

2012

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Recommended Citation

Barwell, Graham, What's In A Name? What Names For Albatross Genera Reveal About Attitudes To The Birds, *Animal Studies Journal*, 1(1), 2012, 67-82.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol1/iss1/7>

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Abstract

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Keywords: albatross genus names, Diomedea, Phoebastria, Thalassarche, Phoebetria, classical literature, Ludwig Reichenbach.

Introduction

Although the question of albatross taxonomy is still contentious at the species level¹, most recent workers in the field are agreed on recognising four genera: *Diomedea*, *Phoebastria*, *Thalassarche*, and *Phoebetria* (e.g., Robertson and Nunn; Brooke; Double; Onley and Scofield; Checklist Committee; Gill and Donsker). The name of the first genus comes from Linnaeus (1760), given in the first formal scientific description of an albatross, while the remaining three names were proposed by Ludwig Reichenbach (1828), a century later. The coiners of these names did not explain their derivation, meaning or significance, so it has been left to others to provide such explanations.

An accurate understanding of these names is valuable because they give an insight into the way in which albatrosses were regarded by European scientists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The situation is similar to that faced by ethnographers working in societies where traditional environmental knowledge differs from that found in Western systems. As Eugene Hunn puts it, the “descriptive force” of native plant and animal names is revealing . . . of what is *seen* most clearly by Native eyes’ (147). Such names are ‘rich in cultural nuance and highly informative of contrasting cultural perspectives on the living environment’ (148).

Though the coiners of the names of albatross genera were working within the Western tradition, the passage of time since the names were created, together with the languages, Greek and Latin, which provided them, act as a barrier for modern readers, who are often unfamiliar with the classical world and the mindset of the early scientists. A careful analysis of those names may reveal something about earlier cultural attitudes and show how they link with the attitudes of today. In addition, some of the well-established and often-repeated explanations for the names are either inadequate or unhelpful in throwing light on the choice of particular names. Hence, it is timely to review what the names indicate. Such reconsideration must start with a full re-examination of the derivation and meaning of the names.

Origins of the Names of Albatross Genera

Diomedea

It is generally agreed (e.g., Jobling, *Dictionary*; Jobling, *Helm Dictionary*) that the name of the genus *Diomedea*, in which Linnaeus placed the bird he described as an ‘exiled’ or ‘wandering’ (*exulans*) albatross in naming it *Diomedea exulans*, comes from Diomedes, a celebrated Greek warrior. Details of Diomedes’ life and adventures are given by a number of ancient Greek and Roman writers from Homer (5.311-51), c. 9th-8th century BC, through to Servius (on *Aeneid* 11.271-74), 4th century AD. These details vary from writer to writer and sometimes conflict with each other, thus indicating that there was no fully consistent, stable account in existence over that long period of time. Elements which are common to several accounts but not necessarily mentioned in them all

include that he and his companions took part in the war against the Trojans; that he incurred the wrath of the goddess Aphrodite/Venus by wounding her; that, on return from the war, he settled not in his lands in Greece but ruled a kingdom in south-east Italy; and that he is buried on the Tremiti Islands in the Adriatic Sea.

His connection with birds lies in the well-established story of the transformation of his companions into birds. This is found as early as the third century BC in the poem, 'Alexandra', by the Greek author Lycophron (lines 594-611), and in a work on marvels ascribed to the philosopher Aristotle (836.a.9/par. 79). In the early years of the Roman Empire, it was alluded to in Vergil's epic poem, *The Aeneid* (11.271-74), and included among the wondrous transformations the Roman poet, Ovid, wrote of in his *Metamorphoses* (14.506-09). Ovid says that Diomedes had wounded Aphrodite in the course of the Trojan War, and so, after a series of misfortunes following the war's end, when his companions goaded the already vengeful goddess, she retaliated by turning some of them into birds.

