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Anne Collett

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Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

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Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which
is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be
found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory
of Australia.
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EDITORIAL

I am told that it was the flamingoes to which I constantly desired return on a visit to the zoo as a very young child. Of all the animals that I must have seen for the first time, it strikes me now as a curious preference, but perhaps it was the sheer audacity of the bizarre and the beautiful in colour and shape that attracted me then as now: the blaze of flamboyant pink, the curious beak, the ability to stand effortlessly on one slender leg. I think it is the otherness of Bird — the sheer quality of the fantastic and the alien — combined with aspects of Bird behaviour and mannerism that lends itself so readily to anthropomorphism,¹ which holds me in thrall. Many of my favourite fairytales featured birds — the swallows of ‘The Happy Prince’ and ‘Thumbelina’, ‘The Ugly Duckling’, ‘The Emperor’s Nightingale’; the story of the princes turned into swans by a witch and their sister who must knit them shirts of nettles to release them from enchantment and return them to human form. The princess struggles with bleeding fingers and diminishing time until all but the sleeve of one shirt are completed. The princes recover their human shape except the youngest prince who is returned to earth lamed — a reminder perhaps of the dangers of enchantment.

Fairyttales gave way to a love of poetry, and foremost among my favourite poets were those of the Bird — John Keats, John Clare, John Shaw Neilson, Judith Wright and most recently, Olive Senior, whose latest collection of poetry, over the roofs of the world, is devoted to stories, images and poets of Bird. In ‘The Secret of Flying Close to the Sun Without Melting Wings’ she gives a distinctive Amerindian voice to the long association of Bird with flight and the human desire for a metamorphosis into feather and air — a transformation that enables escape and transcendence:

   For you, flight is given as gift of bird messenger sustained
   by rattle, by drum, by song. You soar, sail, glide.
   For a brief moment you gain Sun’s nod.

   You are Bird itself. But know: such ecstasy is not forever.
   You will re-enter your world, but let down lightly
   cradled as gently as egg.²

The image of a brief moment of ecstatic intensity and a gentle delivery back to earth is a beautiful one, but for me Bird has little to do with the symbolism of flight. I might rather be a sparrow than a snail,³ but not because I desire release from the burden of the world or my humanness — even temporarily. Like Keats,⁴ and like Camus,⁵ I am one who believes that the desire for immortality is a fancy that cheats us of this life: the symbolic flight of the nightingale is a darkling of our imagination that must be resisted, for such faery lands are forlorn (and yet I yearn for them).

My feeling for Bird is more often a grounded one, and thus to some extent I have more affinity with the pragmatic earthiness of Olive Senior’s Hen than the hubris of Icarus:
Some find you loud mouth and simple,
for every egg laid a big announcement
a cackle, some find you
the broody hen, not knowing all
is meant to throw spies off the scent
of our blood’s secret: you know
the sky isn’t falling, geese don’t lay
golden eggs, superior knowledge
resides in the feet.⁶

For me Bird is an everyday pleasure, an ecstasy of this world to which I can return again and again. The wagtails build their nest every spring in my garden, and every year I watch them teach their chicks to fly from the clothesline to the low branches of the hibiscus tree. Sulphur-crested cockatoos, the noisy acrobatic clowns of the bird world, dangle precariously from the turpentine tree — a tree in which a young kookaburra was given its first ‘laughing lessons’. I didn’t know that kookaburras have to learn to laugh just as children learn to talk until I heard ‘his’ faltering attempts to imitate the cacophony produced so effortlessly by his more mature brethren. This kookaburra has grown rather magnificently fat — quite ‘the merry king of the bush’ (as I used to sing in primary school) — but he still visits my garden regularly and particularly likes the vantage point offered by the Hills hoist. I’m not sure why the urge to photograph birds is so strong, but the Bird issue brought out the amateur photographer in everyone, myself included.

Anne Collett

NOTES
1 The episode of the buzzards and the dead mule in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), is a wonderful example of this.
2 Olive Senior, over the roofs of the world, Insomniac Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 17.
4 Reference to John Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 1819.
5 See Camus’ essay Le Mythe de Sisyphe and his novel L’Étranger (both 1942).
6 ‘Hen’, over the roofs of the world, stanza 1, p. 23.
Mark Treddinick

THE RIGHT LIFE

Today the wind is shameless
and unfettered; she strips
leaves from the poplars
and lifts letters from the words
of the phrases in one’s mouth.
*Do the right thing; live the right life*
pied flycatcher shrills
in the winter grass.

But one is, oneself, damned
by self-awareness to essay —
all the better days of one’s life —
a thing the bird does
just waking and surrendering
to herself. She dances
herself true in the shapely
pursuit of breakfast.
I AM MY BELOVED’S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE

For Rohan, my brother, and Mariza,
on their wedding, December 2007.
And with a bow of respect to
The Song of Solomon

I
Each afternoon two black ducks
land in the grass and lodge by
the watertrough through the dusk.

II
The silence between them is
depth and it’s most of what they
share and they would be nowhere
else and with nobody else,
and there is something beyond
hope, and this is how it looks,
fallen on the lowly grass,
she, the rose of Sharon, he
the apple among the trees
of the wood. And from my shelf
the clock repeats its old lie,
and he drinks and flares the green
in his wings and says rise up
my love, and come away. Or
something like that. For lo, she
replies, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone;
the time of the singing of
birds is come. And they rise and
eat from the seed of the hens
and return and lie down in
each other’s delight until
night finds them out and he says
come, my beloved, let us
go forth into the field, or
something like that, and they do.
There are seven virtues, at least, and some of them are small as blue wrens and some as great as silver poplars, but none matters beside, and none counts without, what visits us beyond reason and outstays its season and makes the world a garden again. And two birds.

Love is strong as death, I think, watching them articulate eternity in their flight.
Grace Cleave, a New Zealand writer living in London and heroine of Janet Frame’s novel, *Towards Another Summer*, undergoes a mysterious transformation prompted by weather reports of a slow thaw spreading from the west: ‘you see, during the night Grace Cleave had changed to a migratory bird’ (6). There are echoes here of Kafka’s story ‘Metamorphosis’:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. (9)

Whereas Gregor’s body changes completely, Grace’s metamorphosis is psychic rather than physical, though she scrutinises herself for even the slightest trace of feathers, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed by their absence.

… her heart beat faster as she felt on the skin of her arms and legs, her breasts and belly, and even on top of her head the tiny prickling beginning of the growth of feathers. … she threw back the blankets and examined her skin. No feathers. Only a sensation of down and quill and these, with other manifestations of the other world, could be kept secret; no one else need learn of it. (7–8)

*Towards Another Summer* was written in 1963 when Frame was contemplating, with some ambivalence, a visit to New Zealand. In February that year, she had accepted an invitation from Geoffrey Moorhouse, chief feature writer for the *Guardian*, to spend a weekend with his New Zealand wife and two small children at their home in Stockport. This caused what Frame describes in a letter to her friend, John Money, as a ‘roots crisis’.

[To] spend a weekend having repeated, strong, undiluted doses of New Zealand has almost put me off my balance. I sit here … dreaming of snowgrass and snowberries and tussock … of the Southern Alps, and of rivers — where’s the Rakaia, the Waitaki, the Maheno? Good God, I’ve kept asking myself, what am I doing on this side of the world? If I don’t get back to New Zealand I’ll die, or, which is the equivalent to death, my writing will get worse and worse… (qtd in King 243)

On returning to London, she stopped work temporarily on her fifth novel, *The Adaptable Man*, and spent April and May writing *Towards Another Summer*. In October 1963 she arrived back in New Zealand, for what she believed was a short-term stay, fully intending to resume her life in England yet writing to her friend Peter Dawson in January 1964:

… by Holy Holy I’m homesick for the northern hemisphere! At the same time I’m bursting with gratitude for the sun, the sea, the pohutukawas, and I want to stay in NZ
permanently ... [I think] that my home is in the northern hemisphere, but this is the land I want to write about. (qtd in King, 264)

Although Frame does refer to having written what she calls ‘a novel-length autobiographical essay, Towards Another Summer’, she never offered the book for publication.2 ‘Later she would call it “embarrassingly personal”’, (qtd in King 245) perhaps because it alludes so directly and with very little disguise to actual details and events within the Frame household. A decision to publish posthumously was taken by the Janet Frame Literary Trust in 2007, and Pamela Gordon writes on the Trust’s behalf in an Acknowledgement section at the book’s end:

Janet Frame entrusted the care of her literary estate and charitable trust to us, but left no specific instructions about Towards Another Summer. She made it clear that it was too personal to publish in her lifetime, but since she bound two copies of the typescript and preserved them in separate locations, and made no secret of the novel’s existence, we have concluded that she anticipated posthumous publication. (241–42)

The novel’s first five chapters establish the character of Grace Cleave, who lives in a small furnished flat ‘which held a three-piece suite with floral covers’ (25). Outside is a garden where passers-by throw ‘Bus tickets, cigarette packets and papers, chocolate wrappers, all kinds of refuse’ (19). Very little seems to flourish amidst sooty air and harsh winter weather.

In the back yard there were three tubs of plants — two of evergreen trees, evergreen in name only, for their stout leathery leaves were shrouded in soot; and one geranium, its leaves withered, its stalks like tendrils of ageing hair growing from the soot and slush-covered earth. Were the geraniums dead? Every time she looked at them she asked were they dead, for in her own country she had never known geraniums not to be in blossom, they possessed too much fire to let themselves lie dormant, ‘banked’ during the long winter night with their own death-grey ashes. (4)

As the novel progresses, the account of Grace’s immediate experiences in England is interspersed with vignettes of her New Zealand childhood, but despite apparent comparisons between bleak, wintry England and a sunnier, more relaxed New Zealand, both countries are shown to have their drawbacks. Immersed in her writing, which has clearly achieved a measure of success, Grace finds her encounters with interviewers and reviewers quite excruciating, comparing them both to London soot and the sooty stain left after walking through a paddock of paspalum near Auckland.

Being a writer and returning home tired after every venture, you are so surprised to find on yourself a slowly spreading stain of publisher, critic, agent. You turn in panic to the household hints in Pears Cyclopaedia.... Then you realize there’s nothing, you can neither identify the stain nor remove it. (13)

Uneasy and painfully self-conscious in her dealings with others, Grace decides her inner transformation into a migratory bird makes sense of who she is, and this partly prompts her decision to accept an invitation from Philip Thirkettle, who had interviewed her as a writer in London, to spend a weekend with his
New Zealand wife and young children in Relham in northern England. The bulk of the novel recounts Grace’s journey there and the day and a half she spends with the Thirkettles, while Frame portrays with considerable humour the social awkwardness and insecurities of the occasion.

Towards Another Summer explores the theme of migration, particularly through images and description of journeys. Migration inevitably involves an act of imagination as Grace acknowledges when, passing New Zealand House in the Strand, she observes English people staring at ‘displayed photographs of sun and sky and sheep’ wondering whether to emigrate and experience ‘the sun, the beach, your own home’, but content at last to complete ‘the regular mid-morning migration … through the simplest cheapest and most satisfyingly unofficial procedure of dreaming’ (33). In her ambivalence over where she really belongs, Grace too has an impulse ‘to go to the Emigration Department, enquire, fill in forms’ (33). The visit to New Zealand House occurs immediately before her train trip north through a snow covered landscape, ‘as if they journeyed on the face of the moon’ (40), and this journey is later echoed by memories of childhood train travel in New Zealand, for Grace’s father, like Janet Frame’s, has been a train driver and her family has moved from one railway posting to another in southern districts of the South Island.

In 1964, shortly after her return to New Zealand, Janet Frame gave a radio talk claiming we are all travellers.

[At] the moment of birth every human being is an exile — or at the moment of consciousness of the first thought we are exile and home comer, we make both landfall and departure; there is nothing remarkable in our journeys unless it is that human beings … celebrate their movements in works of art … (qtd in King, 273)

Journeying takes on a mythic resonance in Towards Another Summer, since for Grace Cleave artists are mythmakers and journeys an important motif through which myths are structured.

Most music began on earth — in the tradition of the mythmakers who named a definite place of departure to Heaven or Hell; setting out for other worlds you journeyed first to Land’s End or North Cape of New Zealand or some spot in Italy, and when you felt the need to return you retraced your steps and were comforted by the sight of familiar land — or sky-marks: rising (or descending) ‘we beheld the stars’. (222)

Frame combines journeying with another significant mythic feature — metamorphosis — in the figure of the migratory bird. Her heroine reflects on Classical legends of women changed into birds as she considers her own inner transformation.

Birds too, Grace thought, remembering that she had been changed; Philomela; Procne; it was an old tradition; we must tend the myths, she thought; only in that way shall we survive. (109)

Commenting on the transformations recounted in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Marina Warner suggests that ‘the subjects achieve final personality in this new form:
from the perspective of creation and the life force, the shape into which they shift more fully expresses them and perfects them than their first form’ (4). For Janet Frame, the migratory bird image expresses Grace’s situation, divided, as her name ‘Cleave’ indicates, between two countries, while also signifying her true nature as someone who refuses to be earthbound.

Just as Kafka does not specify precisely what sort of insect Gregor Samsa becomes, so Grace Cleave is not actually linked with any one particular bird. When contemplating her transformation, she lists many different varieties: ‘she was a migratory bird; warbler, wagtail, yellowhammer? cuckoo-shrike, bobolink, skua? albatross, orange bishop, godwit?’ (8). Nevertheless, Frame’s choice of an epigraph from Charles Brasch’s poem ‘Islands’, not only provides the novel’s title but also draws attention to one particular bird, the godwit.

…and from their haunted bay
The godwits vanish towards another summer.
Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring
Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;
And none knows where he will lie down at night. (ll. 7–10)

Allusions to this passage and adaptations of it recur throughout the novel. Brasch’s lines evoke the yearning behind a perpetual search for summer and all it represents, whilst conveying the restlessness and uncertainty which inevitably accompany it. ‘Distance looks our way’ sums up that sense of remoteness so many Antipodeans have long been used to feeling. Uncertainty, however, also conveys a sense of freedom, and Grace Cleave finds her migratory situation liberating as well as unsettling.

Frame may also have been influenced by an earlier New Zealand novel, Robin Hyde’s The Godwits Fly, which uses these birds as a central metaphor.

Of the immense northerly migrations that yearly in New Zealand, when summer is gone, shake wings into the sky as if from a giant’s salt-pot, nothing is told. But this is true: every year, from sandy hollows in the north of the northernmost of those three islands, the godwits set out on a migration beside which the swallow’s blue hither and yon is a mere stroll with wings.

And it is true, too, that the godwits flying north, never go near England. They fly to Siberia. But to a child in this book, it was all more simple. A long way was a long way. North was mostly England, or a detour to England. (xx)

Hyde describes young New Zealanders, particularly aspiring artists who yearn to experience a fuller life, as godwits. ‘Our youth, our best, our intelligent, brave and beautiful, must make the long migration, under a compulsion they hardly understand; or else be dissatisfied all their lives long’ (xx). The novel explores this compulsion with a mixture of understanding and irony. Hyde sympathises with young people’s desire to travel to the ‘centre’ whilst demonstrating how an education system which focuses on English literary and artistic achievement distorts responses to one’s own country.
You were English and not English. It took time to realize that England was far away. And you were brought up on bluebells and primroses and daffodils and robins in the snow — even the Christmas cards were always robins in the snow. One day, with a little shock of anger, you realized that there were no robins and no snow, and you felt cheated; nothing else was quite as pretty. The tall sorrel heads of the dock-plants were raggedy under your hands, and the bush of daisies with brown centres stuck out from under the bedroom window…. (34)

Although young New Zealanders’ urge to visit England may arise from an impulse to try their wings, and seek new experience, Hyde also shows how deeply conservative the longing can be. Augusta Hannay, the heroine’s mother and a great traditionalist, constantly talks of ‘dear old England’, which she has never seen, having been deflected by marriage in the midst of her journey there, and cherishes throughout her life an ideal of a ‘white house like a Greek cross, just outside the New Forest’ (101).

Towards Another Summer emphasises not so much the urge to migrate as the migrant’s simultaneous involvement with two different countries and cultures on opposite sides of the globe. Grace’s surname ‘Cleave’ means ‘to adhere’ as well as ‘divide in two’, and although she is now established in England, her life and personality have been formed in New Zealand and her visit to the Thirkettles reveals how profoundly she cleaves to her native land. The household’s untidy confusion is a comforting reminder of Grace’s childhood home, ‘where the rooms had been a muddle of possessions and furniture and food and chamberpots’ (51). She sleeps in a room belonging to Philip’s New Zealand father-in-law who is temporarily absent on holiday, and is drawn to a map of New Zealand hanging above the fireplace. As she traces with her finger ‘the once familiar towns between Oamaru and Dunedin and further south’, the effect is not unlike Alice’s experience of climbing through the looking glass as Grace and the reader move directly into scenes from her childhood. One odd detail in her bedroom is a tray of seed potatoes left on a shelf, references to which keep recurring throughout the novel. They seed memories of her early New Zealand life as she remembers feeding potatoes to the family cow while it is being milked. Her host, hoping to plant part of New Zealand in his English garden, tells her he has sought out this particular variety of potato because it tastes like kumara — ‘She remembered kumaras, creamy-golden and sweet, and the flax basket that old Jimmy had given their father, a special kumara basket’ (90).

Psychologically, Grace Cleave moves not only between two distant countries, but also between the ordinary, mundane world and an inner region of intellect and imagination.

Now journeys were not simple matters for Grace; nothing is simple if your mind is a fetch-and-carry wanderer from sliced perilous outer world to secret safe inner world; if when night comes your thought creeps out like a furred animal concealed in the dark, to find, seize, and kill its food and drag it back to the secret house in the secret world…. (5–6)
Such migrations, however, are hazardous. The secret inner world may prove elusive, or else transform into something out of nightmare or sinister fairy tale.

... if the strange beasts walk upside down like flies on the ceiling; crimson wings flap, the curtains fly; a sad man wearing a blue waistcoat with green buttons sits in the centre of the room, crying because he has swallowed the mirror and it hurts and he burps in flashes of glass and light; if crakes move and cry; the world is flipped, unrolled down the vast marble stair; a stained threadbare carpet; the hollow silver dancing shoes, hunting horns.... (6)

According to Marina Warner, tales of metamorphosis arose often in spaces, geographical and mental, ‘that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures’ (17), and Grace’s awareness of her own transformation into a migratory bird is preceded by a sense that ‘boundaries were not possible’ (6). Metamorphosis into another species is also Frame’s way of indicating her character’s sense of isolation and inability to fit comfortably into standard patterns of social behaviour.

I might change to another species. I might move on and on — where? I don’t know, but farther and farther away from the human world. (8–9)

Grace continually toys with the idea of informing those around her that she is actually a migratory bird, wondering what their reaction would be. She also recognizes the possibility of transformation in others. Out walking one morning during her visit to Relham she observes a woman wearing a black and white dress.

Then she began screeching again. Grace stared at her black and white patched dress, listened to the screeching, and thought, — She’s a magpie, she’s not a woman, she’s a bird. As she watched the woman more closely she saw the final change taking place in her — she had surprised her in private metamorphosis — she saw the arms mould themselves to wings, the black and white patched dress change to feathers about her body, her nose extend sharply to form a beak. (117)

She longs to tell her host and hostess that she has seen a woman change into a bird, but feels unable to risk it, for fear of embarrassing consequences, even though she suspects the Thirkettles actually have sufficient imagination and sympathy to understand what she would be telling them. Nevertheless she remains silent on the matter.

With all its strangeness, the novel is rich in humour, arising mainly from Grace’s reflections on her difficulties in conforming to social expectations and her sharp observations of human behaviour. At one point, for example, she remembers her brief love affair with an American man.

How could she have made love with someone who at the moment of climax began to recite Gunga Din? Perhaps that was not so unfortunate — he could have recited lines from If.... (24)

Just as Kafka’s fantastical account of Gregor Samsa’s transformation takes much of its force from the carefully detailed realism with which his house and family
life are presented, so Frame’s story of metamorphosis is thrown into relief by her meticulously realistic portrayal of Grace’s daily life in wintry London. For a New Zealander like myself, living on a meagre income as a postgraduate student in early 1960s England, the whole novel is remarkably evocative. Like Grace Cleave I was acutely conscious of the contrast between the great cultural riches within relatively easy reach and the bleak, dingy surroundings where much of my time was spent. It was in England where I first learned, with a mixture of dismay and resentment, to regard myself as a colonial subject and although I never actually entertained the idea of going to New Zealand House and filling in the appropriate forms to emigrate to my native land, I still read the episode in Frame’s novel with a shock of delighted recognition.

Perhaps, however, the aspect of the novel which resonates most is Frame’s skill in conveying a life poised between two worlds, the centre of Empire and one of its far flung outposts. In following Grace Cleave’s awareness of herself as a migratory bird, the reader moves between countries, between hemispheres and, most importantly, between a world of mundane ‘normality’ and the transformative realm of the imagination. Migration results in metamorphosis. Living in another country, even if one has been taught from early infancy to think of it as ‘home’, changes perceptions of oneself and one’s country of origin. Frame also suggests that a migratory existence, however unsettling, offers greater insight than remaining in any single location can provide.

NOTES
1 The story was first published in 1916 and the Muir translation originally appeared in 1933.

WORKS CITED
Currawongs, perhaps the most advanced member of the family, are adept scavengers and tree-living gleaners which spend much of their time roaming when they are not breeding.

I struggle
to keep upright
as branches
twist and crack
in blustering
winter winds.
Should your hair
smell of cut lime
your skin of tamarind?

The wattle is beginning to bloom.

When you crossed the Atlantic
and crossed the Pacific
did your bones splinter in chill?

The Pied-currawong
calls in flight,
arboreal, strong.

Your history
was posted in airmail letters
to friends and family we never knew,
Christmas correspondence our mother
now fulfills.

... contact calls can be quite soft and yet keep a family or a flock together as its members forage ... Like your fingers swiftly
tatting thread after thread
of coloured cotton
I’m weaving knowledge
of your migration.
The most obvious altitudinal migrants ... are the pied-currawong, the gang-gang cockatoo, the king parrot, the crimson rosella, the golden whistler, the crescent honeyeater and the red wattlebird.

On summer nights
sticky like rum,
the smell of bananas
and castor sugar frying,
of freshly mowed lawn
and suburban quiet

the call of curra-wong curra-wong.

WORK CITED
IN SEA FOG

In koropun
where rocks fall
from human voice
fog horns sound

you left Jamaica
where you were born
then from England
you came here

where Coquon flows
through the valley
to the sea
and swamps spread out to
Tirrikiba-place of fire
where steelworks of tirriki
blast the skies with steam

and as you passed the singing cliffs,
Yirannalai,
this far-off place
coal seamed
and metal-grey water leched
the river flowed on strong
to the sacred songs of tel-moon

but as the fog yaralkulliko,
the wind the scent
of honeysuckle
the Doctor Bird’s
black tail whipped

the Doctor Bird
called your name
Doris Butcher

the Doctor Bird
sang you back
to Jamaica
where this poem
summons you to return
NOTES
The Doctor Bird, or Swallow-Tail Hummingbird, is the National Bird of Jamaica. The Arawaks, the Indigenous people of Jamaica, believed the bird had magical powers. They called the bird ‘God Bird’ believing it was the reincarnation of dead souls. See, Jamaica Information Service, ‘National Bird — The Doctor-Bird (Trochilus polystomus) or Swallow-Tail Hummingbird’, This is Jamaica, October 2005, online http://www.jis.gov.jm/special_sections/This%20Is%20Jamaica/symbols.html.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS FROM THE AWABAKAL LANGUAGE

koropun: haze, fog, mist
Coquon: Hunter River. Coquon was the name as recorded by Dr J.D. Lang. The Awabakal word for water was Ko-ko-in. The origin/translation of Coquon and Ko-ko-in are likely connected.
Tirrikiba: place of fire (later the site of the Newcastle Steelworks)
tirriki: flame, red in colour, red hot.
tel-moon: the sacred bird of women — the Australian Woodpecker. Still to be seen in the mountains around Newcastle. Women would strongly protect this bird.
yaralkulliko: move away, like the clouds.
Yirannalai: cliffs between Newcastle and Bar Beach.
GRAHAM BARWELL

Coleridge’s Albatross and the Impulse to Seabird Conservation

On the long sea journey to Australia, ... Coleridge was a regular companion. Emigrants’ diaries and journals rarely failed to describe one particular landmark experience: the first sighting of the albatross, followed by attempts to kill or capture a specimen, in the style of the Ancient Mariner. ‘Who could doubt their supernatural attributes? Certainly not a spirit-chilled landswoman, with Coleridge’s magic legend perpetually repeating itself to her’, wrote 27-year-old Luisa [sic] Meredith, arriving in Sydney in 1839. (Lyons 13)

What is remarkable about Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798), is that, despite its having a powerful impact on the imaginations of its readers in the nineteenth century, it had, as the epigraph indicates, almost no effect on the practices or behaviour aboard ships, whether among sailors or emigrant passengers. Even though the poet appears to be a proto-conservationist at one point in the poem, asserting that ‘He prayeth best, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast’ (612–13), his readers, at least in the English speaking world, seem to have been noticeably immune to any application to their own circumstances of the terrible consequences of the Mariner’s actions in killing the friendly albatross, while being perfectly willing to give elements from the poem a special place in their imaginations. Indeed, this willingness to internalise the poem extended to everyday speech, as some of its phrases and images passed into the common vernacular.

In this essay I will examine the figure of the albatross, beginning with accounts of early European voyagers before moving to Coleridge’s poem and discussing the part that poem played in establishing the bird in the imagination of readers and speakers of English. I am interested in the significance accorded to the albatross, partly as a result of the poem, and I will consider what relationship the bird and the poem have with the movement for the preservation of seabirds and the marine environment, which began in the twentieth century.

My focus is on the place of the bird in the Western imagination, primarily among the people of the North Atlantic seaboard, together with the English-speaking settler societies of the southern Pacific — Australia and New Zealand — where some albatrosses breed and are regularly encountered in the adjacent seas. It should be recognised that the bird had its special place in the culture of
indigenous peoples of the Pacific region, such as the Maori of New Zealand or the Inuit of the Bering Sea, but that significance is completely unrelated to Coleridge and is thus beyond the bounds of this paper.

By the albatross I mean those large members of the family, Diomedeidae, which are known in English as albatrosses or sometimes, in the case of some of the smaller members, as mollymawks. They generally breed on remote islands and range widely across the oceans of the Southern Hemisphere particularly, but some species are also found in the North and East Central Pacific Ocean. While the taxonomy and nomenclature of the birds is still not completely settled, the most recent major study by Michael Brooke recognised twenty-one species and its nomenclature will be used here when referring to individual species. But for the most part my discussion centres around the bird in general rather than a particular species and is most concerned with those albatrosses encountered in the Southern Ocean.

**EARLY EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS WITH ALBATROSES**

By the time Coleridge came to write his poem near the end of the eighteenth century, the albatross was relatively little known to his fellow Europeans. The seas of the North Atlantic are not commonly visited by albatrosses, so that the birds had never formed part of the familiar avifauna of people in that part of the world and had not been invested with particular attributes, associations or myths in the same way that local birds had, like doves, or some birds from further afield, like parrots or peacocks, which had become familiar over many centuries through the exotic bird trade or by becoming naturalised.

Early European explorers who ventured south of the Tropical Zone reported encountering very large unfamiliar birds with bodies as large as swans or geese. These reports were often vague and confused, with the descriptions appearing to mix up albatrosses with frigatebirds — large seabirds with piratical habits which were confined to tropical and warm temperate seas. By the middle of the eighteenth century, some albatrosses had been captured as specimens and brought back to Europe, as noted by the Englishman, George Edwards, in the second part (1747) of his ornithological publication whose title indicates the exotic and unfamiliar nature of its contents: *A Natural History of Birds, Most of which Have not been Figured or Described, and Others very Little Known, from Obscure or too Brief Descriptions without Figures, or from Figures very Ill Designed.* Edwards (2: 88) remarks that he had seen two stuffed albatrosses, one in the Tower of London and one in the possession of Benjamin Cowell, Surgeon, of Lombard Street, and that he had a skeleton by him as he prepared his description and illustration, the first published unambiguous depiction of the bird (fig. 1).

It was the three exploratory voyages led by Captain James Cook in the period 1768–80 which helped make the bird better known to audiences hungry for
details of the exotic and largely unknown ‘South Seas’. Apart from the tropical and northern temperate zones of the Pacific Ocean, the three voyages covered extensive tracts of the Southern Ocean and the southern temperate zone of the Pacific, as Cook determined the non-existence of the imagined Great Southern Land and explored and mapped unfamiliar territory. The seas between about latitude 30° South and the Antarctic pack ice were inhabited by seventeen species of albatross, so the birds were frequently encountered.

Cook’s ships carried scientists to collect, investigate and report on the flora and fauna new to European knowledge as well as artists to make drawings and paintings of those new species. Apart from Cook himself, many of the members of each expedition, passengers or crew, kept journals, and these, together with the specimens assiduously collected and recorded, the ethnological items obtained by trade or as gifts, and the paintings and drawings, were brought back to England as a record of a new and exotic part of the world. The official accounts of the first and second voyages were published in 1773 and 1777, each within two years of Cook’s return, and were either based on his journal, in the case of John Hawksworth’s narrative of the first voyage of 1768–71, or written by Cook himself in the case of the second voyage of 1772–75. The intense interest the Cook voyages sparked in the reading public of the time meant there was a fertile market for books relating to the voyages, so that numerous works appeared on this subject in the last quarter of the century.5

On the first voyage Joseph Banks, the gentleman scientist aboard, recorded in his journal the collection of the first albatross of the expedition as it made its way south in waters off modern Argentina, around latitude 37° south, on the evening of 23rd December 1768. Banks identified the bird he shot as ‘Diomedaea exulans’, a variant spelling of the name given today to the Wandering Albatross, and Sydney Parkinson prepared an (unfinished) watercolour of it which still survives (fig. 2).6 Subsequently, albatrosses were regularly encountered on this and the later voyages whenever the ships were in southern waters.

References to albatrosses in the published accounts of the voyages tend to focus on the same points of interest, especially the size of the birds and the means of catching them. In Hawksworth’s account of the first voyage, he writes of Banks going out in early February 1769 in a small boat on a calm sea west of Cape Horn to shoot birds:

The albatrosses were observed to be larger than those which had been taken northward of the Streight [the Strait of Le Maire]; one of them measured ten feet two inches from the tip of one wing to that of the other, when they were extended … (2: book 1, ch. 6)

In his journal for 4th February, Cook declared this bird was ‘as large as a Goose’ (1: 55). While birds were often shot and retrieved from small boats — it being impractical to retrieve from the sea any bird shot from a moving sailing ship — other means of capturing them were used. On the second voyage, when the ships were a day south of Cape Town on 24th November 1772, Cook noted in his
Figure 1. The Albatross, coloured engraving in Joseph Banks’s copy of George Edwards, *A Natural History of Birds*, part 2 (London, 1747), plate following p. 88. Banks may have written the name *Diomedea exulans* below the depiction of the bill. ©British Library Board.

Figure 2. Probable immature Wandering Albatross, unfinished watercolour by Sydney Parkinson of a bird caught 23 December 1768, No. 25 in his paintings from Cooks’s first voyage. ©Natural History Museum, London.
journal there were ‘[m]any Albatrosses about the Ship, some of which we caught with Hook and line’ (2: 52). William Bayly, astronomer on the *Adventure*, gave details of the method in his journal entry for 3rd October 1772. A baited hook is laid on a piece of wood trailed behind the boat and the whiteness of the board attracts the bird so that he pitcheth on the water by it & swims along side of it, & seeing the bait greedily swallows it hook & all & is thereby caught. (qtd. by Beaglehole 2: 41n3)

While the birds were caught for scientific purposes they were not able to be preserved as specimens, once examined, measured and described, and so this gives rise to a third commonly mentioned feature of the albatross, its suitability as a tasty item for human consumption. Immediately after the passage from his journal for November 1772 cited above, Cook notes that the birds ‘were not thought dispiseable food even at a time when all hands were served fresh Mutton’. The tastiness of albatross meat had been established early on the first voyage, Banks noting in his journal for 5th February 1769 that he ate ‘part of the Albatrosses shot on the third, which were so good that every body commended and Eat heartily of them tho there was fresh pork upon the table’.

Occasionally, comments about albatrosses deal with other matters. On the first voyage Banks had written in his journal entry for March 1770 that Maori personal ornamentation for both sexes included ears pierced with plugs of cloth, bone, feathers or wood. ‘The women also often wore bunches of the down of the albatross which is snow white near as large as a fist, which tho very odd made by no means an unelegant appearance’. On the second voyage Johann Forster, the scientist aboard the *Resolution*, likewise noted in his journal entry for 7th April 1773 the use of albatross skin for ear adornment among a Maori family they met in Dusky Sound and remarked that they gave Cook ‘some Albatrosses skins’ (2: 249).

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the previously vague and confused reports of these large seabirds of the southern oceans were supplemented by more reliable information as the accounts of the voyages and the more formal scientific descriptions of new species appeared. Johann Forster, for example, published his account of three albatross species in a French journal in 1785 (‘Mémoire’). While this included three plates showing the birds, illustrations in the voyage narratives were necessarily less concerned with detailed depictions of them (fig. 3).7 But many of the paintings based on first-hand experience of specimens were never published,8 so that it was still possible for a major work of eighteenth century ornithology to publish a strangely distorted picture of an albatross (fig. 4).9 Certainly most educated readers would not have been in a position to assess the representations of albatrosses in the light of their own experience, so that there were virtually no constraints on the way a skilled writer like Coleridge might depict the bird.

* * * * *
Figure 3. The Ice Islands Seen the 9th January 1773, engraving by Benjamin T. Pouncy of a drawing by William Hodges from James Cook, *A Voyage towards the South Pole and round the World Performed in his Majesty’s Ships the Resolution and Adventure in the Years 1772, 1773, 1774, and 1775*, vol. 1 (London, 1777), plate XXX, Cook, James, 1728–1779, National Library of Australia (http://nla.gov.au/nla.aus-nk5677-1-s36x-e-cd).

Figure 4. The Wandering Albatross, engraving from [Georges-Louis Leclerc] de Buffon, *The Natural History of Birds from the French of the Count de Buffon*, trans. with preface and notes, vol. 9 (London, 1793), plate 255. (University of Sydney, Rare Books Library.)
THE ANCIENT MARINER’S ALBATROSS

The genesis of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is well known and set out in the edition of Coleridge’s Poetical Works by J.C.C. Mays (1.1: 365–66). The poem was begun in November 1797 as a collaboration with William Wordsworth during the time Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, were living near Coleridge in Somerset. It was proposed as a way of defraying the expenses of a walking tour the three of them undertook that month, but Wordsworth withdrew from the joint project and Coleridge completed the poem in the first months of 1798. The finished poem recounts the circumstances in which a guest at a wedding meets the old sailor of the title who insists on telling his unfortunate story of a voyage into polar regions and thence to the tropics. This voyage begins well but misfortune strikes as the crew endure terrible privations as a result of offending the Polar Spirit. They are becalmed in the tropics and all, apart from the Mariner, die of thirst, only to be returned to life temporarily as zombies, as the ship is blown back home by winds driven by favourable spirits. There the ship sinks, the Mariner is rescued and begs one of his rescuers, the Hermit, to hear his confession, but subsequently finds himself constrained to wander and retell his story whenever he is struck down again by the agony of guilt.

His guilt comes from his awareness that it was his killing a friendly albatross that offended the Polar Spirit and led to the deaths of all his shipmates. This bird appears when the ship is alone among the icebergs, it accepts food offered by the crew and accompanies the ship for nine days as it sails north, until it is shot by the Mariner. The crew first deplore the killing then approve of it, based on a perceived relationship between the bird and the weather they encounter, but finish up blaming the Mariner and hang the dead bird from his neck. This remains until the Mariner blesses the water-snakes, when it falls from his neck into the sea, a wind stirs and the ship with its zombie crew begins its long voyage home.

Though some of the poem’s inspiration comes from Cook’s voyages of exploration, Coleridge does not localise it in the present but gives it semi-medieval flavour, partly in accordance with its presentation of the Mariner as a type of the Wandering Jew and partly in recognition of a contemporary literary taste for the Gothic, especially in the form of old ballads. The original spelling of the poem’s title, ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’, the deliberate use of archaisms such as eftsoons (12) or swound (62), and the presence of characters like the Hermit all indicate a setting in earlier times. This is why Coleridge has the Mariner shooting the bird with a crossbow rather than the muskets Banks and the Forsters used on Cook’s voyages.

The poem was first published in the 1798 first edition of Lyrical Ballads, which contained works by both Coleridge and Wordsworth, though neither author was named. ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ was the first poem in this collection. It was revised and republished in the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800), and from then on Coleridge kept tinkering with it as it reappeared in subsequent collections, adding its epigraph and prose gloss in 1817.
The sources Coleridge drew on have been extensively studied and it has long been known that the shooting of the albatross came from Wordsworth, who had been reading George Shelvocke’s account of his round the world voyage, 1719–22. In the narrative of the voyage, Shelvocke reports how in late September-early October 1719 his ship was driven well south of Cape Horn by continuous bad weather. At this time they saw no signs of life except a disconsolate black Albitross [sic], who accompanied us for several days, hovering about us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley, (my second Captain) observing, in one of his melancholy fits, that this bird was always hovering near us, imagin’d, from his colour, that it might be some ill omen. That which, I suppose, induced him the more to encourage his superstition, was the continued series of contrary tempestuous winds, which had oppres’d us ever since we had got into this sea. But be that as it would, he, after some fruitless attempts, at length, shot the Albitross, not doubting (perhaps) that we should have a fair wind after it. (72–73)

Shelvocke does not indicate whether the death of the bird brought the result Hatley desired, though he comments on how on sailing in these waters is truly melancholy since they had been separated from their accompanying ship, were far from any port and were in constant danger of losing their masts (73–74). He notes that they made slow progress back northward over the next month until they eventually reached the coast of Chile in mid November.

Apart from Shelvocke, whose influence he denied, and the narratives of the Cook voyages, it is unclear whether Coleridge had any other sources of information about albatrosses. He may have heard something about them from those close to him. There was, for instance, a stuffed albatross in the museum set up by Peter Crosthwaite at Keswick, Cumberland, which Wordsworth visited in 1794. On the other hand, Bernard Smith has argued that Wordsworth’s suggestion of the killing of an albatross may have been supplemented by stories Coleridge had heard in his schooldays at Christ’s Hospital, where one of his teachers was William Wales, who had served as meteorologist and astronomer aboard the Resolution with Cook, 1772–75 (154–57). Whether Wales was an influence or not, Coleridge certainly had no first-hand experience of the bird at sea, even though he was keenly interested at this stage in his life in many current developments in the scientific understanding of the world including the literature of discovery.

In his poem Coleridge provided a number of details about the albatross: it appeared out of the fog when the ship was in the polar region (63–64); it ate unfamiliar food provided by the sailors (67); it accompanied the ship, flying round and round it (68), coming to the sailors’ call (73–74) and perching on the mast or rigging for nine nights (75–76); it was hung from the Ancient Mariner’s neck (141–42); it was harmless (400) and loved the man who shot it (404). There is no indication of the colour of the bird, though Shelvocke’s albatross was black. Apparently on the assumption that Coleridge likewise had a dark bird in mind, there have been a number of attempts to identify the Mariner’s
Figure 5. The Mariner wearing the albatross, woodcut by William Strang, frontispiece to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Edward Arnold, New York: Samuel Buckley, 1903). Fine Printing Collection, Special Printed Collections, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
albatross. John Livingston Lowes identified it as ‘the so-called “sooty albatross”’ (206–207), one species of which the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (*Phoebetria palpebrata*) ranges around southern South America, though other species have been suggested, including a juvenile Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), a Brown Skua (*Catharacta lomnbergi*), or a juvenile Southern or Northern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus* or *halli*). The most recent editor, Mays (1.1: 377n), assumes Coleridge must have had in mind one of the two sooty albatross (*Phoebetria*) species.

