5) as this occurred over one very long day! – Wednesday October 6th 1937 when Tom and a friend left at 3.45am and got home at 11.30pm.

Brandon obviously had a special interest in birds of prey and their breeding, as he often noted how many species of raptor eggs he had collected. There is also a dramatic write-up of his quest for Wedge-tailed Eagle nests in 1937 with additional notes on previous years' nests (Brandon 1938). These notes included comments on the size and assumed age of some nests, e.g. one nest in a river red gum 70ft from the ground consisted of 4 nests, each one built upon the other.

"This years (sic.) nest was 3ft wide and 2ft deep. Egg cavity 8" x 6" but from the bottom of the original nest to the top of the present was 11ft, each nest being easily distinguished. I should say that the bottom one would be 30 or 40 years of age."

His letters and notes indicated how Wedge-tails were viewed by the farming community. Apparently in 1937 very few eagles were seen out on the plains whereas in previous years it had been necessary to watch lambing ewes all day with a gun to keep the birds off. He described several birds flying over lambing ewes in early 1937 and that on 23rd March 1937 one was found eating a lamb, with the brains and eyes having been eaten out. In a letter of 11th April 1937 he tells of being offered five shillings a head for a certain pair of Wedgies during the lambing season. This was a pair that he had tried to find the nest of for the past 3 years and which he believed had about 20 nests.

He also remarked that he rarely heard Wedgies make a noise, but one of these few occasions was when he hit one with a rifle bullet. Another occasion was:

"when a bird came gliding in to its nest with a rabbit in its claws to find the writer standing in the nest with its two fledglings. It dropped the rabbit uttered a peculiar squeal and flew off to a great height. This was on 13th Aug. 1934."

Permits were required for egg collecting and we know that Brandon had a permit as his letter of January 10th 1938 mentioned that he had applied for his permit but was unsure whether it would be granted. His next letter indicated that his permit was renewed within about a week of his request. Modern day readers may tend to think of collectors as oblivious to conservation, but this was clearly not the case. For example, Sutton had requested a specimen of a Blue-winged Parrot and in Tom's letter of 22/11/36 he mentioned that he hadn't forgotten that request, but that he only goes into the hills where they are found in the nesting season and doesn't like to take them then as they are not plentiful.

In a letter of 2/7/37 Brandon suggested that he is thinking of starting a skin collection of the rarer birds so that he can send skins to Sutton for identification and to have the bird and the eggs together in his collection. He asked about the special tools and powders that he would need. Sutton replied (11/7) that it would not be a good idea to store the skins and eggs together as the cabinets required would be large and that the danger of beetles attacking skins and eggs was increased. He would, however, be happy to send instructions if Tom decided to go ahead. There is no other mention of this in subsequent letters. Sutton may have wished that he had, given his predilection for posting birds to him!

Like so many of Sutton's country correspondents, Brandon sent birds through the post to the Museum. A letter of 6/1/37 accompanied a Horsfield's Bushlark (killed on January 4) with the hope that it won't be too bad when Sutton gets it. Sutton's letter of 11/1 confirmed that the bird arrived on the 9th and was in fit condition for skinning. The taxidermist would try to make a skin, otherwise it would be made into a skeleton. A few months later a letter from Sutton dated 21/3/37 indicated that 3 Rosellas & a Raven were received by the Museum (presumably sent by Brandon's mate from Wilmington, as he was then at Langhorne Creek).

"Last week the Museum received three Rosellas and a Raven by post but on account of the recent weather the Rosellas were in such a bad state that they had to be destroyed – the stench was very bad – ... We would like to receive specimens of this species from your district for the Museum but it would be best not to send them until the weather is cooler."

The crow-like bird was a beautiful specimen of the [Australian] Raven, *Corvus coronoides*. It was in a smelly condition but the taxidermists were able to make a skin of it. Tom's letter of 2/7/37 also indicated that he had sent the body of a honeyeater to Museum – his tentative identification of a Yellow-fronted Honeyeater (now the Grey-fronted) was confirmed by Sutton in a letter of 11/7/37.

In July 1937 Tom posted the head of a crow, another bird and more rosellas (identified as a probable Little Crow, a Rufous Whistler and Adelaide Rosellas by Sutton). Earlier, in April of that year, the body of small bird reached Adelaide and Sutton confirmed its identity as the Brown Weebill.

The SAOA Correspondence is silent about Tom Brandon from early 1938 until 1973, when a letter of 25 May was sent by Brandon regarding an account that he had received for \$10 (\$5 for the current year and \$5 for arrears). He indicated that he would prefer to just get the *SAOrn* if possible, as he didn't feel that he had got much from 20 years of SAOA membership (e.g. he had only attended 2 or 3 meetings). The Secretary of the day, Bob Brown, replied to the effect that the Association would accept his resignation from the date of his letter and that he could become a subscriber for \$2.50/annum. Bob also suggested that he had been a member for 28 years and that, if he wished to dispose of back numbers of the journal, Bob would be happy to advertise this in the Newsletter. Brandon replied on 21 August, obviously taking up Bob's suggestion re membership as he enclosed \$7.50. He wondered what *SAOrns* were worth and whether it would be better to sell them in year lots or as one lot, but that he hadn't decided what to do yet.