When Pliny the Elder wrote his great work on the natural world as he knew it in the first century AD, he too referred to the story of the transformation in the course of his account of the *aves Diomedae* (literally 'Diomedes' birds'), which inhabit an island off the Italian coastal region of Apulia famous for the tomb and temple of Diomedes, saying that they were the source of the legend of the transformation of Diomedes' followers (bk. 10, ch. 61). Geographers like Strabo (bk. 6, ch. 3, sec. 9) knew of the story and it continued to be mentioned by later Roman writers such as Aelian (bk. 1, ch. 1), Antonius Liberalis (ch. 37), and Servius (on *Aeneid* 11.271-74), the grammarian who wrote an extensive commentary on Vergil's epic. All those writers generally mention the story in connection with the birds living on what they called the island or islands of Diomedes (the Tremiti Islands). These birds appear to have been shearwaters, possibly Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* (Medway 154; Tickell 16n8), which still nested on the largest island, San Domino, at least until the late 1990s (Winthrop; Snow and Perrins 1: 42-45).

In the stories the occasion of the transformation varies: it occurs some time after the end of the Trojan War when Diomedes and his men are unable to return to their homes in Greece (Lycophron, Vergil, Ovid); or, it occurs around the time of Diomedes' death (Aristotle, Strabo, Antonius Liberalis, Servius). When a reason is given, it is the work of the gods, either Aphrodite/Venus on account of Diomedes having wounded her (Lycophron, Vergil, Ovid), or Zeus for no specified reason (Antonius Liberalis). Those who report the revenge the goddess exacts on Diomedes generally link it with his wanderings after the end of the Trojan War after being prevented from settling back in his homeland (Lycophron, Vergil, Ovid). Indeed, Ovid calls him '*profugus Diomedes*', 'exiled Diomedes' (bk. 14, line 457).

If writers mention the size and colour of the birds, then they are said to be large (Aristotle), the size of swans (Lycophron, Ovid), and white (Ovid). Only Pliny the Elder differs, describing the

aves Diomedeeae as being similar to coots, but his interest is more on the actual birds nesting on the Tremiti Islands and he does acknowledge that another writer says they are white. Only Lycophron describes them specifically as seabirds. The different accounts emphasise a variety of behaviours of the transformed men. Some mention their calls, described as pleasant murmurs by Lycophron, but as tearful by Vergil or as loud screaming by Aelian; many mention their tameness, either towards fellow Greeks (Lycophron, Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, Antoninus Liberalis, Aelian, Servius), or towards honourable men (Strabo). Others mention habits clearly consistent with shearwaters, such as coming ashore by night (Lycophron) or nesting in what must be descriptions of burrows (Lycophron, Pliny the Elder, cf. Thompson 93).

Phoebastria

The derivation of this name is clear enough, since it is the equivalent of the Greek feminine noun, *phoibastria*, ‘prophetess’. The change of the medial Greek diphthong *oi* to Latin *oe* is quite regular (Nybakken 58).

Thalassarche

This name must be derived from the Greek nouns *thalassa* ‘sea’ and *archē*, in the sense of either ‘power, command’ (Jobling, *Helm Dictionary*) or ‘beginning, origin’, thus meaning something like ‘having command of the sea’, or ‘having its origin in the sea’. The Greek form allows either sense.

Phoebetria

Jobling (*Dictionary*; *Helm Dictionary*) gives the name as coming from the Greek, *phoebētria* (presumably a Latinised form of the Greek noun, *phoibētria*), meaning ‘prophetess, soothsayer’. This explanation is followed by Tickell (114n6) and Safina (*Eye* 28) and goes back to the nineteenth century (Coues 125). This meaning of the word is not, however, attested to in the standard Greek-English dictionary. Liddell and Scott list *phoibētria* as a noun meaning ‘purifier’, while the words for ‘prophetess’ are *phoibas* or *phoibastris* and for ‘prophet’ *phoibētēs*, *phoibētēr*, or *phoibētōr*. However, since the feminine noun *phoibētria* is formed from the masculine noun *phoibētēs* (‘prophet’) in the same way as the feminine noun *kathartria* is from the masculine noun *kathartēs* meaning ‘cleanser, purifier’, and in classical Greek culture there is a significant connection between prophecy and purification (Hornblower and Spawforth, ‘Delphic oracle’, ‘purification’), there is every reason for Reichenbach to have understood the word, *phoibētria*, in the sense Jobling and others ascribe to it. It is not necessary to declare that the significance of the name is unknown (Gaskin and Peat 8).