It seems to be missing the point to assume that Coleridge was thinking of a particular species, since the bird in his poem behaves in some respects unlike living albatrosses. While some albatrosses commonly follow ships, they do not respond to the calls of sailors (unless this is accompanied by food which they find attractive being thrown overboard), the maggots of the 1798 version would be too small to be an appealing food, and the notion of roosting on the ship — ‘In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud./It perched for vespers nine’ (75–76) — is much more applicable to other species of seabirds, like gulls, terns and noddies, for instance. Bourne felt that Coleridge had probably deduced the habits of the bird from watching gulls and this might also explain why he imagined the dead bird being slung from the Mariner’s neck. To anyone familiar with the size and bulk of the larger albatrosses, this picture is somewhat ludicrous if taken too literally, and the difficulty of the literal reading has troubled many readers, Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance. The scene Coleridge offers also poses a challenge for illustrators of the poem. While some avoid the problem by not illustrating the bird, others represent a bird ranging from rather small and gull-like to a large animal almost the same size as the Mariner (figs 5 & 6). For those choosing the latter option, there is the further challenge of the weight of such a bird. Often this is addressed by showing the Mariner with the bird dragging on the ground (figs 7 & 8). One illustrator, bearing in mind that the Mariner had the bird round his neck for a period of time, shows the bird as a skeleton as it eventually falls into the sea (fig. 9).

Having barely any experience of sea-going himself at the time of writing the poem, Coleridge was unlikely to have been much concerned with the relationship of his bird to any real creature. While the albatross has a central role in the poem as the innocent victim of the Mariner’s unmotivated violence, with its death providing the cause for the Polar Spirit’s vengeance on him and his shipmates, Coleridge’s primary poetic focus is on the spiritual and emotional states the Mariner experiences as the ship continues its journey. But even though this was the case, the poem with its depiction of the bird nevertheless had a decisive influence on the entry of the albatross into the popular imagination of the English-speaking world.

* * * * *

Figure 7. The Mariner wearing the albatross and pointing to the spectre ship, engraving by Joseph Noel Paton for his illustrated *Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Art-Union of London, 1863), plate 8. (Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)
Coleridge’s Albatross and the Impulse to Seabird Conservation

Figure 8. The Mariner dragging the albatross behind him, woodcut by Gerald Metcalfe for The Poems of Coleridge (London: John Lane The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane, [1907]), 180.
©British Library Board.

De han begin te breken.

Figure 9. The skeletal albatross when the Mariner is released from his burden, drawing by Mart Kempers for De Ballade van de oude matroos, translated by Anthonie Donker (Utrecht: De Roos, 1967), 28.
©British Library Board.
THE INFLUENCE OF ‘THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER’

The poem on first publication was not a great success. The reviews had been mixed, and Coleridge himself later observed that purchasers of the collection may have been labouring under a misconception as to its content: ‘I was told by Longmans that the greater part of the Lyrical Ballads had been sold to seafaring men, who having heard of the Ancient Mariner, concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters’ (‘Thomas Allsop’s Report’ 375, section headed After 15 Sept. 1821). Wordsworth had been more forthright about the contribution of the poem to the failure of Lyrical Ballads to sell well. Writing to Joseph Cottle on 24th June 1799, he confided that from ‘what I can gather it seems that The Ancyent Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on’ (1: 266). In the second edition (1800), Wordsworth included a note making apologies for the poem which Coleridge had in the meantime extensively revised in an effort to prune the archaisms.

For the remainder of his life Coleridge continued to tinker with the poem as it was republished several times (Mays 2.1: 504–509) and came to occupy what Mays called ‘a central prophetic significance in the body of his poems’ (1.1: 368). After the poet’s death in 1834, the poem continued to be republished, appearing with increasing frequency in single editions in the latter part of the century. The first of many illustrated editions appeared in 1837 with etchings by the Scottish artist, David Scott, and the poem’s entry into the canon of English poetry was marked by the production of editions for the school market. William Jameson wouldn’t have been the only school child who had been forced to learn chunks of the poem by heart and found it not to his taste.

As its familiarity increased, the poem entered into the mindset of English passengers on board ships sailing into the Southern Ocean, like Louisa Meredith in 1839, as well as impacting on the mental worlds of writers from other countries who had made similar journeys. Charles Baudelaire, for instance, who had sailed as a young man at least as far as L’île de la Réunion and Mauritius on a voyage to India in 1841–42, wrote a poem on the albatross in which his view of the bird, which he would have seen on the voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, seems to have been influenced by Coleridge. Herman Melville recognised Coleridge’s influence on the conception of the albatross, though he denied the poet’s particular influence on his own view. In Moby Dick (1851) he has Ishmael declare that ‘Nature’ not Coleridge is responsible for the spiritual associations of the albatross (1: 236) and in a note on the passage speaks of his first reactions to a captured albatross, observing that they did not come from the English poet since he had then neither ‘read the Rhyme, nor knew the bird to be an albatross. Yet, in saying this, I do but indirectly burnish a little brighter the noble merit of the poem and the poet’ (1: 237n).

By the latter part of the nineteenth century as the poem entered into the school curriculum and children were forced to learn parts by heart, phrases and other...
elements of the poem became widely recognised, so much so that the expression, ‘to have an albatross round one’s neck’, eventually entered into ordinary speech as a metaphorical reference to an unwanted burden. New editions of the poem continued to appear with great regularity in England and the United States; some illustrated, many in limited editions targeted at bibliophiles, and others directed at children. It was also translated into a number of European languages, French, Czech, and Dutch, for example, sometimes several times into the same language. As the twentieth century progressed the poem became so familiar that it was often the subject of parodies or other forms of humorous treatment. But even as the attitudes toward the canonical texts of English literature changed, the poem still retained its place in the school and university curriculum.

Even though other writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries wrote about the albatross, it was Coleridge’s poem which had by far the greatest impact. R.G. Brown calls the albatross in that poem ‘one of the best-known ornithological references in English literature’, while the distinguished author of a standard account of the zoology of albatrosses, W.L.N. Tickell, declared that the poem ‘established the public conception of [the] albatross’ (5), having had a far greater effect than any natural history of the birds (373).

* * * * *

The Meaning and Significance of the Bird

If Coleridge did fix the bird in the public imagination, it is worth asking just what kind of picture he established. Apart from some of the traits mentioned above, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ invests the bird with the following associations. It followed the ship because it is friendly, well-disposed to sailors and indeed loved the Mariner (ll. 71–78, 404–405). Harmless (401) and of good omen (71–74 gloss), it is a fellow living thing in a desolate region (57–58, 63–66). The sailors claim that it both makes the wind blow and that it brings fog and mist (91–102). Killing the bird is thus either reprehensible or a worthy action. The tenor of those particular lines jars with the stanzas which immediately precede and follow, since the ship is said to still benefit from ‘the good south wind’ blowing behind it after the bird has been killed (87–90). It is possible that Coleridge is here following Shelvocke’s treatment of the relationship between the bird and conditions at sea in the lack of an immediate and direct connection between the bird’s death and a change in the weather. But, regardless of awkwardness of the ascription of a connection between the bird and the weather and the inconsistent views of the sailors, the poem absolutely depends on the notion that the killing of the bird produces bad luck for the Mariner and the ship’s crew.

Apart from Shelvocke, Coleridge probably drew on the Cook voyages for some of the associations he ties to the bird. On his second voyage, Cook had noted that, as the ships encountered icebergs on their way south into uncharted waters near the Antarctic pack ice, some of the albatrosses they had been seeing
gradually disappeared until only two varieties were present, the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (one of which Johann Forster shot) and what was most likely one of the giant petrels (which Cook identified as a species of albatross). In Cook’s words in the published account of the voyage, these ‘were the only albatrosses that had not now forsaken us’ (1: 38). Despite this, the literature of discovery reveals that sailors held some views about albatrosses which do not appear in Coleridge’s poem.

Dark-plumaged birds, like the one Shelvocke’s first officer, Simon Hatley, shot, were associated with the sombre clothing favoured by Quakers and hence referred to as *quakerbirds*. Cook comments on this terminology in his journal entry for 12th January 1773 (2: 76) and George Forster likewise observes in his entry for 7th December 1772 that name for the smaller dark albatross they encountered in the Southern Ocean well south of South Africa (1: 91–92). George’s father, Johann, who usually refers to this bird as a ‘Quackerbird’ (Resolution *Journal* 2: 189–90, 213–14), went on to formally describe it as *Diomedea* [*now Phoebetria*] *palpebrata* Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (‘Mémoire’), based on a bird he had shot near the Antarctic pack ice in January 1773. Later authors have also seen that bird in terms of religious dress; Robert Cushman Murphy, who first encountered it in the South Atlantic in November 1912 and went on to write an important book on South American seabirds, remarks on its ‘pearly body contrasting with the dark cap and wings — giving it the fanciful appearance of a cowled monk’ (*Oceanic Birds* 1: 498).

Another view current among some members of eighteenth-century ships’ crews was reported by George Forster after he had noted the ‘infinite number’ of albatrosses around the *Resolution* when it was east of Cook Strait, New Zealand, on 9th June 1773:

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; who now, exiled to a part of the ocean which they shunned before, were forced to gather a precarious subsistence instead of enjoying their former affluence, and were made the sport of storms which they had never felt in their cabbins [sic]. This stroke, which may pass for witty enough, confirms what I have before observed of the original humour of sea-faring men. (1: 234)

Anders Sparrman heard the same views expressed by some of the crew of the *Resolution* (44). How widely this view was held is difficult to say. Linnaeus, who in 1758 coined the name *Diomedea* for the genus currently applied to the large albatrosses, probably was aware of some part of this notion that the birds are reincarnated people, since he based the name on that of Diomedes, a Greek hero of the Trojan War, whose companions incurred the wrath of the goddess Venus and were changed into birds like snow-white swans (‘forma … albis proxima cygnis’) in the story the Roman poet, Ovid, told in his *Metamorphoses* (bk. 15, 483–509). Later writers refer to the notion that albatrosses are reincarnated
seamen — Annie Corder (stanzas 11–12), John Masefield and Frank Waters, for instance — sometimes specifying, as Masefield does, that it is drowned seamen particularly who come back in this way as birds. The reality of this belief is debatable; Waters speaks of ‘the pretended belief … that when old sailors died they were transmogrified into Albatross [sic]’ (71), while L. Harrison Matthews reports that one of his shipmates who asserted his faith in this belief was scoffed at by his fellows for his credulity (39–41).

And of course there was the way in which, at least from Dampier on, the bird came to be seen by voyagers from the Northern Hemisphere as a mark of otherness, a sign that the ship had left northern and tropical waters and was entering the less familiar southern seas. As Arthur G. Guillemard put it in 1887, ‘passengers of both sexes, whether berthed in the poop or steerage, welcome with delight the first Albatross. … now that the tropic zone has been cleared’, since they understand that it, or some other seabird, ‘alike under blue skies or lowering rain-clouds, in howling gale or favouring weather, will accompany the ship over some eight thousand miles of water until Australia’s shores are sighted’ (iv).

After Coleridge, as some of the older traditions surrounding the albatross remained current in the nineteenth century and later, other beliefs became attached to the bird. One of the more interesting is the notion that the bird is a vicious killer. John Gould, the great nineteenth-century ornithologist, who had made the long sea journey to and from Australia in 1838–40, described what he called the Wandering Albatross as having such a ‘ferocious disposition’ that it is regarded with terror by other birds: ‘So sanguinary in fact is it, that it is even said it will attack and tear out the eyes of a drowning man, a feat, from what I have observed of it, I can readily imagine it would attempt, if a human being should unhappily be placed in such a position, and be unable to defend himself’ (2: 427). It is unclear what these comments are based on; he has not confused the Wandering Albatross with the much more aggressive and ferocious giant-petrels, since these are treated (as one species) elsewhere in his book (443–45). The belief underlying Gould’s comments can be found repeated elsewhere. Tickell, among other examples, mentions a nineteenth-century French music hall song in which albatrosses attack and eat a sailor who has fallen overboard (380), while Julian Corbett, in a volume of the British official history of World War 1, reports that albatrosses attacked survivors of the German light cruiser, Nürnberg, sunk in the Battle of the Falkland Islands in 1914 (432). But this general belief was contested. As far back as 1887 J.F. Green had doubted whether an albatross will attack a person in the water and was certain that it would not pounce on someone who had fallen overboard (10–11).

For the most part, however, albatrosses inspired admiration for their apparently effortless flight and mastery of even the most severe weather conditions at sea.36 While it was not uncommon for observers to comment on the agility and skilful flight of the sooty albatrosses,37 what becomes obvious as the nineteenth century
Figure 10. The shooting of the white albatross, engraving of an illustration by Gustave Doré for his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London, 1876), reproduced in *The Annotated Ancient Mariner*, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (London: Anthony Bond, 1965), 117.
Coleridge's Albatross and the Impulse to Seabird Conservation

progresses is the way in which Coleridge's bird and the notion of albatross in general become closely associated with the great albatrosses, a group of birds comprising several species, including the Wandering Albatross, which is widely distributed around the Southern Ocean. While the taxonomy of these albatrosses is not completely settled, with what were formerly agreed to be two species now being considered to comprise six or seven, the specific identity of a bird seen at sea was of little consequence to most people who might have been aware of Coleridge's poem. As Murphy pointed out in 1936, 'to sailors, voyagers, and until recent times to ornithological recorders, any great albatross was merely the albatross' (Oceanic Birds 1: 541), as distinguished from smaller albatrosses and sooty albatrosses.

Compared to the sooty albatrosses, adult great albatrosses are generally much whiter birds and this aspect of their plumage must have helped to make the link with Coleridge's bird easy. Coleridge did not specify his bird's colour, but he did emphasise that the bird posed no threat — it was 'harmless' (409) — and he closely ties it to the notion of a Christian soul (65) and the whiteness of the polar region — it appears out of the 'snow-fog' (63–66 gloss). The implication of innocence and purity in his poem, coupled with common Western notions about race and the connections between whiteness and superiority, even nobility, would aid in the conceptualisation of the albatross among nineteenth-century readers as a predominantly white bird. The extent of this imagining is evident in the illustrations in editions of Coleridge's poem. In nineteenth-century editions with black and white illustrations the bird is never shown as dark, being predominantly pale, sometimes with dark-tipped wings (figs 10 & 11). Early twentieth-century editions in colour often show a white bird (fig. 12). Even when the influence of Coleridge is denied, the conception of the albatross as essentially white is still evident. This is most plain in Melville, who devotes a chapter in Moby Dick to Ishmael's consideration of whiteness in 'natural objects' (1: 234), particularly when whiteness, when combined with a fearful creature and lacking 'kindly associations' (1: 236), magnifies the terror inspired by those animals, such as with Polar Bears and sharks. He includes the albatross among the creatures that inspire 'spiritual wonderment and pale dread', but asserts that the emotional reaction comes from 'God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature' (1: 236), not Coleridge. In Melville's note to this passage, reporting his first encounter with the bird, he emphasises its nobility, purity, whiteness and angelic appearance, calling the captured bird he saw on the deck of his ship 'a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness ... [with] vast archangel wings', and declaring, 'as Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white' (1: 236–37n).

By the twentieth century, the symbolic weight of the bird becomes even more burdensome as the range of associations attached to it grows. In illustrated editions of Coleridge's poem, it continues its association with Christian spirituality as some artists represent it in flight in a way which strongly recalls traditional

representations of the Holy Spirit as a dove with its wings raised up in a V (figs 13 & 14).43 These religious associations extend to the Mariner himself as he is represented, for example, with arms outstretched like a crucified Christ (fig. 15),44 the albatross hanging from his neck, or with the bird feeding from his mouth with a ship’s wheel positioned halo-like behind his head (fig. 16).45 Apart from editions of Coleridge, the bird becomes a vehicle for a wide range of meaning in writers who give it a central role in their work, from a symbol of freedom connected to the spiritual wisdom of indigenous people46 to a representation of female sensuality and sexual appeal.47 In accounts of their experiences in the Southern Ocean, some travellers report on beliefs about the bird which continue from those current in much earlier times; about their being reincarnated seamen, for instance.48 Even so, in many of these cases the link to Coleridge is present, usually by explicit acknowledgement of his work.49

But what is really striking about the associations which coalesce around the albatross is the lack of prominence of the central aspect of Coleridge’s poem, that killing the bird brings bad luck and serious ill effects on its killer.

* * * * *

**THE CONSEQUENCE OF KILLING AN ALBATROSS**

Coleridge had always imagined the killing of the bird to be an evil act of cruelty. When the Mariner’s shipmates think of the act as having produced adverse weather they describe it in all versions of the poem as a ‘hellish thing’ (91) while the Polar Spirit’s two ‘fellow daemons’ refer to the Mariner’s ‘cruel bow’ (400). In the version of the Argument of poem added to the 1800 republication of *Lyrical Ballads* (subsequently dropped), Coleridge wrote of ‘how the Ancient Mariner cruelly, and in contempt of the laws of hospitality, killed a Sea-bird’, a view which is developed in the glosses he added to the 1817 version of the poem. There he repeats the notion of the Mariner being inhospitable (gloss to 79–82), referring to
the act as a ‘crime’ (gloss to 97–102), which requires vengeance (gloss to 119–22) and ‘penance’ (gloss to 393–97). The Mariner’s version of the lesson to be drawn from his experience is conveyed to the Wedding Guest at the conclusion to the poem:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
  Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
  All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
  He made and loveth all (612–17).

When one of his readers, Anna Barbauld, a fellow writer, told him that she felt the poem had no moral, the poet felt obliged to respond that he felt it had too much and too obvious moralising (Table Talk 1: 272–73). He claimed that the poem should have had no more moral than the tale in The Arabian Nights of the merchant whose casual casting aside the ‘shell’ of a date puts out the eye of the son of a genie who in return demands vengeance. The merchant’s action is thoughtless but not one of deliberate cruelty, though it has an unfortunate consequence.

Regardless of Barbauld’s response to the poem and Coleridge’s view of how it should have been written, the overt moralising of the final section fitted well with the sensibilities that developed in the nineteenth century, which valued simplistic, sentimental responses to the world. The strong linkage between Victorian sentimentality and the overt moral of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is plain in the hugely popular hymn for children, Cecil Frances Alexander’s ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’, first published in 1848, with the lines in its refrain, ‘All creatures great and small,/All things wise and wonderful,/The Lord God made them all’. While Coleridge’s moralising might have appealed to some Victorian sensibilities, other readers have remarked on what seems a disproportionate consequence for the Mariner and his shipmates from the killing of one bird. Indeed, in partial
recognition of that reaction, twentieth-century historicist readings of the poem tend to offer an explanation for it in terms of a reaction either to the slave trade or to the consequences of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{54} They point out that, like his friend Robert Southey, Coleridge himself had written on the slave trade\textsuperscript{55} and he had been saddened by the descent of the radical politics of the revolutionaries into bloodshed and violence. One influential twentieth-century re-evaluation of the whole English Romantic movement goes so far as to argue that its adherents felt that a love of the natural world leads to a love of humanity and to revolutionary politics.\textsuperscript{56}

While critical readers offer sophisticated explanations for what happens in the poem, most readers, especially youthful ones, might have been most struck by the bad luck which follows the killing of the bird. This aspect of the consequences of shooting an albatross does extend into the world outside the poem, though it is not especially prominent and does not become all that noticeable until the twentieth century.

It can be seen, for example, in the story Lowes reports hearing from an informant in 1920, which included both the shooting of an albatross, within a sequence of terrible privations for Norwegian seafarers, and a ship populated by a supernatural crew (257, 516–18n83). During the Cleveland Museum of Natural History expedition to the South Atlantic in 1925, there is a clear contrast between the superstitious reluctance of most of the seamen to kill an albatross because of the ‘disaster’ that would follow (especially bad weather) or even to eat albatross meat, and the ready willingness of the scientists to kill birds in order to obtain specimens (Simmons 37–40). In Barbara Hanran’s 1977 novel, \textit{The Albatross Muff}, Moak, the protector of ten-year-old Stella, is said to have witchlike powers (8, 198) and she avers that killing an albatross on the voyage to England is unlucky (12, 16, 195). She is proved right by this event coinciding with Mr Backhouse’s sexual abuse of Stella, an episode which prefigures the nature of Stella’s later seduction by her future husband and her death following childbirth. Reports of this belief in the consequences of killing albatrosses find their way into museum display labels. In the Museum of Wellington (NZ): City and Sea, a muff made of
albatross breast feathers is displayed next to a label stating that ‘Seafarers rarely killed albatrosses … as it was held to bring misfortune’ (viewed June 2006). The idea is present too in modern films. It is there in the dialogue in Werner Meyer’s 1995 film of Deborah Savage’s *Flight of the Albatross*, while in a more recent work, Joss Whedon’s *Serenity* (2005), Captain Malcolm Reynolds of the spaceship *Serenity* observes that an ‘albatross was a ship’s good luck til some idiot killed it’.

What is particularly striking about all of the examples cited above are the links with Coleridge. Lowes reports how the writer Joseph Conrad, to whom Lowes had sent his informant’s story for comment, declared that there could be no doubt that ‘[d]ear old Coleridge invented the Albatross of that tale’ (qtd. by Lowes 518n83). In Simmons’s popular account of the Cleveland Museum expedition, he prefixes his report of catching the first albatross by noting that one day an albatross followed their ship attracted by food thrown overboard, ‘as in Coleridge’s poem’ (37). The museum label includes two lines from the poem above the focus of the exhibit, the muff, while the links between Hanrahan, Savage and Coleridge have been noted previously (n49). After the comment quoted above, Captain Reynolds acknowledges the link, going on to wryly observe that ‘yes, [he’s] read a poem’.
Only Meyer’s film lacks the explicit or clearly implied link, though it is there in the book the film is based on.

This belief in the ill consequences for anyone killing an albatross appears to have been completely absent in the eighteenth-century accounts of killing these birds for scientific study and food. Indeed, Edward Armstrong, who published a special study of the folklore associated with birds in 1958, commented that the belief was not that widespread (214), while in the same year, Jameson, after investigating superstitions about the birds among sailors, concluded that Coleridge was the source of the belief (68–77), a view which was endorsed more recently by Tickell (374).

The most compelling evidence for Coleridge being the source of a belief that becomes more common in the twentieth century is in the behaviour aboard nineteenth-century ships, particularly those bringing settlers to the colonies. As noted in the epigraph to this essay, the significant moment of the sighting of the first albatross was followed by immediate attempts to catch or shoot it. Meredith commented on these practices among the passengers on her ship, with both white and dark albatrosses among the targets (24–28). Guillemard, having noted the delight with which passengers welcome the first albatross, comments how the ‘bright-eyed middy [midshipman]’ who spots the bird becomes the focus of attention from ‘an animated group of enquirers’. He describes to them ‘its wonderful powers of flight, and his own pet method of setting about its capture by means of a long line and carefully-baited sail-hook’ (iv). James Froude, writing in the latter part of the century, a year before Guillemard, observes how one might have wished Coleridge had seen a bird on the wing before he wrote his poem, since its graceful flight is not described (66), but recognises that among the passengers on his trip into southern seas, their ‘chief anxiety was to shoot these creatures’ (67).

Apart from being used for target practice (fig. 17) or for a kind of fishing, birds were regularly killed for a variety of purposes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. J.F. Green enumerates the various uses for their body parts:

Everyone knows the final uses the specimen may then be put to. Its webbed feet make capital tobacco-pouches … The wing-bones make excellent pipe-stems; the breast … a warm though somewhat conspicuous muff; and the beak, in the hands of a skilled artificer, a handsome paper-clip. (9)

As David Medway points out, birds would sometimes be killed at sea for the unlaid eggs they might be carrying or simply consumed as a source of fresh meat. Sometimes they would be stuffed and form part of a private or museum collection of birds. Another use of the birds was for their feathers as stuffing. James Backhouse, who visited Australia in the 1830s, observed in 1832 that nearly 1000 birds were said to have been killed for this purpose on Albatross Island off northwest Tasmania in the previous year (102). George Augustus Robinson gives a vivid description of the gruesome scene on this island in the same year.
when the albatross killing season was in full swing (663–67). But whatever the purpose the birds were killed to satisfy in the hundred or more years following the appearance of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, in no case does there seem to have been any constraint on this behaviour produced by a belief that bad luck would follow their death.

Indeed, it is relatively common to find writers commenting on how the practices fly in the face of the overt moral of the poem. This goes back to at least the middle years of the century. Louisa Meredith, quoting those very lines, remarks somewhat wistfully how she wished that these lines were ‘as familiar and impressive in the minds and thoughts of others as they are in [hers]’ (30). In 1860 E. Horton quotes two lines of light-hearted verse pointing out how the contemporary treatment of albatrosses shows how attitudes of sailors have changed since Coleridge’s day, while Froude quotes the same lines as Meredith, but moves out from them to a consideration of a human willingness to kill:

So says Coleridge. We admire and quote — but we hunt and shoot notwithstanding. We have a right to kill for our dinners; we have a right perhaps to kill for entertainment, if we please to use it; but why do we find killing so agreeable? (78)

Remarks on the lack of any dire consequences following the killing of an albatross, despite Coleridge, continue into the twentieth century, and while the nature of the threat to the birds from humans has changed, attitudes towards them have also changed. It is worth considering what relation Coleridge’s poem has to this change.

* * * * *

THE IMPULSE TOWARDS SEABIRD CONSERVATION

It will be clear by now that ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ had a powerful effect on the culture in which it circulated. As it became well-known, it affected the language, supplying phrases or lines to writing and conversation, and adding to the generally available stock of metaphors. It appears to have been the source of the belief that killing albatrosses brought bad luck, even if those expressing such a belief did not always recognise its origin. It may well have been, as Tickell argued, the source of the popular conception of the albatross. In this respect, the poem was able to build upon some of the views and beliefs surrounding the bird which were current before it existed and which continued after it. The notion that killing an albatross is to be avoided fits nicely, for instance, with the tradition that the birds were the reincarnated spirits of dead seamen.

It might be imagined, therefore, that the poem’s cultural influence, coupled with some of the pre-existing traditions and beliefs about the bird, might have had a real effect on people’s behaviour. Indeed, Brooke, speaking of petrels (which include albatrosses) in general, states that the myths and superstitions surrounding the birds somewhat restrained the way in which they were treated in the nineteenth century (156). He does not indicate whether he believes this was
true of albatrosses specifically and whether Coleridge had an important role in this, though he acknowledges his poem as one of the most famous works giving expression to these myths (4). Yet it is hard to be convinced that there were any real restraints based on superstitious beliefs operating in this period, given the prevalence of the attitudes and practices briefly outlined above. While there is no general agreement that the overall effect of the resulting at-sea mortality on albatross populations may have been ‘trivial’, as Brooke argues (156), the general attitude to these populations was one of unconcern as the birds were seen as part of a limitless abundance of wildlife. While some might have noted a diminution of numbers of birds, others, like the feather gatherers of Albatross Island, believed that they were ‘inexhaustible like mutton birds’ (Robinson 665). This view was shared by leading ornithologists. John Gould noted that hundreds of Wandering Albatrosses were killed annually at sea without their ‘numbers being apparently in any degree lessened’ (2: 429).

This lack of concern for the health of populations extended into the twentieth century as the birds faced a much greater danger in the southern oceans — that posed by the fishing industry, especially longlining for tuna. Essentially this practice involves setting very long lines, up to 100 km in length, with thousands of hooks attached. The birds are attracted to the baited hooks as the line is being set. The serious effects on albatross populations by this fishery are well covered by Tickell (chapter 17) and Brooke (chapter 10), with Tickell outlining in some detail the international efforts to reduce the damage and make the threat to albatross populations more widely known. These efforts have involved non-government organisations, like the conservation groups behind BirdLife International’s ‘Save the Albatross’ campaign, which has been supported by innovative strategies which catch the public imagination, like the Big Bird Race in 2004 and 2005 funded by the world’s biggest bookmaker, Ladbrokes.com. This involved radio tagging Tasmanian-breeding Shy Albatrosses and following them by satellite as they made their regular flights across the Southern Ocean to South Africa. Governments too are active, with eleven countries having signed the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels which came into effect in 2004.

This impulse towards the conservation of seabirds in Western cultures is not new, even if it has achieved a higher profile in the late twentieth century as part of the increased ecological awareness signalled, for instance, by the rise of the Greens Movement in a number of countries. Historically the first legislation for the protection of seabirds in the Western World came from the naval administration of Newfoundland in the late eighteenth century with a proclamation offering protection to Great Auks (Gaskell 104). Here, as elsewhere in nineteenth-century legislation offering seabirds protection, the key factor driving the legislation was the usefulness of the birds for humans, such as the way their presence at sea perhaps gave warning in poor visibility of dangerous shoals nearby. Somewhat similarly the Great Auks provided fishers with the best indication of the location
of the Grand Banks, the valuable fishing grounds off southeast Newfoundland (Gaskell 111). Albatrosses in the Southern Ocean played no such role, though in some cases they might be a source of information for an observant seafarer. Nevertheless, their economic value was not great and it was not until the twentieth century that they began to attract legislated protection as part of a more widespread recognition of the dangers posed to birdlife by unrestrained human activity.

It is not clear that Coleridge had any particular role in the development of this legislation, though he was increasingly seen in the late twentieth-century as a proto-conservationist. In literary criticism this is most clearly demonstrated by James McKusick who offers an assessment of the significance of ecological thought on Coleridge’s intellectual development and the relevance of this way of thinking to his literary work. In a reading of the poem, McKusick finds it to be ‘a parable of ecological transgression’ (385) as the Mariner, whose condition as a man initially cut off from participation in the world of life around him is signified by the unmotivated aggression towards the bird, is gradually released from this state of alienation from the natural world, beginning with his blessing of the water snakes. The poem is thus one of ‘environmental advocacy’ (388).

In contemporary conservationist writing aimed at general audiences, Coleridge is regularly adduced in support of the need for the protection of albatrosses. In the Autumn 2004 issue of a popular Australian wildlife magazine, Greg Czechura devoted his regular column to this topic, beginning with a quotation of lines 63–70 from ‘The rime of the Ancient Mariner’. A recent coffee-table book on the birds breeding in Australian territory by Aleks Terauds and Fiona Stewart is aimed at ‘all lovers of nature, conservationists, students and researchers’, according to the dust jacket, which reproduces lines 71–74, though the poem is not otherwise mentioned in the book itself except for the allusion in its title, Albatross: Elusive Mariners of the Southern Ocean. In the BirdLife International website, a reference to Coleridge is included in the section on albatrosses in history.

In this way ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ has been recast as conservationist poem even though it had almost no effect on the actual treatment of albatrosses in the century or so following its publication. Its significance lies not so much in its environmental advocacy, even if that is a popular way of reading it today, as in its providing the conception of the bird and establishing its profile in the Western imagination, so that some of the gravitas coming from the poem’s canonical status can be harnessed to the international movement for albatross protection. This is no small achievement for a poem which began its public life by disappointing those buyers more than two hundred years ago who thought they were getting a naval songbook.
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NOTES

1 The citation from Meredith is from her Notes and Sketches p. 30.
2 Unless otherwise stated, references to the poem (including line numbers) are to the 1834 version, the last printed in Coleridge’s lifetime. This and other versions of the poem are cited from the edition by J.C.C. Mays.
3 See, for example, the account given in 1618 by the first European to round Cape Horn, the Dutch explorer, Willem Schouten, of his experience with what must have been these birds (22), or William Dampier’s comment on ‘Alcatrosses’ near the Cape of Good Hope (1: 531).
4 Johann Forster commented in 1772 on this confusion with frigatebirds, which he called the ‘Man of war bird’ (Resolution Journal 1: 178).
5 As examples of the kind of works which soon appeared, the published journal (1773) of Sydney Parkinson, the draftsman and artist who died before the Endeavour returned to England, related to the first voyage, while the second voyage gave rise to separate accounts by the father and son scientific team, Johann Reinhold Forster (1778) and George Forster (1777), and a report of the astronomical observations by William Wales and William Bayly (1777). Sometimes published accounts were delayed. Anders Sparrman, the Swedish naturalist on the second voyage, did not publish his narrative until the early nineteenth century.
6 The watercolour, number 25 in the collection of drawings and paintings by Parkinson in the Natural History Museum, London, is of a chocolate brown bird which could be an immature bird in the Wandering Albatross group or perhaps an adult of two taxa in this group, Amsterdam Albatross and Antipodean Albatross, the latter less likely, given it was shot on location. A note on the verso identifies it as the bird caught on 23 December 1768 off Argentina. It is treated as a Wandering Albatross in the catalogues prepared by Averil Lysaght (277) and Alwyne Wheeler (43). In his journal entry for 1 March 1769, Banks indicates that this chocolate brown bird was the first albatross he killed.
7 The plate in Cook’s account of his second voyage (A Voyage1: 36–37), depicting the Resolution and Adventure near the Antarctic pack ice on 12 January 1773, is a good example. It shows men in three small boats gathering floating ice to replenish the shipboard water supplies as a man, probably Johann Forster, shoots at birds from a fourth boat. Forster wrote in his journal (2: 213–14) that he collected a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross here, but this engraving by B.T. Pouncy of a drawing by the ship’s artist, William Hodges, gives only a stylised representation of the bird.
8 Parkinson’s unfinished paintings and drawings of albatrosses seen on the first voyage are a good example. The colour paintings based on the albatrosses of the second voyage, which George Forster made or had others prepare on his behalf, were the basis for the three engraved plates in his father’s ‘Mémoire’. Most of his bird paintings
finished up in the Natural History Museum (details in Lysaght), but some copies are
in the State Library of New South Wales (Iredale), and a third group, including those
used for the ‘Mémoire’ engravings, are in the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (Steiner and
Baege). Only the paintings held in Germany have been published in full.

Buffon’s illustration of a Wandering Albatross (9: plate 255) shows the bird perched on
a rock, standing upright with a disproportionally large head. Apart from the albatross-
like hooked bill, the bird looks more like a large gull than anything else.

John L. Lowes gives a full analysis of the Mariner’s relationship to the mythical
Wandering Jew. The taste for older ballads had been given great impetus by the
publication of works like Percy’s Reliques in 1765. The poet’s deliberate imitation of
the ‘style [and] … spirit of the elder poets’ is acknowledged in the Advertisement for
the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads (reproduced by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones 8).

The actual time is not stated but Coleridge may have been thinking of the late fifteenth
century, since the Lyrical Ballads Advertisement spoke of his belief in 1798 that the
language of his poem was as intelligible as the older ballads had been for ‘these three
last centuries’ (Brett and Jones 8).


The most exhaustive examination is that by Lowes.

Wordsworth told his friend, Alexander Dyce, that the idea of ‘“shooting an albatross”
was mine; for I had been reading Shelvocke’s Voyages, which probably Coleridge
never saw’. Dyce reported the poet’s comment in a letter to H.N. Coleridge. The
information based on this letter is preserved in the edition of Coleridge’s poems by
Derwent and Sara Coleridge (383–84) and Wordsworth repeated the claim in the notes
he dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843 which were later published by Christopher
Wordsworth (1: 107). Lowes (485–86) thinks it unlikely that Coleridge had not seen
Shelvocke’s book.

Thomas De Quincey wrote that Coleridge denied any borrowing when questioned in
1810 and that Wordsworth could not understand that response from his friend (291).

Noted by Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron (18) who cite an 1826 catalogue of the
museum’s holdings.

W.L.N. Tickell, for instance, considered that Smith overstated his case (373). W.R.P.
Bourne, on the other hand, thought that Coleridge, inspired by Wales, possibly met
Johann Forster and read his 1785 ‘Mémoire’ in the Christ’s Hospital library.

This aspect of Coleridge’s intellectual life has been well covered by Ian Wylie and in
the collection of essays edited by Nicholas Roe.

In the first published version of the poem in 1798 Coleridge had the bird being fed
‘biscuit-worms’ (67), that is, maggots. The wording was changed to ‘the food it ne’er
had eat’ in the 1817 revision. Lowes (207) suggests that one of the reasons for the
change was that the original wording suggested the bird was rather small, more like a
European wren in size.

Brown and Bourne have both written on the question of the bird’s identity.

Cook noted in his journal (3.1: 16) that a Common Noddy settled on the rigging and
was caught in the south Atlantic on 8th Oct. 1776 and William Anderson recorded that
a tern was caught in the same way later on that voyage (3.2: 819). Besides, William
Jameson (33) points out that it would be physically impossible for an albatross to perch
in the way Coleridge described, since the birds lack a hind toe.

Mays (1.1: 377n) remarks on Hawthorne’s puzzlement.
Patten Wilson is an example of an artist avoiding the problem. For examples of the varying size of the bird, compare the illustration of a huge bird by William Strang (frontispiece) with that of a very much smaller one by Patrick Procktor (reproduced by Woof and Hebron 113), for instance.

See the illustrations by J. Noel Paton in 1863 (plate 8) or by Gerald Metcalfe in 1907 (180), for examples.

Mart Kempers shows the bird in this way in his illustrations to a Dutch translation of the poem (28).

In Appendix C of their edition of Lyrical Ballads, R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones reproduce a selection of contemporary reviews of the collection.

The note is reproduced by Brett and Jones (276–77).

A good example is the edition of the poem in the Collins’ School Classics series in 1873.

The poem was begun in 1842 but not completed until 1859 with the addition of the final verse. Frances Scarfe (35) notes the influence from Coleridge whose work on the imagination Baudelaire also knew.

See the Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘Albatross’ sense 2b. The earliest example the dictionary offers is 1936 but the usage is likely to be older than that.

For example, see the poem by R.P. Lister in which a seaman, who had experienced a series of ludicrous disasters at sea, bitterly regrets not having shot an albatross following his ship. Hunt Emerson’s comic book version of the poem is an excellent example of an irreverent, witty treatment of the canonical text.

In the upper level of New South Wales high schools, for instance, the poem is currently (2007) set as part of the common content for the Standard and Advanced English Courses in the Higher School Certificate syllabus (http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/—accessed 10th August 2007).

Apart from Baudelaire and Melville, poems on the bird were written by Annie Corder, John Masefield, Frank Waters, Roy Campbell and Arnold Wall, for example. These are conveniently gathered together by Tickell in chapter 18 of his book. In more recent times the albatross has played a significant role in a novel by Barbara Hanrahan and in young adult fiction by Deborah Savage.

Curiously this comment was omitted in the published narrative of the voyage (Voyage 1: 38).

Murphy declared that these birds were shearwaters, a form of much smaller seabird in a family, Procellariidae, within the same order as the albatrosses (‘Foreword’ 10–11).

Gould, for instance, described the Wandering Albatross as a ‘noble’ bird (2: 427), while Baudelaire’s poem depends on the contrast between elegance of the bird in flight and its ungainliness when captured and brought aboard ship. This leads to the elaboration of the equivalence between the bird and the poet, a creature of the clouds, rejoicing in the tempest, but an object of scorn on earth, impeded by his wings of imagination.

See, for example, Green (14), Murphy (Oceanic Birds 1: 500) and Matthews (40–41), all of whom travelled on sailing vessels and were impressed with the skill of the birds in satisfying their apparent interest in the masts and spars. Murphy notes, however, that the birds have been known to collide with these parts of a ship in stormy weather.

It is probably coincidental that the notion of wandering is attached to this bird and to the Mariner. Linnaeus had given the bird the specific name exulans ‘wandering’ in 1758 in reference to the wanderings of Diomedes after his return from Troy, while Coleridge had thought of his sailor as ‘the everlasting wandering Jew’ (Table Talk 1: 273, 31 March 1832). It is the Mariner, not the bird, whose constant wandering is
driven by guilt.

