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Book Reviews

Edited by R. Todd Engstrom

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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Contributions to the History of Australasian Ornithology.—William E. Davis, Jr., Harry F. Recher, Walter E. Bowles, and Jerome A. Jackson, Editors. 2008. Memoirs of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, no. 14. Nuttall Ornithological Club, Cambridge, Massachusetts. vii + 481 pp., 93 black-and-white photographs, 5 maps, 5 diagrams. ISBN 1-877973-43-2. Cloth, $50.—This book is an emu feather in the cap of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. While it is the sixth Nuttall Memoir to deal with the history of ornithology, it is the first to look beyond North America. More descriptive than interpretive, it follows the example of the essays in the two most recent Nuttall Memoirs in 1995 and 2000 that provided histories of selected museums or organizations. This Australian volume, however, has three noteworthy exceptions.

Clemency Fisher's biography of John Gilbert in Australia, 1838–1845, is both a masterpiece and a labor of love. Her extensive research, supported by 223 detailed, scholarly footnotes, proves Gilbert to have been the most important collector of higher vertebrates in the history of Australia. Gilbert, a working-class Englishman who for some years worked for the artist and collector John Gould, collected the type specimens of at least 8% of Australian birds. These included specimens of the still rarely seen Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) and the now extinct Paradise Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*). Part of Ms. Fisher's accomplishment lies in tracking down Gilbert's specimens and letters in 11 museums and seven libraries throughout the world. Some specimens are of historical importance because they were collected in areas where that particular species no longer exists.

About half of this biography deals with Gilbert's contributions to the Leichhardt Expedition, on which he was killed when Aborigines attacked and a sharp spear punctured his carotid artery. Ms. Fisher was a member of the 1990 Royal Geographical Society of Queensland expedition that retraced the arduous route of the Leichhardt Expedition, and she attended the Leichhardt Exposition of 2004 and the Leichhardt Expedition Rally in 2006. Such familiarity lends authority to her assertion (pages 80–81) that

> Gilbert led a surprisingly rich scientific life for a man with such humble origins . . . Gilbert was no ordinary collector…a good shot, an experienced bushman, and careful observer, and a brilliant taxidermist whose specimens can often be picked out in a drawer just by looking at their excellence compared to the others.

Fortunately, Gilbert's journals and his last specimens were saved by the original members of the expedition when, after his death, they completed their journey to the northern tip of the Northern Territory.

Stephen Garnett and Gabriel Crowley's history of threatened birds in Australia and its islands deserves equivalent praise. Since 1750, 9 of the 640 bird species in Australia have become extinct, and a further 43 are threatened. The litany of ecological follies committed by humans has been great. As early as 1839, sheep grazing in western Victoria annihilated the most important source of carbohydrate for indigenous people, Murnong (*Microseris lanceolata*). In 1829, Tasmanian Aborigines were moved to the much smaller Flinders Island, and from 1839 Aborigines in Victoria were rounded up into missions. Overgrazing by sheep and cattle led to rapid deterioration of native pastures and invasion by exotic weeds. Rabbits were introduced in 1859 and were present in pestilential numbers throughout southern Australia by 1900. Sparks from coal-burning trains ignited fires that probably eliminated most of the Noisy Scrub-birds. More recently, increased upland temperatures may have caused the dramatic decline of the Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) in Tasmania. This essay makes for disturbing reading, even if Garnett and Crowley note a few recent, hopeful signs, such as Queensland ordering the end of land clearing as of 2005.

Leo Joseph describes how, from 1972 onward, emerging details of continental drift brought the realization that Australian birds had indeed evolved in Australia. Only in 1985 did Sibley and Ahlquist unmask the massive convergent evolution "that had misled systematists and ecologists alike for years." Also noteworthy is the unusual extent of cooperative breeding by passerine bird species in Australia.

The four chapters about organizations include Billie J. Gill's account of the Auckland Museum, one of four museums in New Zealand, and Ian Rowley's about the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO). In 1947, its first involvement in ornithology was Dom Serventy's evaluation of the

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mutton-bird (or Short-tailed Shearwater; *Puffinus tenuirostris*) industry. From 1953 until 1984, CSIRO organized and operated the Australian Bird Banding scheme.

In telling the story of the Australian National Wildlife Collection at CSIRO, Richard Schodde provides an extremely personal account, warts and all, of the "impact of personalities, politics and prejudice" (page 305). Similarly, R. E. Johnstone tells how the Western Australian Museum in Perth, once considered "the most under-staffed and ill-equipped State Museum in the British Commonwealth" (page 165), increased its ornithological collections from 9,800 specimens to 45,000 during decades when specimen collecting was diminishing elsewhere.

This well-bound, well-indexed, well-illustrated, informative book belongs in major university libraries around the world. It not only provides valuable information about the history of Australasian ornithology, it also documents some of the harm done to Aborigines and the environment by the carelessness, rapacity, and destructiveness of European immigrants, from 1778 onward. Readers on our continent will see many parallels to the harm done to the indigenous people and to wildlife in North America.—C. Stuart Houston, *863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8, Canada. E-mail: stuart.houston@usask.ca*

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