Some writers (Jobling, *Dictionary*; Tickell 114n6) suggest a comparison with the Greek noun *phobētron* in the sense of ‘a scarecrow, an object of terror’. This is misleading. The Greek word for scarecrow is derived from *phobeō* ‘to frighten/fear’. *Phobētron* is not related to the *phoib-* group of nouns, which are derived from the epithet *phoibos* ‘bright, radiant’ for Apollo (Liddell and Scott), who was strongly associated with prophecy with his oracle at Delphi (Hornblower and Spawforth, ‘Delphic oracle’), and the verb *phoibazō* ‘to prophesy’. The name *Phoibē* (Phoebe), mentioned by Marchant and Higgins (338), shares the same derivation, but it has very limited connection with Apollo and prophecy, being applied by later classical authors to his twin sister, the goddess Artemis/Diana, or to the moon (Hornblower and Spawforth, ‘Phoebe’). Raising a connection with Diana in relation to the origin of the generic name thus introduces misleading associations with the attributes of that goddess (the moon, margins, savageness). Chester’s suggestion that *Phoebetria* honours Artemis, ‘untamed spirit of the natural world’ (155), while initially appealing, says more about modern attitudes to albatrosses than the actual derivation of the word Reichenbach chose. Safina (*Eye* 28; ‘Introduction’ 20), who seems to have based his account of the derivation of the name of the genus *Phoebetria* on Jobling (*Dictionary*), confuses matters further by citing an unrecorded Latin word *phoebetron* as an ‘object of terror’.

Attitudes Revealed by the Names of Genera

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was common for scientists interested in the natural world to have a classical education. This brought a familiarity with poets, like Vergil and Ovid, along with writers of natural history, like Aristotle and Pliny the Elder. Evidence of this familiarity can be seen in some of the major works of this period. For example, the German zoologist and botanist, Peter Simon Pallas, who worked mainly in Russia, included Latin quotations from the Roman writers Martial, Ovid, and Seneca, as epigraphs near the beginning, middle, and end of the ten-part first volume of the book that included the first account of a Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*. The Dutch naturalist and correspondent of Linnaeus, Pieter Boddaert, reused Pallas’ Seneca quote, itself formerly used by Robert Boyle, on the title page of volume 1 of his *Elenchus Animalium*.

When Linnaeus named *Diomedea exulans* in 1758, he had neither seen a specimen nor had personal knowledge of the habits or habitats of albatrosses (Medway 154), since he supports his account by references to descriptions and illustrations provided by three earlier natural history writers (Grew 1: 73-74 and plate 6; Albin 3: 76 and plate 81; Edwards 2: 88 and plate). In choosing the Latin name for both genus and species, Linnaeus seems to have been most influenced by the sheer size of the bird as reported in his sources – Grew refers to it as a ‘very great’ bird (1: 73), while Edwards calls it ‘one of the largest, if not the very biggest, Water-Bird in the World’ (2:

88). In the classical stories of Diomedes, Aristotle (836.a.9/par. 79), Lycophron (line 599), and Ovid (14.508-09) comment on the size of the birds his companions were transformed into, but only Ovid combines this with an emphasis on Diomedes as an exile from his native land. Given that Ovid was a familiar writer to the circles Linnaeus moved in, it is likely that it was his account of the transformation which guided Linnaeus' choice of name. Medway suggests the specific name *exulans*, 'exiled', came from the bird's wandering or wide-ranging habits (154), but it is more likely a sign of a greater influence from Ovid than has been previously acknowledged. After all, Linnaeus demonstrates his lack of familiarity with the bird by including a penguin in the genus *Diomedea* along with *Diomedea exulans* (132), and his account of the albatross shows a confusion with frigatebirds (referred to as man-of-war birds), which characterised a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts (J. Forster, *Resolution Journal* 1: 179; Medway 155-56).