39 The two species were Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* and Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*, as recognised, for example, by Marchant and Higgins in 1990. Tickell in 2000 and Brooke in 2004 followed taxonomic changes proposed in the later 1990s and recognised a larger number of species within the great albatrosses. In some recent treatments (e.g., by Onley and Scofield in 2007), the name ‘Wandering Albatross’ itself has been applied to a group of related species of great albatross rather than being confined to an individual species.

Louisa Meredith noted how ‘the great white albatross (*Diomedea exulans*) fully realized all [her] ideas of its grandeur and solemnity’ and that she ‘never saw it without thinking of Coleridge’s wild and wondrous tale’ (26).

40 This paleness is sometimes strongly emphasised, as, for example, in Gustave Doré’s depictions of the white bird in flight against a dark background (115, for example). E.H. Wehnert shows the bird as having pale wings with dark tips (10).

41 See, for example, the illustration by Paul Woodroffe (plate 2 between pages 10 and 11).

42 This idea is conveyed in illustrations by Duncan Grant in 1945 (colour plate opposite p. 9) and Errol Le Cain in 1972 (colour plate between pages 26 and 27).

43 David Jones uses this iconography in his illustrated edition of the poem (copper engraving between pages 16 and 17). He is explicit about the equivalence of the Mariner to Christ in his lengthy essay on the poem (*Introduction* 30), describing the albatross as ‘a sacrificial victim’ (10).

44 This Christlike aspect of the Mariner is in one of the unnumbered aquatints Alan Andrew Farrant produced in an illustrated edition. In his preface the artist indicates that the bird represents the soul whose essence is ‘the poet’s or artist’s gift of perception’.

45 This is the general tenor in Deborah Savage’s *Flight of the Albatross* (1989), a work of fiction for young adults, where the bird comes to represent the main character, Sarah Steinway, as well as the Maori boy she is attracted to, Pita (who calls himself Mako), and the mysterious Maori woman, Aunt Hattie, who gives shelter to the Wandering Albatross Sarah rescues.

46 In 1951 Matthews noted how more than twenty years previously one of his ship mates had indicated his belief in this tradition. Others on the ship scoffed at it (41).

47 Savage uses a quotation from Coleridge’s poem as an epigraph to the novel (ix). While Hanrahan does not refer to the poem explicitly, some of her readers have certainly seen the connection. Carol Merli, for instance, calls Stella’s friend Edith, who narrates parts of the novel, ‘a Mariner figure, who writes “to soothe the past”’. Matthews refers directly to Coleridge in connection with his comments (39–40).

48 The notion of the act being a crime may have come from Wordsworth. In the notes he dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843, which are reproduced in Christopher Wordsworth’s *Memoirs* of his uncle, the poet’s version of the genesis of Coleridge’s poem has him suggesting the ‘crime’ of the killing of an albatross which demands vengeance by the

In Richard Burton’s translation the merchant throws away date stones which strike the genie’s son in the chest, killing him. Three old men save the merchant by telling stories which amuse and placate the genie so that he pardons his son’s killer.

The popularity in Victorian times of the first collection to include this hymn, Alexander’s *Hymns for Little Children*, is shown by the fact that by 1884 it had appeared in its sixty-second edition. The hymn was soon included in the standard Anglican hymnal, *The English Hymnal*.

Lowes gives a useful account and response to that sort of reading (chapter 16, particularly 273–78).

Raimonda Modiano gives a valuable account of this kind of critical reading of the poem.

Leslie Stephen points out that Coleridge won the Browne medal for a Greek ode (on the slave trade) in 1792 during his first year at Jesus College, Cambridge. Southey’s unpublished poem, written by October 1798, deals with the guilt felt by a man who has flogged a female slave to death (Mays 1.1: 367).

Jonathan Bate makes this argument (31–32).

David Medway gives a thorough account of the nature and effects of killing albatrosses at sea around this time, concluding that the Wandering Albatross may have been the species most affected. His article includes a number of illuminating sketches and photographs documenting nineteenth-century practices.

Banks and Cook were by no means alone in remarking on the deliciousness of roast albatross. In 1912, J.T. McKinnon considered that if ‘Coleridge [had] ever made a meal of roast albatross, English literature would have been the poorer by the loss of a great poem’. Matthews dedicated his 1951 book on the Wandering Albatross to ‘bird lovers, especially those who love them piping hot, well browned and with plenty of bread sauce’.

Backhouse called these birds Wandering Albatrosses, but they would be Shy Albatrosses *Thalassarche cauta*, which still breed on this island.

Medway considers that a ‘considerable number’ of birds must have been killed at sea and that Wandering Albatross numbers in particular must have been substantially reduced (198). Tickell believes there is a ‘persuasive case’ for there having been a ‘substantial seabird mortality’ from these causes during the nineteenth century (359).

George Bennett observed in 1860 that at sea the Wandering Albatross ‘is not … seen so commonly at the present day as the smaller … species’ (70).

Brooke gives a brief and clear description of this method of fishing (156).

Jeremy Gaskell gives a valuable overview of the development of legislation protecting seabirds in North America and the United Kingdom up to the late nineteenth century (165–88).

In the course of Cook’s second voyage, for instance, Johann Forster concluded from the increased number of large albatrosses around the ship when it was sailing towards New Zealand from the southwest in March 1773 that they were approaching land and especially warmer latitudes (Resolution Journal 2: 236–37).

The sealers Robinson accompanied on his visit to Albatross Island in 1832 told him that
they sold ‘the feathers for ninepence per pound and 1/- to the merchants in Launceston’ (665), but that when Tasmania was first settled by Europeans they were offered twenty shillings a pound. By the end of the century the number of albatrosses nesting on this island had been greatly reduced (Terauds and Stewart 63).

67 For instance, in the New Zealand region (including the subantarctic islands), which could be described as the albatross capital of the world with around the half the known species breeding there, the birds were not given complete protection until 1922 (Scofield and Sagar 4).

68 Antje Klesse, in the course of a detailed study of the way the poem has been illustrated and read, comments on how it now has a particular resonance with ecological thinking (22, 199).

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Jeremy Cronin

PENGUINS

You’ve heard the alarm clock a second before it actually went off?

i.
Waddle, bray away
Shuffle down your dune
Grunt, grunt again
Head looming over tummy
Short-sightedly to check
On your own clown-footed step
Flop
If you must
Into water, flop, letting your bandaged wings unwind their
Sheer
Flippery
Pirouette, porpoise-like, flying the inside of a green-hearted wave
Torpedoing the loop-the-loop, wizarding a thrust, bringing the ocean’s immense,
in short
Orchestras
Speechless
…..To hush

ii.
I imagine hearing the alarm-clock a shade
Of a second before it actually goes off
Is the weak vestige of that in-built capacity
In penguins
To swim home
Across hundreds of miles open sea
Guided by the thinnest electro-magnetic map-work
Like that which radiates above my head from
Two-and-a-half volt
Two Eveready
Alarm-clock batteries
Or is this
Retrospective to soothe the desperation of being
Wrenched awake from dreams?
iii.
Imagine these words dropped off in remote bays
Swimming with uncanny instinct
Towards the end of a poem
Like this fascination for penguins
(Easily dismissed)
(People are starving, why give a damn about birds?)
A fascination that, nonetheless, presses on, seeking some hint of compassion in chaos
In this too often cynical place with its oil spills
And nature’s alarm clocks going off
These words want
To splash, home, waddling ashore
With that bewildered, blinking, hesitant
Out-of-element
Air, is it wrong, they seem to wonder
To feel wonder
For penguins?

NOTE
A recent oil spill threatened the colony of breeding African penguins on Robben Island off Cape Town. The birds were removed by truck overland several hundred kilometres up the eastern coastline and then released back into the sea. They swam back over the following month or so, but the weeks of grace as they returned provided an opportunity to mop up the oil spill.
FOR COMRADES IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Every time they cage a bird
the sky shrinks. A little.

Where without appetite —
you commune
with the stale bread of yourself,
pacing to and fro, to shun,
one driven step on ahead
of the conversationist
who lurks in your head.
You are an eyeball
you are many eyes
hauled to high windows
to glimpse, dopplered by mesh
how-how-how long?
the visible, invisible, visible
across the sky
the question mark — one
sole ibis flies.
A Poem about a Bird Can Be a Picture of the World: Reading ‘Heron’s Place’ by Jeremy Cronin

A landscape is the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself.

(F. Inglis 489)

A few kilometres outside Kimberley in South Africa is a pan called Kamfers Dam which is home to the largest population of flamingoes in the country. When I first saw them, stopping the car on the side of the N7 highway to Johannesburg and getting out to look, the multitude of birds seemed like an affirmation of joy and wildness after the grey dust of the diamond city. Wading, chattering, flying, the pink flowering of a myriad flamingoes was something wonderful — a glimpse of liveliness and continuity before, or perhaps beyond, the troubled history of the mines and the world that they made possible.

This response should not be surprising: the flamingoes were not only pink and beautiful, they were also birds; and in the world of poems and stories in which I was raised, birds tell of freedom and the beyond. The skylarks, thrushes and swallows of imagination are made for song and flight and the possibility of transcendence. So when the robin redbreast is put in a cage, and the nightingale will no longer sing for the king who has captured her, my sense of outrage is not only for the bird itself, or even for all creatures that human beings have subjugated. It is also a recognition of the measure of what we as human beings have lost. If wild birds evoke a realm uncolonised by the city, a nature which endures outside the walls of human culture; then birds in cages are a reminder of the coercive power of a certain kind of civilisation, and perhaps even of human confinement and loss of a freedom. This is why, I think, after a day of tramping around Kimberley, the sight of the flamingoes was such a balm to the senses. ‘Here we are’, they seemed to say, ‘here we are in abundance’, as though the ancient liveliness of things endured, in spite of the city, and generations of power and pain.

Or so it appeared. Investigating the flamingoes further on my return home, I learned that their lovely multiplicity exists not in defiance of the city but, ironically, because of it. In the past the wetland was more seasonal but now the pan is topped up daily with treated sewerage effluent and storm-water runoff. It is full all the time, quite smelly, and the birds seem to love it. Ornithologists are worried, though, that this curious situation is not sustainable. The flamingoes will
not breed at Kamfers Dam and there must surely come a time when the hundreds of tons of salts and phosphates and faecal bacteria that flow into the closed system of the pan each year make the water too polluted for the birds to endure it.

This information was disappointing and not what I had wanted to hear. Of course the tempting opposition that the lively pink birds had seemed to confirm — some persistent fantasy of a nature separable from culture — was just too simple to explain what was actually taking place. Instead, I had to recognise that the flamingoes (and presumably other birds too), inhabit a place which is inextricably interwoven with the lives of other beings, human ones included, and that history and human culture are ineradicable participants in the wetland where they live.

On reflection, their presence came to seem not so much a manifestation of transcendence as of interbeing and interconnectedness: the colony of flamingoes on the water near the highway reflects the patterns of a myriad things. Each slender bird is made of pink and paler feathers, a sharp beak, long legs, delicate feet and the sounds of all the others, calling. Each one is fish and mud, wings and eggs, sewage and fertilizer, diamonds and effluent, mines and compounds, and the city’s quest for lasting treasure.

In ‘Heron’s Place’, a poem from Jeremy Cronin’s recent collection, More than a Casual Contact (47–48), the attentive observation of a particular bird offers the speaker a similar, but differently situated, opportunity for reflection. The heron whose place is the subject of the poem is, like the flamingoes, a wild bird who feeds in the waters at the edges of human habitation. This liminal zone, the Tongati river estuary in Kwazulu Natal, is like Kamfers Dam, a place that embodies quite clearly the interpenetrations of human culture and natural environment. Though the heron in Cronin’s poem catches fish as her kind have always done, the water is full of human things: sewage again, but also textile effluents from a nearby factory, pollutants from dumps and other sources, and the toxic by-products of the sugar industry in the form of fertilizers from the farms and chemicals from the mill. The poem does not consider these aspects of the physical pollution of the Tongati river, but it is directly concerned with the impact of industry in the region, and with what this reveals about human power and culture in a specific place. At the same time, the heron who continues to dwell and fish in this ambiguous territory becomes one instance of a kind of resistance that human beings may also practice. Vigilance, tenacity, specificity in the absorption she brings to her ancient task, the heron embodies a quality of attention, integrity and endurance amidst an environment infused with the globalised networks of business, money and power. Though she may not be free of its constraints, her awareness-in-place evokes the possibility of a resilient cultural practice that survives somehow, in spite of it all.

Reading the poem I attempt to situate a response in terms of my own location, and wonder, towards the end of this essay, what its standpoint might imply for one particular cultural practice in which I am involved at this strange, moment in history — the teaching of English.
Here is the poem in full:

Heron’s Place

Here the winter Tongati trickles from miles of cane field,  
Through the indentured smell of molasses,  
Under the M4, to come to sea.

A sand-flat under an inch of water.  
A place that might be lifted  
On a fringe of an incoming wave-surge  
That flips and spins up  
Minnows the size of small coins.

Which is why she is here  
All afternoon, holding fast to place,  
Pinning down the specific,  
Unregarding of the heavy-duty mill trucks  
That grind the highway behind.

Further on, a curve of beach, here, there,  
Solitary rods mark fishermen, hoping for shad.  
Most of them the unemployed-retrenched  
Some still wearing frayed mill overalls.  
For them, this is not hobby  
But the pursuit of proteins  
For the squatter camp hidden  
In a patch of vestigial forest behind  
As they cast lines  
Weighted with old spark plugs.

‘In the past, the tourism industry  
Presented South Africa merely as an exotic landscape.’  
It’s my friend, on TV, the minister,  
‘Now communities must learn  
To package themselves and their cultures.’

I think of poetry — when  
There’s a sudden, flouncing, knock-kneed  
Holding up of skirts that’s neither  
Exotic nor packaged  
As the heron bolts off in pursuit of minnow

A digestive shaking of her neck tells the outcome.  
And then she returns composed  
Back to place, her neck a supple rod,  
Her beak a poised cast.

I think, as I was saying, of poetry  
The least commodified of arts,  
Solitary, a bit, given to outburst  
Suspicious of shine, wakeful to slipperiness  
Each line weighted just so,  
Insisting on the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things.
Tenacious to place,
Standing its ground,

Whatever the highway behind.

(Cronin 2006 47–48)

The opening stanza situates the speaker’s attention spatially, even geographically, in a region of KwaZulu Natal that is dominated by the monoculture of sugar cane. At the Tongati river estuary this appears as the ‘miles of cane field’ that have displaced diverse ecosystems and required too, as one of the strategies of Empire, the displacement of large numbers of people across the planet. Beginning in 1860, around 150,000 people were shipped from India to the region to work as indentured labourers. In the poem, this history is present to the senses in ‘the indentured smell of molasses’ — the sweetness of sugar infused with the bitterness of a labour system that originally made it possible. David Lincoln has described the social order that controlled the early production of sugar as ‘an ascendant sugarocracy’ (Lincoln 1988 1). Cronin’s suggestion that the smell of molasses remains, even today, ‘indentured’, indicates that labour practices in the current industry are not much improved.

Through this highly managed environment the old river flows, or rather (because of the season, or siltation from the cane fields, or both) it ‘trickles’, passing under the M4 motorway before it reaches the sea. This highway, which runs parallel to the South Coast, is the route that takes the land’s sweet freight to Durban, South Africa, and the world. Tongati, Tongaat, Tongaat-Hulett: the region is the executive centre of an industry that today produces more than two million tons of sugar per year, and this road is the pathway that links it to the market. This could seem to suggest that whatever occurs at this location on the map is inescapably conditioned by the global networks of trade and power that track through the region: the mill trucks pass by noisily with their burden of sugar, exhaling carbon fumes.

Yet in the next stanza the point of view shifts from a wide spatial perspective to the minute particularity of minnows in an inch of water. The fish are tiny, ‘the size of small coins’, and where they occur it is fluid, watery, ephemeral, a place ‘that might be lifted / On a fringe of an incoming wave-surge’. To notice the minnows at all, or to observe the transient presence of a single wave flipping them up into the air, requires from the observer a radical change in focal setting: from the spatial view to the specificity of place, from 150 years’ history of sugar to a single moment as the wave turns over, from the economies of a global industry to a few small coins. Shifting then into a more lyrical voice, Cronin evokes both this specific and lively reach of water at the meeting of sea and river, and the act of attention that is required in order to perceive its activity.

This attitude of mind is a central concern of the poem. Sand, river, minnows; the particular ecosystem calls forth the heron, fishing: ‘Which is why she is here
All afternoon, holding fast to place’. Like the flamingoes at Kamfers Dam, the heron is made of the patterns of fish and water, and because, in this sense, organism and habitat are one system, this particular location on the Tongati river lagoon is precisely ‘Heron’s Place’, her place, a realm inhabited, if not possessed, by someone other than Tongaat-Hulett, someone who is not even a human being. In this respect, the bird in the poem has ‘agency’. Her activity is unambiguously intentional, and the speaker is looking not primarily at her, but at her act of attention — what might be called her ‘gaze’, its vigilance and responsiveness. But what interests me is not, primarily, whether or not the heron as nonhuman subject is sentient (she clearly is), but rather what her solitary presence at the water’s edge and in the poem conveys about place, specificity and attention. The term is first used in the title and then repeated four times: ‘place.’ I understand it to refer here to a particular location that is known and intimately inhabited, with connotations of dwelling, of being at home. At the same time, to speak of place is also to imply a way of seeing and understanding the world that is potentially quite radical. As Tim Cresswell describes this:

> When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience. Sometimes this way of seeing can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world, a way of seeing that has more space than place. (Cresswell 2004: 11)

Whereas late modern industrialised human beings have often been described as being displaced, placeless, dislocated, homeless and even ‘off-ground’, what the heron in the poem is doing could not be more specifically located: her survival quite simply depends on it, on ‘pinning down the specific’, in the place where she is at home. So complete is her attention therefore that the vehicles of business and industry, the ‘heavy-duty mill trucks / That grind the highway behind’, seem (though the human speaker reminds us of their reality) quite irrelevant to what she is engaged with.

But stories of place cannot for long hold off narratives of dispossession and loss, particularly in South Africa. The next stanza moves from an ecological understanding of the heron-in-her-place to an image of people from the nearby squatter camp who are fishing in the sea. Making a home amid the remnant of indigenous coastal bush that has somehow endured the imposition of the cane fields, the fishermen, like the heron, are solitary, marginal, and attentive to the particulars of survival in this environment. Unlike her, the human inhabitants of the area bear more visibly the marks of a troubled economic history — ‘Most of them the unemployed-retrenched / Some still wearing frayed mill overalls’ — and because of this history the human beings, like the heron, are fishing in pursuit of ‘protein’, their lines weighted with old spark plugs. By representing them in this way, Cronin characteristically evokes a picture of ordinary people’s resilience, ingenuity and commitment to survival under conditions of exploitation and
injustice. In many of his poems ‘the oppressed’ may be embattled, bewildered and suffering, but they are never simply victims. In the poem, ‘Faraway city, there’, for example, the people of Cape Town are ‘unshakeably / defiant, frightened, broken / and unbreakable’ and the shack-dwellers whose homes have been demolished will rebuild them yet again (Cronin 1983 71). Twenty-three years later he sets the bravery and solidarity of communist comrades in the Nazi death camps, and the lively tenacity of kerb-side culture in a post-apartheid South African city against the totalising master narratives of Soviet doctrine and (later) the neo-liberal project of corporate globalisation (Cronin 2006 16–23). In ‘Heron’s Place’, the confluence of river, bird, people and ‘vestigial’ forest evokes, I think, a similar affirmation.

In all this, Cronin’s view of the Tongati estuary and its human and nonhuman inhabitants could be described in terms of what Tim Ingold has called ‘the temporality of the landscape’. Here the relational, even ecological, view which Ingold calls a ‘dwelling perspective’ sees the living landscape as being constituted as ‘an enduring record of — and testimony to — the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves’ (Ingold 152). In Cronin’s poem, the patterns of activity of sugar barons, canfields, workers and birds inform and are informed by the conditions of this particular landscape, for as Ingold puts it, ‘it is in the very process of dwelling that these forms are constituted’ (162).

By contrast, the fifth stanza introduces another way of seeing landscape, and another sort of industry: ‘In the past, the tourism industry / Presented South Africa merely as an exotic landscape’. Someone is being quoted here who is critical of an old-style form of cultural imperialism in which the country was presented simply as a scenic object, without real people. This view may well have instrumentalised the environment (constructed it as a scenic object, a touristic resource) as much as the sugar barons did with their fields of monoculture, but it is now, the speaker tells us, something of the past. Nowadays South Africa is not (as some of the early explorers may have imagined, and subsequent colonial discourses reiterated) just ‘landscape’. It is inhabited by real people, ‘communities’ in fact, people who must become empowered: ‘Now communities must learn,’ but here in the moment of a single line-break the discourse transforms itself yet again ‘To package themselves and their cultures’. The source of the utterance is someone with whom the main speaker in the poem shares the ambiguous association of several roles: ‘It’s my friend, on TV, the minister’. Though Cronin simply quotes the actual words without comment, in the context of the poem the statement resonates quite disturbingly. The verb ‘to package’ evokes at one level a summoning together of (soon-to-be-discarded) paper, plastic, advertising, graphic design, coloured inks and so on in order to wrap and sell a particular product; but it also suggests, more generally, the containment and reification of people and ecosystems involved in a culture of commodification and in the global pervasiveness of ‘the market’. The point of view here echoes the poem ‘End of
the Century — which is why wipers’ (from the same collection) in which the
global phenomenon he calls managerialism zombifies our diverse humanity into
‘one thing all — clients’ (Cronin 2006 22). In ‘Heron’s Place’ the critique is less
direct, but the irony is clear and somewhat tragic: notwithstanding the liberatory
convictions of the social movements that brought the new State into being, the
post-Apartheid government’s promotion of a brand called ‘South Africa’ turns
people and environments into commodities. Rather too much like the Tongaat-
Hulett company which made the sugar barons rich and powerful, this industry
appears as yet another node in the trading networks of corporate globalisation
that reduce the myriad diversities of the earth and its inhabitants to the poverty
of monoculture.

Whatever it could mean to market or package one’s culture (let alone oneself),
the implied question leads to a self-reflexive thought about the cultural practice
of poetry — this is, after all, a poem — but at once this thought is interrupted
by the immediacy of the heron, who has just seen a minnow. Breaking through
the observer’s abstract reverie, the bird is all action and singleness of intention:
‘sudden, flouncing, knock-kneed’ the heron who bolts off in search of minnow
is ‘neither exotic nor packaged’, nobody’s object. Her presence and irreducible
reality are represented as being something unarguable, ordinary and simple, whose
purpose is pursued quite independently of human culture and exists outside of
language. This is it (the poem would seem to suggest) — not words about the
thing but the thing itself. If the heron’s dive is described as a ‘holding up of
skirts’, and her neck is ‘a supple rod’, her beak ‘a poised cast’, the effect is not
so much anthropomorphic or metaphoric (suggesting simply that the heron is like
a very skilled human being, fishing). Rather, it seems to me that by representing
her in this way as a ‘person’, Cronin is suggesting the continuities between
the situated practice that the heron is engaged in and human practices — fishing
and poetry, for example. For again, there is a certain self-reflection here, as this
depiction of the heron is itself a demonstration of the poet’s tools of fine attention
and what has been called the ‘sympathetic imagination’. Their activity in this
case is to evoke a one-pointed awareness that (at least in the momentary dive of
a particular image or phrase) manifests bird — fish — water — place as a single,
non-dual system. In the momentary absorption of the heron’s dive (as indicated in
a couple of lines of poetry) the world is indivisible: not two.

Once the heron has eaten her minnow the speaker returns to reflect on poetry.
By contrast with the TV injunction for communities to package themselves and
their culture, this sort of practice is ‘the least commodified of arts,’ and (like the
heron and the fishermen), somewhat ‘solitary’. Here again, the relation between
bird and people seems to me not so much a case of metaphor or analogy as
of correspondence or resonance. The heron, the fishermen and the practice
of poetry have in common a quality of attention and precision, of solitariness and
endurance, a position in the social order that is situated on the margins of the
economies of big capital, and exhibits a certain resilience. In all, the integrity of their activity derives from its locatedness in the minute particulars of place: ‘Tenacious to place, / Standing its ground’.

What sort of poetry or cultural practice does this imply? Whereas the flamingoes at Kamfers Dam are a pink, chattering multitude, lotuses blooming in the city’s excrement, the heron is usually grey or brown, and solitary in habits. The sort of poetry she calls to mind is this-worldly in focus, attentively crafted, ‘suspicious of shine’, and persists against the grain of the mainstream media. It is also, crucially and in several respects, ‘wakeful’. In an earlier poem, ‘Even the Dead,’ Cronin uses a characteristic combination of playfully conversational tone and abstract reflection to put it like this:

I am not sure what poetry is. I am not sure what the aesthetic is. Perhaps the aesthetic should be defined in opposition to anaesthetic.
Art is the struggle to stay awake.
Which makes amnesia the true target and proper subject of poetry. (Cronin 1997 40)

In ‘Heron’s Place’, the practice of wakefulness involves an insistence on ‘the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things’, on the specificity of living beings, systems and places that the highways of the market economy bypass, and the grand vision from above overlooks. This emphasis recurs in Cronin’s poetry. What is perhaps his most widely anthologised poem describes the intimately situated knowledge that is needed if poets (and South Africans generally) are to learn ‘how to speak with the voices of this land’ (Cronin 1983 58). Again in his recent collection, the poem ‘End of the century — which is why wipers’ foregrounds the improbable metaphor of the action (or ‘activism’) of a pair of windscreen wipers that turns ‘grand vision into rhythm’, and makes possible a certain clarity of (ironic, ambiguous, particular, located) vision in the midst of the ‘global, homogenised, totalitarian deluge’ in which late twentieth-century people are awash (Cronin 2006 16–23). As this suggests, in the more recent writing, the earlier target of racial capitalism and the apartheid state have to some extent been replaced by a critique of the local impacts of corporate globalisation and the relative unfreedom of contemporary South Africans. The anger and sadness evoked in this struggle to stay awake against the easy appeal of amnesia is sometimes very harsh. In a poem about HIV/AIDS, he says, ‘It’s not as bad as they say. They say because / perhaps / it’s worse’ (2006 62). Yet the articulation of a problem is not the same as despair, and Cronin’s poetic voice maintains a tone of determined hopefulness.

This is part of what (for me) makes the poetry compelling — but what sort of affirmation is it actually making? Earlier this year in a course on literature and the environment, I asked a group of undergraduate English students to make a list of non-commodified activities, relationships and skills that are valued and shared (not bought and sold) in their homes and communities. This exercise was in response to a question that the educationalist C.A. Bowers has suggested could
be used as a starting point with students for examining alternatives to the symbolic infrastructure that supports globalised commodification. He puts it like this: ‘Are there any aspects of individual and community experience that have not been commodified and calculated as part of the gross domestic product?’ (Bowers 161). Sadly, most of the students could hardly think of anything much, and by the end of the class many of us felt rather dispirited. Along with a recognition of their / our implicatedness in an (environmentally and socially unsustainable) commodified culture, came a sense of our all being what Ray Dasmann influentially called ‘biosphere people’. As globalised human beings (one rule of thumb says that everyone who has access to a private car is a member of the global North) our food, friends, energy, water, ideas and so on tend to come from (and our wastes disappear to) places we have never seen — everywhere in the world but the immediate environments in which we live.

In ‘Heron’s Place’, the highway, with its freight of sugar and other commodities, is the clearest manifestation of this form of civilisation. Like the shopping mall and the uniform housing development, the modern freeway has been described as one of the architectural expressions of deplacement, a structure which discourages any sense of rootedness, responsibility or belonging (Orr 127). Set against the scale and pace and particularity of the Tongati estuary, and its lively diversity, the highway is big, fast, noisy and impersonal, a single route through the territory, a link in the grid of global trade. In connecting the stories of sugar, marketing, monoculture and corporate globalisation in this way, the poem evokes questions that many of us are asking in different ways about the pervasive ecological and social impact of global neo-liberalism: Is it possible to resist? To act in good faith? Though Cronin does not answer such questions directly, the poem ends with the affirmation of a kind of practice (poetry for instance) whose integrity derives from its insistence on ‘the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things’, a practice of vigilance, locatedness, and specificity. Where the highway embodies a spatial or geographical view of the territory from above, as a location on the map, the poem that invokes it is about the intimate, wakeful, situated knowledge of place. It concludes with an assertion of the resilience of this attitude of mind that the heron embodies: ‘Tenacious to place / Standing its ground / Whatever the highway behind’.

The confidence of this conclusion makes me wonder whether an immersion in reading and/or writing the poetry of place might help my students find alternatives to commodified culture or even discover the tools or the intention to resist it. One could of course point out that while herons, fishermen and poets may disregard the highway (whatever highway), in order to get on with their solitary practice, the highway itself remains unaffected. Or one could say that place-based political activism does not necessarily translate into broader engagement. In terms of collective action, as David Harvey has noted, while oppositional social movements may be very efficient at organising ‘in place’, they tend to be relatively
disempowered when it comes to organising across space. In fact, he says, ‘In clinging to place bound identity, such oppositional movements become a part of the very fragmentation which a mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation can feed on’ so that while they may be excellent bases for political action, ‘they cannot bear the burden of radical historical change alone’ (Harvey qtd in Ruiters 2002: 121). Perhaps too, this is the point at which to remember that the author of ‘Heron’s Place’ is not only a poet or a solitary heron at the water’s edge. As Deputy General Secretary of the SACP Cronin regularly assumes a public voice that articulates a vision for transformation that is drawn in the large outlines of a national narrative. In this context the standpoint that he assumes in relation to the networks of global trade and industry is what might be called spatial—a view of the territory from above. In a recent interview, for example, in response to questions about the Party’s stance on state ownership of industry he says, ‘The real question is: how do we take strategic control over the character of our development?’ (Cronin 2007 12). This is surely neither the heron nor the place-based poet speaking, though the concerns about the globalised market remain. Does this make it contradictory? Will the real Cronin stand up?

I think not. Multiple visions, or seeing from different places, is after all, one of the things that some of us sentient beings do rather well. Herons, for example, and flamingoes may be intimately located amid the mud and fish of particular waters, but they cannot be limited to the single vision of one point of view. Birds move. They fly. The bird’s eye sees the world from above as well as from below. The migratory communities track far across the planet and back each year — highways of multitudes, calling to each other as they go. This essay has been concerned with situatedness in place, but surely both ‘place’ and ‘space’ are available and necessary to people as metaphors for locatable vision and engagement.

Beyond this, I have no answers as to how to wake my students (or even myself) up from the amnesias of a commodified, atomised, alienated life. But beginning with a place, or places, or ‘where you come from’, is one way of making a start. In this regard, reading a poem can then become quite instructive: to look very closely at the tracks and lives which take form in the estuary of a river near a national road, to look at a heron fishing in the rippled stream, and at spark-plugs recycled for weighting a line. If, as ecologists and others have demonstrated, each node in the natural/cultural network connects to all the others, then the vision of particularity is not an alternative to other forms of seeing but a way into them. A poem about a bird can be a picture of the world.

Perhaps birds can be free then, after all. Perhaps freedom is always contingent. Like the rest of us the birds arise and pass away in the rhizome of interdependent being — feet wading in the toxic mud of fertilizer and waste, plastic down the gullet, twine in the wing. The predictions for our common future are disturbing, particularly in the South. For birds, as much as for us human beings, extinction is really possible. But, so far at least, herons and flamingoes continue to fish and
fly, and their absorption in the work of survival is complete. May they endure the consequences of fossil-fuel and of the highways which certain of our kind have built. And perhaps (at least sometimes) we human beings may remember to be birds.

NOTES

1 First used in 1974, Dasmann’s term indicates a form of human social organisation which draws on the entire biosphere for its resources, as distinct from ‘ecosystem people’ whose consumption is more regionally specific. See his discussion of this in Called by the Wild: The Autobiography of a Conservationist (152f.)

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Stephen Gray

GREATER FLAMINGOES

I said: stretch your metre and a half, 
the tip is black for down, stay in the pink —
do not be ashamed of it, caked blush, 
or you’re a dead immature. Fly after father. 
We used to steer by battlefields and the odd DR 
steeple, siloes in the sunflowers, furry mealielands. 
Now it’s all Telkom and the Bismillah Store. 
Veer left at Thusane Funerals and the Salon Zelda … 
There as ripple-free among the reeds, our shining 
pan. I said: unbend your knobby knees 
as you alight. Breathe in, sieve for shrimp, 
lift, breathe out. Stiltwalk. Ignore the plastic 
bags, the old diesel sump and Castle cans. 
I said: eat your carotenoids. I said: 
mucky head beneath your wing. That way 
you cease to exist, wake up clean. Or else 
it’s back to the nursery like gawky ducks. 
I said: move over.
SNIPE

Decorator of swamps and quagmires,
said John Clare, along rancid streams.
If undisturbed delves and drills the gelid
mass apart for food, hell on molluses,
probes the moor’s spongy lap.
With the annual liquid into ice may leave
thy mystic nest in crackling reeds, depart.
Whither o shut-legged long-billed zigzag?
Needs pudges, moss, the stagnant flood.
For Africa’s esturaries, gorged with mud.
Fly straight for Mthatha’s mangroves,
your mate in rendezvous, paddling, probing.
Wading for crabs. With global warming
less and less mud in Africa, drill mud,
split mud, dried out, cracked. Home
again for British damp, little left.
My bill longer than my head.
Romantic poets of the sinky foss,
all let earth breathe. Hit concrete.
OYSTERCATCHER

Gone from this shoreline since wild Joyce
at the Ocean View with her crowbar prised
the last oyster from its bed, pink
in her rolled-up-T-shirt, slimy on her sandy,
salty tits. Evading the Catch Monitor.
Those all-black shorebirds, red-eyed, blade-like
bills. Nesting in tidal debris and washed-up
kelp. Mussels they’ve reseeded here,
take tropical fish from cosy reefs, netted
the dunes with scrub. But those broken
shells are oyster fossils now, thrown up, no sprays
of sperm, no culch. While the sea still runs
its idle water to the shore, the oystercatchers
of the Indian Ocean have moved on along.
Trying the Atlantic side.
ONE SOOTY FALCON

Along the cliffside a batch of euphorbia
covered in honeysuckle, bringing butterflies,
when in the binocular’s clear O,
there: a hook-billed eagle / buzzard / kite —
basically grey as the squall at sea
behind him, yellow cere over black culmen,
eye shining, crest down, a yellow claw
strikes up to scratch his gape.
Flick, turn. Clasp his perch, so his prey.
Raptors are hard to identify, one from another.
Confuses with a juvenile brownish tail.
Must cruise bush. Swivels, avoids drizzle.
And like a thunderbolt at dusk he wobbles.
LESSER KESTREL

At least with dusk she had the wheel and screech
of their flypast, a stop-dead spectacle:
spotted brown like khaki rags hovering ...
‘cast’ is the collective word, a cast of thousands
rotating in the vast failing sky, before
they sink and roost in the same village gum
or pepper-tree each summer. Cleaning out
the insects of the Great Karoo. Her slender
rufous falcons of Hanover, tumbled all the way
from Jedda and Turkmenistan, their Palaearctic
breeding grounds, migrating half the world away
to feed above politics. One night a hailstorm struck
and stunned the advance guard of all the lesser kestrels,
flapping and gaping — worse than bloody Kitchener.
She gathered them in her apron, nursed them right —
Olive Schreiner I mean, under house arrest,
confined to domestic duties and quite unable
to escape herself.
TWO RAVENS

Sheeny. All black, except for the white
nape we flash you below only when wheeling.
In pairs we prospect. Larger even than
your pied or plain black crows. Omnivores,
but for choice a lamb disabled, peck
out its eyes ... a blind baby Jesus:
in the snow they stagger, fall into
crevasses, strip off soft parts before
they freeze. We’re falsetto — easy
to tune into from other kraaks, stay
paired for life. Scavenge, yes, eye
your dirt and dumps and disembowel.
Mostly we glide glossily and alight
only on our dark shadows.
West-Coast Birding as Postcolonial Strategy: Literary Criticism in the Field

Setting the Ecotone

*Poetry’s landscape is an ecotone
where human and natural orders meet.* — John Elder

It might seem odd to claim birding as a postcolonial reading strategy, as a strategy of approach to the text and the world that implicitly questions power structures and political injustices. Pre-eminent American ornithologist John James Audubon, after all, infamously slaughtered hundreds of avian specimens in the interest of preserving and identifying, through image, unique features for classification. Is it possible, after such a history, for the act of birding to be fairly neutral? Can birders avoid charges of ownership, especially considering the privileged economic, class requirements typically associated with the practice? I think they can, but not without acknowledging their complicity in a historical and an ongoing cultural and ecological imperialism. On the one hand, poets privileged enough to also bird (and write about birds and/or birding) tend to acknowledge in their very language their own linguistic, and therefore human, limitations. On the other hand, birding might be one of the most democratic of outdoor activities. Everyone can be a birder, whether one lives in country or city, farmland or suburbs, industrial or developing nations.

By now, postcolonialism has been defined so many times the term itself has begun to lose currency in literary and cultural theory. I understand how repetitive definition and redefinition produces in some critics a vigilance that cancels out others’ complacency, leading to a dead dialogue. For me, though, postcolonialism — the term and the strategy — designates something that cannot be contained by an author’s biographical status, or the politics surrounding the publication of her next book. For me, postcolonialism means a way of reading the world that is patently self-conscious and reflexive, ironic, stubbornly anti-authoritarian; it also prefers process to product and seeks to make meaning out of the former, to enact a mode of thinking about the world that attempts to bring readers into closer contact with the world — and its inhabitants. Birding has the capacity to do something similar. I am interested in how the literary critic, when reading a poet who has clearly done his research on, for example, birds, trains himself to read the science and the birds themselves. What follows is an account of a birder-critic’s attempts to put into practice the theoretical process of stepping out of the text and into the field, of paying close attention in and to various fields.
FIELD MARKS

Knowing, not owning:
being, not having,
the rags and the blisters
of knowledge we have: — Robert Bringhurst

During the following half century [between 1934 and 1990] the
binocular and the spotting scope have replaced the shotgun.
— Roger Tory Peterson

It has become a common way for him to begin the day: with coffee and a
newspaper. This day, it is a quietly patient routine he hopes will translate
effortlessly to time spent in the field: quietly patient routine as metaphor — no,
not just metaphor, but strategy — for living every day in the world. As a student
of literature, he (the birder-critic; let’s call him BC) understands that field work
inheres metaphorically in the process of close reading, a process distinct from
the act of theorising critical strategies of approach and analysis. The difference
between close reading and theorising is, he admits, a difference in degree and not
in kind; he is all the more aware of this distinction for having shifted his research
focus from the postmodern implications of Canadian historiographic metafiction
to the ecological implications of Canadian poetry. The latter interest has, almost
by necessity, become a compulsion to resist categorising himself as a particular
kind of scholar — to being categorised, labelled, lumped in with a group of
like-minded academics — by insisting on the permeability of disciplinary and
epistemological boundaries. Over time, BC has come to realise that the boundaries
more closely resemble, not permeable cell walls, but intertidal zones, riparian
buffer strips, and forest-clearcut edges: what ecologists call ecotones, areas where
two ecosystems meet at their edges and create a third ecosystem with shared and
distinct characteristics.

In order to understand how poets’ proximal relation to birds inflects their
poetry about birds, BC decides one day to take up his binoculars, to find a portable
field guide, and to spend some time outdoors. Reading is all well and good, but an
extra-literary approach is necessary to attempt an ecological literary criticism that
recognises ecology as both a science and a metaphor.