Tom appears to have made two egg collections. The first was sold interstate and broken up many years

ago, while the second, comprising 1,443 clutches, was donated to the South Australian Museum in April 1991 (P. Horton pers. comm.). Tom Brandon still lives in Wilmington and remains very actively involved in restoring old farming equipment (windmills are his specialty), the Booleroo Steam & Traction Preservation Society Inc. and polishing stones. My thanks to Lynne Brandon for his assistance with biographical information.

Below I have listed the items in the correspondence between John Sutton and Tom Brandon held by the SAOA and upon which this paper was based. JS = John Sutton and TB = Tom Brandon.

1. 28/4/36, copy letter from JS to TB
2. 2 lists in TB's h/w of birds in the Wilmington district & breeding records from same area (in JS's hand May 23 – presumably recd by JS on that date).
3. List of birds in Wilmington area with nesting/breeding notes added in JS's hand, presumably as appeared in *SAOrn*.
4. 16/5/36, Langhorne Ck, letter from TB to JS, noting that he will send list for Wilmington district in next few days
5. List of birds in TB's h/w in pencil – letter of 15/5/36 says that it is a list of clutches in his collection.
6. 24/7/36, Wilmington, letter from TB in pencil to JS enclosing list of birds recorded in Langhorne Creek district (list appended in pencil)
7. 2/8/36, copy letter from JS to TB
8. 30/5/36, copy letter from JS to TB (out of chronological order)
9. 25/6/36, Langhorne Ck, letter from TB to JS (also out of chronological order)
10. 5/8/36, Wilmington, typed letter from TB to JS
11. H/w note from TB on breeding Black-shouldered Kite in Langhorne Creek area
12. 22/11/36, Wilmington, typed letter from TB to JS; pinned to it are two scraps of paper – one in JS's hand is a list of 8 bird names with abbreviation or full scientific name; the 2nd is in JS's hand & is a list of birds – further notes on birds of Wilmington district, from letter 22/11/36 – looks like something publ in *SAOrn*
13. 7/12/36, copy letter from JS to TB
14. 27/12/36, copy letter from JS to TB
15. 10/1/37, Wilmington, letter from TB in pencil to JS
16. 3/1/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS (out of chronological order)
17. 6/1/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS (also out of order)
18. 11/1/37, copy letter from JS to TB
19. 17/1/37, copy letter from JS to TB
20. 28/2/37, Langhorne Ck, letter in pencil from TB to JS
21. Notes in pencil of some of the rarer sightings from Wilmington (enclosed with 28/2/37 letter – no. 20)

22. 21/3/37, copy letter from JS to TB
23. 11/4/37, Wilmington, typed letter from TB to JS
24. 15/4/37, copy letter from JS to TB
25. 20/4/37, copy letter from JS to TB
26. 22/4/37, Wilmington, typed letter from TB to JS – pinned to it is a scrap of paper with a note asking what this is (he obviously sent a bird in the post)
27. 2/7/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS
28. 11/7/37, copy letter from JS to TB
29. 21/7/37, Wilmington, letter on small piece of paper from TB to JS, enclosing the head of a 'Crow'
30. scrap of paper (JS has written 29/7/37 on it in pencil – pres the date that he recd it) a PS asking if he wanted a specimen of *Meliphaga plumula* – this is probably a PS to letter of 26/7 – see below)
31. 26/7/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS
32. 8/8/37, copy letter from JS to TB
33. 26/9/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS
34. 1/10/37, copy letter from JS to TB
35. 5/12/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS, enclosing notes on Wedge-tailed Eagles (see no. 40)
36. h'w notes by TB on day's outing to Carrierloo Stn (in JS's hand in pencil – 12 Oct, pres the date that he recd them)
37. 9/10/37, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS mentioning Carrierloo trip (see no. 36) – out of chronological order
38. 10/1/38, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS
39. 19/1/38, Wilmington, letter from TB to JS; in JS hand in pencil is his reply dated 26/1/38
40. H'w notes by TB on nesting Wedge-tailed Eagles in 1937 & other notes from other years

Bibliography

- Brandon, T. 1936. The Birds of the Wilmington District. *SA Orn*, 13, pt 8: 228-30.
- Brandon, T. 1937. The Birds of the Langhorne's Creek District. *SA Orn*, 14, pt 1: 29-32.
- Brandon, T. 1938. Nesting of the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*) in 1937, etc. *SA Orn*, 14, pt 5: 117-121.
- Strathalbyn Naturalists Club Inc. (comp. by). 2000. *Natural History of Strathalbyn and Goolwa Districts*. Strathalbyn Naturalists Club Inc., Goolwa.

Penny Paton, May 2004