William Jameson offered an additional reason for Linnaeus' choice of a specific name (48). He suggested that the notion of wandering with no fixed abode comes from a belief current among eighteenth-century seamen that albatrosses incorporated the souls of sea captains on the East Indies run, who, having had a much more comfortable life than ordinary sailors, were condemned after death to wander as birds in the inhospitable southern seas. He states that one of the German scientists on the second of James Cook's expeditions to the Pacific, Johann Reinhold Forster, comments on this belief. It was in fact Forster's son, George, who reports this view, but his wording suggests that it might have been offered as a kind of humorous jest:

Some of our sailors, who had formerly sailed on board of East-India ships, after comparing the facility of those voyages to the hardships of the present, propagated the ludicrous idea among their messmates, that these birds contained the departed souls of old India captains . . . This stroke [i.e., notion], which may pass for witty enough, confirms what I have before observed of the original humour of sea-faring men. (1: 234)

Another scientist aboard the *Resolution*, the Swede Anders Sparrman, makes the jocular nature of this alleged belief more evident when he comments that it arose when some of the ship's company, who had sailed in East Indian waters, were 'joking over the East Indians' belief in the transmigration of souls, and about the hardships of our voyages' (44). Apart from the testimony of those on Cook's expedition, there is no clear evidence that the belief had much currency, so it is unlikely to have contributed to Linnaeus' choice of name for the Wandering Albatross.

In the literature on albatrosses, authors commonly offer explanations for the scientific names. In these explanations, there is a danger in giving composite accounts of a semi-mythological story or a version which includes details peculiar to a single ancient author, or which are not found in any ancient author. As an example of the latter, Jameson misrepresented the ancient world by

stating that the companions of Diomedes were turned into birds by a magician (48), whereas the ancient sources, when they give an agent for the change, agree that it was the work of a goddess (Aphrodite/Venus) or a god (Zeus). Jameson's explanation was repeated by others, including Gaskin and Peat (8). Doughty and Carmichael (62) have Diomedes and his men offending a different goddess, Athena, in a campaign after the siege of Troy. Neither the goddess nor the occasion accords with any version of the classical story.

Sometimes the inclusion of details in explanations of the name can be misleading in providing an understanding of the choice of name. In their explanation Marchant and Higgins (265), for instance, repeat the statement found only in Servius (on *Aeneid* 11.271) that, after Diomedes died, his companions were inconsolable and were transformed into birds. This association of inconsolable mourning with albatrosses seems misplaced. It connects better with the ancient references to the calls of shearwaters nesting on the Tremiti Islands, the *aves Diomedae* 'birds of Diomedes', since these were sometimes described as being like a 'loud screaming' (Pliny bk. 10, ch. 61) or being 'tearful cries' (Vergil, *Aeneid* 11.274). Jobling, whose 2010 explanation is more elaborate than the one offered in the earlier edition of his dictionary, likewise mentions the distraught companions, as well as offering a number of details of Diomedes' life that have no obvious bearing on Linnaeus' choice of name. He notes, for example, that Diomedes 'abandoned his kingdom because of the sexual excesses of his wife during his absence at the siege of Troy, and founded the city of Argyripa in Italy' (*Helm Dictionary*, 'Diomedea/diomedea'). While these elements can be found in ancient authors – Lycophron (lines 612-15) and Antonius Liberalis (ch. 37) both mention the wife's adultery, and Strabo (bk. 6, ch. 3, sec. 9) the founding of the city – they offer little insight on why Diomedes was chosen as the basis for the generic name for albatrosses.

While the names *Phoebastria* and *Phoebetria* are associated with prophecy, Reichenbach gave no reason for connecting albatrosses with this practice. The reason needs to be sought in the ways Europeans reacted to albatrosses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Encounters with albatrosses at sea could provoke a variety of emotions. Some might welcome such an encounter (e.g., Guillemard iv), seeing the bird as a kind of faithful companion on the ship's passage through the Southern Ocean. It might offer a counter to the boredom of a long sea voyage, and if caught and brought aboard, could elicit a range of responses, from being the butt of practical jokes to inspiring admiration, pity, and curiosity, while nevertheless being seen as the source of material for human use, such as for food, for personal adornment, or for scientific study (Bennett 2: 366-68; Green 7-9). In some circumstances the bird could be regarded in a much less positive way, particularly when a sailing vessel met foul weather. George Shelvocke, whose ship endured several weeks of constant storms southwest of Cape Horn in 1719, reported that one of his

officers shot a dark albatross which had accompanied them for several days (72-73). According to Shelvocke, this action resulted from the man's superstitious imagining that the bird's colour indicated it was an ill omen and that shooting it would produce better weather. A century later, George Bennett noted how, in poor weather, superstitious seamen believed an albatross hovering over a ship indicated the bird regarded the ship as doomed to sink and those aboard it to become the bird's prey (2: 366).