By combining the literary with the extra-literary, he feels he can get closer to
the birds, trees, and rivers he reads about, much the way biographies help readers
get closer to their subjects and political history brings readers into proximity with
events recounted in fiction. Birding’s capacity to bring readers into closer contact
with the world and its inhabitants is on display in a published dialogue between
Robert Bringhurst and Laurie Ricou about the former’s poem ‘Sunday Morning’.
Ricou argues convincingly ‘that the poem is to the critic as the bird is to the
ornithologist…. The birder-critic, who must pay close attention to the nuances
of marking, has first to be quietly patient’ (93). BC progresses, stepping away
from the text and into various fields, from recognising field marks and using field
guides to eventually becoming a writer himself and making field notes.
Back in his living room with his coffee and paper, something catches BC’s attention. Maybe it is because that morning, Thursday 28 September 2006, he is planning to step out of the office and into an actual field to observe birds instead of just reading about them. A headline in the Globe and Mail’s Review section — ‘Birdman of B.C.’ — initiates a process he had not planned to undertake. The article, a fairly straightforward Q&A with Vancouver author and artist, Douglas Coupland, was not really about birds. But something in the interviewer’s final question, the only question that included any mention of birds, resonates. Leah McLaren recounts the last time she met Coupland, when he was ‘taking a case of peanuts home to feed the blue jays’ (R2). That morning, he — the birder-critic — accomplishes a task of epiphanic proportions. He recognises an error in nomination, a failure in taxonomy. Douglas Coupland, you see, lives on British Columbia’s west coast: Blue jays (Cyanocitta cristata) do not. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, ‘The western edge of the range stops abruptly where the arid pine forest and scrub habitat of the closely related Steller’s jay (Cyanocitta stelleri) begins’ (‘Blue Jay’ n.p.). Coupland feeds Steller’s jays on a regular basis, not eastern blue jays. Is the mistake McLaren’s, BC wonders, or Coupland’s?

The Steller’s jay was the first west-of-Alberta species BC came to recognise. Having grown up in Southern Ontario, the birds of his childhood and, consequently, of his imagination were mourning doves, grackles, cardinals, and blue jays. Once in Vancouver, though, those birds came to occupy a portion of his consciousness reserved for nostalgia, at best, and narrow-minded assumptions regarding the primacy of originary experience, at worst. He recalls some favourite lines from one of John Thompson’s ghazals: ‘Absence makes what / presence, presence’ (135). Mourning doves gave over to rock doves (pigeons), grackles to northwestern crows, cardinals to starlings, and blue jays to Steller’s jays. Of the four new species in BC’s expanding worldview, only the crows and Steller’s jays were native to British Columbia; only the Steller’s jays were not a ubiquitous presence. Perhaps it was this refusal to be ever-present that drew BC to these crafty, loud versions of blue jays. Crows and jays are among the most common of bird families, the Corvidae, which also includes ravens, magpies, and other jays; they are found worldwide, except for South America, Antarctica, and some islands (Peterson 252). Northwestern crows (Corvus caurinus) differ from American crows (Corvus brachyrhynchos) in at least three ways: they are slightly smaller, have faster wingbeats, and, as their common name suggests, occur along ‘the narrow northwestern coast strip’ of North America (252).

BC understands, without much in the way of research or field work, why pigeons, starlings, and crows are so successful and so, well, present. Ironically, intelligence — at least in the way humans understand intelligence — does not seem to have much to do with ubiquity in Vancouver. Crows and starlings have both demonstrated certain intellectual capacities previously thought to be the sole domain of primates, if not of humans — New Caledonian crows can actually...
make tools (cf. Weir, Chappell, and Kacelnik), and starlings have the capacity to recognise recursive linguistic structures (cf. Gentner, et al.) — but feral pigeons seem about as unintelligent as an avian species can be when placed in a human-centric paradigm. Steller’s jays exist somewhere in between. They might not be as intelligent as crows or as sweetly linguistic as starlings — their ‘harsh “shaar”’, and rapid rattling “shek, shek, shek, shek” (‘Steller’s’ n.p.) are not likely to inspire the next Mozart — but they exhibit a jouissance possibly a third of the way toward ravenhood. In fact, Steller’s jays look like they’re wearing a hood of raven (or crow) feathers.

Around the same time BC arrived in British Columbia and began replacing his memories of eastern birds with the experiences of western ones, Don McKay was publishing essays about his experiences as a migratory poet-birder. For McKay, ‘bushtits were one of the first west-of-the-Rockies species’ he encountered (2001 83). The encounter was significant enough to inspire an essay, ‘The Bushtit’s Nest’, about the relations among metaphor, wilderness, and poetry, because McKay, a well-known birder, was unable to identify the birds when first asked — ‘which was socially embarrassing, but at the same time exciting, since the details of their presence … could occur without the centralising and reductive influence of the name, which so often signals the terminal point of our interest’ (2001 83–84). In McKay’s poetics, each of these familiar words — metaphor, wilderness, poetry — means differently; each word, newly understood, enables an engagement with the world that neither recapitulates nor reaffirms a colonial relation to the world through language: metaphor is ‘the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting the world’ (85); wilderness is ‘the placeless place beyond the mind’s appropriations’ (87); and ‘a poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can’t do: then it does something with language — in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise’ (87). BC likes that McKay simultaneously loves and distrusts language, admires the way he finds comfort in the inevitable failure of his, and all, naming.

BC’s quiet patience includes a willingness to fail, a willingness to get lost in the literal as well as the figurative sense. He is not truly a birder, you see; he has been trained as a literary critic. The poem or the novel is his field not the forest or the riparian buffer zone. All this has changed, however, as BC has begun working at the intersections of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Reluctant simply to enter the realm of ‘pure spondaic’ theory (McKay 2005 88), BC made the decision to take seriously American ecocritic Lawrence Buell’s call for a literature, and a criticism, that leads readers back to the physical world rather than away from it (11). The birder-critic is willing to acknowledge, and to embrace, the limitations of language, of knowledge, of naming. The postcolonial world of the west coast invites an especially rigorous introspection in part because ‘there is nowhere on the planet left to go’ (Gaston 37). With no more land to conquer to the west of what has already been claimed and/or embroiled in legal battles for ownership,
and with the current state of global environmental crises, perhaps the west-coast poet is turning his gaze to the local, the familiar, the edge of known geography and ecology — and literary criticism. The North Pacific Coast, like all coastal regions BC can think of, provides rich metaphorical possibilities for poetry, the landscape of which, as John Elder has written, ‘is an ecotone where human and natural orders meet’.

Colonialism might not be over, might not be exactly post, but the geographical, westward expansion of colonial desires has ceased, at least on the North American continent. The quiet patience BC is cultivating, which is characterised by the poet who pays ‘close attention’ to his surroundings — namely birds, rocks, and trees — seems at odds with much of what might be called a colonial aesthetic. Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz ‘finds that the boundary between categories and reality is more complicated than he previously thought’ (Morris 50). He didn’t come to this conclusion in the inner world of his poetry, or while travelling throughout Europe’s Old World. He reached this epiphany after having moved ‘to the shores of California in middle age’, into a ‘strange, new intoxicating environment [that] leads him back to close observation of natural life forms’ (Morris 50). More specifically, ‘he is struck by the similarity of the Steller’s jay of the American [and Canadian] west coast to the species of jay in his native Poland’ (50) after hearing ‘Jays screech outside the window’ and recognising ‘the cries, the thievishness, the audacity’ common to all jays (Milosz 20). ‘Jayness is a human construct, but it also exists’ (50); so writes David Copland Morris in response to Milosz’s reflections on the ‘amazing’, paradoxical ontology of being a jay by not being aware of being a jay.

This discussion of avian ontology reminds BC of similar ruminations by McKay, albeit in a more sweeping statement about birds in general, about birdness. Reflecting on bushtits — on their gourd-shaped nest hanging precariously over his driveway, on their status as ‘“creatures of the air” not only because they fly through it, but because it comprises so much of their bodily presence’ — McKay writes that ‘birds do not need a Lao-tzu [author of the Tao Teh Ching] to remind them of the non-being their lives depend on’ (2001 103–104). Don Stap refers to avian physiology to explain birds’ ethereal existence and describes a Bewick’s wren that was in the midst of repeating ‘a complex series of notes with precision and force’: ‘Each time he sang, the wren expelled air from his respiratory system with extraordinary efficiency. Nearly 100 percent of the air passing through a bird’s vocal cords is used to make sound. Humans use only about 2 percent’ (73–74). In his statement about the non-being of avian existence, McKay both acknowledges a human need for textualised meaning and an avian proclivity to mean textually. Bushtits become a living, breathing Lao-tzu from which BC might learn a little something about the world and his place in it. Identifying a bird — ‘“Ah, bushtits”: check, snap. Next topic’ (2001 84) — tells BC as much about himself as it does about the bird. Field marks place BC in relation to an invented system of knowledge and the objects of that system.
But what is the relationship between identifying features — field marks — and the words used to name birds? ‘The bird “student”, too’, writes Thomas Gannon, ‘indoctrinated into Peterson’s “field mark” revolution, is thus armed with a set of visual and verbal signifiers that determine the scope of his/her interpretations of these new-world “aborigines” with feathers and wings’ (Gannon n.p.). BC is not terribly interested in participating carelessly in a Foucauldian narrative of order; as much as they exist as parts of individual birds, field marks are tools for identifying avian species. They are but one tool of many that birders have to employ in the field or in the office.

Again, BC turns to McKay for some advice: ‘The small measure of congruence evident with the onomatopoeic chickadee disappears entirely with ring-necked duck, a beautiful diving duck whose neck ring is all but invisible unless you’re holding the bird in your hands’ (McKay 2001 64). While BC was hiking around Sasamat Lake in Port Moody, B.C., recently, other hikers gathered on a footbridge, clambering to identify a small gathering of black and white ducks. Most wanted to name them ring-necked (Aythya collaris), but no one could see, really, even with high-powered binoculars, a subterminal ring on the beak (a field mark used in identifying males). Proximity inflects specificity, sometimes to a degree that is not particularly useful. American critic Dana Phillips complicates the congruence evident in the chickadee’s onomatopoeic name by imagining a novice birder attempting to identify a particular species of chickadee. Phillips notes that ‘establishing the identity of black-capped as opposed to Carolina chickadees can be surprisingly complicated’ (178) in spite of the illustrations and descriptions — including field marks — Roger Tory Peterson’s field guides provide. In the end, ‘the birder is confronted with a variety of interpretive options’ (178); in the end, Peterson’s (or Audubon’s or Sibley’s) ‘stylised images’ cannot enable, in each instance, the proper identification of a bird: ‘the birder will have to engage in a lot of back-and-forth between text and world, and world and text, and between stylised image and bird, and bird and stylised image, if she really wants to know what kind of chickadee she saw’ (179). Phillips refers to the green-backed heron, which used to be called the little green heron, even though it is not little or ‘green all over, as the name implied’ (180). The new name, while it is not ‘especially descriptive’, ‘seems arbitrary and yet it is perfectly accurate’ precisely because the bird does have a green back and other characteristics not included in the name (180).

So, why is naming such an important aspect of birding and of poetry? After reading McKay and considering the differences between blue and Steller’s jays, BC finds the act of naming itself less compelling than contemplating the implications of a human desire to name and to know; but to arrive at such a position, one must first establish a useful repertoire of names and be able to identify field marks. It is like Francis Ford Coppola directing Dennis Hopper, who had not learned his lines (but had apparently done a few in his trailer) prior to shooting Apocalypse Now: memorise your lines first; then you can forget them. For poets this is akin to mastering the grammar so as to create meaning at the edges of linguistic order; for
ecopoets, it is akin to undermining the unquestioned authority of anthropocentric language and knowledge. Scott Bryson illuminates the paradox a little, claiming that for ecopoets ‘Ignorance is exalted over conventional knowledge, which is usually connected with the acquisition of wisdom’, with the collection of empirical data at the expense of other ways of knowing (105). Bryson’s ‘ignorance’, thinks BC, informs a humility that encourages an understanding of the world qua the world. But humility with McKay is not exalting ignorance so much as following a trail of ecological referents to get closer, maybe getting lost in the meantime because of a lack of knowledge (perhaps an ignorance) that is inevitable, though not necessarily exalted. We can know via biology, ecology, and ornithology. The question remains: So What? What will we do with such knowledge, knowing? Folding the paper and putting his mug in the sink with the rest of the breakfast dishes, BC sets out for a walk. So, he thinks, let’s find out.

FIELD GUIDES

Birding and other forms of nature observation seem to be a symptomatic response to the disjunction between human life and nature typical of modern societies. — Andrew Durkin

He would be a bird book full of lavish illustrations with a text of metaphor. — Don McKay

As a literary critic interested in how his work might effectively participate in environmental, ecological, and (related) political discourses, BC often feels like the stereotypical environmentalist defended by historian Richard White. Responding in part to a bumper sticker with the offensive rhetorical question, ‘Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living’, White challenges those intellectual, philosophical approaches to environmentalism that consider work — specifically physical labour — in opposition to conservation. Most environmentalists, offers White, ‘equate work in nature with destruction. They ignore the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature’ (171). This resistance to physical labour — farming, fishing, logging — not only ignores certain ways of ‘knowing nature’ but presumes a particular way of knowing to be more important than others. It also assumes, rather arrogantly, that no farmers, fishers, or loggers work in a sustainable manner on a local scale. Like White, who admits ‘not hav[ing] to face what [he] alter[s]’ because of his urban, academic position, BC consequently ‘learn[s] nothing from’ the physical world beyond his office walls, beyond words on the pages he reads daily, and beyond his own supposedly limitless imagination (184). But that is changing as BC spends more time walking around his Vancouver neighbourhood listening to, looking for, and learning from field marks. He also turns to bird books that are ‘written to instruct the novice’, aware that ‘a minimum degree of assimilation to the work of birdwatching is required’ (Law & Lynch 285). Birding occupies a space between physical outdoor labour and imaginative indoor work.
Before heading out to Jericho Beach in search of migrating warblers, BC picks up Sue Wheeler’s *Habitat*. In the collection’s opening poem, ‘Understory’ (11), which is dedicated to Don McKay, Wheeler responds to McKay’s avian-inspired writing with the following:

To walk out of the field guide  
and listen. To wait  
for the world to approach with its dapple and hands.

There’s an understory here, shades  
of meaning, tale told by a rock  
signifying everything.  
To open the grammar of being seen  
and let the creatures name you.

Wheeler’s infinitives coupled with the poem’s title (which appears in the poem between two vague markers of place: there, here) reflect a tentativeness BC wants to emulate. The listening. The waiting. The birding. The ontological shift when he allows himself to be named in a language he will never understand. BC keeps coming back to McKay’s most recent collection of essays on place, wilderness, and poetry, in which McKay reveals an interest in ‘the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has been so thoroughly one-way’ (2005 18). Reverse flow represents a complex postcolonial, environmental relationship, a conscious willingness to admit complicity and desires yet still manage to work (against the mainstream) toward a more equitable relation to other humans and nonhumans. BC is an actor in the saga of place even as he resists complicity by learning the names of things in place. McKay’s reverse flow echoes Tim Lilburn’s notion that humans in a new place ‘should learn the names for things as a minimum’ gesture, ‘as acts of courtesy … entering the realm of decorum’ (‘Going’ 184). One does not respectfully engage in a dialogue with another person and begin, ‘Hey, what’s-your-name! Let’s talk about this land you claim belongs to your ancestors’. The saga of place can take place in the realm of decorum. BC is convinced he can start, as ecopoets and interdisciplinary ecocritics have started, by learning the names for birds, trees, winds, and the people who live and have lived along this coast.

Recapitulating a colonial expansion westward, BC moves through rainforest toward coast and waves; salal and Oregon grape border the trail, interrupted by ‘illegitimate, superfluous’, occasional yet persistent bursts of Himalayan blackberry, an introduced *Rubus* cultivar courtesy of famed horticulturalist, Luther Burbank (Robertson 125). Arbutus trees point nakedly toward sun and waves. He is looking for a bird-poem, a hybrid creature like himself. But what does it mean to be walking like this? Like Wordsworth walking the Lake District in an earlier time, ‘imaginatively and physically’ BC ‘is always moving around’ — unlike Wordsworth, BC considers his relation to the natural world with a healthy dose of humility. If ‘motion is’, as John Elder claims, ‘the integrating dimension of a quest’
(137), BC sees his walking, his moving through the landscape, as a participatory gesture. Otherwise, the quest is likely to become a conquest, recapitulated colonial expansion to become postcolonial, as it were, thus reaffirming a continuing presence of colonial thought. As if in response to a poet’s bird-word playfulness, birds become participial modifiers, gerunds, continuing actions in the present — meaning, birding — and to look at them thus becomes a way of looking at and of knowing ‘trees and rocks and seas and all that weaves itself into habitat’ (Brinthurst & Ricou 93). BC moves from the specificity of recognition and nomination — Steller’s jay, check — to an inclusive consideration of linked entities and of a process of connection between this Douglas fir, that spotted owl, and his own desiring gaze. The task is difficult, but as Gabriele Helms suggests, ‘the interconnectedness of all the environment, of the human and the nonhuman world, its interdependence and mutual implication, make it possible for the [birder-critic] to come to an answer to her/his own impatience and frustration’ (51–52). The answer often rests unobtrusively in a space, in a moment, between not-knowing and knowing; BC necessarily hesitates, delays the action of naming in order to pay homage to the named.

But how is it possible to represent birds as birds in the pages of literature, or in a poem? How is it possible for the birder-critic to negotiate the layers of representation and, in reading McKay’s ‘Song for the Song of the Common Raven’ (2006 27), for example, write about actual ravens? One answer, an easy one, is: It cannot be done. Even field guides, with their ostensible ‘capacity … to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment’ with their ‘stylised images’ and mimetic representations, necessarily fail to achieve scientific or literary realism (Buell 97). BC is not interested in debating how real things are in themselves, though. Reality he takes for granted; but he understands that his experience of the real, how he perceives things, removes him from their experience in the world. Helms puts it this way: ‘From a constructivist point of view, I do not deny the existence of an ontological, non-textual reality; what I deny is the possibility of making a statement about its “real” nature’ (45). BC feels impoverished by the proximity he seeks, not by the birds. BC wants to know more about the birds because he is relatively new to this place, their home. His presence alone informs an ongoing history of colonial presence; and it also inheres in an even older history of humans’ misunderstanding and destruction of the more-than-human world. Familiarity on the way to recognition, then. He is learning that ‘users of [all] guides will encounter innumerable frustrations, uncertainties and quandaries. Such “troubles” are typically experienced by committed birders as temporary problems arising within a personal and situational relationship to “reality” – problems with perspective, acuity and luck’ (Law & Lynch 291). Knowing includes being known: but the moment of recognition, of realisation, is constantly changing. Familiarity takes time. BC longs to achieve the familiarity expressed by P.K. Page in ‘Only Child’ (114–16), a poem about a mother (a
‘noted naturalist’) and ‘her very affectionate and famous son’. The son, neither interested in learning Latin binomials nor in knowing the common names for the birds he and his mother encounter, nevertheless gains a familiarity through proximity afforded by walking with his mother; ‘he knew / them by their feathers and a shyness like his own’ (114). His guide is polymorphous.

In his critical appraisal of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips analyses Roger Tory Peterson’s field-mark system of bird identification, what Buell identifies as ‘highly abstract renderings that have proved, in the experience of veteran birders, to enable the student to identify the originals more effectively than would a denser mimetic image, such as a photograph in the Audubon Society field guide’ (97). Responding to Buell’s description of Peterson’s field-mark system, Phillips criticises Buell’s ‘assumption that the images in the Field Guide have something of crucial importance to do with “originals”’ (174). Buell’s use of the term ‘original’ is problematic, to be sure; however, BC has little ethical difficulty taking Buell to be referring to a bird or species of bird that existed prior to any representation, image, or description, whether mimetic, abstract, or verbal. While Phillips and Buell agree on the irony implicit in Peterson’s Field Guide being ‘not only mimetically parsimonious, but visually impoverished, too, and deliberately so’ (Phillips 174), they disagree on the value and success of such an aesthetic. Phillips remains unconvinced of the guide’s ability to put its reader ‘in touch with the environment’ since Peterson’s ‘merely adequate’ images, which require the birder to become a reader, push the birder to consider ‘another image, and yet another, while returning, now and again, to the environment for fresh impressions’ (176, 179). In other words, Buell privileges a too-simplistic version of literary realism that Phillips seeks to complicate:

Every transaction entails further action: the birder will have to engage in a lot of back-and-forth between text and world, and world and text, and between stylised image and bird, and bird and stylised image, if she really wants to know what kind of chickadee she saw. I think it is precisely this going back and forth between text and world, and between nature and culture … to enable [identification], which gives a notion like getting ‘in touch with the environment’ whatever it may have. (179)

It is also such back-and-forthing, BC thinks, that Buell would privilege as a way to lead readers back to the physical world and not away from it (Buell 11). Phillips’ acknowledgement of a world that exists independently of text is promising, in spite of his sustained and bellicose critique of both ecocriticism and the science of ecology. That he uses chickadees and Peterson’s Field Guide to Birds to do it is significant for another reason, namely because it illustrates the central importance birds — real birds — have in the ongoing problem of environmentally conscious literature and criticism.

Yet for all that BC wants to demonstrate how learning about the biology and ecology of birds can help to develop a less anthropocentric model of critical inquiry, Ricou reminds that ‘something in us resists a guide. Hence the sometimes
hectoring tone, as the poet-guide has to persuade his companion to see it his way. We would rather go it alone’ (1997 22). If the poet is guide, BC must learn how to read the guides, must learn nuances of the genre. In contrast, Andrew Durkin notes that the typical ‘“consumer” of a [field] guide is not a reader in the usual sense but a user’; not until ‘the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between the technical means to produce well-illustrated, relatively inexpensive books on an enormous scale … did the bird guide take on what might be called its modern paradigmatic form’, of which Peterson’s Field Guides are most representative (5).

What other guides might we turn to? While Lilburn claims that Euroamericans are not quite capable of being ‘autochthonic’ the way, say, Aborigines in Australia or Haida in British Columbia are (2007 45), BC wants to keep an ear tilted toward available stories, available strategies for attempting the world. There is a danger, though, he realises, in the way simply ‘speak[ing] of Native Americans in relation to place, earth, land, or any other geographic location courts cliché’, but as Kathryn Shanley argues, ‘the definition of “indigenous” entails place’ (137). During one of his visits to a library across campus — the First Nations House of Learning, or Xwilx̣wa Library — BC encounters Leroy Little Bear’s foreword to Native Science. To ‘the Native American mind’, Little Bear suggests, land’s significance goes beyond mere affinity or identification with Nature as stereotypical constructions of Indianness would have it. BC has come to a stark realisation regarding the emergence of a North American environmental consciousness. Though in the academy and in literature it represents thoughtful responses to centuries of abuse both Euroamericans and Natives have perpetrated on the earth and its inhabitants, the colonisation of the Americas by European settlers effectively upset(s) the precariously balancing dynamism theorised and practised by the continent’s First Peoples, a dynamism that emphasises respect for, and participation with, the natural world — a dynamism developed and maintained across generations through the act of storytelling. Indigenous communities, even in the seemingly mundane, domestic act of cultivating their gardens, BC learns once he gets past Little Bear’s foreword, express by way of an ‘attitude of reverence for their food plants … the central foundations of Native science — participation and relationship’ (Cajete 132). Despite current consensus that acknowledges Native North Americans’ role in unsustainable hunting practices and the extinction of ‘four-fifths of all large vertebrates in North America’ (Glavin 123), Western scientists — and Western literary (eco)critics/academics — who refuse to acknowledge the parallels between Indigenous and Euroamerican cultures, refuse to acknowledge and consider the efficacy of ‘participation and relationship’ in the development of their theories, including ecocriticism, refuse to acknowledge their own complicity in the world’s ill health. Stories that are of a particular place, that are chthonic, can still tell us something about how to live in the world. ‘Unless the cultural/ecological context of a relationship is understood’, however, ‘one cannot fully comprehend a particular Indigenous technology’ (125). BC wonders
at the seemingly innocuous slashing together of culture and ecology in Cajete’s phrasing; surely it is a significant typographical and theoretical decision, as if to say culture can be defined in terms of a particular geographic region and the practices of a particular group of people living in that region, but the cultural practices are not exclusive of a broader ecology.

**Field Notes**

*I forget: why are there broken birds behind me; words, goddamnit, words.* — John Thompson

*If to record is to love the world, let this be an entry.* — Roo Borson

While a field guide might help with the identification process in the field, often BC finds there is not time to flip, find, and identify *in situ*. The field guide is often of more use after returning from a day in the field. C. Bernstein advises the birder to ‘[c]ompare your sighting with books only after the notes are made. Having the book at hand during the note-taking will only interfere with the process…. The description often is that of the picture in the book, *not* of the actual live bird seen’ (2). Once observed, though, identifying characteristics — field marks — have a tendency simply to disappear as memories often do. Something else is needed, BC thinks, to bring marks and guide together: call it ‘striv[ing] for affirmative praxis’ by way of note-taking as Gabriele Helms does (46); embrace Ricou’s argument that ‘the act of writing, and rewriting, is essentially a mode of thinking’ (2002 135). Making notes in the field enables a mode of thinking that destabilises the written word’s — and hence conventional knowledge’s — imperial authority. Paradoxically, by making notes toward naming, BC engages a ‘radical process of demythologising the systems that threaten to define’ the natural world, effectively ‘uninvent[ing] the world’, as Robert Kroetsch would have it (1989 394). For BC, having first arrived on the west coast, the idea of making notes was persistently absent, even when he consulted the *Sibley Guide to Birds* purchased on a whim in Toronto. He made a mental note about the flight pattern of a bird silhouetted against a typical northwest coast sky (grey) and flying from treetop to treetop, the familiar level flight punctuated by brief flapping, with wingbeats almost entirely below the horizontal plane. Turning to page 351 in the Sibley guide, BC saw the Steller’s and Blue jay side by side for the first time, and saw that conspicuously ravenous hood, too, for the first time — on the page and not in the field. Birds on the west coast of North America — on this geographically last post of colonial presence — bring us, all of us, closer to the observation of natural life forms if we, all of we, so choose to be brought. This last post strikes BC as both a theoretically and a geographically significant marker of newness. Or, not newness exactly, but of the impulse to stop expanding and take a walk in a place newly acknowledged, to turn and look at one’s environment.
Tues 17 Oct,  
walking dog after dinner, noticed long line of crows flying  
east — hundreds, too many to count; is this a usual occurrence?  

Wed 18 Oct,  
walked dog at same time as yesterday — saw crows again, tho  
not quite as many — where are they going?  

BC still consults books, searching for a key or a legend — some piece of a map  
he doesn’t yet hold. He reads George Levine: ‘I take the arbitrariness of naming  
as part of the pleasure of birding, a continuing revelation of the ways in which  
“nature” and human conventions and consciousness are always intermingled  
and never in entirely satisfactory relation’ (153). Identifying a particular bird  
correctly, as McKay suggests, does have ‘its indisputable satisfactions’ as ‘one  
of the pleasures of system to which us big brains are addicted’ (2001 84), but the  
name addict might be apt to assume his pleasure is more important, ontologically,  
than it is.  

Walking his dog the other day, BC heard what he thought was a Steller’s  
jay; but it might have been a northern flicker, or a starling in mimic mode.  
Nevertheless, he made a note on a recipe card — he now carries recipe cards in  
his pocket, and a pen — for later investigation:  

Tues 24 Oct  
quick, successive ‘laughs’; descending, harsh.  

He knows this is not enough, that there is something missing. The note lacks  
coherence, it is too cryptic; and when BC compares it to other notes from the  
field — notes that share a slight resemblance to notes he makes while skimming  
journals in the library — he has a hard time piecing a narrative together. He  
recalls an article from the New York Times Magazine that came out in the  
wake of the ivory-billed woodpecker controversy. Ivory-billed woodpeckers  
(Campephilus principalis) have been considered extinct by most ornithologists  
since approximately 1940. In 2005, some ornithologists claim to have sighted  
(and heard) ivory-bills in Arkansas.3 To support their sighting, field notes would  
play as great a role as the grainy video and audio files.  

But the act of birding, ultimately, is an act of storytelling. For instance, if someone said  
to you, ‘I saw this cardinal fly out of nowhere with yellow tips on its wings and land  
on the side of a tree’, even the least experienced amateur would counter that cardinals  
don’t have yellow wingtips and don’t cling to trees but rather perch on branches. Each  
bird is a tiny protagonist in a tale of natural history, the story of a niche told in a vivid  
language of color, wing shape, body design, habitat, bill size, movement, flying style  
and perching habits. The more you know about each individual bird, the better you are  
at telling this tale. (Hitt n.p.)  

If birding is storytelling, what writerly activity, BC wonders, cannot be  
approached as a field in which to take notes? Jan Zwicky writes that ‘[s]ome  
things can be known that cannot be expressed in technocratically acceptable
prose’ (‘Brighurst’s’ 109); the idea of story, save, perhaps, the improvisational storytelling of many First Nations cultures, seems too linear, too structured to embody the frantic, hesitant notes of a birder as she stands, shivering, just past sunrise watching and listening for signs of avian life, head cocked, mouth slightly agape, pen at the ready.

Leafing through a pile of papers in his office, BC stumbles across another piece of writing by Laurie Ricou, an essay called ‘Field Notes and Notes in the Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins’, that helps to alleviate the frustration brought on by his incomplete note: ‘Field notes. The form is the form of absence, defined by what it is not’ (119); ‘Field notes are the unrealised raw material of art, not the achieved object…. [They] are fragmentary, cryptic, ostensibly scientific and factual and empirical. This form suits [poets, critics, birders] who despise words, who want to, who must, keep rein on their imagination’ (120). The form invites careful observation of a fragmentary world, a world that does not defer to a master narrative, either natural or artificial. No note can ever be entirely factual or complete or accurate because the world and its inhabitants — Steller’s jays, Haida sculptures, black spruces, plastic bags, postcolonialists — are never entirely certain or complete or whole. This note about the descending, harsh notes will suffice until BC gets home. After that, who knows?

In his introduction to Robert Kroetsch’s *Completed Field Notes*, Fred Wah urges readers to ‘think of “field notes” as temporary, as momentary gestures that interpenetrate possibility. Perhaps even as investigations into the potential for narrative’ (xii). Similar to McKay’s corpus of bird poems, BC’s nascent list of birds remains even less ‘completed’ than Kroetsch’s field notes, ‘announced in medias res as continuing’ yet, ‘in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed’ (2000 251). Where Kroetsch’s impossibility manifests in the poet’s inexorable reflexivity and self-doubt, in an endless deference to the symbolism of words, BC’s failure to know for sure recapitulates a postcolonial desire — BC wants to defer to the authority of schists, shrubs, and shrikes, of terranes, terrain, and towhees, of faultlines, forests, and flickers. This act of deferring, of accepting the possibility of failure in the process of learning about the field, in the field, positions BC as patient observer, as part of a naming that ‘will be quiet, useless, broken maybe’ (Lilburn 2002 184). Insofar as birding comprises identifying field marks, reading field guides, and writing field notes, its connection to reading literature, particularly from a postcolonial perspective, remains.

BC takes part by taking notes; the wrens take part by making notes. In the field, of the field. He has enough material now, enough impetus to keep returning to the field with his guides and his recipe cards. But he also needs to spend more time inside, in front of the computer, reading and writing. The notes will continue to accumulate; the poetry will continue to speak.
NOTES
1 In *Lifebirds*, George Levine provides a useful gloss on the various ways ‘bird’ is used: ‘But I am a “birder”. That’s the noun birders use to describe themselves. There is a related verb, “to bird”, which I use a lot, and there’s a participial noun built from that verb, “birding”, which is what most of the essays in this book are about’ (3).

2 Though European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are now common across North America — thanks to Eugene Scheifflin, who endeavoured to introduce to the New World all the birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare — and thus not unique to the west-coast, they are not common in BC’s hometown.

3 See Jerome A. Jackson’s *In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker*, updated after the controversial rediscovery.

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Rabindra Swain

THE NEST IN TATTERS

These lines came
with the birds already perched on them.
Before I was aware of it.

they have hung themselves upside down —
thin, tiny substances, self-effacing,
were it not for the bright
yellow spot on the neck
and that of white on the male’s belly.

I did not have to play host,
nor give in to them to weave
out of my lines a nest.

They came
before these lines came.
They did not have to pick
twigs and straws of my thought;
they had their glue, of course.

The way they fluttered
above my head, it seemed
I did not exist for them.
Or maybe, they accepted me
as a part of the landscape
they had come to inhabit.

Laying eggs
the mother-bird prayed.
I joined her:
Let the chicks see the light of day.

Only one of them survived.
I watched them feed it
from their tubular beaks,
watched the fledgling grow
day by day but failed to see
when it learned
the art of flying.
I never saw
it touch the ground on its tiny feet.

Once they were a threesome
they were hardly to be seen
till they disappeared
in a windy night.

They are gone.
The nest, now in tatters,
taunts me to retrieve from it
the lines they wove.
THAT PAIR OF PIGEONS

This humid afternoon
a pigeon fell at my feet, bleeding,
cut by the blades of a revolving fan.

While I cleaned my room
I found another pigeon
on the skylight.

I do not know
which one of the pigeon pair,
male or female, died.

But the other pigeon on the skylight
still glowers at me
seeking an explanation I cannot provide.
OVER A CUP OF TEA

Our house is without a fence.
All that is there are only sparse hedges,
a few trees of jasmine and a kaniar
(of late I discovered this funnel
of a yellow flower is dear to our lord
Jagannath). Here sleep comes late
and leaves early. Still drowsy
you come out to the balcony
with the morning tea
and with an accumulation of
days of doing nothing. You imagine
the balance the days, emptied,
would make
were they to be placed
one atop another, and on top
of them all you sitting
with a cup of tea and letting
yourself flutter horizontally —
a 5’4” temple banner.
Breaking the spell
a small gray bird comes hopping
towards you and picks worms
and seeds — the dawn is
so quiet you could hear them cracking
inside its beak. Then it goes away
without bothering to look at you,
making you realise the flimsiness,
the transparency of your being,
your being inconsequentially there
in one sunny morning with a
cup of tea, and your inability
to say something like
I let a morning with a bird go by
for sheer fear that the other bird
will soon be here somewhere
on electric wires or eucalyptus tops
with its too familiar note,
tu tuu, tu tuu,
which, in your mother tongue,
sounds like ‘the end of you’.
Relating to Birds in Postcolonial Australia

It would be possible to construct a very convincing account of Australia’s special relationship with birds: how quite early in the nineteenth century many prominent people (and organisations) mounted some of the first environmental skirmishes around the conservation of birds; how some of our prominent poets and writers forged an aesthetic and moral connection to the land through their writings about birds; how artists such as Russell Drysdale used bird motifs to persuade Australians to adapt to our unique conditions; and how birds became cherished symbols of states and nation (Cozzolino and Rutherford 1991; Smith 1997). It would also be possible to point out the 8000 strong membership of Birds Australia; the 7000-odd birdwatchers who took part in the research for the New Atlas of Australian Birds between 1998 and 2001; and how they made over 4.3 million bird sightings of our 1,200 bird species in over 130,000 locations across Australia. All this is impressive but does it warrant the conclusion that Australians have created a particularly good relationship with their native birds. This paper sets out to evaluate this question using a variety of historical and sociological data and especially in the light of a comparison with the relationship the British have established with their birds. 

It is of course also possible to point out that twenty-five bird species have become extinct since colonisation and that on the dawn of a new millennium Birds Australia (which is the unopposed authority on the matter) claimed that one in five species is now seriously under threat. It is also possible to contrast the 8,000 or so bird enthusiasts who, under the careful guidance of Birds Australia, do so much good work for bird species and habitats, with the one million Australian households (around 17% of all households according to another survey in 2000) who keep birds (most of whom are native species) in cages, aviaries and in other confined domestic circumstances. Counter intuitively perhaps, the proportion of households keeping captive birds also seems to have grown over the past thirty years. The Petcare Information and Advisory Service, for example, found that only 12% of Australian households owned a bird (excluding poultry) in 1974. The figures for all of these surveys are based on nationally representative sample sizes and, interestingly, both surveys found the same proportion of household owning dogs (48% in 2000 and 47% in 1974) and cats (30% in both) so one can be reasonably confident in pointing out a substantial rise in caged bird-keeping in Australia. Significantly, in terms of the total numbers of individual animals kept, birds substantially outnumber all of the principal species of companionate species. The 2005 Pet Net Survey estimated that the total number of birds owned
by Australian was 9,000,000 compared to only 3,754,000 dogs and 2,426,000 cats (Pet Net 2005). According to a report in 1997 by the Australian Government’s Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, the one million bird-keeping households in Australia spend an estimated $4.15 million on their upkeep (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, 1995).

On the face of it then, this evidence demonstrates a seemingly ambiguous or contradictory attitude to Australia’s native birds, but the evidence cited so far does not permit very much to be concluded about the nature of the relationship that Australians do have with birds, which is clearly very complicated: both conservation and companionship can be very positive. This essay therefore investigates the question: how do we relate to birds in postcolonial Australia? It will first of all sketch some of the important ways in which Australia has built strong conservational practices in respect of its birds, particularly in relation to various forms of colonial exploitation and how that effort has been undertaken by a broad cross section of political, scientific and artistic communities. It will also set out the main forms of evidence for Australia’s contemporary relationships with birds.

To put the Australian material into better perspective the discussion will then take a close look at the British who were the principle colonisers of Australia. As a former colonising nation, and one as equally concerned with its own environment, they have developed a particularly strong, almost obsessive relationship with their own native birds. Yet they have also developed similarly strong views and practices in relation to the keeping of exotic bird species as pets or companions, which also contrasts very markedly with the Australian case. Such contrasts points up the truth of the continuing influence of colonial experiences (whether colonised or colonising) on present day mentalities and practices (in the former colonies and former colonising powers). However the essay then draws on the material from the first ever national study of human-animal relations in Australia, a major ARC funded project conducted by the author between 2000 and 2004, in order to investigate and resolve the seemingly contradictory relationship between a robust bird conservation movement and an even more robust determination to keep the same species in captivity.

Australia and its Birds

If the memoirs of Horace William Wheelwright are anything to go by it is surprising that any Australian birds were left after the mid-nineteenth century (Wheelwright). As a professional shooter, he and countless others like him wandered from district to district down the east coast of Australia shooting every available bird and animal in sight in order to feed the world’s insatiable appetite for fur and feather. Trained as a lawyer, Wheelwright came out to the goldfields in the 1850s to make his fortune, but ended up turning his hobby into a paying concern for around eight years. Afterwards he returned and wrote up his Wanderings into a guide for the benefit of other keen shooters, and there were undoubtedly plenty of them, who wished to spend a sojourn in Australia shooting its wildlife. One
Figure 1. Information for birdwatchers at a wetland hide in Kakadu National Park.  
(Photo: Adrian Franklin)

Figure 2. An evening flight of cockatoos being observed by author and a tour group on Aboriginal land, NT.
Figure 3. Watching magpie geese feed with a tour group, NT.

Figure 4. Plucking a magpie goose with guided tourists on Aboriginal land, NT. Although many of the party had been to bird watching sites in the area, there was no obvious sign of distress when the Aboriginal guide joined the party with a freshly shot magpie goose to be consumed at the end of the tour and indeed, they were enthusiastic to help prepare the bird. (Photo: Adrian Franklin)
Adrian Franklin

senses that he did not intend or seek to justify to others, the making of a great fortune from shooting wildlife; instead, it was sufficient for him to show how the killing of so many animals was a fine way to finance a romantic form of travel in an exotic land. The language he used to recreate the excitement of shooting eagles and parrots seems perverse now but perhaps then it was set in perspective by the awe with which new settlers and adventurers experienced the vastness and dangers of Australia and the absence of any appreciation of their impact upon it. David Carnegie’s report of his thirteen month long prospecting ‘Expedition into the Great Victoria and Gibson Deserts’, to Halls Creek in the Kimberleys and then back to Coolgardie, also conveys a sense of limitless wildlife resources. At Shiddi Pool he wrote: ‘Of the bronzewings, which at sundown and before sunrise lined the rocks literally in hundreds, we shot as many as we wanted. How thick they were can be judged from the result of one barrel, which killed fourteen’ (qtd in Rolls, 291–93).

The scale of this shooting did not pass unnoticed and it was not universally ignored even if it was in many senses normative in most states. Governor David Collins in Tasmania made an order in 1804 to stop the shooting of swans in the River Derwent when this was deemed to be a valuable resource for the embryonic colony. It was also in Tasmania where the earliest move to protect birds was made through its introduction of close seasons in the 1860s (Bolton 98). Elsewhere at that time, in NSW and Victoria, there were bird protection laws but they only applied to introduced bird species. (Hutton & Connors 1999:40). It was really only later in the century when consumer markets (especially for lyrebird and bird of paradise plumage) for women’s fashions expanded hugely that the impact on native birds was severely felt and objection was voiced/raised. Tasmania formed an ornithological society in 1888; South Australia formed a Bird Protection Society in the 1890s; in Victoria bird protection was carried out by the Bird Observers Club, formed in 1905. State organisations lobbied their governments to improve game laws and extend close seasons and in this work they were joined by sympathetic journalists who called for consumer boycotts to end cruel fashion trades. Such political work resulted in a new Bird Protection Act passed in South Australia in 1902 and this was followed by similar legislation in New South Wales and other states. However, the feather trade could not be effectively stopped without Federal support and this was pursued by a new organisation, the Australasian Ornithologist Union. As Drew Hutton and Libby Connors argue, this was ‘the first organised environmental activity to pierce the Australian consciousness about a particular environmental threat’ (40–41). This organisation pushed for Federal reform up until a showdown in 1908 but in 1905 a new scandal added fuel to the fire: it was revealed that Australia’s seabird population was being obliterated for its oil. In the end the campaign to enact effective trade barriers was unsuccessful but the defeat resulted in a renewed effort to continue the campaign: this time by extending it to include mammals and by a new push to bring wildlife protection
issues into education. One result of negotiations with the Commonwealth that did succeed in 1908 was the introduction of a ‘Bird Day’ in Australian schools. Another was the formation of a Gould League of Bird Lovers in most states after 1909. These organisations worked to establish bush walking clubs and habits among Australian city dwellers and so contributed towards to the establishment of parks and reserves later in the century.

It is possible from the 1920s onwards to trace a complex but important network of environmentalist individuals and organizations that trace their inspiration and resolve back to these early ‘pro-native bird’ groups and their campaigns. One of these threads links the founder of the National Parks Association, Romeo Lahey, with another significant conservationist who was also a literary leader. Lahey was married to the sister of Philip Wright, father of Judith Wright, and stories of ‘Uncle Romeo’s work are said to have inspired her as she grew up’ (Mulligan & Hill 155). Judith Wright’s environmental and conservation work was of course focussed around the Queensland branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society and its major battle to conserve the Great Barrier Reef. However, her poetry extended her influence to a national audience and it is her particular emphasis on birds in her poetry that interests me here. As I have written elsewhere, native animals were particularly important in imagining what it was to be properly Australian (Franklin 2006b). Aside from the formally representative and symbolic, which of course are important, many city dwellers began to form more embodied relationships with the nature of Australia, particularly through bushwalking. Bushwalking connects the walker sensually to country and that country is no longer merely country but the country that they walk; which therefore resides in their memory connecting them to the species that live there. The same is true of those who, like Judith Wright, came to live in a more remote place (in her case, Mt Tamborine, Qld) and formed a bond with it and its creatures. Most powerfully of all, this connection erodes those colonial doubts about belonging and place and permits roots to grow. As Mary Fullerton wrote in ‘Emus’:

Suddenly that hour she knew  
That this far place was good  
This mighty land and new  
For the soul’s hardihood  
For hearts that love the strange  
That carry wonder  
The bush, the hills, the range  
And the dark flat under. (1944 4)

In ‘Emus’, Fullerton seems to reveal a tipping point, when migrants to a new country can replace a sense of foreboding and doubt with one of wonder and confidence. In ‘Return’ one senses a further development: the feeling of belonging and again it is expressed through natural connections and metaphors:

All here again, the beast, the bird, the bush,  
Expelled for many a year…. 
If I return, then why not they?
We are all native here. (1942 6).

For others, toiling in factories and workshops the new bushwalking fashion was slow to enrol them, to move beyond the exclusive (and often male only) circles of varsity and government. By the 1930s it was sufficiently popular for the poet Robert Rowbotham’s cobbler father to take part in and enjoy and he was particularly diverted and recreated by the pleasures of bird watching. In Rowbotham’s 1950s poem ‘The Bird-Lover — In My Father’s Shop in the 1930s’, the author’s father’s life of boredom and repetition is counterbalanced, but also entangled, with the freedom and beauty that birds offer him, repeatedly. Birds perhaps more than any other animal can be sensed as an important escape. They can be fed, watched and heard as if they are singing for others, as indeed they often are.

He is the bird-lover and the solemn mender
Of shoes; in shop half-light endures the leer
Of a ceiling, leather’s irritation, the taste
Of tacks and the petulant thump of a hammer’s head
Beating above the tremor of his heart.
Around his feet the chips of leather fall
And tumble like the crumbs he throws to wagtails, sparrows
And pardalotes in spring, when ‘weekend’ means
A closed shop door, an open heart, and the songs
Of a valley miles away by zig-zag track,
A wing by a thought of love…. The valleyed trees
There brush from him the dungeon-dust that smells
of drab routine. Cupped in the earth’s contours,
He drinks a thousand lyric syllables
To toast the day and sits against a rock
Lit with flecks of congealed sunset, feeling
A legend warm his bones…. Here he pounds
A mite of pointed steel into a shoe
Which, in its dark restored perfection, seems
To his dreaming eyes a moment like a bird
At rest … and he fondles it with rough hands.

These poems expressed the sort of feelings that prefigured the first attempts at conservation by people who now felt that Australia and Australianness mattered. By the time Judith Wright’s poetry came to prominence in the 1950s and early 1960s, Australian conservation, as with conservation movements elsewhere, was more serious and possibly more angered by the idiocy of so much development in natural areas and the power behind it. In literary styles much had changed in the way animals were written into conservation-orientated narratives. Particularly important were those books written in the ‘animal-first and third-person’ by authors such as Henry Williamson in the first half of the twentieth century and his books, *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon*, for example, became popular and were highly influential internationally in adding misanthropic notes to the
conservationist sensibility. As I have written elsewhere this genre positioned animals as good, balanced and sane and humans as spoilers, out of control and irrational (Franklin 1999). It was not only a response to the destruction of natural habitat and the more questioned morality of hunting in modern times, it was also a reflection on the state of modern humanity following the catastrophic First World War. In Germany, Salten’s *Bambi* was one of the most graphic and hard-hitting cases for the wickedness of humanity (and even Walt Disney’s first versions of Bambi which had to be severely softened before a final version was considered releasable to a US audience) (Salten 1928; Cartmill, 1993). Such works had a profoundly negative impact on hunting — the most promiscuous, fleshy (to use Donna Haraway’s preferred term) of entanglements with nature. In the earliest days of Australian bush walking circles, guns and hunting were part of the scene but they had mostly disappeared by the 1960s. Equally, the previously disturbing interventions of natural history practices — the collecting of specimens, the hunting of bird egg collections, and the general mentality of ‘closing-in’ on nature to sketch, photograph and study (all common enough up to the 1950s) — were beginning to fall from fashion among the conservation-minded as they slowly transformed into what was to be called environmentalism (Macnaghten & Urry).2

The ethic of ecology and the integrity of environments come through strongly in Wright’s poetry. It is clear that she feels the aesthetic and political significance of treating nature as a whole rather than aestheticising bits of it over others.

We cannot understand that call

Unless we move into his dream
Where all is one and one is all
And frog and python are the same
We with our quick dividing eyes
Measure, distinguish and are gone.
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies
Yet one is all and all are one

(Judith Wright, ‘Rainforest’, 2002 21)

While she is able to identify a better ecological way of approaching the world as a human, she is still enraged by what humanity does and expresses this in misanthropic lines such as these from ‘Australia 1970’:

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
Dangerous till the last breath’s gone,
Clawing and striking. Die
Cursing your captor through a raging eye…
I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
The drying creek, the furious animal,
That they oppose us still;
That we are ruined by the thing we kill.

(Judith Wright, ‘Australia 1970’, 2002 34)
The idea that nature/birds will triumph over humanity is not a message but a fantasy and Wright’s stronger message is one of human reform, human modesty and a respect for nature that triumphs over our will to consume it. This is very clearly expressed in ‘Lyrebirds’:

Over the west side of the mountain,  
that’s lyrebird country.  
I could go down there, they say, in the early morning,  
and I’d see them, I’d hear them.  
Ten years, and I have never gone.  
I’ll never go.  
I’ll never see the lyrebirds —  
the few, the shy, the fabulous,  
the dying poets.

…….

No, I have never gone.  
Some things ought to be left secret, alone;  
some things — birds like walking fables —  
ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart.

(Judith Wright, ‘Lyrebirds’, 2002 36)

Clearly, Wright’s reluctance to see the lyrebird from the perspective of a visitor or tourist seems to her to be more noble than to interrupt them merely in order to see them; it expresses the ideal of ‘leaving them be’, to know (and rejoice) that they are there and yet deliberately not visit them. It is possible to sense in the 1970s through to the 1990s, a time when the ethic of environmentalism became very strong in Australia, the extension of this practice of separation. There was less enthusiasm to leave wilderness tracks in pursuit of animal encounters (of all kinds) and a greater impulse to reduce the human burden that native animals had to endure. Although bushwalking was no less popular, visitors to the conserved areas were encouraged to keep to the tracks reserved for human use and to avoid wandering ‘off-trail’. Such a policy does not of course preclude seeing birds or bird watching but it does not permit the same degree of access or freedom to roam that the craze for bird watching elsewhere has engendered, especially in the UK. It is entirely possible that the enthusiasm that has grown for such intrepid determination to see individual birds, nests, singing or sites breeding colonies and the rest — in other words, to be a twitcher or quasi-twitcher — was not as favoured in Australia as it was elsewhere.

In Britain where twitching has been taken to the nth degree there are very few wilderness areas per se and human access to bird sites is more or less unhampered. One hundred and twenty thousand miles of footpaths thread their way through every district and wild space, through individual farms and national estates. In Australia, by contrast, the nature of land division, ownership and access in Australia does not favour the development of a mass bird watching movement.
because the national parks are typically at a significant distance away from the major population centres, making easy access problematic. The huge swathes of farming and other lands (with significant bird watching potential) between the metropolis and the national parks is predominantly private. There are typically no paths or trails between landholding that would permit free and easy access and landowners are typically reluctant to give permission. Ironically then, despite occupying vast spaces humanity ends up pressurising the very spaces that are deemed most natural which then prompts codes and rules to reduce access and encourage an ethic of separation (Shoard 1987).

If an ethic of concerned separation has become widespread, perhaps accounting for the small proportion of Australians who have taken to bird watching (in the USA bird watching is also more popular too) it would seem all the stranger if the same people, the environmentally conscious, developed a passion for keeping native birds as pets. On the other hand, in response to the perceived threat from introduced species, many of which are kept as pets and companions, some in the environmental movement in Australia have called for the domestication or ‘companionisation’ of native species. In October 1996 the West Australian Liberal Member of Parliament, Richard Evans, for example, called for the complete eradication of feral cats by 2020 and the introduction of native animals as pets. Other influential Australians have supported this move. In 2000, for example, Professor Mike Archer from the Australia Museum promoted the keeping of native pets on the ABC’s Radio National *Earthbeat* and he was joined by a very active group of fellow thinkers (ABC 2000).

This uniquely postcolonial situation could potentially result in the substitution of native animals for exotic species as principal pet categories in Australia and it could be that this discourse has already had an impact. It might be one of the reasons why survey evidence from the last thirty years has traced a growth in parrot and budgerigar keeping in Australia. However in the study of human-animal relations conducted by the author between 2000 and 2004, there is data that might throw some light on these trends and their possible explanation. One possible hypothesis is that the Australians who support environmentalism, who endorse an ethic of non-disturbance of native wildlife, who are typically city dwellers and who therefore find bird watching less attractive and/or viable, are not the same Australians who keep native birds as pets and companions. This would not affect the irony of the two trends but at least it would rule out an inconsistency in their relations with birds. Before looking more closely at this data I want to turn to the British case, to see why for them bird watching is so attractive and the keeping of birds so repugnant (for the history of this growing repugnance see Thomas 1983).

**The British Case**

It is very difficult to find any evidence that Australians share the same degree of enthusiasm (or obsession) for birds as the British. Lacking the charismatic mega fauna of Australia perhaps, the British have concentrated their totemic
energies on what they really do have a lot of, their birds — and which are much more densely distributed across their smaller land mass. In Britain there is one bird species for every 376 sq. kms compared with one for every 6,348 sq. kms in Australia. Two thirds of all households claim to feed birds and a recent estimate of the numbers of active birdwatchers put it at 3 million (Unwin 2005). Over 2.4 million Britons are now members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, paying around $100 per year for the privilege. In 1999 the value of bird watching in the UK was estimated to be 212 million pounds ($530 million) and there has been a massive increase since then (World Conservation Union 2005:5). Birds Australia, the equivalent of the RSPB in the UK, has around 8000 members as of 2005 and an estimated 7000 Australians are active birdwatchers (Birds Australia 2005). Nonetheless, it is quite clear that human associations with wild native birds in Australia are nowhere near the scale or intensity of the UK. In the UK approximately 5% of the population are active birdwatchers and 2.3% are paid members of the RSPB whereas in Australia around 0.34% are active watchers and 0.39% belong to Birds Australia. On the other hand, as I have noted in Australia around 1 million Australian households (or 17% according to another survey) own birds as pets or companions as compared with a mere 2.8% of British households. Put crudely, the British seem to favour encounters with native birds in the wild and eschew owning both them and exotic species as companions or pets, while in Australia it is the other way around. The Australian preference seems to be to own or to have a specific relationship with birds, most of which are native birds that have a long history of companionate or domestic relations and it is a preference that is growing.

Explaning Relations with Birds in the UK

How can we account for these patterns and trends? In the British case the answer is relatively straight forward. By international standards the British have been extremely sensitive to the moral and welfare position of animals generally in society, being the first to establish anti-cruelty legislations (in 1842); the first to establish a Vegetarian Society (1847); and among the leading group of nations seeking anti-hunting legislation in recent years. In 1995, 55% of British people agreed with the statement ‘Animals have the same moral rights as humans’ as compared with 42% of Australians, 44% from the USA and 48% from New Zealand (Zentralarchiv fur Empirische Sozialforschung). It is particularly over the last thirty years that profound changes can be discerned, particularly with regard to birds.

In 1971 the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (founded 1889) had a membership of 98,000; but over the next ten years the membership quadrupled to 441,000 and, astonishingly, between 1981 and 1997 its membership topped one million and it has continued to rise (National Statistics 2007). To put this in perspective, none of the other major wildlife-oriented organisations had anywhere near the same membership or expansion: in 2004 Friends of the Earth had 114,000,
Greenpeace had 194,000, WWF had 240,000 and the Wildlife Trusts had 320,000. The conclusion from this seems undisputable: there was something about birds that caught the attention of the British and their imagination. What could it be?

In comparison with most other forms of wildlife, birds are more plentiful, more visible and more accessible. Most British native mammals are nocturnal while almost all birds are diurnal. So even if the highly secretive, long-persecuted native mammals could be found, they are always tricky to actually see with any clarity. Birds on the other hand are not only plentiful they are evenly distributed across just about every space and ecology, including the cities and suburbs. So at a mundane level, a major leisure phenomenon was distinctly possible but what were the motivations?

First, there was increasing scientific evidence during this period that the British bird heritage was under threat: the numbers of the most common bird of all, the house sparrow, was declining rapidly in relation to overly restored and bird-proofed house renovations, and many countryside birds were declining as a result of changing farming practices. Since in both cases humans were the cause, perhaps, they felt a need to atone. Hence the growth of these protective activities: joining an organisation that uses its funds to protect birds legally; feeding birds; installing bird nesting boxes and watching birds (and a lot of birdwatchers take part in bird surveys that monitor populations) express not only a moral concern for birds but also emphasises their national significance. It is estimated that there are now between five and six million bird nest boxes installed in gardens throughout Britain (one in four households have one) and there is a National Nest Box week

Figure 5. A bird feeding station in Child Okeford, Dorset, UK. (Photo: Adrian Franklin)
in February every year to encourage the installation of more. The bird feeding industry was estimated to be worth £180,000,000 in 2004 and to grow to be worth £500,000,000 by 2014.

Second, in many ways birds are proxies for the nature of Britain and are very expressive of national identity. Certainly, like most totemic animals they are very effective symbols for their human neighbours and the much cared-for areas. The avocet stands for wetlands, the bittern for marshlands, the house sparrow for city dwellers (especially cockneys), the swan for the monarch, the red kite for Wales, the golden eagle for Scotland and so on. Critically, however, in a crowded and highly developed island their significance also arises from being tied in with
symbolising specific types of habitat and issues of habitat loss. The act of making a trip to watch birds in specific contexts is at the same time to ‘keep an eye on them’. Birds generally, and especially bird watching, seem to provide a very active and aesthetic form in which to express environmental concerns and to do something positive about the environment.

The context in which so many people want to encounter birds, therefore, is in the wild (even if that habitat is suburban or even inner city), in their habitat and in a state of health.

An equally important issue is the relative absence of any tradition of keeping native birds as pets. Historically, as Keith Thomas has shown, there was a very strong market for caged native birds in the UK. They were kept to provide their
song, but not always: Charles II had a pet starling (not known for their dulcet tones) and James I had a pet kingfisher (not known for any tone) and the London market for all manner of birds (including the market for the Jackdaw — a corvid which was kept prior to the importation of parrots because they could speak) thrived right into Victorian times (Thomas 111). By the late seventeenth century, however, the practice attracted criticisms of cruelty and ‘unfreedom’, and criticism was directed at the caging of birds in particular (there was also blinding, wing-clipping and tongue-slitting to be concerned with too) (Thomas 154).

By the end of the century moralists and aesthetes alike agreed that the song of a bird in a cage could give no pleasure. Wild birds were a symbol of the Englishman’s freedom and even aviaries were objectionable. As Lord John Russell told the Commons in the 1820s: ‘It was not from the bars of a prison that the notes of English liberty could ever be heard; to have anything of grace and sweetness they must have something of … wildness in the composition.…’ (Thomas 279)

Indeed in the nineteenth century the practice was widely and severely criticised as when William Blake wrote ‘a Robin Redbreast in a cage puts all of heaven in a rage’. After *The Protection of Birds Act* 1954 all wild birds were more or less protected from any form of capture or possession and whatever market for native birds existed until then was terminated. Prior to the 1970s when the birding enthusiasm took a grip on the nation, exotic birds were common enough as pets but that too changed. Indeed a recent survey showed how the numbers of companion birds plummeted. Popular right up to the 1960s, numbers dwindled particularly over the past thirty years. The British national budgerigar population, for example, dropped from four million in 1964 to 1.8 million in 1987 and in 2004 only 2.8% of households owned one. Equally, the importation of wild parrots halved during the 1980s and today only 1% of households own one. It is unlikely that caged birds are found in more than 3% of households in Britain but, to repeat, in Australia a recent survey placed them in 17% of households.

Certainly the British government clamped down on illegal importing and made licensing more effective but the explanation is more complex. There can be little doubt that the ethical and moral loading attached to the specific way in which the British have encountered British native birds (watching in wild places and accommodating and feeding wild birds around the home) over the past forty years has had a knock-on effect on attitudes to those birds that were commonly seen as companionate: the canary, the budgerigar and the other parrot and finch tribes — many of which came from Australia. The current British bird obsession is based on the ethics of protection and the moral rights of birds to live unmolested in their home range and habitat. As Thomas notes, ‘the caging of birds is unmistakably interleaved in the national imaginary with the abuse of liberty and in literary forms, with the confinement of and cruelty to women’ (279). The notion of capturing, exporting and then keeping birds from different lands in caged accommodation opposes these principles in the fullest possible
sense. Added to this, there is also the sensitivity and historic guilt that comes from being a major colonising nation in the past, and building an entire economy and culture on the exploitation of others. Over the past twenty years the issue of the importation of exotic species to feed a seemingly insatiable demand for pets caused considerable scandal. To many it smacked of an unsavoury form of colonial exploitation, in moral terms comparable to the slave trade, but also, perhaps, to other scandals associated with the sex trade, child slave trade and the exploitation of migrants. Even though many birds sold for companionship and amusement are bred in captivity in the UK, the notion that Europe is still the epicentre of a global exploitation of resources and bodies tempers whatever benefits people may see in the pleasures of companionate birds and no doubt contributes to their continued decline and fall from fashion.

**Bird-Kee ping in Australia**

Although more than one in six Australian households has a pet or aviary bird — a high figure by any standards and one very rich in native bird content — this is an instance where the average is deceptive. More precisely, it says less about national taste/consumption of wildlife, than it does about Australian class cultures (Franklin 2007) shows very clearly that the bird-owning population of Australia is primarily comprised of lower income groups, blue-collar and retail white-collar occupations, the non-tertiary educated, and rural-living Australians. Recent studies of those who join environmentalist organisations or support Australian environmentalism suggest strongly that these people are recruited from among an entirely different group — the higher paid, white-collar professionals (especially those in the public service) and the higher tertiary educated living in the capital cities (Tranter 1996; Franklin 2006b). In other words, there is no contradiction at a cultural or a national level over attitudes and practices towards birds: instead there appears to be a class cultural cleavage. The educated middle classes who have taken a leadership role in Australian environmentalism have enacted practices and policies that conserve and protect native wildlife, all of which serves to create a regime of minimum disturbance and the propriety of separation. The argument has been made here that this minimum disturbance ethos may contribute to relatively low numbers of birdwatchers in Australia but it is also consistent with avoiding giving support to the native wild bird trade and keeping native birds as ‘captives’.

**The Data**

Those Australians with doctorates, Masters and Bachelor degrees differ markedly from those with non-tertiary educational backgrounds with respect to key information about relationships with birds. Only 8% with Doctorates, 11% with Masters degrees and 10% with Bachelor degrees reported keeping a bird on their property as compared with 21% with no formal educational qualifications, 19% with TAFE or Trade qualifications and 18% with School Leaver certificates.
Similarly, only 5% of professional white-collar occupations, and 14% of managerial and administrative white-collar workers reported keeping a bird as compared with 27% of semi-skilled blue-collar workers, and 23% of unskilled blue-collar workers. The proportion of those keeping birds in the income bracket $10–$50,000 was double (18%) those earning between $51,000 and $70,000 (9%).

These variables (education, occupation and income) demonstrate a statistically reliable rift between middle-class and working-class Australians in their relationship with pet or aviary-kept birds. I am only really interested in the overall difference in proportions keeping birds in the UK and Australia, which is extremely significant. The point of the rest of the paper is to interrogate the gross Australian numbers to see if there are any important variations. There was practically no difference along gender lines (women 17% men 16%). There was a concentration of bird-keeping among those aged between thirty-six and fifty-five with far fewer in age groups either side but this was true for most companion animals kept in Australia. Finally, in spatial terms, the capital cities were less keen on keeping birds than those in rural and regional Australia (for example, Melbourne 11% and rural Victoria 24%).

It is also important to understand the motives for keeping birds and it was anticipated that most people would mention their entertainment value (their singing, their beauty, their ‘antics’) but in fact, the main reason given for acquiring them was the same as that given for cats and dogs (the most popular companion species): as company for adults (50% gave this reason) and company for children (37% gave this as a reason). A higher proportion gave ‘company for themselves’ as a reason for acquiring a cat (79%) or dog (81%) but birds were the only other significant companion species in Australia.

The emotional significance of birds suggested by this data is reinforced in respect of another question owners were asked: do you regard any of the animals you keep as part of your family? On this variable birds were even closer to cats and dogs. Forty-five per cent of bird keepers regarded their bird as a member of their family as compared to 52% for dogs and 55% for cats. Although it may be counter-intuitive to many not used to the company of birds, birds show clear signs of close emotional attachment to humans. Love, jealousy, bereavement and loss have all been recorded for many of the species kept in Australia (Anderson 2001). It is entirely plausible that the reasons for wanting to keep birds and avoiding keeping birds relate to very separate issues and that these issues derive from experience within the life world of each class culture. Working-class bird-keepers seem to focus on the specific, close and embodied relationship that it is possible to have with a bird. That such a relationship is possible and desirable may be widely known within some working-class fractions and be absent from many middle-class circles. Such experience has given rise to the idea that humans and birds can live together in a relationship based on mutual care. It is a view that underlines the similarities, commonalities and therefore the mutualities that exist between
human and non-human animals. By contrast, middle-class views on native birds come from an entirely different angle, one based on the assumption that a bird’s life is better if it is wild, free and undisturbed by contact with humans. It is a view that underlines the essential differences between human and non-humans (Tester 1992). When respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that ‘People who mistreated pets should be punished in the same way as people who mistreated their children’ it was the groups who kept birds that were in most agreement and those who did not keep a bird that were in most disagreement.

This subtle but possibly very important distinction is illuminated by answers to a question about animal rights in the survey. Historically, Australian environmentalism has remained very quiet about animal rights since in its view the proper subjects of its concern are ecologies, ecosystems and environments not individuals who can be given rights. Nonetheless environmentalists are no doubt aware of the depth of opinion behind already established rights of individual animals to be treated in particular ways. The law, for example, prohibits cruelty to animals. The Wilderness Society has not been keen on animals’ rights for the other simple reason that the extension of animal rights would hold irrespective of where any one animal lived, and as a social movement the society was keen to pursue the eradication of those animals that did not live inside their native ecologies but which were feral, introduced or foreign.

In previous focus groups across a range of class, gender and age permutations it was found that the greatest support for animal rights issues and opposition to the extermination of introduced species in Australia was among those who had had very little exposure to higher education and those circles where environmentalism is strongest.

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement ‘Animals are deserving of the same moral rights as humans’. Fifty-five per cent of the sample agreed but again, it was the less educated, blue-collar occupations that were in most agreement and the most educated and the professionals who agreed least. For example, those with Doctoral, Masters and Bachelor degrees were below average (46%, 33% and 47% respectively) while those with no formal educational qualification, those with school-leaver certificates and those with none were above average (60%, 57% and 63% respectively).

**Relationships with Wild Birds**

In the survey all respondents were asked whether they encouraged, tolerated, or discouraged wild species onto their property. Of all categories of wild species, birds were the most encouraged (62% reported encouraging birds) and least (actively) discouraged (only 4% tried to keep birds off their property — presumably to protect fruit). Importantly perhaps, place seems to matter in our relations with wild birds around the home. Among the most encouraging were those respondents from Perth (81%), rural WA (75%), Adelaide (73%) and rural Tasmania while those from Sydney, ACT and NT were the least encouraging (50%,
53% and 56% respectively). Other keen ‘encouragers’ were the widowed (70%), full-time housewives, (87%) the retired (79%), and white-collar managers and administrators (79%). Only the unemployed were particularly discouraging (40%).

Data was also collected on observing, feeding and photographing wildlife. Although observing birds cannot be isolated from this data the nocturnal nature of so much other wildlife means that a great deal of the reported observation must be of birds, even if such data cannot be taken as a register of bird watching *per se*. Fifty per cent of our sample of 2000 Australians claimed to observe wildlife frequently. In the case of people from Perth, NT and rural WA the proportion exceeded 65% indicating yet again a possible special relationship with birds in WA and NT. In age terms, the most keen to observe wildlife are the 40–65 year olds, and the 16–25 year olds are the least keen. Thirty-two per cent of respondents fed wildlife frequently, a group that is much smaller than the UK equivalent (66%) but one in which the over 56-year-olds and rural Australians predominate. Clearly more focussed research would be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

This essay has suggested that the aggregate data on Australian attitudes to birds needs to be disaggregated in order to show that there is not one pan-Australian view or experience, but that there is broadly speaking at least two and that these are based on relatively clear class cultural coordinates. What looked at first to be a relative disregard for birds in Australia (the relatively small numbers of birdwatchers; the relatively large numbers who keep them captive) can be interpreted in an entirely different, more positive but nuanced manner. More research needs to be done but the evidence presented here suggests that birds are important to Australians but that people express their care for them and enjoy their presence in very different ways both amongst Australians and in comparison to the British. Opinion, attitude and practice seem to bifurcate in class cultural terms, particularly as between the educated social elites (particularly of cities) and the less educated working classes (and particularly rural Australia).

Some space was dedicated to looking at the historical experience of middle-class Australia in the conservation and the environmental movement, an experience that gave great emphasis to conserving by upholding separate lifeworlds and the practice of non-disturbance. Humans were to be encouraged to love and visit nature as environments, or as ecologies, but only in such a way that impact and disturbance was minimised. Such a new ‘nature culture’ (to use Donna Haraway’s term though she prefers the two separate words to be rolled together because they cannot in theory or in reality be separated) emphasises the connectivity and collectivity of nature rather than a special focus on particular aspects of it, and this connectivity and collectivity is expressed in aesthetic terms through such genres as wilderness photography. This view would not endorse a passion for concentrating on one element of nature as bird watching seems to do (Franklin 2006a).
Working class cultures have remained relatively isolated from environmentalist circles and culture, but we have seen how their experience with individual birds, and the possibility of making a profound and meaningful emotional relationship with them has been most telling in their experience and attitudes. In their view it is possible that birds and humans can share a good, caring relationship based on mutual love and affection. Their keenly felt views about the familial status of their birds and the moral equivalence of those who mistreat children or birds reinforces such view. Depending on the bird in question such relationships can be very long term (for example, 17% of our bird-keeping respondents had had their bird for over ten years). This view is not based on theory or intellectual opinion on how one should properly relate to animals but on embodied, emotional experiences of how people can and have related to birds, positively. Such bird-keeping cultures do not coalesce over night but have long historical precedents and develop often with networks of enthusiasts sharing knowledge. It would be worthwhile to conduct an historical investigation into bird-keeping in Australia, to see whether there were special conditions such as individual loneliness and social isolation that favoured the development of close ties with companionate species. I am reminded, for example, early on in Patrick White’s *Tree of Man* how the two isolated men, ‘old Joe Skinner’ and Stan Parker, once alone on his new remote holding, seemed to attract the friendship of birds, and both fed them crumbs from their table (White 12–16).

There are also powerful legal frameworks and commercial markets that render these practices normative and even nationally significant. In Victoria, for example, it is legal to own without a licence no less than twenty-four different native birds as compared to one mammal, (the dingo) and eight reptiles.

A relatively new discourse that has some connection with environmentalism has also encouraged the development of specifically Australian companion species as a replacement for foreign and problematic species. Palimpsest-like, colonialism is present in all postcolonial nations and the totemic recruitment of native birds into our hearts and homes has not at the same time ruled out the colonial mentality of exploiting them as a national resource or symbol. In 1995, for example, the Australian Government’s Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation notes that ‘Many Australian native birds and reptiles have much higher economic value … (up to 60 times more valuable) … in foreign markets than they have at home. An industry based on them is appealing’ (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 1995). Equally, as I have argued some political leaders and other influential professionals have called for the replacement of native for introduced species as companions and pets for Australians. In his broadcast on Earthscan in 2000, Professor Maike Archer of the Australia Museum argued that

[O]ne of the ironies of this whole thing is some of the most suitable ones … are actually endangered, and while we watch our endangered animals declining to the point of
extinction, some of them vanishing forever, thinking that we’re doing the best we can by leaving them in the wild and leaving them alone, in fact by not valuing them, by not getting closer to them, by not integrating them into our lives and ours into theirs, the indifference that we have in effect to their wellbeing, leads to many of them being lost.

Professional views such as this endorse the working class practice of keeping birds and question the (well-meant) wisdom of separation that is favoured in middle-class circles. Keeping native species such as birds is not merely symbolic: creating close embodied ties is, at another level, a ritual enactment of postcolonial naturalisation.

NOTES

1 Only fish outnumber birds and although fish do form close relationships with humans, they are not seen as companionate in the same way birds are.

2 This is an excellent discussion of the transformation from natural history to environmentalism and its consequences.

3 In Tasmania, for example, many new building developments contain covenants to restrict the keeping of cats among residents.

4 The current Bird List contains a total of 570 different recorded species which is a lot less than Australia’s 1200 although it represents a denser concentration of different species over its smaller territory.


7 William Blake, Auguries of Innocence, 5–24, Cygnet, London.

8 The Protection of Birds Act 1954. Today the protection for birds is summarised by the RSPB in the following points: ‘You may not:
   intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird;
   intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird whilst it is in use or being built;
   intentionally take or destroy the egg of any wild bird;
   have in one’s possession or control any wild bird, dead or alive, or any part of a wild bird, which has been taken in contravention of the Act or the Protection of Birds Act 1954;
   have in one’s possession or control any egg or part of an egg which has been taken in contravention of the Act or the Protection of Birds Act 1954;
   use traps or similar items to kill, injure or take wild birds;
   have in one’s possession or control any bird of a species occurring on Schedule 4 of the Act unless registered, and in most cases ringed, in accordance with the Secretary of State’s regulations (see Schedules);
   intentionally or recklessly disturb any wild bird listed on Schedule 1 while it is nest building, or at a nest containing eggs or young, or disturb the dependent young of such a bird.

9 The nation’s many pet and vet shows carry regular stories of evil importers.

10 Data collected in 2000–2004 for the ARC funded project, The Changing Nature of Human Animal Relation in Australia. The survey was administered via telephone to 2000 Australians and the sample drawn is representative at a national, regional and ‘capital city’ level.
11 King quail (*Coturnix chinensis*)
Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)
Zebra finch (*Poephila guttata*)
Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*)
Western rosella (*Platycercus icterotis*)
Scarlet-chested parrot (*Neophema splendida*)
Bourke’s parrot (*Neopsephotus bourki*)
Elegant parrot (*Neopsephotus elegans*)
Turquoise parrot (*Neopsephotus pulchella*)
Alexandra’s (Princess) parrot (*Polytelis alexandrae*)
Gouldian finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*)
Star finch (*Neochmia ruficauda*)
Blue-face finch (*Erythrura trichroa*)
Long-tailed finch (*Poephila acuticauda*)
Chestnut-breasted mannikin (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)
Double-barred finch (*Taeniopygia bichenovii*)
Red-rumped parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*)
Rainbow lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*)
Painted firetail (*Emblema pictum*)
Peaceful dove (*Geopelia placida*)
Diamond dove (*Geopelia cuneata*)
Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)
Sulphur-crested cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*)
Little corella (*Cacatua sanguinea*)


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In my family, ornithology meant lyrebirds. Just before I started school we moved to the market town of Croydon, at that time beyond the fringes of suburban Melbourne. The Dandenong Ranges were in our backyard, close by — too close when the major fires of the summer of 1962 swept through, and my father joined the firefighters and came home, late, blackened, with his eyebrows singed. But in late autumn and winter, the Dandenongs were cool, friendly and at peace. Dad and I would rise at 5 am, long before dawn, and creep around a chilly and dripping Sherbrooke Forest, with sticky black soil clinging to our hands and knees. Ornithology meant being quiet, listening, searching, for Spotty. I could never quite work out how my father knew which of the birds we heard was Spotty, except that we seemed to follow the loudest and clearest calls. Usually we would find him in a clearing, foraging in deep leaf-mould with his long feet. Sometimes we were really lucky and he would throw his long tail over his head and dance.

My father, like so many enthusiasts before him and since, never tired of the antics of the lyrebird Menura novaehollandiae. He never noticed it was cold or wet when he was watching lyrebirds. Much has been written about the beauty of their tails, but the fascination of this bird for him was its almost-human personality. With large bright eyes adapted for dark forest life, and teasing calls — master of both mimicry and ventriloquism — Spotty lured us to thinking like a bird. If we could wriggle into a position where we could watch for a sustained period, we could observe the tricks of the trade. He would be here — but his call was over there. Whose call? My favorite was his Whipbird imitation, but it could equally be a Bell Miner, or one of the many scratchy little calls of as-yet-unidentified Little Brown Birds. Spotty was an ornithological schoolmaster. As he worked through his mellow repertoire, Dad would whisper to me the names of the birds
Spotty was imitating. The sounds were not all birds. He did a splendid breaking twig too — the noise he possibly associated with us.

* * * * *

The lyrebird is secretive, but not always shy. It takes the trouble to bury its discarded feathers and drop the faecal sacs of its young in streams to be washed away. Yet its bold encounters with the human species have given it a special place in the popular imagination. The mutual fascination of lyrebirds and people emerges from many of the curious lyrebird anecdotes recorded in the ‘Stray feathers’ sections of early Emus. The men building a road into Walhalla, east of Melbourne, in 1907 were favoured with a regular ‘building inspector’, a male lyrebird who capitalised on the grubs and worms disturbed by the works. ‘On Friday morning last it paid no fewer than ten visits to the scene of operations’, The Argus reported, ‘The bird whistles beautifully, sitting on the bank near, and seems to have no fear of his friends. He has several dancing-beds in the vicinity, and is a beautiful bird, with a tail about 2 feet [60 cms] or over in length’ (‘A Confiding Lyrebird’ 104).

Many of the early twentieth-century reports express concern about nests so close to the ground: ‘In Southern Gippsland foxes have become so numerous that all ground nesting birds are in a fair way to extinction’, The Australian Naturalist reported in 1906. ‘It is to be hoped that before the last of [the lyrebirds] fall victims to Mr Reynard, they will learn to build out of reach’. L.C. Cook at Poowong in South Gippsland recorded that indeed lyrebirds learned to build nests higher and higher as fox numbers increased (101).² H.V. Edwards described its nesting habits as ‘erratic’, and in 1919 reported a nest in the fork of a tree over 18 feet above the ground (298–99).

The assumption that this bird could ‘learn’ where to place a nest was supported by its ability to learn sounds. It was well-known for its double calls — reflected in many of its Aboriginal names, including Golgol in the Newcastle area and Buln Buln in Gippsland (after which the Shire is named). Anecdotal reports included lyrebirds imitating knapping (chipping stone), chainsaws and even the three blasts of a timber-mill whistle. One bird caused havoc by imitating in duplicate the three whistle sequence of the mill. Thus it inadvertently gave the six blast signal that was reserved for reporting a mill fatality!

³ The lyrebird’s curiosity about human activities made it possible to domesticate if caught when very young. Jack (1885–1905), a tame friend of S M’Neilly, grew up on a farm at Drouin, in Gippsland. Jack’s life history and antics were closely monitored. At the age of six or seven he developed his magnificent tail, which he shed each year in an annual moult. He fed on grubs, worms and the occasional bit of meat. He loved his bath and preened his feathers for some time afterwards. He was so interested in people that he was constantly in the way — hence his favourite saying: ‘Look out Jack!’ His mimicry included the noise of a horse
and dray moving slowly, dogs howling and chains rattling, a range of musical instruments including a violin, a piano and a cornet, and other useful sayings such as ‘Gee up Bess!’ People so often said to him ‘Poor Jack’, that he had learned a reply: ‘Not poor Jack, fat Jack.’ His death on 18 April 1905 was recorded in *Emu*.