Apart from being an ominous bird in those circumstances, albatrosses had another prophetic aspect to them; they might signal proximity to land or even to specific locations. Thus William Dampier observed that English seamen sailing from Brazil to the Cape of Good Hope take the albatross as a sign they are near their destination (1: 531). Johann Forster reported one of the officers on the *Resolution*, Richard Pickersgill, saying in 1772 that dark albatrosses were seen 'only in high Southern Latitudes within a few degrees of land' (*Resolution Journal* 2: 189). The presence of albatrosses might be predictive of certain winds. Sailing east across the southern Indian Ocean in July 1788, William Bligh noted that it was observed that birds like albatrosses left them when the wind turned to the north, but their return 'was the forerunner of a southerly wind' (42).

Sometimes attitudes to albatrosses seem to have been influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. The poem deals with the consequences of the shooting of an albatross, an action which the Mariner's companions regard in a contradictory way, first deploring then approving, but finally blaming the unfortunate shooter (Barwell 28). This work first appeared in 1798, but became so widely known that it is credited with establishing the public conception of the bird (Tickell 5). Its effect on people's beliefs is evident in the writings of passengers on nineteenth-century ships (e.g., Meredith 26 and 30), as well as in the behaviour of some seamen. John Singleton, a doctor aboard an immigrant ship making for Melbourne, reports the death of a seaman on the evening of Christmas Day, 1850 (Hughes 47-48). The man had been overcome by drink in the course of celebration of the festive season, just as the ship encountered a strong wind and a rising sea. Seeing an albatross coming to rest on a railing then disappearing, the man shouted out that he had shot the bird and in a fit of what was described as *delirium tremens* threw himself to his death in the sea.

Coleridge's poem also affected explanations of Reichenbach's choice of generic names for members of the albatross family. Thus in 1882, Elliott Coues, author of a checklist of North American birds, explained *Phoebetria* and *Phoebastria* as being 'with great propriety and correct sentiment applied to albatrosses, the import of whose weird presaging will be felt by one who reads Coleridge's "Antient Mariner", or himself goes down the deep in ships' (125). This comment is repeated in the 1991 first edition of Jobling's dictionary, but is absent from the 2010 second edition.

There is no evidence that Reichenbach knew Coleridge's poem and was influenced by it in his choice of names associated with prophecy. A more likely explanation for the name lies in the dark colouration of the birds he designated as type species in *Phoebetria* and *Phoebastria*. For *Phoebetria*, this was the Light-mantled Albatross (*P. palpebrata*), originally described by Johann Forster ('Mémoire'), but here given the specific name *fuliginosa* which Reichenbach took from Johann Gmelin (Checklist Committee 77). For *Phoebastria*, he designated the Short-tailed Albatross as the type species, but using as the specific name, *brachyura*, rather than *albatrus* as used in the original description of the species by Pallas (pt. 5, 28-32). Pallas had noted in his formal description of the bird that there was one form (in fact that of the younger immatures) in which the body was wholly dark.

In the century preceding Reichenbach's description, dark-coloured albatrosses were regularly encountered by ships in the Southern Ocean. To the Europeans the dull and sombre plumage of the birds reminded them of the clothing worn by members of a nonconformist religious group, the Society of Friends or the Quakers as they were sometimes known. Quakerism, which developed in the seventeenth century, extended across the northern part of Europe from England to Holland and Germany. In the eighteenth century, the adherents' appearance became distinctive as a result of their belief that fashion was to be avoided and they should dress plainly in brown and grey colours (Punshon 129). This was so well established that dress alone distinguished someone as a Quaker to the world at large (Gummere iii).