Tom Tregellas (1864–1938) was one of the earliest to make the lyrebird his specialty. He sought to find out as much as he could about its life-patterns and behaviour. For seventeen years he camped regularly in a boarded up large hollow log he called ‘Menura’ in Sherbrooke Forest observing and photographing the Superb Lyrebirds for whom his home-away-from-home was named. About 1913, he started using identifying bands of his own making. He banded every nestling he could find, but never saw any of his banded birds as adults in all his long and careful observation and study. It is possible that the bands he used were worn off by the energetic foraging of the lyrebirds on the forest floor (Reilly 5).

Tregellas’ mission and obsession with the lyrebird enthused a younger photographer, Ray Littlejohns, who was responsible for the first moving-film footage of the bird in the 1920s. Littlejohns recalled that his first introduction to lyrebird technology had not been a happy one: ‘in fact it was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life’ (10). Littlejohns had volunteered to assist Tregellas with one of his lectures on the lyrebird, through operating ‘a lantern of ancient design, illuminated by an intricate carbon-arc system. My failure to coax more than a flickering glimmer of light from the infernal engine wrecked the visual aspect of the lecture’ (10). Nonetheless the lecture kindled more than a flickering glimmer of enthusiasm for lyrebirds in the assistant’s heart, and twenty years later, Littlejohns wrote *Lyrebirds Calling from Australia* a small book illustrated with his own photographs produced to cheer up the troops at war in 1943. It reminded visitors that ‘Australians are more than a little proud of the lyrebird’ (9).

Littlejohns credited Tregellas with changing Australian attitudes to lyrebirds. The former collector turned observer certainly crusaded for lyrebird protection with all the zeal of a late convert. And lyrebirds needed protection. The decorative lyrebird tails of the federation era extended throughout the whole south east corner of Australia in a misplaced gesture of patriotism. The taste for lyrebird tails as parlour decorations was deplored by Spencer Roberts in Queensland: ‘numerous tails adorned, *horribile dictu*, the houses of many of my patients’ (242). John Leach observed one in a lady’s hat on the corner of Collins and Spring Streets, Melbourne (114). Sid Jackson reported on horrific lyrebird drives in northern New South Wales, whereby hundreds of male lyrebirds were slaughtered ‘to supply globe-trotting curio-hunters with the unique tail feathers’ (45). The practice was common in Gippsland too, where male birds were disappearing at an alarming rate. In 1915 L.C. Cook of Poowong reported stories of female lyrebirds ‘deprived of their consorts’. One lone female had chosen to live with the domestic hens on a farm at Glen Alvie, and was a brilliant mimic of her new companions (52).
Littlejohns was wrong when he attributed to Tregellas the connection between lyrebirds and nationalism. Lyrebirds adorned colonial and national postage stamps, furniture and coats of arms long before Tregellas took up their cause. Lyrebird motifs were prominent, for example, on an arch erected by the German community to commemorate the opening of the first Federal Parliament in May 1901. What Tregellas did do was to redirect destructive patriotic fervour towards lyrebird protection and observation, rather than trophy-hunting. Tregellas made the trip to Sherbrooke Forest a visit to a sacred site, something undertaken with respect, on hands and knees.

The lyrebird has, more than any other bird, challenged the latest technology in every era. When Littlejohns took up its cause, he felt the need to show the bird, singing and dancing. Filming birds in the 1920s was a major enterprise, and *Emu* published some frames from his 1925 film (Littlejohns 271–74). The Lyrebird was the subject of the first live broadcast of a bird on the wireless through the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1932, 1933 and 1934. Littlejohns was behind this and also, in 1931, the first live gramophone recording, *The Song of the Lyrebird* (Chisholm 22; Boswall 65–74).

Lyrebird enthusiasts have often been masters of photography as well as sound. A.J. and A.G. Campbell, L.G. Chandler and A.H. Chisholm were all keen lyrebird photographers. Chisholm, author of *The Romance of the Lyrebird* researched the history of lyrebird discovery, as well as studying them in the field. Michael Sharland who watched over the lyrebird’s introduction to Tasmania in the period from 1934–45, was also an outstanding photographer, as was Ralph Kenyon, who started the first Sherbrooke Survey Group in 1958. More recently, the author, scientist, photographer and retired Director of the National Parks Authority, Len Smith has written two major books about lyrebirds, illustrated with his magnificent photographs. He has also recorded lyrebird song and mimicry. Moving photography has also advanced with the century, and Laszlo and Jenny Erdos’ 1986 video, *The Kingdom of the Lyrebird*, includes a spectacular sequence capturing lyrebirds dancing, courting and mating in the wild.

Lyrebirds have been a major challenge to science as well as technology throughout the twentieth century. Because of the patient studies of Tom Tregellas — who thought nothing of waiting ‘from dewy morn to dusky eve’ to photograph and observe the birds — we knew much about its habits and its habitat, its antics and breeding behaviours (Tregellas 95). We even knew from Charles Stone’s observations that its eggs are porous: ‘during the process of blowing beads of water exuded over the whole surface’ (109). But with all this detailed knowledge we still seemed no closer to understanding how it fitted in with other birds. Here was a bird that could sing like a dream, but could barely fly. It had distinctive big feet, so well adapted for scratching the forest floor. The failure of the bird to fit known categories is reflected in the diversity of its names. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century some called it a ‘mountain pheasant’, others thought its tail
demanded that it belong with the Birds of Paradise, whilst still others referred [to] it as the ‘wren as big as a peacock’ (Leach 113). By the beginning of the twentieth century, lyrebirds were in an order by themselves, adjacent to but not part of the ‘perching bird’ order.9

The twentieth century has seen Passerines transformed from ‘perching birds’ to ‘singing birds’. ‘Singing’ birds have then been divided into oscine (Passeri) and sub-oscine (Tyranni) according to the structure of their syrinx. The syrinx, named for the nymph chased by Pan who became the reed of the panpipes, is the voice producing organ of birds. The most advanced and complex syrinx is a feature of the Passeri. Most Australian passerine families are in this class.10 The lyrebird’s latest grouping among the Corvida, a largely southern branch (parvorder) of the Passeri has built on both established knowledge of the lyrebird, and on new studies of its close relative, the scrub-bird. The superfamily Menuroidea also includes the bowerbirds and treecreepers. The other very Australasian superfamilies included in the corvine assemblage are Meliphagoidea and Corvoidea. It is striking how many of the birds chosen as distinctive avifaunal emblems for Australian states and used as national motifs, like the lyrebird, are Corvida. There are major exceptions of course, including the Emu, a Ratite of Australasian origins.11

In the history of bird-song recordings in the Australasian region, the lyrebird, master of mimicry, was first, and has remained very significant. It [was] the first species recorded by Norman Robinson when the CSIRO Division of Wildlife established a laboratory for the study of animal sounds in the 1960s. Robinson was a pioneer in the field of sound recording and analysis for specialist scientific workers (Boswall 72). The scientific study of bird song has contributed significantly to understanding territorial and other behaviours. For many birds of the north-temperate regions, only males sing, but in the Australasian region and elsewhere, females sing too, sometimes in a cooperative display.12

Regional variation and even lyrebird history can be inscribed in song. In a remarkable study spanning over thirty years, Norman Robinson and Syd Curtis, a Queensland lyrebird enthusiast, analysed the territorial songs of both lyrebirds by region. Astonishingly, the song of Tasmanian lyrebirds, introduced from Toolangi in Victoria still resembled that of their counterparts north of Bass Strait. They maintained their precise dialect over generations for more than fifty years.13

Lyrebirds provide an excellent motivation for ornithological excursions, at least in the eastern states, because they are active in late autumn and winter, a time of year when other birds tend to be at their least active. Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra all have Superb Lyrebirds within an hour’s drive of the city, and since they were introduced into Tasmania, the Superb Lyrebird is an attraction of Mt Field National Park, near Hobart.14 They are not found in South Australia, the Northern Territory or Western Australia. Attempts to introduce them to the Karri forests of southwestern Australia in the 1920s, something discussed at length at the time of the RAOU campout at Normalup in 1927, came to nothing.
Lyrebird conservation has been a particular concern because of the proximity of much of their habitat to large and sprawling cities. Harold Bradley, the octogenarian secretary of the Sherbrooke Survey Group, is typical of the many voluntary enthusiasts who have supported the conservation work through banding and observing over the years. In 1998, the group of a dozen or so spent 1000 hours surveying lyrebirds and their habitat in 377 visits to the forest, and produced 233 written reports of sightings located with compass bearings. This group is ‘the eyes and ears of the forest’ for Parks Victoria. Their work and that of Len Smith, and Parks Victoria, is collectively having some conservation success through predator control programs directed at foxes and feral cats. Lyrebird numbers are at least stabilising now after many years of decline, and the signs are that their survival rate is increasing in Sherbrooke.

Brisbane’s population must drive a little further to the forests in the mountains on the southern border country and search a little harder for the rare, rich chestnut Albert’s Lyrebird *Menura alberti*, which is a little smaller than the Superb. Albert’s is now the only other species of *Menura*, distinguished by Gregory Mathews from *M. novaehollandiae* because its tail lacked ‘the long curved out rectrix’ (Roberts 243). Queensland’s Albert River was part of its home territory, but echoes of its royal name also appear in the historic subspecies, the Victoria Lyrebird, *M. novaehollandiae victoriae*, a darker Superb, so called because *Menura superba* was the name given to the bird collected in 1798.15

Albert’s Lyrebird is much less studied and more threatened than the Superb. It is more secretive and less inclined to mimic. With a very limited range and precise habitat needs — forest floor with thick leaf-litter and deep soil in high rainfall areas — and possibly as few as 1500 pairs left, they are not yet on the official ‘near threatened’ list, but moving rapidly that way.16 Knowledge of the optimal habitat needs of the Albert’s Lyrebird is scant. A new study conducted by Sandy Gilmore between 1996 and 1998, suggested that, if all else is equal, the birds prefer Eucalypt rather than ‘rainforest’ habitat. Eucalypts growing on deep soil in high rainfall areas are very productive and attractive to the timber industry, especially if they are accessible. The latest Regional Forest Agreement for example, has resulted in logging concessions being granted in Whian Whian forest in the Nightcap Range, New South Wales, in exactly the place which Gilmore’s study shows may potentially contain the best habitat for the bird.17

* * * *

Spotty was not just Spotty for our family. He was a Melbourne institution of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. His dates are recorded: 1942–64. Like his predecessor, Timmy (1927-53), he was a reason to visit Sherbrooke Forest for generations of parents and children.18 Spotty starred in a television documentary ‘Dancing Orpheus’ in 1963 (Reilly 80). He was the last of the ‘famous’, personally-named lyrebirds. The proximity of his haunts to a growing major city made him famous, but also
vulnerable. In 1964, Spotty disappeared. Although he was very old (possibly nearly 22 years), there were suspicious circumstances. My father muttered about vandals and shots being heard in the area. Like much of Melbourne, my family went into mourning about his disappearance. I was seven years old when I heard of his death. It was the end of an era. We didn’t seek out lyrebirds much after that. The poet, Judith Wright didn’t either:

Some things ought to be left secret, alone;
some things — birds like walking fables —
ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart

(‘Lyrebirds’).

NOTES
2 Cook also reports a ‘control’ experiment whereby he trained the birds on his property not to build on the ground by removing the eggs himself as soon as they were laid there.
3 ‘Knapping’ is reported by Edwin Ashby from Cowra Creek, New South Wales, pp. 94–95. Chainsaw and cross-cut saw stories abound. The six blast story appears in Australian Geographic 5 Jan-March 1987, p. 3.
4 Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 1909, reported in Emu, 9(1), 12 July 1909, p. 45.
5 The lyrebird featured on a New South Wales postage stamp as early as 1888.
8 The film was edited by David Cooke, and reviewed by Stephen Davies in RN 71, March 1987, p. 12.
9 Order XX in Bowdler Sharpe’s list, as reported by Leach in 1911.
10 In Australia, the Pittas are the chief representative of the less complex syrinx or ‘suboscine’ group, though some suggested that lyrebirds and scrub-birds belong there too. See Reilly, The Lyrebird, p. 74.
11 The Black Swan (Western Australia) is clearly another exception, as was the Magpie Goose chosen for the International Ornithological Congress.
13 I am grateful to Eleanor Russell for drawing my attention to this fascinating study.
14 The first suggestion that lyrebirds be introduced into Tasmania was made at the Hobart Congress of the RAOU in 1906, and supported by letters from the ‘Tasmanian Field Naturalists’ Club to the Chief Secretary in Hobart. Fear of the growing threat of mainland foxes was the chief driving force behind the initiative. Emu 8(2), 1 October
As well as Victoria Lyrebird there was another subspecies, the Edward Lyrebird, lighter in colour than what was described as *M. n. novaehollandiae* and simply called ‘Lyrebird’ in the era before the 1926 Checklist. See A J Campbell, ‘The Lyre-Bird, *Menura novae-hollandiae*, Latham: a Key to Varieties, or Sub-species’, *Emu* 21(4), p. 241. In Richard Schodde and Ian Mason’s 1999 *Directory of Australian Birds*, this older division has been returned, with ‘Edwards’ being north of Sydney, and ‘Victorias’ south. The question of whether David Collins’ species name (*superba*) or Latham’s (*novaehollandiae*) had priority has been extensively debated. Both were published in 1802, but convention now favours Latham.

The estimate of 1500 pairs is made on the basis of 600 known male territories for a total estimate of 1000 territories in New South Wales, and extrapolated from that to take into account Queensland, where territories have not been counted. Sandy Gilmore, *pers. com*, 25 November 2000.

The relevant concession is approximately 3,000 hectares. Alex (Sandy) Gilmore, ‘Distributional ecology of the Albert’s Lyrebird *M. alberti* in North-east New South Wales’, presented at Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress, 29 June 2000. See Astheimer and Clarke *Second Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress*, p. 69.


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My days in the plateau were sung by coal-black birds.

There were other birds, of course — the Bassian Thrush; the Crimson Rosella; the Yellow-Breasted Robins out the back; the Eastern Spinebills in the grevilleas under my study window; the nesting pair of Bulbuls; the raucous Red Wattlebirds; the Satin Bowerbird and his squabbling elegant troupe; the sweet Golden Warbler; the Whipbirds, who whistle up the morning from wherever it’s been; the Kookaburras, whose is the dawn and the dusk; the Currawongs, who sing their name and steal everyone else’s; the migrating Cuckoos and Koels; the tiny Thornbills; the Gang-Gangs, scarlet headed, metal grey, with a voice like an iron gate opening in fog; the Sulphur-Crested Cockatoos, shockingly white, some kind of errant messengers of the fallen gods; the Sacred Kingfishers, itinerants, gods themselves; and in the valleys, the eagles.

But my days in the plateau were strung on the plainsong of black cockatoos. Particularly the days of that last Christmas.

December in the plateau is the season the black-cockatoos fledge their young. In the days before Christmas, a pair that has nested by our bungalow at the edge of the scarp for as long as I have lived here, and probably much longer, feeds its young one on the cones of the black pines. The three of them strew the ground and batter the Jeep with ransacked seedcases, which drop to the ground and lie like exploded grenades.

These birds by my house are the yellowtails, *Calyptorhynchus funereus*. They’re named for their plumage and their song; mourning is their habit. Their cry is an unearthly, world-weary keening. ‘Whyla’ is what it sounds like, and that was what the Gundungurra called them, for that is how the birds named themselves. ‘They sing all our grief,’ Judith Wright wrote once. But that is just a projection. What they’re doing these days of Christmas is weaning their child; they’re teaching her to fly.

With a tired kind of grace, with the slow and languid beating of their wings that is also their habit, this couple leads its young one from treetop to treetop — from silvertop ash to pine to peppermint gum to pine — as though they were decking the boughs and ringing the house with song. It’s not a happy song — more a wail than a wassail. It’s an incantation, a spell, a sad kind of carol.

A week after Christmas there is only one cry in the trees about the house. The parents have abandoned their child to the plateau, and flown wherever it is that they go — down into the valleys or the city parks along the coast. They’ll be back;
but she doesn’t know that. For now she’s lost. Soon enough the place will find her. She doesn’t sound like she knows how lucky she is.

WHY I CAME AND WHEN

I came to the plateau in the winter of ninety-eight. A place a thousand metres in the air and a hundred ks west of the city. Not far west, but far enough. A world of sandstone and eucalypt and unregenerate weather, a place just fallen from the sky. The pitch of the night and the closeness of the stars within it and the sky asleep in the valleys at dawn: I came for that, and I came for the faces of the vermilion stone that no one would ever own, and I stayed because there was real estate here, nonetheless, in all this inalienable wilderness, that even I could afford.

I came to leave the city behind, a place that never wanted as much of me as I had wanted of it; I came to live with a woman I loved in a landscape that never ended, and I thought I’d like to be here yet if it did.

The house we found in May and moved into in August was a plain timber cottage, caught somewhere between Federation and California Bungalow, and it stood on the south side of Katoomba, and since 1911, when the allotment was cut from woodland near the cliff’s edge, it had sat without pretension through all the years in all the wind above the valley of the Kedumba. A stand of trees, peppermints and silvertop ash, geebungs and banksias, kept the house from the valley and the valley from the house, but most days I took the path through those assembled and restless trees to the edge of the scarp and looked down to where the plateau had once been and where now only the valley remained.

To live in the plateau is not to live high, but deep; it is to cleave to a landscape most of which is gone and most of which is space and most of which is down below you. To live in the plateau is to live inside something, not upon it. Katoomba sits on a narrow ridge, and canyons gape all about. They surround you; they are where your eye wanders and your mind falls. The valleys are the larger part of what the plateau is, and they are what it will all one day become.

ANTIPODES

The sky had fallen — pieces of it. It was early morning, and down below the escarpment, cloud sat like snowdrift, and it had the valley covered.

On cold clear nights like the one that had just ended, the valley surrenders its warmth fast, and the air inside the valley cools more rapidly than the air above it, and it finds itself stuck. Moisture — the perspiration of the soil, the transpiration of grasses, the breathing of the streams — saturates the cold incarcerated air and gives it form and turns it white. And so in the morning, the valley has pulled down the sky and trapped it and transfigured it as cloud.

And as I looked down to where the Kedumba should have been, five white cockatoos flew up out of the cloud and perched in the crown of a eucalypt on the scarp. The birds stayed uncommonly silent; cloud insists on silence. They sat above the cloud, three hundred metres below me, and they waited for the sky to
work out which way was up. The world was upside down, and I was at the top of it.

But it wasn’t the sky that had fallen; it was the valley trying to leave. And the sky was having none of it. High above me, a sheet of altocumulus flowed in from the south. It too would pass, and the day would slowly warm, and I would go back inside to work, and by midday the night prayers of the Kedumba would have dissolved the sky’s resistance; they would have been accepted and forgotten. The valley would be the valley again, and the air would all be blue from top to bottom.

**THINKING LIKE THE SKY**

I’m taking the Prince Henry track, later that same day, thinking about the sky, and here’s what I’m thinking. You cannot stand on sky, but you can be in it as you can be in water or in sleep. Not like the birds, of course, who own it in song and flight. And I envy them — these three black cockatoos, for instance, rowing heavily through the late blue air below me; these two white cockatoos dropping in the dusk faster than light down the face of the escarpment, spinning like twin gyres — I envy them their poise through three dimensions, their acquaintance with the amplitude of things, their perspective. But this will do, this walking with only one’s head in the clouds.

Sky is the mind of the country, its abstract thought, its awareness of itself. Weather passes across it like bright ideas and sour moods and memories. The sky is how the land dreams — and where. It’s an ecstatic kind of ground.

Sky is ideal; land is actual. Sky is infinite and quick; land is finite and slow. I’m looking out now over the Kedumba Valley and feeling the sky’s impetuous geomorphology roll and unroll. I’d need a satellite map to see it; but it’s out there happening all the same; it is, in fact, a whole lot realer than it looks. Ridges are rising and travelling north and eroding again all in an afternoon’s orogeny. Troughs deepen and dissipate — look. Plates collide and pull apart; basins fill and empty. And there’s not an idea it rehearses up there in its swirling pressure cells and down here now in the valley, over and again, that is not taking place, or has not already, or won’t sometime, among these rocks I stand on.

One is always, as I am here, subject to the sky’s eternal and cyclical reinvention of itself. Wind and cloud, specifically, are the children of what passes for love between land and sky up here; between the ideal and the actual, here. Between mind and body. Now, and again now. Up here, I live inside the weather. But there’s more to it than weather; I live inside a state of being, a particular quality of awareness, a personality, ignited by the place where the infinite meets the finite, here. I walk along this animate ridge, inside the plateau’s sensibility, shifting with it, unmaking my mind and making it up again in a characteristic pattern not unlike the plateau’s.

Sky goes fast; land goes slow. But nothing is really standing still. Even a plateau runs like a river. Changes like a mind.
KARMA

One winter’s night I drove back from three days in the Kanimbla, and the sky was low, and the road was lost in it. I rounded the bend on Kurrawan, taking it easy because it’s hard to see when the sky is turbid and you’re driving at the bottom of it, and my lights picked out a shape on the tarmac. A shape that said lump of wood. I pulled alongside it. Thinking cat or possum. But it was frogmouth, playing chicken.

I wound my window down, and she turned her amber eyes upon me without moving her head. She’d heard the car and seen the lights, and made of herself a broken branch. This is how frogmouths disappear. They raise their beak and petrify.

‘I’d move, if I were you,’ I said.

And she did. Without a sound, the branch took flight. I lost her in a moment.

Three hours later, after getting in and making dinner and sharing it with the kids, I went outside near midnight to haul the rubbish up to the street. The sky was still the sea, and the night was still the bottom of it, and at the top of the drive I looked up and saw through the mist something roosting on my mailbox. Broken branch with yellow eyes. It stopped me dead. It was the bird, returned. She’d found me. I stepped closer; she stayed where she was, and she stayed calm. She sat and looked at me. And I’ve got to tell you it felt like thanks she’d come to observe; it felt like a blessing she’d come to bestow. If there are angels, she was one, and I knew it was I who’d been saved.

DROUGHT SONG

My last summer was as dry as any the plateau could remember. It followed a nearly waterless winter and a season of fire before that. Had there been water to spare the trees would have wept. But the groundwater was running low where only the tall trees could find it, and the sky was giving nothing away. All the storms were dry storms, loud and purple with cloud, rich with electricity but good for nothing more than, say, a hundred plump drops. Now and then some virga teased the canopy and withdrew and kept her virtue intact. Some of the trees didn’t make it through.

It’s troubling to see trees die like this — trees, those shepherds of fire, those talented survivors of weather. It’s as though we know who’ll be next. The younger eucalypts and casuarinas, the small heath trees and banksias — thin plants holding rocky ground and those planted in the cuttings along the highway — browned, gave up their ghosts and stood on in death. But the bigger trees managed. They mourned. They shed leaves and stopped growing awhile, holding everything within them. And then, instead of tears, they wept flowers, more colorful, more abundant, more scented with honey, than usual — flowers to make fruit to set seed to make new saplings in time, to keep the forest going once the rains came. Which they must.
All through late September, through October and November, small fires rehearsed through the dry sclerophyll forests. A large fire got going at Mount Hay in October and filled the blue-eyed sky for two weeks with that sweet hell burning eucalypts raise. There were blazes at Yengo in the Hunter, west at Lithgow, south on the Shoalhaven, east at Llandano on the Cumberland Plain. Smokes rose everywhere. You got used to that smell in the air, especially in the dusk. The trees gave it off without waiting for the fire. As though they knew what was coming and grew tired of waiting.

It is the night of the twenty-fifth of November, a night like any other but warmer. It’s still twenty-five degrees at seven o’clock when I walk out in twilight along the cliff path and find the lyrebirds. I pass under the first without seeing her. But I sense something looking at me from the limb that flies out over the path; I look up and see the bird, and then I hear her partner high up in the eucalypts beside the track. The first bird sits me out a while then joins the other in the big trees at the edge of the cliff.

For ten minutes I squat and watch the birds trapeze, all ungainly, from limb to white limb of two tall oreades, which lean into the evening, there, above the valley. They stay silent, grey ground birds unsteady in the tall timber, looking upon the valley and turning their small faces to catch the loud passage of sulphur-crested cockatoos in their sudden white plunge to blue gums on the valley’s floor. Then I walk to the next lookout on its promontory and turn and lean on the rail and look back until I find the birds again in the canopy.

The voice of a young man comes along the trail from the south, and down the stairs, and then comes a man, its owner, and a woman. We greet each other. I show them the birds in the last light.

‘They mimic other sounds don’t they?’ the young man asks.

‘Yep,’ I reply. ‘All sorts of other birds. Chainsaws, mobile phones, the works. They even do themselves sometimes.’

We talk about music-making for a bit. They’re music students from the Conservatorium in Sydney, up here for a couple of days’ break after exams.

‘What do you play?’ I ask.

‘This,’ says the boy, touching his throat. ‘I’m studying opera.’

‘Piano,’ says the girl.

So there we were, just north of Echo Point, Mount Solitary sinking into night: a young man learning to sing, but singing nothing, and a pianist, accompanying him without playing a note, and these lyrebirds, made of song but just now miming only the dusk’s brown silence, and I and the darkening valley and the dry warm night and the dry cruel ground and these weeping trees, and no water falling but these cockatoos falling like mad stars into the valley, the banksias failing, the cicadas nearly done for the day and for the season, the moon not yet up, the sun gone down and this sustained chord of remembered light and suppressed heat. Which swelled and imperceptibly faded. And not a single note of explanation.
played in all this plain and unsung music, which we were this night. Nor any rain.

In the night the wind got up. The sound of fire in rehearsal.

**THE SACRED**

It’s taken — what — six years? The plateau’s blue has taken flight and come to pray by my house.

This afternoon I saw a pair of sacred kingfishers on the power-lines near the head of my street, above the ruined swamp by the edge of the cliff. The birds perched still as idols upon the wire, caught in the divine dichotomy, alert and yet at ease, poised within the afternoon but galvanised by the prey upon which they were intent. I drove beneath them and broke their current of attention. They flew for the cover of the timber in the high school, and the blue of their flight was the colour of the fire that passes, sometimes, through the mind, the current that leaps from synapse to synapse in the brain: it had the snap of revelation. The trajectory of prayer. The tincture of divinity. But it was nothing uncommon I saw — just the blue of the wing of a kingfisher’s flight. Kingfishers are blue the world over; and the sacred kingfisher’s a common enough bird up here. You’d expect one around a swamp, no matter how long gone, this time of year.

It’s as common — this small god in its blue King-Gees, in its cyan raiment — as the small sacraments of which real life is made; it’s as common as the intervals that run between all the lives, the atoms and particles, the forms, the intervals, the fragments of time, that compose a place like this. And never stop.

But this sacred blue bird’s a migrant — like me, though more reliable. She travels. But a place like this is where she comes to nest and breed and leave again, to give herself back to her wider world.

An hour later, I left the house to run some things to town. I didn’t see the birds this time. I wasn’t looking; I drove too fast. I was going slower coming home, half my mind intent upon what I would read tonight at the festival, the other half alert for the sacred on the corner of Kurrawan and Bourne. And there it was upon the wires. The birds had returned, and they stayed this time. My car and I had become already part, an unremarkable instance, of the ecology of their afternoon, of the mind of the place in which they searched for a fresh idea for dinner.

I’m not going to tell you this was an epiphany — this seeing them and then seeing them again this close to my home after all these years of never seeing them here at all. But I thought I should mention it, this being a short sacred geography, a brief natural history of home. The birds should be in it — being sacred; this being their geography. They should be in it, no matter how late they’ve left their run. No matter how close I may be to the end of mine. They felt like some kind of an answer to some kind of a prayer. Not necessarily mine.

I’m going to steal a word for this sacred moment.² This was geophany. This was the flash of the very soul of the place. A wink from the eye of its god — a nesting pair, to be precise.
HOME IS A VERB

Leaving, the plateau told me, is part of what belonging, and for that matter becoming, entails. Passing away is what the plateau does. That is its calling. Non-attachment is what this place practises and what it quietly preaches. Eternal impermanence.

The plateau is a verb, and I am, too. For a while there I thought we were the same one. And perhaps for a while we were.

Home, too, is a verb — a word that dwells infinitely between those who say it often enough together. Home is the sayer and the said and above all it is the saying. Home is the conversation we make with what, and whom, we say we love; and what it’s about is who we are and always were. Home is a word — sometimes it is a whole sentence — for the ecology of belonging, and it includes deposition and erosion, the wet and the dry and the cold and the wind; it includes the making and the unmaking, the coming and the going, and it isn’t always happy. Sometimes it rains, and sometimes it burns, and sometimes it falls and you fall with it. But home runs deep, and it runs hard, and sometimes it runs dry, and once it starts, it never seems to end. Home happens in fire and falling water, in snow and flood, and in the shimmer on eucalypt leaves; it happens in west wind and cold night and embers in a hearth; it happens in massed stars — heaven shattered — in winter dark sky; it happens in erosion and drought; it happens in the cry of black cockatoo returning and in the cry of a new child waking; it happens in staying and in leaving for good.

For seven years, home happened to me in the Blue Plateau, and although I thought I’d left, home doesn’t seem to want to stop.

THE PAST

When the men had been and gone, when they had emptied the house of the boxes we had emptied the house into, we stood in the front room, which had long ago been a veranda where the plateau came inside and sat, and it was as though everything we had lived here, dreamed and made, broken and mended, everything the place had made of us, was yet to be.

NOTES


2 From Tim Robinson, who coined it in his essay ‘Listening to the Landscape,’ Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara, Lilliput, Dublin, 1996, p. 164, for ‘a showing forth of the Earth’. 
Raper’s Bountiful Birds: A First Fleeter’s Impressions of Australia’s Avifauna

Eight months after leaving Portsmouth, and two since the Cape of Good Hope, young Midshipman George Raper must have been very glad to see the gentle, bleached hills of New Holland. From the deck of *HMS Sirius*, flagship of the eleven ships now known as the First Fleet and carrying the convicts and marines who were to establish the new British colony, Raper may well have spotted the seabirds that signalled the fleet’s approach to land. Birds would provide him with recreation, companionship and sustenance in the new colony and feature among the artwork that forms his major legacy.

Raper began the voyage as an Able Seaman and studied navigation, cartography and topographical drawing with second-in-command Captain John Hunter and First Lieutenant William Bradley. The young trainee officer left few words, but his shipmates, including Hunter and Commander Arthur Phillip, give some indications of his experiences and avian influences.

Within days of the fleet joyfully gathering in Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, Phillip, soon to be the colony’s first governor, moved the ships north to the more suitable Port Jackson, where they set about establishing a settlement at Sydney Cove, with ‘the finest spring of water’ and good anchorage (Phillip 33). First Fleet diarist and Captain of Marines, Watkin Tench, recorded that ‘The general face of the country is certainly pleasing, being diversified with gentle ascents, and little winding valleys, covered for the most part in large spreading trees which afford a succession of leaves in all seasons’ (Flannery 70). The heath land flora particularly impressed him: ‘In those places where trees are scarce a variety of flowering shrubs abound, most of them entirely new to an European and surpassing in beauty, fragrance and number, all I ever saw in an uncultivated state’.

The birds too caught Tench’s eye; they were: ‘in great variety and of the most exquisite beauty of plumage, among which are the cockatoo, lory, and parakeet; but the bird which principally claims attention is a species of ostrich’ (Flannery 72). The latter was the Emu (fig. 1), which Tench found ‘tasted like beef’. It had ‘wings … so small as hardly to deserve the name’, but the big birds left far behind the fleetest greyhounds and were ‘so wild as to make shooting of them a matter of great difficulty’ (73).

Other birds were also wary. ‘A single snipe has been shot. Ducks, geese and other aquatic birds are often seen in large flocks, but are universally so shy that it is found difficult to shoot them’, Tench remarked. ‘The country, I am of the opinion, would abound with birds did not the natives, by perpetually setting fire
to the grass and bushes, destroy the greater part of the nests’ (Flannery 241). Still, ‘of the parrot tribe alone’ Tench could ‘count up from memory fourteen different sorts’. Hawks too were ‘very numerous, so were quails’. While he found that ‘Some of the smaller birds were very beautiful’, they were ‘not remarkable for either sweetness or variety of notes.’ Hunter concurred; he had ‘not found one with a pleasing note’ (Hunter 1793 69).

Like Tench, Hunter was captivated by the number of lively, exotic parrots. ‘With respect to the feathered tribe, the parrot prevails’, he wrote ‘all those of the parrot tribe, such as the macaw, cockatoo, lorey, green parrot and parroquets of different kinds and sizes, are clothed with the most beautiful plumage that can be conceived; it would require the pencil of an able limner to give a stranger an idea of them, for it is impossible by words to describe them’ (Hunter 69). Hunter himself painted birds — he had ‘a pretty turn for drawing’ when it came to illustrating coastlines to advantage future navigators (White 79). However, the ‘able limner’ turned out to be eighteen-year-old Raper and Hunter apparently copied most of Raper’s natural history work — a common practice at the time, in the absence of cameras and photocopiers.

Although it was also usual in the period to include natural history collectors and artists on voyages of exploration, there were none on the First Fleet, launched with the primary purpose of easing overcrowded British gaols and establishing a colony for strategic purposes and trade. Nevertheless, there was great interest in Britain’s colonies and their natural productions, and books, especially illustrated books, about these far-flung places were eagerly awaited. Tench, Hunter, Bradley and Surgeon-General John White all published accounts of their time in the fledgling colony of New South Wales.

In his free time on land, Hunter studied the medicinal uses of the flora and, with encouragement from a naturalist friend, Thomas Wilson in London, collected specimens, including examples of the fauna. Bradley too was an officer of ‘more than common abilities’ (White 79) who has left capable watercolours of coastlines, landscapes and records of first meetings with aborigines. Both officers, Hunter and Bradley, were very able draughtsman but neither had the artistic ability of Raper. As noted art historian, Bernard Smith, has written, Raper’s watercolours ‘reveal a sensitive feeling for linear design and for the relationship of the image to pictorial space, qualities in which his work far surpasses all of the other First Fleet draughtsmen’ (Smith & Wheeler 205).

At some stage Raper sketched the grey-green coastline and pale, jumbled sandstone blocks that mark the entrance to Sydney Cove and Port Jackson. His and Hunter’s sketches show the Sirius at anchor in the harbour, in the background a well-wooded landscape thins out towards the shore where patches are cleared for a few tents and fenced fields. In those early months ‘the principal business’ was ‘the clearing of land, cutting, grubbing and burning down trees’ and other activities associated with setting up living quarters, farms and gardens’ (Worgan 5).
In March 1788, the *Sirius* arrived back from Norfolk Island, having seeded a subordinate colony there. On the return journey they had discovered Lord Howe Island, 700 km north-east of Port Jackson. On the 9th March, Raper sketched the approach to the island group from several angles. There, as White chronicled on the ship’s return to Port Jackson, the sailors ‘found in great plenty a kind of fowl, being in general all white, with a red fleshy substance rising, like a cock’s comb, from the head…. These not being birds of flight, nor in the least wild, the sailors … easily struck them down with sticks’. There were ‘also many birds of the dove kind, as tame as the former … some … brought alive’ to Port Jackson (94).

These were the White Gallinule and the White-throated Pigeon (figs 2 & 3). Raper painted both — the gallinule possibly from a specimen skin. He may have drawn the pigeon from the captives brought back on the ship. Both paintings are dated 1790, obviously completed later when he was stranded on Norfolk Island. The pigeon was not recognised by science until 1915, when ornithologist Gregory Mathews viewed Raper’s painting in the British Museum and realised it depicted a new bird, a unique subspecies of the White-throated Pigeon. Raper’s watercolours are among the scant tangible evidence of these birds’ existence: the unwitting gallinule was hunted to extinction by 1834 and the pigeon by 1853.

As the beginnings of a settlement began to take shape, the surrounding area of Port Jackson was explored, always with an eye for fresh produce. In March or April, White’s party were surprised by a ‘bird [that] is so very singular in its several characteristics … the bill seems most allied to a hornbill, but the legs are those of a toucan, and the tongue is more like a crow than any other … the toes are placed two before and two behind, as in the parrot or toucan genus’ (98). White called the unusual find the Anomalous Hornbill and it is now known to be the spectacular Channel-billed Cuckoo (fig. 4). The next day ‘the Wattled Bee-eater … fell in our way’ (Red Wattlebird), seemingly it was ‘peculiar to New Holland, and … undoubtedly a species which has not hitherto been described’ (98). On a salt-water lagoon they came across nine birds that ‘resembled the *rara avis* of the ancients, a black swan’ (95). The officers fired at them, but they were too distant. White noted, with some relief, a familiar flash of white on the outer wing as they took flight. They also saw what White took to be the Banksian Cockatoo (Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo) ‘met with in several parts of New Holland’ (96). He reported that it differed ‘in some few particulars’ from the usual description. It was in fact a Glossy Black-Cockatoo (fig. 5), then unknown to science. Although the birds were new to him, White was aware that several had been collected on earlier voyages and sent back to England where they were formally described. The exploring party came across birds they recognised as Great Brown Kings Fisher (Laughing Kookaburra), Gold-winged Pigeon (Common Bronzewing) and a goatsucker ‘remarkable for the excessive wideness of the mouth’ (Australian Owlet-nightjar) the latter the Australian representative of a group said to suck the teats of goats, a proposition that White rightly noted was ‘wildly improbable’ (157). The Red-shouldered Paroquet (Swift Parrot),
however, was identified as new to science, and hence bears the scientific name White assigned to it (177). His Holland Creeper (White-cheeked Honeyeater) was also new, but overlooked as such.

Raper was to sketch many of these birds, especially the more striking species and the most colourful. A bias towards the larger and more flamboyant of the birds may simply have been what was readily shot for the pot, rather than a preference of Raper’s. As Tench recalled, the pot or spit received everything they could catch or kill. Certainly, the big birds gave Raper something more substantial to fill the page and he captured them better. Regardless of size, the brilliant bodies seem to have unleashed in Raper an eye for form and colour, if not an interest in natural history.

His art must have been an escape from the hardships: scurvy returned and there was a ‘want of fresh provisions and vegetables and almost constant exposure to the vicissitudes of a variable climate’ as Tench remembered (91). There were floggings and hangings, drought and fire. Relations with the Aborigines were poor. The 1788 wheat crop failed. In October 1788, in desperation, the *Sirius*, captained by Hunter, and with Midshipman Raper, sailed for provisions to the Cape of Good Hope. Hunter took a novel route and arrived in record time of 91 days.

In Cape Town, while stores were being negotiated and loaded, Raper and Hunter probably had some free time. There was a menagerie to visit and like-minded people to meet. Among them was Robert Jacob Gordon, a British officer stationed at the Cape from 1777 until 1795, who was said to be very hospitable and ‘a gentleman of extensive information in most branches of natural history’ (Rookmaaker 64). Gordon amassed a collection of natural history specimens and drawings both on his own expeditions and from visitors to the colony. Governor Phillip was a friend and after Gordon’s suicide recommended the manuscripts and drawings held by his widow to Sir Joseph Banks, Britain’s leading scientist of the day, who had an abiding interest in the natural history of the Colony of New South Wales. Foremost amongst Gordon’s estate was a collection of natural history paintings, now known as the Gordon Atlas and housed in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Amongst the works are three attributable to Raper, some almost identical to those in the Alexander Turnbull Library: an Emu, Brolga and Jabiru.

Raper also left his calling card amongst the drawings of Francis Masson. Masson was a botanist who collected for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Masson spent two periods at the Cape and assembled large folios of drawings. His second stay, 1786–1795, corresponded with the visit of the *Sirius* and Hunter tried to encourage him to spend time in New South Wales as an agricultural advisor, but he declined.