This was the point of resemblance that led sooty-coloured albatrosses to be referred to as *Quaker birds* or *Quackerbirds*, as noted by those on Cook's second expedition into the Pacific when they encountered Light-mantled Albatrosses south of South Africa (Cook 2: 76; G. Forster 1: 91-92; J. Forster, *Resolution Journal* 2: 189-90). That name remained current for sooty-coloured albatrosses into the nineteenth century (Bennett 2: 363; Newton et al., 'Quaker'), while the association of the Light-mantled Albatross with religious figures extends into the twentieth. Robert Cushman Murphy commented how the contrast of the grey body with the dark cap and wings gives the bird 'the fanciful appearance of a cowled monk' (1: 498).

In addition to the distinctive colour of their clothing, Quakers were also strongly associated with prophecy, testifying to their beliefs in their actions and way of life. Given that Reichenbach designated the bird Johann Forster described as *Diomedea palpebrata* as the type species for the new genus *Phoebetria*, he would certainly have known of the name Forster reported in his journal (*Resolution Journal* 2: 189-90). Reichenbach, whose father had compiled the first Greek-German dictionary, had an extensive education in the classics, so would be familiar with the Greek tradition of sibyls, female prophets, such as were associated with the oracle of Apollo at Delphi (Hornblower and Spawforth, 'Delphic oracle'). It is likely, then, that he chose for the newly created genera forms of Greek words for female prophets, without necessarily having a view about the birds in the genus

having any particular prophetic quality. If he did know the story of the transformation of Diomedes' companions, he would be aware that Vergil described the metamorphosis as portentous (*Aeneid* 11.271).

It is characteristic for humans to respond to what is unfamiliar in terms of what is familiar. Those who first encountered albatrosses compared them with common birds they knew. Thus the word which in Arabic originally applied to the pelican, *alcatraz* (in all its variant spellings), was used by Spanish and Portuguese sailors for different large sea birds, eventually being regularised in English as *albatross* (Newton et al., 'albatros'; Tickell 14). Others referred to the new birds in terms of swans (Hawkins 71), gulls (Schouten 22; Mundy 5: 36), or herons (Ravenstein 3-4). The meat of Short-tailed Albatrosses was sold in nineteenth-century Japan as *okino-tsuru* or 'offshore crane' (Safina, *Eye* 182).

Sometimes the name indicated the attributes the birds appeared to have. Thus foolishness, perhaps in relation to a perceived reluctance to fear and shun humans, lies behind one of the etymologies offered for *mollymawk* (*OED*, 'mollymawk'; cf. Newton et al., 'malle-muck'), with a similar attribute underlying the word *gony* or *gooney*, applied to two of the North Pacific albatrosses (*OED*, 'gony'; Tickell 17) and also being the meaning of the Japanese words, *aho-dori* and *baka-dori*, 'fool-bird', for the Short-tailed Albatross (Austin 284). The attitudes lying behind these sorts of names are those which legitimated the unrestrained exploitation of the environment, for profit, sport, or other motives, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. North Pacific albatross populations suffered major depredation at the hands of those who would profit from the international trade in bird plumage and then were severely impacted by military activity in their breeding areas in the mid-twentieth century (see for example, the accounts by Austin and by Rice and Kenyon).

Only occasionally was the birds' mastery of flight represented in a name, such as in Reichenbach's *Thalassarche*. When it came to creating names for new genera, Reichenbach's practice otherwise followed the commonplace pattern of finding points of familiarity, taking as his starting point the dull colours of the clothing worn by members of a religious group. But in the choice of feminine forms, his names *Phoebetria* and *Phoebastria* also show the patterns of association which were common among scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for whom the Greek and Roman worlds were familiar, as demonstrated also by Linnaeus.

Historical meanings and associations of particular animals are interesting and revealing, since aspects of those meanings often remain or return in future time. This is true of albatrosses. Where once these birds were associated with prophecy on account of their association with various natural features or phenomena, or by the similarity in the colouration of dark-coloured birds to the plain dress of Quakers, this prophetic aspect remains today in respect of their role as indicators of the effects of human activity, especially some forms of fishing, on oceanic wildlife (Tickell 357-70;

Brooke 149-70; Lindsey 101-13; Croxall et al. 1). In this respect they have recovered one of their early roles for people in the developed world, or at least retained a long-standing pattern of association, even if for a different reason than that which Linnaeus or Reichenbach would have recognised.

Notes

¹ See W.L.N. Tickell's work on albatrosses, and also compare Christidis and Boles with Gill and Donsker.

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