There is speculation whether Masson himself was the artist of any of the works in his collection or whether Gordon or some of his artists may have been the primary artists. Masson’s second collection has been lost, but Raper copied two of the paintings, presumably in 1789. Among the ‘Collections of views/sketches and natural history in a voyage to Botany Bay in 1787–1788–1789–1790–1791 by Geo. Raper’ in London’s Natural History Museum are a beautiful Gemsbok
and a Cassowary, both titled in Raper’s distinctive lettering: ‘from an original in the possession of Mr. Mason’. One of Raper’s shipmates noted a Cassowary in the menagerie, presumably from New Guinea — the species was not then known from Australia.

Mementoes of the dash to the Cape are also found among the Raper collection in the National Library of Australia. Three African birds — a Secretarybird, Blue Crane and Eurasian Crane — were probably sketched from birds in the Cape Town zoo. The three works are uncaptioned, unsigned and have identical borders which do not resemble Raper’s edgings. When Raper’s bordered his finished works he apparently always titled and signed them. Compositionally, he often put birds on a ‘pedestal’: any ‘ground’ was used as a base to the main figure and rarely spanned the painting as in these three African works. Nor do they show Raper’s strong yet refined use of paint. They may have been a gift from Gordon or Masson. Possibly Raper also took with him similar paintings, now lost, of the Gemsbok and Cassowary and copied them at a later date. Indeed, Raper’s Cassowary is signed and dated 1790, and the Gemsbok 1792, both well after the Cape Town visit.

The *Sirius* returned to Port Jackson on 6th May 1789 with welcome supplies. In June until November that year, the ship was moved to Careening Cove (now Mosman Bay) where the crew repaired storm damage incurred on the homeward voyage off the south coast of Tasmania, and leaks detected in Cape Town. Many of the Sydney paintings seem to have been done during these five months, as indicated by the plants, which are mostly spring flowering.

Among the multitude of birds Raper painted the remainder of that relatively leisurely year were: Collared Sparrowhawk; Grey Goshawk (fig. 6); Buff-banded Rail (fig. 7); Masked Lapwing; Common Bronzewing; Brush Bronzewing; Glossy Black-Cockatoo; Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo; Sulphur-crested Cockatoo; Swift Parrot; King Parrot; Crimson Rosella; Ground Parrot (fig. 8); Channel-billed Cuckoo; Laughing Kookaburra; Southern Emu-wren and Bassian Thrush; Noisy Friarbird (fig. 9); Blue-faced Honeyeater (fig. 10); White-naped Honeyeater; Eastern Whipbird and Crested Shrike-tit. Others, undated, also thought to have been painted that year include: Black Swan; Flesh-footed Shearwater; Reef Egret; Nankeen Night Heron; bittern (?); sandpiper; Silver Gull; Brown Goshawk; Brolga (?); Barn Owl; Owlet Nightjar; Tawny Frogmouth; Rainbow Lorikeet; Eastern Rosella; Fan-tailed Cuckoo; Sacred Kingfisher; Spotted Pardalote; Dollarbird; Variegated Fairy-wren; Noisy Miner; Yellow-faced Honeyeater; New Holland Honeyeater; Eastern Spinebill; Flame Robin; Golden Whistler; Grey Shrike-thrush; Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike; White-breasted Woodswallow; and Red-browed Finch. These were all at least seasonally common birds at the time.

If Raper visited Sydney today, he might draw Feral Pigeons, Spotted Turtledoves, Sparrows, Starlings, Skylarks and Blackbirds, White Ibis, and a few of the old guard, including Rainbow Lorikeets, Crimson Rosellas and Noisy Miners.
The Ground Parrot, Emu and Brolga are no longer found close to the city. The Ground Parrot, considered good eating by the First Fleeters, is listed as vulnerable to extinction nationally. The Swift Parrot, once plentiful in years of profuse flowering, is now a rare, intermittent visitor, and Endangered nationally. The Brush Bronzewing and Nankeen Night Heron are uncommon, and Blue-faced Honeyeaters, so common in the early years, are rarely seen today. The nocturnal Australian Owlet-nightjar was commonly seen by First Fleeters, perhaps because the trees in which it roosted by day were felled; few would know it in today’s metropolis. The Red-bellied Fairy-wren (fig. 11) has not been seen in the Sydney area seen since the early days of European settlement, when Raper and others drew it. Whereas the pterodactyl-like Channel-billed Cuckoos that so fascinated First Fleeters returned to the city in the 1990s after decades of scarcity. Blue-Bellied Parrots (Rainbow Lorikeets), ‘in great plenty at Botany Bay and Port Jackson’ (White 96), are among the few species to have continued to thrive.

Repairs to the *Sirius* were finished in Sydney Cove, but the colony was again short of food. In early March 1790, Governor Phillip dispatched the *Sirius* and her sister ship, the *Supply*, to Norfolk Island. Aboard were some 80 marines and officers, including Raper ‘a very promising young midshipman’ (Phillip 47), and 200 convicts; the latter Phillip hoped would be able to support themselves on the island. With its reefs and unsheltered access, Norfolk Island is a difficult place to land. Hunter appears to have been misinformed about conditions for landing and the *Sirius* was swept against a sunken reef at Sydney Bay. The loss of the ship was a disaster.

Initially, a great deal of time and effort went into salvaging provisions and equipment. Raper saved his painting case from the sea and painted the ‘Melancholy wreck’, masts lobbed and sails flailing, most likely as evidence for the anticipated court martial. Bradley also painted the stranded ship and Hunter appears to have copied Raper’s views.

The *Supply* returned to Port Jackson, but relief was slow in coming for the crew of the *Sirius*. For once there are some words from Raper on his experiences. In an extract from a letter among the papers of Banks, Raper writes almost cheerfully of his months on the island. It was not until near rescue that the 500 inhabitants were facing starvation, so his time there may have been quite pleasant — digging, planting and tending a vegetable garden, and painting.

The few surviving pages from Raper’s lengthy letter detail the role that birds played in sustaining the stranded men; the natural history aspects would have been of great interest to Banks and were presumably why he came to have that section of the letter. As Raper explained: ‘No doubt you will wonder when I tell you that the same tasks were performed on these very, very reduced Rations, as when on full allowance; but this was owing to a divine and providential resource from and about Mount Pitt, which place supplied the whole Settlement with Birds; from the latter end of March, till the middle of August. The bird is a specie
of the petrel which comes to this island about the beginning of March, when they
burrow under Ground for laying’ (77).

The petrels seemed limitless. ‘They were, at first, taken out of their holes
in the Day, but, soon after, we found Night to be the Time for slaughter, as our
whole Horizon (in the Woods), was then covered with them, and there was no
walking without kicking them before you’ (Raper 77). The loose earth on Mt
Pitt made access to their one metre long nest burrows easy. ‘About the middle
of April there were vast numbers of Eggs taken, both from the Holes and Birds,
which, if possible, were now thicker than ever’. From May to June ‘eggs and
birds were plentiful … there was no scarcity in any part of the Town, and [they]
were bartered at a very cheap rate’ (78).

Governor King attempted to regulate the harvest: ‘On the 19th April the
Birds became so very plentiful (and our stores so lean) the Governor sent out
a conditional Order, that if every person would give up half a pound of his salt
that Week, they might kill and bring home as many Birds from the Mount as
they pleased (as long as it did not interfere with their Work)’ (Raper 78). Before
this they had been restricted, ‘by allowing only so many Persons to go out at a
time, and that quantity issued out by the Store Keeper to every individual’. The
new arrangement was agreed to and ‘instantly took place’, and Raper wrote ‘the
slaughter, and nightly havock is, beyond description’ (78). Raper himself became
a dab hand at collecting ‘Birds or Cabbages (the heart of the Palm Tree)’ (79). In
May, the Governor, increasingly worried at the waste, put a stop to the killing of
birds only to collect their developing egg.

In his letter, Raper enclosed drawings of the unfortunate petrel (fig.12) and a
‘fat and firm’ fish much esteemed but scarce because there were few days suitable
for fishing (79). The latter — a wonderfully bold, modern work — he titled the
‘Snapper of Norfolk Island’ (fig. 13).

He described the island as rich-soiled and well-watered. Their gardens grew
well, he said, but grubs attacked them and so did birds: ‘the Paroquets [Green
Parrot, now Endangered] make vast havoc, devouring the Seeds of all Grain, as
well as most of the Garden Seeds; and small Spots would be entirely consumed,
were they not well watched’ (81). They took action against the marauding birds,
which, he wrote: ‘fly in great Flocks, and are so tame, that, with common caution,
you may knock them down with a stick’. Still, Raper explained, ‘in spite of these
Evils (thus far) there is no cause of complaint’. His main worry was the anticipated
inquest over the loss of the *Sirius*: ‘I fear, I dread the consequences!’ (85).

The stately Norfolk Island Pines he found magnificent but unsuitable for
masts as hoped by Captain James Cook on discovery of the island in 1777. ‘There
is some little variety of Birds. A Parrot, Paroquet, Pidgeon, Dove, Hawk and Owl,
with many small birds. The Parrot is very curios; the Paroquet common, with no
great share of Beauty: The Pidgeon beautiful, the Dove delicate, the Owl and
Hawk quite common. Amongst the small Birds, there is but one worthy of note,
which is not unlike a Robin, having a rich vermilion Breast. The only quadruped is a Rat, and those rather diminutive’ (83).

On the subtropical island, Raper seems to have found time to finish some of his paintings and rework and refine others (Red-backed Fairy-wren and Sacred Kingfisher, King Parrot, Australian Pelican from Port Jackson and the two Lord Howe birds); he also painted some of the novel fauna of the island. Several of these paintings, bordered, titled and signed, are now held in the Natural History Museum, London. Some of the apparent ‘originals’ or arguably less-polished versions are in the Alexander Turnbull Collection and the National Library of Australia. Many of the island’s common birds he drew are now extinct — the Grey-headed Thrush (fig. 14) — or in such low numbers that they are Endangered — Scarlet Robin and Providence Petrel. Intriguingly, Hunter seemingly copied so many of Raper’s paintings that his Norfolk Island Kaka (described by Raper as ‘very curios’), New Zealand Pigeon, Norfolk Island Ground Dove, all endemic to Norfolk Island and now extinct, hint at Raper paintings of these species yet to be discovered.

After five months of slaughter, on 3rd August, fellow castaway Bradley noted that the few surviving petrel chicks were about to fledge. In the nick of time, in mid August, relief arrived from the mainland. Raper was not unaware of the serendipity involved: ‘It is worthy of Remark that these Birds [Providence Petrels] were coming in when our sad and melancholy catastrophe happened. And were very scarce at arrival of relief’ (78). He reported that at the time the relief vessel arrived their gardens were flourishing, with potatoes, French beans and fine cabbages soon ready to be harvested. Indeed, he wrote that they were fortunate, ‘all our men keeping health to the last’ (78).

Bradley took a more jaundiced view, describing the situation in early August, just prior to rescue, as ‘distressed’ and complaining that ‘it is unaccountable what could have kept him [Gov. Phillip] from relieving us sooner’ (209). He also cautioned future visitors to the island that ‘The Birds which so providentially afforded us subsistence … cannot again be expected for some years, from the vast number of Eggs and young Birds that were destroyed and the ground in which they burrowed being torn up’ (221). In fact, they never recovered. After nearly one hundred years of apparent absence, in 1985, a tiny population was discovered on Phillip Island (a small island in the three island Norfolk group) and has slowly increased since to perhaps one hundred birds — a meagre reminder of the tens of thousands that saved Raper and colleagues.

But, after a long, hot summer, conditions were just as grim at Port Jackson. The Supply and Raper arrived back in early February 1791, to a heatwave and water shortage. The previous December, as Tench had written, ‘it felt like the blast of a heated oven … the sky hazy, the sun gleaming through at intervals’ (Flannery 232). By February, Governor Phillip was despairing of the hot wind and fires: ‘Great numbers of parroquets were picked up under the trees’ (Hunter 507). Flying Foxes appeared in immense numbers and ‘many dropped down unable to
bear the burning winds.’ It was not until March that the weather eased. By then Raper had departed the colony.

Raper, with Hunter and Bradley, had sailed almost immediately for England on a hired Dutch vessel, the hulking *Waaksamheyd*. As far as is known Raper made only one or two further bird paintings, the Cassowary and, perhaps, an Emu, though he continued with his coastlines and landscapes. Curiously, his Emu is dated 1791, finished either in the first month of that year or on his voyage back to England. Further trials and dangers were encountered on the journey — many of the crew died horribly from scurvy or the infamous Batavia fever.

On the 22nd April 1792, over a year after departing New South Wales, the ship arrived in Portsmouth, England, the officers to face court-martial for the loss of the ship. Despite their fears, they were honourably acquitted and, presumably, Raper, still only 22-years-old, was reunited with his family. In June 1793, following an examination of his *Sirius* journals, certification from Captains Phillip and Hunter as to his ‘Diligence and Sobriety’ and noting his ability to ‘splice, knot, Reef a Sail’, Raper was promoted to Lieutenant (Hindwood 1964 35–36).

And so Raper continued with his naval career, which was apparently uneventful compared with his Australian adventures. He died of unknown causes, in September 1796 at sea in the West Indies, as Commander of the cutter HMS *Expedition*. He was just 28. His will stated that he wished his ‘Drawings papers and Books’ be ‘Put up in my Painting Case and delivered to my dearest and beloved Mother’, the widowed Catherine (Hindwood 1964 36).

Raper’s subjects covered topography, ethnography, mammals, reptiles, fish and plants, but it is the bird drawings that form his principal contribution to natural history. The first known is the Teneriffe Partridge dated 1787 and unfinished, yet it shows that he was already an accomplished and distinctive watercolourist. His last known is the powerful image of a Cassowary in 1792. This brief but productive period in his life leaves a picture of the avifauna of the first European settlements in Australia. Some of the paintings are especially significant because they are the only extant images, in some cases the only evidence, of species that are now extinct.

There is no indication that Raper intended to publish a memoir; there are no known journals, and few letters. He appears to have had little interest in the scientific study of nature and the description of new species, though some of his paintings have ably served that purpose. It seems likely that the antipodean beauties and oddities he encountered stirred his imagination and were drawn for pleasure during a challenging period of his young life, when he encountered starvation, floggings, drownings, lethal sickness, murder and madness. On Norfolk Island, birds sustained him in more ways than one. During the quiet times, particularly in harbour and when shipwrecked, his art would have helped him fill the days. Not least it likely pleased his mentor, Hunter; it cannot be a coincidence that after their travels together ended, Raper seems never to have painted another bird.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WORKS CITED


Figure 1
George Raper
‘Emu of Port Jackson’ (with egg and detail of feather) 1791
Watercolour and ink 47.7 x 31.5 cm
Natural History Museum, London 15167
This is possibly the most scientific of Raper’s natural history works. It shows the Emu’s salient features of stunted wings, heavily scaled sturdy legs and three toed feet, and comes complete with a scale to indicate the bird’s height, easily topping 7 feet. It also illustrates the characteristic double-shafted body feather ‘of the Natural Size’ and large blue ‘Egg 5 inches x 3 and ¾ from the only one yet seen’. As with many of Raper’s works the drawing is framed with a thick black ink line and a triple-banded border, the central band of which is coloured with a pink wash and contains the title.
Figure 2
George Raper
[The White Rail of Lord Howe Island] 1788–1790
Watercolour and ink 46.0 x 31.0 cm
Alexander Turnbull Library, Auckland E-327-f-022
This untitled, unsigned work is clearly in the style of Raper and shows the very large, tame, flightless White Gallinule, which was quite common on discovery of Lord Howe Island in 1788. Its closest relative is the Takahe of New Zealand. Some individuals were pure white, others had traces of purple-blue. When Lord Howe was settled by Europeans in the 1830s the trusting gallinule was no longer present, having been hunted to extinction by First Fleeters and subsequent visitors. Two specimen skins and Raper’s paintings are all that remain.
One hundred and twenty-five years after Raper painted the unfortunate pigeon, it was recognised from his illustration as a unique subspecies of the White–Throated Pigeon. There are no known specimens and the last birds were seen in the 1850s. The drawing is signed with one of Raper’s more creative signatures: ‘GEO:RapeR’. Alone amongst the First Fleet artists, he used both Roman and Italic script, and a unique crossed ‘I’.
The huge-billed, raucous-voiced Channel-billed Cuckoo (and flowering Broom) is a summer visitor to Sydney, arriving August–September and departing March–April. Raper may have painted it (and other birds) from a specimen skin collected to take back to England for naturalists to identify the strange new species, the largest of the cuckoos. The species was to be first described from an engraving in Governor Phillip’s account of the voyage to the new colony, published the year that Raper made his painting. As here, in his finished works Raper often added a flower for balance and interest, though the plant had little or no ecological importance to the bird.
The Glossy Black-Cockatoo, one of the many parrots that enchanted the First Fleeters, was not uncommon in 1788 but is now declining in numbers nationally and seldom seen in the Sydney region. A forest bird, the large billed parrot feeds mainly on she-oak seeds and has suffered from clearing of its habitat. Raper’s flamboyant bird is a female, distinguished by the yellow plumaged head. It illustrates Raper’s flair for bold shapes and clever use of colour.
The striking Grey Goshawk (white form) was noted by Raper to be ‘Natural Size’, indicating that it may have been the, smaller, male of the species. Today the hawk is patchily distributed in coastal forests and generally eschews the districts taken up by city and suburbs.
Raper drew the Buff-banded Rail preening its feathers, one foot forward in a typical stance, suggesting that he was familiar with the live bird. It a remarkably animated composition; at the time most artists drew birds posed stiffly on a branch, often from a lumpy stuffed specimen, and with little or no indication of typical behaviour. The rail now occurs uncommonly around Sydney, where Raper would have drawn it; he may also have encountered it on Norfolk Island.
This untitled, unsigned work, thought to be that of Raper, has the words ‘Glycine or Ononis’ across the bottom — John Hunter’s customary way to record the local Aboriginal names for the various species he drew. It shows a Ground Parrot even though Raper, as did most early illustrators, placed the parrot on a perch — it is one of the few parrots that never perches. Clearing and drainage of swamps, and removal of the heathlands so admired by Tench, have ensured that the Ground Parrot is no longer found in the Sydney district.
The bizarre looking, bald-headed Noisy Friarbird (and Honey Flower) is a large honeyeater. It was described by White (1790) as the ‘Knob-fronted Bee-eater’, but feeds on nectar, insects and some soft fruits. The honeyeaters evolved in Australia and would have been very unfamiliar to the First Fleeters.
With its striking two-toned facial skin, the Blue-faced Honeyeater lives in small communal groups. Today it is rarely seen in Sydney. Raper painted it with a Leafy Purple Flag, a native iris, which echoes the curve of its body and its blue face, and a sundew for balance. Fast drying and suitable for small paintings, watercolours were the medium of choice for ship’s draughtsmen: officers, like Raper, with the time to paint.
Figure 11
George Raper
‘Birds of Port Jackson’ 1789
Watercolour and ink 47.6 x 32.8 cm
Natural History Museum, London 15143

The Red-backed Fairy-wren was one of the many beautiful small birds noticed by the First Fleeters; it no longer occurs as far south as Sydney. Raper chose to paint it with an odd partner, the Scared Kingfisher, a summer breeding migrant to Sydney from northern and inland Australia. However, the shapes make a fine composition, cleverly stabilised by the addition of the whimsical fly.
Raper was stranded on Norfolk Island following the wrecking of the *Sirius* on 19 March 1790. With the extra mouths to feed, the penal colony, established the year before, was stricken with famine. They were sustained for five months by the thousands of petrels that returned to the island each year to nest on the two small mountains, Mt Pitt and Mt Bates. Adults were easily captured at night and their chicks dug from shallow burrows in the sandy soil. The Providence Petrel, named for the episode, was itself not so fortunate and within a few years was harvested to extinction on the island.
The boldly coloured Sweetlip Emperor was sought after on Norfolk Island, as it is today, but seldom caught. It was first described from Norfolk Island in 1848 and occurs north to New Guinea. By day the fish is bright and at night changes to drabber colours; it reaches nearly a metre in length. Raper drew it lying flat, in a bold, bright composition, but John Hunter hung it from a hook.
When Raper was shipwrecked on Norfolk Island he painted a male Scarlet Robin, which he described as ‘not unlike a Robin, having a rich vermilion Breast’. It is not related to the European robins that Raper noted it resembles, but belongs to a unique Australian group. Raper teamed the robin with a Grey-headed Blackbird or Thrush, extinct since the 1970s, due to clearing, introduced rats and cats and, possibly, hybridisation with the introduced European Blackbird.
Chris Wallace Crabbe

AND GATHERING SWALLOWS TWITTER

(for Paul Carter)

You might think the world is being taken over by those properly-named rainbow lorikeets whizzing over like fighter planes that squeal but a couple of magpies have moved south into our square, reasserting the musical verities: a square in which seagulls assemble late every morning to be fed with crumbled bread by the old Greek woman next door. Sometimes we see a raven or two hoeing into dry sandwiches; and feral pigeons, oddly so-called, given they live in cities, and not at all in a secretive way like foxes do. Mudlarks, peculiarly at home with traffic are generally called peewits in New South Wales, although their yelp is far more piercing than that. Red-rumped or grass parrots will start up under your feet as you cross the far larger park, where softly spoken doves and unwelcome starlings are also grazing: Ted Hughes likened the latter to blowflies. They have a nasty sheen. Sparrows abound where concrete and crumbs abound, with a particular fondness for the stylish outdoor café, while Indian mynahs can well look after themselves. Wattlebirds are aggressive and lithe: according to Cayley they produce a sound much like pulling the cork out from a bottle of wine. At other times it’s the loud repeated effect of a donkey braying. Once I saw a bloke in nocturnal pyjamas beating a streetside tree with a furious broom, attempting to quell the din. Attractive greenies with their sliver of white carol from treetops in the most pleasing way, keeping it brief. All of them belong to a geographical culture that both underlies and overlays our own, and will no doubt be glad to be rid of us in God’s good time or that of the ozone layer or some other card in the genetic casino.
THE SPEECH OF BIRDS

That there should now
be red berries down there
to the left of third-big-tree
will concern me later

for now I know
plentiful grass-seeds are eating-ready
near fence and far enough
from cat

and even before that
I’ll pick up
those excellent lengths of straw
just the shot

for home repairs
a bit closer though
to big cat prowling ground

Four legs more dangerous
two more or less benign
but upstairs in our tree

those bloody wattlebirds
and squealing gangs of lorikeets
could drive one crazy

Some days I can’t even hear
a melodious lovesong
from down the way

nor the clamant warning
that sparrowhawk is hovering now
somewhere above leafless

riding the breath of death
The Significance of Avian Metaphors in Akachi Adimora-Ezeibgo’s *Children of the Eagle*

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle*, published in 2002, is a narrative whose multiple avian metaphors produce and are paradigmatic of symbolically significant cultural referents in Igbo traditional life. In patriarchal Igbo society in South-eastern Nigeria where the phallocentric order assumes absolute hegemony over the matriarchal principle and is inscribed within the matrices of socio-cultural institutions, econo-political patterns of societal engineering and juridical matters, it is epistemologically and ideologically important that this novel negotiates the matriarchal condition through the deployment of avian metaphors.

Eagle-woman is the name of the eponymous female character who shapes and reshapes, defines and redefines the narrative kinesis and perspective trajectory of the novel. This female protagonist is an Eagle of a woman and her five children are made in her mould. They include: Ogonna Okwara-Nduka, a secondary school teacher in Lagoon City married with four children; Nnenna Okwara-Okoli, an academic at the University of the South, also in Lagoon City and married with a son and daughter; Obioma Okwara-Ebo, a pastor and evangelist, married with four children. There are also Chiaku Okwara-Kwesi, a divorced medical doctor who practices in London and Amara Okwara, a journalist who is single but on the threshold of getting married. The only male member of the family, Nkemdirim is Eaglewoman’s grand-child born by Obioma outside of wedlock.

As the narrative begins, Eaglewoman and four of her daughters (except Chiaku) are at the graveside of the family patriarch, Pa Josiah Obidiegwu Okwara, in a pensive mood preparatory to the commemoration of his passage to the ancestral world. As the omniscient narrator informs the reader:

> They are Eaglewoman’s children. They form the centre of her life. She wakes up every morning with thoughts of them flooding her mind. Thinking of them means praying for them…. They are the joy of her life since the loss of Osai, her husband…. Each morning, without any conscious effort on her part, the thought of her children animates her body, waxes it to stir, to rise with the sun (17).

Appropriating the avian metaphor of the eagle, the novel foregrounds the potential power of women in Igbo society as Eaglewoman and her daughters engage with and confront patriarchal practices and resist the behaviour and rules ascribed by male constructed social institutions. These include land inheritance rights which
privilege men but exclude women and the subjection of women to a regime of silence and invisibility. Eaglewoman and her daughters are, therefore, involved in the politics of resistance against a phallocentric order that denies women their veritable share of inheritance in landed property, monetary bequest and other valuables. As eagles, the women succeed in taming male power by deploying their power to reverse and revise social institutions and practices thereby re-constituting and redirecting the power inherent in the eagle as a metaphor for maleness.

The eagle is a predatory bird endowed with unique features for hunting prey. It has a sharp, forked beak for tearing the flesh of prey and powerful talons for catching prey. Its feathers are made up of primaries, secondaries and quills that are called into service for soaring to the heights. According to Webb, Wallwork and Elgood, ‘Many of the larger birds, notably eagles … use thermals to soar on nearly motionless wings, and can remain airborne for hours with a minimum energy expenditure’ (137–38). Eagles have keen, powerful and penetrating vision. They also have strong jaws, muscular tibias and tarsuses, and possess a flamboyant colouration around the nape and mantle.

Eaglewoman has the strength and courage of the eagle that enables her to confront the retrogressive, oppressive and repressive traditional practices of male-dominated Umuga society that are exploitative and discriminatory against women. She stands up against the phallocentric order and its associated traditions, vehemently resisting Uncle Reuben’s attempted appropriation of her land. As Ogonna, one of her daughters reminisces, Umuga tradition discriminates against ownership of property by women simply because of patriarchal inheritance rights:

Mama had more than her share of provocation, oppression from cruel and envious relations…. I remember clearly an incident that took place in the year 1967, few months to the outbreak of the civil war. My Uncle, Reuben, visited us in Port City and asked Papa to sell to him four plots of land we have in Enymba City. To Uncle Reuben’s disappointment, Papa rejected his request. He blamed mama for this…. It was after the incident that my sisters and I realised that women were not expected or permitted to own land in our culture even when they pay for it with their own money. If land is bought with a woman’s wealth, the real owner of the land is her husband, if she is married. (94–95)

This exclusionary politics of land inheritance marginalises women — placing them on the periphery of cultural discourse and debate; but Eaglewoman contests this order. Her physical constitution and endowments make her beautiful and attractive even as she ages gracefully. But beyond her pulchritude, Eaglewoman possesses the resilience and inner strength to run the family and provide for its diverse needs even with the departure of Osai, her husband. As a visionary, she not only invests in land with her husband but also owns a bakery enterprise from which the family derives its sustenance. Eaglewoman demonstrates the qualities of the eagle through her capacity to transcend these prohibitive restrictions. She refuses to be intimidated and cowed into submission during the challenges she faces when her in-laws contest her right to hold the title of the family land.
The character and courage of the eagle which Eaglewoman possesses is also shared by her daughters — they are the authentic children of the eagle. Though four of them operate within the confines of marriage as housewives, they still assert their independence within a restricted familial institutional space that interpellates women as mere appendages of men. The women are educated and expect to be respected and accorded human dignity. Demonstrating the inner strength of the eagle, these daughters travel alone form Lagoon City without their husbands, driving in turns, until they arrive safely at their destination. The following conversation reveals their courage and strength:

‘Though we travelled home in Obioma’s car … we just yapped, joked and laughed, as we usually do, all the way from Lagoon City to Umuga

‘Well, yes, but with our spouses’ reluctant consent, remember? … Afam was worried about the idea of us travelling without a driver. Thank God we made it in one piece. That will show these guys that we are not as weak as they think’.

‘We did it in spite of their doubts and fears’. (123)

The same daughters demonstrate the uncommon courage of the eagle by rebelliously protesting attempts by the Umeaku family to appropriate the family land on the death of their father. They resolve to write a letter to the Ogunana Ezeala, the village association, to lodge a complaint and the dispute is resolved in the family’s favour. They also denounce the refusal of tradition to honour deserving female ancestral figures with posthumous chieftaincy titles in the annual Obuofo Day. Through their intervention, this traditional practice is rendered obsolete. Liberated by virtue of their education, these women shift the consciousness of the village women, and thereby inaugurate an alternative trajectory for the definition and redefinition of womanhood in Umuga society. These women are, indeed, children of the eagle and against this backdrop, Amara, one of them announces exultantly: ‘Hey, we are children of the eagle … aren’t you proud of it? I am’

‘And like the eagle, we will soar into the sky’, Obioma says (191).

The alliance of the eagle and woman in this novel is a particularly effective literary strategy because the eagle occupies a central position in the cultural subconscious and ritual practices of the Umuga society. It is a central motif in the Ulaga masquerade that entertains the people during the festive period, executing magnificent dance steps and intricate footwork. After the Ulaga masquerade, Nnenna asks:

‘Did you notice that the bird on the head of the Ulaga is an eagle? … I’m struck by the proliferation of the eagle motif in different aspects of Umuga culture. Have you thought about it? The eagle is the only bird of distinction accorded symbolic value in our culture’. (190–91)

The Ulaga masquerade with its iconic eagle head represents and underscores the artistic accomplishments of Umuga society. But transcendent to this, its appearance during the festive season carries a cultural symbolism that underscores
The Significance of Avian Metaphors

The importance of seasonal change. The literary use of this symbolic change in the seasons, headed by the figure of the eagle, prefigures the reconstitution of Umuga social life — a life achieved by women’s assertion of their humanity and strategic significance.

The significance of the eagle and its metaphoric power within Umuga culture is evident in the society’s naming process. The canon of names in this society glorify, celebrate and idealize the eagle. The eagle iconology here achieves the cultural symbolism of individual and communal greatness, swiftness and agility, vision, courage and dignity. In the novel, the eagle iconology writes woman into prominence within social structures and appropriates the agency of the eagle which is exclusively associated with men, by pointing to the use of eagle nomenclature applied (traditionally) to both women and men. The Igbo word for eagle is ‘Ugo’ and this is used as either a prefix or suffix in Igbo names. As Nnenna informs the reader:

Take the cast of names, for instance, babies are often given names beginning or ending with the bird’s name Ugo. Whether as a prefix or suffix, such names proliferate. Ugonma, Ugochi, Ugonwayi (our mother’s name), Ugodiye, Ugokwe, Ugochinyere, Ugoma, Ugochukwu, Ugonna, Mbugo, Adaugo, Ojijugo and Nwugo. (191)

Names are particularly significant to individuals because they confer on them distinct identities. This is why in answer to the question, ‘What’s in a name?’, Linda Lindsay states that ‘a simple one word answer to this question is “identity”… a name symbolically links us to our past and provides us with a sense of self-definition’ (78). A name, according to Vincent Ovuakporie, ‘has a divine significance’, since ‘the philosophy that guides a man’s life, his success and failure, his actions and reactions are to a large extent encapsulated in the mystery surrounding his name’ (44). Similarly, Abd-Rushin argues that ‘Every person on earth bears precisely that name which he earned for himself. Therefore, his name is not only what it is, he is not only called by this name, but he is the name. Man is what his name is’ (139). Within Umuga culture, a name spells the life of the individual and weaves a rich tapestry of existence for the bearer. A person’s life trajectory is predetermined at birth by the name she is given even though an individual can sometimes mediate this through name change. To be named Eaglewoman, as such, confers female dignity, courage and greatness within a patriarchal system.

Names are also communal property. As such, they celebrate a society’s history, culture, values, mores and existential strivings. This is why every name espouses two mutually exclusive and irreconcilable ideological ends: domination and liberation. As David Goldberg informs us, ‘Power is exercised epistemologically in the dual process of naming and evaluating’ and in ‘naming or refusing to name things in the order of thought, existence is recognized or refused, significance is assigned or ignored, beings elevated or rendered invisible’ (150). The ideological significance or political persuasion of a name may be associated with gender, race, ethnicity or creed. As Ousseynou Traore observes, names are ‘rooted in
ontological matrices and have their own narratives of origination and mythopoetics’ with ‘gender ideals and conflicts’ (41).

In the narrative, the names celebrate the eagle as a bird but also have metaphoric resonance — being representative of the cultural configuration of Igbo traditional society. As a valued creature, the eagle signifies royalty, majesty, dignity, beauty, honour and courage. As such, Eaglewoman and her children are paradigms not only of courageous womanhood but also of positive and creative mobilization of individual energies and the channeling of these towards the emancipation of those enslaved under the cumbersome yoke of phallic tradition.

A radical contrast to the metaphor of the eagle in the narrative is that of Udele, the vulture. This image is refracted through a poem that Nnenna recalls was used during her school days to encourage children to eat well so as to be healthy:

The vulture eats between meals  
And that’s the reason why  
He rarely feels  
As well as you or I  
His head is bald, his eyes are dull  
His neck is growing thinner  
Oh, what a lesson for us all  
To always eat our dinner. (110)

Within the context of the novel, this poem, acts to juxtapose the qualities of the eagle and the vulture. Though both are predatory birds, the vulture is delineated as a wretched, emaciated, dull and physically unattractive bird principally because of its dietary habits. While the eagle feeds on live, nutritious preys, the vulture prefers decomposing carcasses as its culinary delight. Its physical repellence is also radically at variance with that of the eagle, which has fine, patterned feathers and a beautifully shaped and coloured bill. On the other hand, the vulture is bald, with a thin neck and uninspiring dull eyes. This binary opposition between the eagle and the vulture has symbolic cultural significance: it reveals that within Umuga and, indeed Igbo society generally, the regal bearing of the eagle finds greater appeal among the people than the funereal aspect of the vulture. J.H. Elgood describes vultures which belong to the class *Aegypiidae* corroboratively as ‘large repulsive birds with much of the head, sometimes also the neck, devoid of feathers. They have powerful hooked bills and strong claws’ and that they ‘are scavengers, rapidly assembling at a carcass’ (2). The common or hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) is seen around villages and towns, and because vultures survive on carrion, they are seen as metaphoric representations of human cannibals who ‘feed’ on human beings by exploiting, oppressing, repressing and dominating them unjustly. From an existential perspective, the vulture is an avian metaphor of a doomed humanity condemned to a menial existence of privation in an uncaring world. In the novel, the author gives an ideological pattern to these avian metaphors by assigning the eagle metaphor to women and consigning the vulture to men.
Birds are also associated with the Umuga (Igbo) corpus of proverbs. Proverbs that employ avian metaphors in the narrative yield significant messages. One of the proverbs, for example, talks about a ‘chicken quarreling with the pot cooking it, rather than the knife that severed its head’ (94). This proverb is a stinging indictment of Uncle Reuben who wants to dispossess Osai of his land. The former is utterly disappointed with the refusal of Osai but instead of confronting Osai vents his anger on Eaglewoman, Osai’s wife. Thus, instead of taking on Osai, who refused his request, Uncle Reuben chooses to attack the innocent woman just as the chicken quarrels with the cooking pot, ignoring the knife that killed it in the first place. Culturally the signification of the proverb is that women are blamed and castigated in a patriarchal society for anything men find as threatening or undermining of that tradition even when they are not responsible for it. In the novel, the discriminatory and exclusionary practices of this patriarchy are resisted, challenged and revised by Eaglewoman and her daughters.

Another proverb, ‘An early bird … catches a worm’, (190) encourages the habit of punctuality. The proverb is rendered in relation to the Ulaga masquerade. It is women who wake up early in Igbo society to fetch water, firewood, cook, feed the family and tend the crops and as such the novel claims that women deserve the reward of commination and appreciation for their industry as custodians of fire, water and the land. The Ulaga masquerade here has the head of an eagle, which becomes a metaphorical representation of industrious and affirmative womanhood. Yet another proverbial flourish concerns the hen laying its eggs and incubating them in secret (242). This alludes to the need to keep the real parentage of Nkemdirim secret, for Nkemdirim is the result of the pregnancy of Obioma, the third daughter of Eaglewoman, and Osai, conceived outside of marriage. Eaglewoman creatively hatches a plan that she will feign pregnancy while Obioma will be taken far away from Umuga until she delivers the child. She will then assume responsibility for the child as though she were the real mother; a plan that is successful. In this regard, it is important to note that ‘traditional’ proverbs are deployed in the novel in ways that are subversive of patriarchy and supportive of the undermining tactics of the women; thus underscoring the capacity of proverbs to transcend prescribed meanings.

In Umuga and the entire Igbo society, birds are also useful for their feathers. The feathers of eagles, for instance, are used as cultural markers of titled men and as status symbols. Eagle feathers are used to adorn the caps of the Igwe or Obi (chief) and other men of prestige as marks of achievement and accomplishment. The feathers are also necessary for ritual performances (in which the men participate) without which certain rites would be rendered ineffective. In the novel the significance of bird feathers (and claws) is underscored by Obioma when she observes: ‘Everything about the eagle is valued in this town including its feathers and claws’. Then Nnemne responds ‘Eagle feathers are considered priceless in certain rites. Titled men wear them in their caps and sometimes carry
fans decorated with them. I have wondered why the eagle is honoured above other
birds such as the parrot, hawk, ostrich and owl’ (191). Through this interrogation
of male appropriation of the eagle metaphor, especially the feathers as a marker
of male achievement and chieftaincy, Nnenne interrogates male institutions and
patriarchal power structures. She thereby questions the exclusive arrogation of
the eagle to maleness, and, by implication of her eagle nature and inheritance
through her mother, associates it with accomplished womanhood.

Honours and titles are also bestowed on men using birds and their names.
Among the Igbo, the titles of men and their achievements are often reflected and
given legitimacy by the eagle. For, instance, the celebrated Nigerian novelist,
Chinua Achebe, who is a native Igbo, has the title of ‘The eagle on the tall iroko
tree’. The eagle is preferred because it is symbolic of grandeur, strength, ferocity,
intelligence and vision. As Obioma observes in the narrative:

I think it’s because the eagle is the most intelligent bird in the world…. It’s an amazing
bird and can soar higher than any other winged creature. Eagles are said to see three
times better than human beings. (191)

If the principal character in this novel is a woman called Eaglewoman, it signifies
that women too possess penetrating vision and have the capacity to order Igbo
society along the path of meaningful growth and development. As the novel
demonstrates, women are better visionaries and, armed with traditional wisdom
and modern education, they can mobilize their energies and train their vision for
the benefit of the society.

Other birds used in the narrative are the dove in a song by Obot’s school
children on page 81 and the kite on page 254. While the dove is epistemologically
associated with peace, love, meekness, grace, temperance, innocence and virtue,
attributes that define the theology and doctrine of the Holy Spirit and, by extension,
children who are innocent, the kite is predatory bird that is directly opposed to the
dove. The kite preys on its victims by swooping on them when they least expect
and uses its sharp talons to catch them. In some cultures in Africa especially in
the West Coast, the kite is a metaphor for death. Its predatory instincts can be
regarded as blows of death on innocent humanity, just as the kite preys on the
innocent, unsuspecting chick. Through the oppositional binaries of these avian
metaphors, women are associated with the dove and men with kites. Within a
larger postcolonial Nigeria, the author’s political commentary suggests that,
like kites, men have preyed on the Nigerian nation, evidenced in the widespread
corruption, the country’s arrested development and failure of leadership. As such,
the novel claims that moment for female leadership has arrived.

Through the instrumentality of the avian metaphor of the eagle, the novel
inscribes women into positions of strategic prominence and significance within
the contours of patriarchal Igbo society. *Children of the Eagle* is a revisionist
project that testifies against patriarchy as an exploitative, oppressive and
retrogressive ideology whose politics has succeeded for too long in undermining
the agency and subjectivity of womanhood in Igbo and Nigerian society. The novel, therefore, achieves the authorial intent of appropriating the essentially phallic avian metaphor of the eagle in Igbo society and assigning it to women. This strategy affirms female energy, re-constitutes gender patterns of relations in favour of women and negates the exclusive male appropriation of the avian metaphor of the eagle as representative of Igbo and Nigerian national life.

WORKS CITED
Sean Murray

EARLY MORNING, MAY

The birds have come again.
They are insufferable, so thick in the trees,
so near the windows with their hollow bones,
their loud songs gaudy and erudite.
The trees are not so much complicit as helpless.
The beans, planted in the old strawberry pot last month
look the other way, tend to their roots and new blooms.
I know. The racket has woken you too early.
Lines of blackbirds march across
the lawn every evening after grass is cut.
Today, they came walking uphill,
but I had seen them do the opposite.
The birds cannot be random, though.
They are meticulous,
methodically coordinated
in their bending and picking,
their straight-legged advance from left
to right.
They come in brigades, platoons
like India. They know something
I never will learn about
walking on grass.
Traditionally, literary beasts of the colonial era tended to reflect visions of an exoticised other, feared or desired. They provided texts with aesthetic but passive images, tropes of human desire, but were rarely displayed as creatures considered as themselves. Leconte de Lisle’s poems, for example, abound with creatures that evoke nostalgia for civilisations gone-by; attraction to far away countries; and a yearning to escape from modernity and the day-to-day realities of western societies. Animals were essentially ahistoricised aesthetic figures with which no real encounter was taking place. Postcolonial writers were quick to draw a parallel between human and non-human creatures, showing how animals and colonised human beings were both deprived of history. Or rather, as postcolonial theorists from Fanon to Glissant have acknowledged, how their histories have been absorbed by that of the dominant subjects. In fact, both animals and slaves have been instrumental in the construction of colonial power from which they were excluded. In their poetic representation of ahistorical animals, writers of the colonial area, consciously or unconsciously promoted visions of this exclusion. Appropriated as poetic accessories of the exotic by Western poets of the nineteenth century, birds, appearing frequently but exclusively as aesthetic figures, were symbols of a seductive and passive other. They were used as a device to evoke exoticised visions of alterity or to mask visions of oppression through their aesthetic presence. Referring to the ambivalent representation of oppression in Saint-John Perse’s poetry, Chamoiseau highlights how colonisation has been implicitly encouraged by creative artists who promoted visions of the exotic while suppressing to silence the suffering of the colonised:

Les romanciers et les poètes ont souvent précédé, souvent accompagné, les colons et marchands! [Saint-John Perse est] un conquistador de grand talent mais … conquistador quand même! Car il ne dit rien du feu des âmes dans le silence des oppressions […]! Il les sent, les devine, mais en fait il s’en fout…! (Chamoiseau 2003 481) [Italics in original]

[Novelists and poets have often preceded, often accompanied colonisers and traders! [Saint-John Perse is a] very talented conquistador but … nevertheless a conquistador! He does not say anything about the fire of the souls in the silence of oppressions […]! He feels them, guesses them, but in fact he does not give a damn…!]
As voices emerged from this ‘silence of oppressions’, animals appeared in texts in three essential ways: first, as characters taken or inspired from traditional tales; second, as tropes of colonisation and oppression; third, as wild creatures or imaginary non-human creatures present in the landscape and life of a given community. The examples I choose will refer to Creole and African cultures, as writers discussed later belong to these cultures. In the first instance, animals tend to be used as a strategy of resistance against or of denunciation of oppression. Although not endowed with speech, they are instrumental in spreading the ‘parole fondatrice’ (founding speech) (Chamoiseau 2000 725) of cultures deprived of written history. The rabbit, for example, one of the most recurrent characters in tales, is always portrayed as finding ways to escape and functions as an allegory of freedom from oppression. Although birds are rarely part of the traditional bestiary of tales, they do appear in them, mainly as allegories of freedom.

In the second instance, some domestic animals figure as emblems of colonial power. Dogs and horses, the traditional accomplices of white colonisers in their acts of violence, often appear as visions of domination. They are particularly present in French Creole literature, and they also haunted white writers decades before postcolonial texts were written. In 1924, when Saint-John Perse described his soul as darkened by the scent of a horse (‘mon âme tout enténébrée d’un parfum de cheval!’) (177) in his poem Anabase, connotations of suppressed violence can be perceived. Associations between violence and birds emerge in creole texts through representation of rooster fights (Frankétienne 1975).

The third group of animals mentioned refers to real or imaginary creatures associated with a particular country, area or culture. Within the context of postcolonial creation, this last category of representation is particularly interesting, as it does not consistently or exclusively rely on traditional images or on established symbolic perceptions of non-human creatures. Animals invest the text with a creativity that is less anthropocentric and allows writers to ‘tear reality apart’ (‘déchirer le réel’) (Chamoiseau 2000 729), superimposing real and non-real, human and non-human, historical and magical realism. It also invests them with the power to construct cultures of diversity and opacity such as those promoted by postcolonial thinkers, For Edouard Glissant, in particular, the comprehension of other beings is not always necessary or even desirable. Part of the attraction to them in general and to different species in particular resides in a non-comprehension of them, which he refers to as opacity and which he sees as instrumental in the formation of human identities. (see Le Pelletier 170). Wild birds, so diverse in their sub-species and so different from humans, appear very frequently in this last group of textual representation.

As creatures which are not intrinsically useful to human societal and economic structures, wild birds have been chosen to illustrate how their ‘opaque’ presence contributes to the construction and/or to the deconstruction of cultural memory. I shall also consider how domesticated species can be represented and used as part of both a discourse and a counter-discourse of enclosure. Birds such as ducks,
crows and magpies can in fact be associated with claustrophobic, nostalgic or ambiguous visions of possession and dispossession.

Birds play multiple roles in postcolonial fiction. They reveal attitudes which echo and perhaps pre-empt new visions of alterity and identity. They initiate a wide spectrum of emotional reactions from human beings, from the idealisation of an aesthetic image to an expression of repulsion. They produce contrasting associations, from freedom to imprisonment. They play a large role in colonial and postcolonial texts, including Chamoiseau’s and Coetzee’s (auto-)fiction. Finally, literary birds can be allegorical or metaphorical but they are rarely deliberately anthropomorphic, unlike domestic animals or wild mammals. In fiction, the latter are often introduced as characters in their own right, generally associated with their human counterparts. Birds, on the contrary, do not play a diegetic role. They generally do not tell a human story. Writers include them as tropes of human concerns, but also, perhaps more importantly, as a non-human presence, be they instruments of deterritorialisation or living creatures conveying, as far as it is possible, a non-human perspective of the world.

Birds appear as recurrent figures in Creole and black South African literature, less significantly perhaps in the latter. Winged creatures are one of the few species not associated with oppression in the history of the West Indies and, indeed they feature as free spirits. In Omeros, Nobel prize-winner Derek Walcott uses the sea-swift as a unifying device for the narrative and expresses the closeness of birds and humans in West Indian culture:

Toutes gibiers c’est frères moin’, pis n’homme ni pour travail.
[Every bird is my brother;
Because man must work like the birds until he die. (Walcott 160)]

French West Indian literature hosts three types of birds: tropical birds associated with the forest, with its strong connotations of freedom; fighting birds, such as cocks, which are part of a tradition inherent in West Indian and Haitian cultures; imaginary birds such as the soucougnan — half-man half-bird — which haunt Creole oraliture. Birds in Creole literature cannot be mentioned without reference to the trees and forests in which they dwell. For instance, throughout his work, Glissant portrays woods as a shelter for escaping slaves and as a restorative space where an individual can regain sanity and heal his/her wounds. Birds permeate both Glissant’s fiction and his theoretical work. The spectacular cross-breeding from which they issue symbolises Creole identity, as the following excerpt emphasises:

Dans la Caraïbe, les oiseaux Zémi ont rencontré à la fin les oiseaux d’Afrique. Le koribibi, survivant à la Conquête, et inspiré du Serpent à plumes, partage la nuit des cases avec l’oiseau Sénoufo, invisible évadé du bateau négrier. (Glissant 2005 77)

[In the Caribbean, Zemi birds finally met African birds. The koribibi, survivor of the Conquest, inspired by the plumed Serpent, shares his nights in the cabins with the Senoufo-bird, invisible escapee from the slave ship.]
As one of Glissant’s spiritual and intellectual heirs, Chamoiseau builds his imagery from these visions. The etymology of his name, which means ‘bird of cham’ also reminds French readers of his affinity with birds. As Glissant emphasises, the author of Texaco is ‘à l’écoute d’une voix venue de loin, dont l’écho plane sur les lieux de notre mémoire et oriente nos futurs’ (keen to listen to a voice coming from far away, whose echo hovers over the realms of our memory and gives direction to our futures) (Glissant 1988 6).

Birds are particularly pervasive in Chamoiseau’s Biblique des derniers gestes, a 780 page allegory of anti-colonial resistance. The main protagonist, Balthazar Bodule-Jules, ‘born in all eras, in all places and in all oppressed circumstances’ (Chamoiseau 2002 27) revisits colonial history. Chamoiseau takes the reader through a maze of polyphonic discourses, but it is the immemorial counter-discourse of the forest which gives all these voices meaning and allows the narrator to tell his tale with authority:

Le vieux rebelle revit les arbres de son enfance, et ces arbres lui ramenèrent tous les arbres qu’il avait rencontrés […]. Les souvenirs du rebelle qu’il était devenu et de l’enfant qu’il avait été se mélangaient dans son esprit à des feuillages multiples, se confondaient dans l’ombrage des troncs immémoriaux, se superposaient sur les touffes de bambous et les rideaux de liane qui provenaient de partout. Des merles se mêlaient à des songes de corbeaux, […] des colibris battaient famine en compagnie de vieux toucans, de chouettes, de quetzals, et de volées d’oiseaux bien plus incalculables que les milliers de noms dont les peuples de la terre les avaient affublés.

The old rebel remembered the trees of his childhood and these trees brought back for him all the trees he had encountered. […]. Memories of the rebel he had become and of the child that he had been were merging in his mind with multiple foliages, were disappearing in the shade of ageless trunks, were projected onto bamboo clumps and curtains of creepers coming everywhere. Images of blackbirds were dissolving into visions of crows, […] humming birds were sharing their hunger with old toucans, owls, quetzals and more innumerable flights of birds than the thousands of names which the people of the earth had saddled them with.]

Birds, in Chamoiseau’s texts, are primarily images of a pre-colonial reality. They are instrumental agents in making the reader aware of that reality which is essential to the revisiting of colonial history. Horses and mastiffs tend to haunt Creole texts as figures of colonial domination, as shadows of a static and painful past. Birds on the other hand, are restorative. They are creatures of light, freedom, colour and movement. They are mediators between humans and non-humans, between past and present. They are visions of a past that was not a past of oppression and can be linguistically referred to in Creole and/or in French, bridging the gap between the two cultures and valuing both. In the tropical and postcolonial environment that underlies Chamoiseau’s fiction, they burst through the text as signs of irrepressible beauty and diversity. More than allegories of freedom or ideological decoys, they function in the text as visions of ‘diversality’, defined by Chamoiseau and other Creole writers as a notion of universality that
refuses uniformity, one that values ‘a world diffracted but recomposed, the conscious harmoniation of preserved identities’ (Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant 903).

Birds also appear as premonitory beings and tropes of human fears. They are not seen as idealised, pre-lapsarian creatures evoking a golden age or a universal paradise. Chamoiseau belongs to a generation of Creole writers wary of the universalising tendencies of the négritude movement. In Césaire’s poetry and theatre for example, dogs tend to appear exclusively as metaphorical visions of oppression. Chamoiseau is aware of the limitations of unilateral symbolic associations, particularly with regard to animal representation. They can perpetuate binary visions of otherness. Chamoiseaus’ winged creatures are not only signs of the diversity of life on our planet: they are cultural and expressive landmarks, and tropes of our many emotions. Chamoiseau gives new meanings to old metaphors and deconstructs symbolisms to express diversality. He also virulently denounces Western obsessions with naming and classifying living creatures with the aim of controlling or possessing them for human profit or consumption, and reappropriates the notion of naming. Lists of birds are not inserted with a dry, dehumanising effect as enumerations frequently are. In Western societies, they tend to be associated with Linnean taxonomy, and with the hierarchical, rational classifications of living creatures as scientific objects of study. In Chamoiseau’s texts, they either echo human emotions, or are presented as real creatures - manifestations of an eco-diversity that must be valued for the natural environment to be preserved and for suppressed histories to be reclaimed. Two examples will be given to illustrate this. Both are taken from Biblique des derniers gestes.

In the first example, Balthazar Bodule–Jules relates his vision of a condor as the catalyser of deep feelings of anxiety. After this experience he sees birds as releasers of emotion, evidence of cultural memory, and signs of artistic presence. They belong to cultures that are at times relevant to a local context (the humming-bird of Aztec civilisation), but which also can be meaningful worldwide (Charlie Bird Parker). Twenty birds, mostly imaginary, are listed in a footnote at the bottom of the main text, which breaks the linearity of the narrative, involving the reader in a more interactive approach. Chamoiseau’s lexical choices in the naming of these birds are extremely varied, but always antithetic to scientific taxonomies. Birds, which originate from the four corners of the globe, incarnate members of a musée imaginaire. References can be quite esoteric as for the Okombo bird of Edouard Glissant’s recent novel, Sartorius, le roman des Batoutous; in contrast to such intertextual complexity, simple blackbirds picking custard apples are also introduced. The birds of Biblique are associated with writers, creative artists and a range of cultural traditions. They trigger both the reader’s memories and emotions. I can only give an excerpt from Chamoiseau’s long proliferation:

M. Balthazar Bodule–Jules […] vit un mâle-manman-oiseau, les ailes ouvertes sur plusieurs mètres, qui exerçait très haut une lenteur funèbre. […] Il l’avait conservé en
mémoire, non plus comme un condor, mais comme signe alliançant et la terre et le ciel, passé et avenir, mort née de la vie, et vie jointe à la mort. Avec les compressions de la mémoire, il devint l’épure même de l’espèce des oiseaux. Oiseaux!... […]

Depuis l’angoisse du Condor rouge, je regarde les oiseaux, et même mieux je les vois! ... Ils enveloppent le monde des effets de leur vol: Oiseaux bleus des encre de l’Asie! Les hommes-oiseaux d’Océanie! L’oiseau jaune-rouge de Chine, maître du chaos, qui n’a pas de visage mais six pattes et quatre ailes! L’oiseau Anza de Babylone! Cet oiseau très intime qui fit Charlie Parker. Oiseaux de l’Inde qui ne se tiennent que sur les branches du monde! [...] L’albatros de Baudelaire qui fut vœu du poète! Et l’oiseau de Coleridge que le marin maudit trimbalait à son cou! Et l’oiseau de Glissant, cet Okombo du peuple des Batoutous, pas plus visible qu’eux-mêmes et qui élève ton âme et qui t’aide à durer! Les merles noirs de Saint-Joseph qui crevent mes pommes-cannelles! Et l’oiseau-colibri qui fut dieu de la guerre en cet endroit où j’ai souffert! Et cet oiseau caché dans le nom de Faulkner, et qu’il décrit comme idéal du soi! (Chamoiseau 2002: 203)

[M. Balthazar Bodule–Jules […] saw a male-mannan-bird, its wings spanning several metres, exercising his gloomy flight high above. [...] He had kept it in his memory, not as a condor any more, but as a sign of alliance between heaven and earth, past and future, death born of life and life joined to death. With memory compressions, it became the template of the bird species itself. Birds!... […]]

Since my anguish relating to the red Condor, friends, I have been looking at birds, and even better: I am seeing them!... They are enveloping the world with the effects of their flight: blue Birds of Asian inks! Bird-men of Oceania! The yellow–red bird of China, master of chaos, with no face but six legs and four wings! The Anza bird of Babylon! The very intimate bird which made Charlie Parker! Birds of India holding on to branches of the world! [...] Baudelaire’s albatross which was the poet’s aspiration! And Coleridge’s bird hanging about the ill-fated mariner’s neck! And Glissant’s bird, the Okombo of the Batoutos people, as invisible as they, which elevates your soul and helps it to endure! The blackbirds of Saint-Joseph which pierce my custard apples! And the humming-bird which was god of war in this place where I suffered! And this bird hidden in Faulkner’s name and described by him as the ideal self?

Birds not only function as tropes in the text. Chamoiseau also inserts more realistic descriptions and lists which emphasise the diversity of a rich tropical winged fauna now decimated or in danger of extinction. As noted earlier about Glissant’s representation of birds, the presence of diversity echoes visions of creoleness as a vital process of crossbreeding of species, ethnicities and cultures, that is indispensable to life and to the emergence of novel creative trends. The realistic presence of birds in Chamoiseau’s text also contributes to the structural and linguistic creolisation of the language. In the passage quoted below, the rebel protagonist is a child. He is initiated into the mysterious powers of the forest by Man l’Oubliée, spirit woman, healer, safe-keeper of Martinique’s memories and, beyond these, of our planet and its beings. The child discovers that his capacity to communicate with animals goes jointly with an awareness of how numerous birds are. Once more, the enumeration takes place in a footnote where Chamoiseau gives way to his ‘déméasure’ (taste for excess), referring to birds endemic to the Caribbean region:

Ce fut la période de sa vie où il rencontra le plus d’oiseaux aujourd’hui quasiment disparus… Cette aptitude à fasciner bestioles et animaux s’amplifia à mesure qu’il en prenait conscience.
[This was the period of his life when he met birds, most of whom are today nearly extinct…This capacity for attracting bugs and animals grew as he became aware of it.

Caribbean elaeniae, white-tailed nightjars, buff-breasted sandpipers, killdeers, small blackswifts, yellow-billed and bright-eyed cuckoos, masked ducks, crazy bare-eyed thrushes, pewees and brown tremblers.]

Birds appear in Chamoiseau’s texts as biological, linguistic, cultural movements which are essential to our appreciation of life. They are visions of the chaos and opacity exposed in Glissant’s poetics of chaos (1997), which are at the heart of Chamoiseau’s writing:

Il faut réclamer le droit à l’opacité. Je n’ai pas besoin de comprendre quelqu’un pour accepter de vivre, d’aimer, de travailler avec lui. […] Et si l’on acceptait de ne plus se comprendre un moment? […] Il n’y a pas une seule réponse […]. Il y a une poétique de la relation et des poétiques du chaos. (Le Pelletier 1998 170-171)

[We must reclaim the right to opacity. I do not need to understand someone to live with him, to love him, to work with him. […] How about accepting to not understand each other for a moment? […] There isn’t just one answer […]. There is a poetics of relation and there are poetics of chaos.]

For Chamoiseau, creativity is in opposition to sterile order and rationality. It thrives on opacity and on what Glissant would call ‘nomadic thinking’ (Glissant 1997). Birds in Chamoiseau’s text function as signs, symbols and/or real visions of colours and movements which humans cannot always decipher but which make us feel alive and give us a sense of belonging to the world, beyond our races, genders and histories:

Il [Balthazar Bodule–Jules] sut à quel point le mouvement était inscrit au cœur des choses vivantes : la matière insensible des ombres et des lumières, la vibration des feuilles, la voltige des oiseaux […] tout bougeait, allait imperceptible, vibrait sans cesse […] nulle conscience ne fixait l’étendue de ce mouvement profond, mais tout règne de l’immuable interdisait une perception apaisée du réel. L’indéchiffrable allant où se fondait le-temps-qui-passe renvoyait au paisible du monde, au signal de la vie bien vivante. (Chamoiseau 2002 231–32)

[He [Balthazar Bodule–Jules] knew how much movement was inscribed at the heart of living things: the non-sentient matter of shadows and lights, the vibration of leaves, the flutter of the birds […] everything moved, shifted imperceptibly, vibrated constantly […] no awareness regulated the spread of this vast movement, but the reign of the immutable always thwarted a calm perception of the real. The indecipherable went where the time-going-by was ending, referred to peace in the world, to the sign of a life fully living.]

In his dying moments, Balthazar Bodule–Jules ‘j’écoute les voix du monde’ on his radio (‘listening to the voices of the world’) (752) also realises the degree
to which birds allow him to broaden his perception of reality and his awareness of the limited spectrum of his own:

Les merles viennent jusque dessous la table récupérer les miettes de pain rassis. [...] Ce sont les merles qui lui montrent ce qui tombe de sa vie. [...] Ils sont vigiliants, nerveux, vibratiles. Leur plumage brille, leurs yeux sont illisibles, leur fiente instantanée. [...] Ils sont dans un autre ordre de réalité, reliés à d'autres structures de réel, ils voient entendent perçoivent au-delà de ce qui m’est donné. (750)

[Blackbirds venture beneath the table to get the wasted bread crumbs. [...] The blackbirds show him what is falling out of his life. [...] They are alert, nervous, vibrating. Their feathers are shining, their eyes are unreadable, their droppings instant. [...] They are in another order of reality, linked to other structures of the real, they see hear perceive beyond what is given to me.]

Chamoiseau’s birds — and his insects, also introduced as creatures of wonder instead of the creatures of repulsion that they are in traditional western cultures — enter Creole writing in unique ways. They are agents of diversity at the heart of Caribbean landscapes and express Caribbean identities. They therefore allow Creole readers to share a sense of belonging to their own environment, to their own geographies and to retrieve cultural memories obliterated by colonial history, visible in and essential to the pre-colonial settings of forests.

If for Chamoiseau birds — their movements, their colours and their songs — are both restorative and instrumental in promoting creolised cultures, J.M. Coetzee’s visions of winged creatures are neither healing nor uplifting, as the reader might expect from a writer who conveys bleak visions of both the self and the other. Colonial fiction and poetry written by white writers tended to exoticise and aestheticise birds, the latter generally figuring in their works as accessories. Yet they could also represent an other unable to speak for him/her/itself, like Crusoe’s parrot, regurgitating human phrases and clichés. Elleke Boehmer comments on Defoe’s masterpiece, that Crusoe ‘trains his parrot to speak to him his own name. Thus the signifiers of his past life are repeated back to him’ (Boehmer 17); and in his Nobel lecture, which revisits Robinson Crusoe’s story, Coetzee himself emphasised that ‘Even at his best, his island parrot [...] spoke no word he was not taught to speak by his master’ (Coetzee 2003). In Waiting for the Barbarians, one of his earlier books, a dead parrot haunts the dreams of the Magistrate of Empire, ‘poisoned by history, [...] only capable of mere parroting’ (May 415). Similarly, the forlorn version of Robinson Crusoe introduced by Coetzee in his Nobel lecture keeps with him ‘the dead parrot fixed to its perch’ (Coetzee 2003) — a symbol of the past he is carrying with him.

In Coetzee’s work, birds do not appear as frequently as dogs, spiders, insects and various crawlers that are placed prominently in his texts. Non-human beings have been increasingly visible in the fiction of an author who recently stated that ‘most stories present themselves as being about other people (and animals)’ (Coetzee 2003a: 134). For this painter of human cruelty and indifference, dogs (and other animals such as hunted game or cattle doomed to be slaughtered) appear mainly
as victims of human perversity or thoughtlessness while insects, often associated with humans, show them indifference. Spiders provide powerful allegories of a web that humanity has spun around itself, trapping itself and any other form of life as it manufactures its own oppression. Birds, more discreetly perhaps but nevertheless consistently in over four decades of writing, emerge as figures that highlight the perverse obsession of the human species with rationality. Although this essay deals with Coetzee’s more recent fiction, I shall start with examples from his first and last books to illustrate how the theme permeates his work. In his first piece of fiction, *Dusklands*, one of the two main protagonists is an expert in psychological warfare. He is briefed by the US Department of Defense to write a report on propaganda methods during the Vietnam war. Unstable and disturbed, presumably by the topic of his report, he desperately tries to hold on to rational certainties. His obsession with classification at the expense of understanding and perception seems to anticipate his collapse into insanity:

> At all hours of the day, birdsong falls on my alert ears. I do not know the names of the birds, but have no doubt that they can be learned, given time, out of books or from an informant. […]

> [Significant to me,] I now find, is the problem of names. […] Think of the songbirds of the forest. With each other, as well as with other phenomena they have rather simple relationships. Therefore one tends to ignore songbirds in favor of things that enter into more complex relationships. This is an example of the unfortunate tyranny of method over subject. It would be a healthy corrective to learn the names of the songbirds. (Coetzee 1998 35–36)

The ‘healthy corrective’ would be of course to be able to hear and appreciate the bird songs and not to turn exploration into oppression, but as Coetzee suggests forty years after this first novel through the fictional voice of Mr C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, this is not in line with rational thinking:

> What Cartesian nonsense to think of birdsong as pre-programmed cries uttered by birds to advertise their presence to the opposite sex, and so forth! Each bird-cry is a full-hearted release of the self into the air, accompanied by such joy as we can barely comprehend. If says each cry: ! What a miracle! Singing liberates the voice, allows it to fly, expands the soul. In the course of military training, on the other hand, people are drilled in using the voice in a rapid, flat, mechanical manner, without pause for thought. What damage it must do to the soul to submit to the military voice, to embody it as one’s own! (Coetzee 2007 132)

Although in his biographical work, Coetzee indicates how much he values wild birds and what an important part they played in his childhood (Coetzee 1998a 80), visions of birds in Coetzee’s fiction are rarely so optimistic. Their representation tends to be twofold. Domesticated birds, ducks in particular, are associated with a sense of loss of the past, with pastoral visions and life styles which cannot — and perhaps should not? — be sustained any longer. Wild birds on the other hand are generally portrayed as agents of indifference or allegories of evil. Interestingly, and in spite of the passage quoted above, Coetzee’s birds,
whether wild or domesticated, are mostly silent. This silence contributes to the bleakness of his fiction, but it also acts either as a sign of indifference to humans — as illustrated by the mute albatrosses gazing at bird-watchers with detachment (Coetzee 2004 56) — or, more frequently, of powerlessness. Silence in South African literature of the twentieth century is mostly about the oppression of the other’s voice. In 1986, Coetzee concluded an article about the South African farm novel with these words: ‘[W]hen will we hear music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?’ (Coetzee 1986 17). More than two decades later, the author’s birds are still muted and, as he reminds us through the voice of Elizabeth Costello, ‘animals have only their silence left with which to confront us’ (Coetzee 2004 70) for their voices, which used to resound on our planet in contrast to human voices can no longer be heard. ‘In the olden days the voice of man raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion’ (70). Now it mostly confronts the human-generated noises of rationality.

The silence or absence of living creatures can also be evoked through inanimate objects representing animals or through animal packs/flocks stripped of all identity and individuality. Recurrent visions of the parrot as the expression of a sense of lack, loss or emptiness was discussed earlier, but domesticated birds can also trigger similar feelings. Ducks in particular are ambivalent creatures in Coetzee’s fiction, expressing simultaneously an attraction for pastoral landscapes of the past and disgust towards it. Just like the dead parrots mentioned above, they can be empty, mechanical figures — ‘wind-up ducks that waddle for a while and then run down’ (Coetzee 2007 183), introduced as analogy to our sense of inadequacy. But tame ducks are also often present in Coetzee’s fiction as creatures that have been corrupted by humans; or as creatures that can inspire corruption. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya displays ‘a waggle of the bum’, aware of its effect on Mr C.:

I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so quick it is almost a shiver. Quick-quack. Why should we be too high and mighty to learn from the ducks? (31)

Such an innocent teasing trick may in fact be viewed more as amusement than corruption, but domestic ducks repeatedly appear as untrustworthy. In his Nobel lecture, Coetzee tells the tale of Lincolnshire ducks (decoy ducks or duckoys) taught by humans (decoy men) to attract German and Dutch wild ducks to fens where they are trapped by decoy dogs, also trained by humans, and ‘clubbed on the spot and plucked and sold by the hundred and by the thousand’ (Coetzee 2003). As ducks appear rarely in Western literature, unlike geese and swans – common traditional literary characters — there is no connotation attached to the species and Coetzee uses this relative neutrality to express the following ambivalence. Domesticated ducks become agents of human power, like horses and dogs, but their betrayal of their own species tends to make them despicable and highlight the human evil in training them to be traitors to their wild counterparts. Their domestication takes them away from the non-humanity which is their essence, not
towards more links with humanity but rather towards inhumanity, that peculiar 
feature of humans which is at the core of Coetzee’s work. The representation of 
domesticated ducks is also ambivalent as, in addition to being accomplices to 
human malevolence, they are part of a pastoral landscape which the son of a white 
South African lawyer from a sheep farming background cannot entirely renounce. 
This is sensitively expressed in Disgrace, where David Lurie, an academic in 
limbo after he has been accused of sexual harassment by one of his students, 
visits his daughter Lucy. She struggles to run ‘a frontier farm of the new breed’, 
growing flowers, vegetables and keeping a dog kennel (Coetzee 2000 62):

He strolls with her past the mud-walled dam, where a family of ducks coasts serenely, 
past the beehives, and though the garden: flowerbeds and winter vegetables […].

In the old days, cattle and maze. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change 
the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. 
Perhaps history has learnt a lesson. (62)

Lucy’s efforts to revisit history in collaborative ways will be compromised, 
as she is attacked and raped by relatives of her black farm-partner and her 
trust in the latter is shaken. In the 1986 article mentioned above, Coetzee sees ‘Schreiner’s account of the farm as conditioned by, and in the service of, her critique of colonial culture. […] Schreiner’s farm is an unnatural and arbitrary imposition on a doggedly ahistorical landscape’ (Coetzee 4). This landscape is not only ‘undomesticated’ but ‘indomesticable’ (2). Coetzee uses similar strategies of textual representation in some of his novels (for example, Life and Times of Michael K.) but here the device is used in reverse. Disgrace is a novel about renouncing power (physical, intellectual, economic and political power, as well as status and dignity). The pastoral scene described above recalls images of a past which is inescapable for a white South African, along with a vision that perhaps history could be rewritten into a possible future. Unlike the barren landscape of Olive Schreiner, a farm with domesticated animals speaks history, and conveys the stability and continuity of that history. David Lurie knows that in post-apartheid South Africa, such visions can only be ghost pastorals reminisced in the illusory silence of a dream:

Nonetheless, there are things he misses — the duck family for instance: Mother Duck 
tacking about on the surface of the dam, her chest puffed out with pride while Eenie, 
Meenie and Minie and Mo paddle busily behind, confident that as long as she is there 
they are all safe from harm. (Coetzee 2000 178)

The illusion is entirely dissolved in Coetzee’s last novel, Diary of a Bad Year, 
where even wild birds figure as creatures of enclosure and entrapment. They 
generally feature in parks or other controlled human spaces, where they lead their 
lives either in total indifference to human beings or express malevolence towards 
them. Either way they seem to defy human visions of possession. Yet, as creatures 
confined to human spaces, be they green enclosures, they are exiled from their 
natural environment:
Once upon a time the little strip of land across from the Towers belonged to the birds, who scavenged in the creek bed and cracked open pine cone for the kernels. Now it has become a green space, a public park for two-legged animals. [...T]he magpie-in-chief (this is how I think of him) [...] walks in slow circles around me where I sit. He is not inspecting me. He is not curious about me. He is warning me, warning me off. He is also looking for my vulnerable point, in case he needs to attack, in case it comes down to that. (Coetzee 2007 207)

Unlike Chamoiseau’s visions of colour, movement and song, Coetzee’s birds do not fly, they do not sing, they are dark and constrained. Anya, the young secretary Mr C. is infatuated with, is keen to suggest a more personal zest to his writing. She suggests, without much conviction, that birds, however ruthless, could be a new source of inspiration:

Write about the world around you. Write about the birds. There are always a mob of magpies strutting around the park as if they own it, he could write about them. Shoo, you monsters! I say, but of course, they pay no heed. No brow, the skull running straight into the beak, no space for a brain. (Coetzee 2007 35)

Coetzee’s fiction does not engage with the process of becoming-animal famously analysed by Deleuze and Guattari. Animals, including birds, remain animals while humans do not go through metamorphosis as Coetzee does not allow them this escape route. Neither man nor beast has the deterritorialisation power necessary to create ‘a continuum of reversible intensities … a circuit of states that forms a mutual becoming, [...] a metamorphosis which] is part of a single circuit of the becoming-human of the animal and the becoming-animal of the human’ (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature*, qtd in Urpeth 108). Coetzee’s rejection of metamorphosis claims no ‘ontology of relation’ (108) between bird and human, no communication. The birds (and indeed the animals) chosen by Coetzee are pack creatures which, in Deleuzian terms, could allow his protagonists a line of escape, as to a degree, insects do for Magda in *The Heart of the Country* (Coetzee 1999 6, 15, 20, 25, 38). But Coetzee’s human characters remain trapped, and his birds remain birds as such. They are individuals, even if some of them are empty shells reminding the reader of his/her own human worthlessness, like the parrot or the mechanical duck previously mentioned. Dead and empty, they challenge us with the weight of our past history; alive, they remind us that human beings are impostors. The world is theirs, just as much as we think it ours. The other may be mute but more threatening than ever:

One morning there was a sudden imperious clatter at my kitchen window. There he [the magpie-in-chief] was, clinging to the ledge with his claws, slapping his wings, glaring in, serving me with a warning: even indoors I might not be safe.

(Coetzee 2007 208)

When magpie does sing his sound is more like a war cry than a song:

Now in late spring, he and his wives sing to each other all night in the treetops. They could not care less that they keep me awake.
The magpie-in-chief has no firm idea how long human beings live, but he thinks it is not as long as magpies. He thinks I will die in that cage of mine, die of old age. Then he can batter the window down, strut in, and peck out my eyes. (208)

The picture is slightly less grim with the cockatoos visiting the park, as they are not hostile at least. An attempt is even made to communicate. But defiance comes from the human being this time:

One [cockatoo] sits peaceably in a wild plum tree. He regards me, holds a plum kernel in his claw as if to say, ‘Would you like a bite?’ I want to say, ‘This is a public garden. You are as much a visitor as I, it is not up to you to offer me food.’ But public, private, it is no more than a puff of air to him. ‘It’s a free world,’ he says. (208)

Outsider and insider — be they master and slave, coloniser and colonised or man and magpie — are not able to establish communication. Birds in Coetzee’s fiction have, to a degree, a symbolic meaning, but this meaning is generated by an inability to fully portray an animal through animal eyes, not by a desire to make the animal stand for something else. The negative symbolism of the magpie, for instance, hovers over *Diary of a Bad Year*. Yet, magpies are described by Coetzee in extremely realistic terms. They appear mostly as non-human creatures leading a life independent from humans. They are represented through human eyes, but a focus is given to their bird-like qualities. It is only because the writer’s expression and the reader’s perception are necessarily anthropocentric that a symbolic meaning is created. Connotations of a bird deemed to be selfish, cruel, known to dislodge other birds from their nests, are superimposed on realistic descriptions. The magpie is portrayed by a human, but also in contrast to humans. In recent years, the boundaries of difference between humans and non-humans deconstructed by philosophers and ethologists (Derrida 2008, de Waal 2005, Lestel 2001, Noske 1997), have become less distinct. Yet Coetzee highlights a difference which is perhaps the saddest possible difference between humans and non-humans: the human possession of ‘a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world’ (Coetzee 2007 225) and the sense of loneliness ensuing from it. Not that Coetzee denies animals a soul but their soul does not seem to have as heavy a burden to bear as the human one. The wild birds he depicts certainly show no concern for any welfare but their own. The author, as the main protagonist he constructs in *Diary of a Bad Year*, is a stranger to them. Alien to this other, he can only see in the latter fragments of his own being. For all the realistic visions of the magpie, at depth, he mirrors the sadness of his human gazer.

In conclusion then, can parallels be drawn between such contrasting visions of birds as Chamoiseau’s and Coetzee’s? Are the histories and cultural backgrounds of the authors too opposed for comparison? Chamoiseau and Coetzee certainly both involve animals in their interpretation of our histories. They both show great sensitivity towards non-human creatures and attempt to dissolve or reject the traditional symbolisms that limits them to social human constructs. But this is where similarities seem to end. Chamoiseau’s lyrical visions urge the presence of
Writers on the Wing

birds that humans may not comprehend. Their beauty is the beauty of difference, in some ways engendered by incomprehensibility, or at least compatible with it. Chamoiseau endeavours to translate their non-human presence into human writing, in particularly visible ways in *Biblique des derniers gestes*. He inserts their song in his text as a counter-discourse to human discourse. This not only gives a fuller meaning to human language but it also contributes to the creation of a poetics of ecology, inherent in Chamoiseau’s fiction. Birds allow the magic realism of the text to take form, appearing at the same time as existing, if endangered, visions of the eco-diversity of the planet and as tropes of a diversity to be valued, interpreted and revisited through the expression of cultural memories. Their song links us to the urgencies of the present and the founding visions of the past. Their presence is essential to the creation of a ‘chant narrative neuf (riche de toutes les épopées) fondateur du Lieu dans le total du monde’ (a ‘new narrative song [enriched by all epics] which can establish the founding Place in the totality of the world’) (Chamoiseau 2002 316).

The language of birds perceived by Coetzee, on the other hand, tends to be not only inaccessible to readers but suppressed by us. For him, ‘birds hover at the edge of our cruelty’ (Ross 187); they appear as inescapable signs of our history, they remind us of a binary dialectic of power which always ends in exclusion and separation. Birds are primarily present as non-human creatures, not just as signifiers of human history. Yet Coetzee’s lone beings, hunted down or confined to the enclosures created by humankind, however realistic their portrayal, inevitably echo our own, painful loneliness.

NOTES

1 Translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

2 Although the Enclosure Movement generally refers to the eighteenth-century trend towards rationalising farms which led to the transformation of public domains into private property only accessible to those who owned it, the notion of enclosure is used in a broader context here. It refers to human control of the natural environment and to the colonisation of “open”, “wild” and “uncultivated” land and subjects’ (Marzec 3).

3 I should specify that the situation of Martinique is that of a colonial rather than postcolonial country, since, as a Département d’Outre-Mer, it is not independent of France politically or economically. Chamoiseau might have preferred the term neocolonialism, but within the comparative context of this article, I have chosen to refer to postcolonialism.

4 This pun on “oiseau de cham” can in French refer to “oiseaux-chants”. The latter are described by the author as creatures of charm in Martinique (Chamoiseau 1994 79).

5 It is interesting to note that the only substantial footnotes in *Biblique des premiers gestes* are devoted to birds. In the polyphonic discourse which characterises *Biblique des premiers gestes*, the inclusion of this paratext contributes to the counterpoint provided by the presence of birds throughout the novel.

6 Chamoiseau distinguishes between the notion of place (lieu) and territory (territoire). Places are multilingual, multicultural, multiracial spaces created through the
interweaving of different histories, as opposed to territories, which are more static entities created from the vision of one, unifying, common myth. (See Chamoiseau 2000)

WORKS CITED


Koel cries in the morning’s ward,
and I wake and leave my family gathered
where the slow episodes of night have washed them unconformably together,
and I enter a dawn poised just north of freezing. Fog traces the dream
of the river south, where spring has made the country good again.
Two roos cross the plain of Lake George like creation’s afterthought.
THIS MORNING

birds sing like the memory of paradise
lost on Sunday, when summer came
to town too early and too hard,
like all our futures come at once.

On Saturday, when it was the present
yet, but already warm, I walked
out to find a home and found,
instead, two wrens returned for spring

And making that old mistake again
in the branch of a bottlebrush down the lane,
already outside the garden fence
and hell to pay forever more.

But today the sky has caught his blue
and the morning’s caught her voice,
and my neighbour’s sinking footings in stone as though
eternity hadn’t been blown apart

And had a place for us yet. And the wind’s
in the south and the road’s a mess
of fallen limbs, and the wrens are gone,
but what they brought sings on at the end of the road.

—Glebe, 25 September 2006
ABSTRACTS

GRAHAM BARWELL

‘Coleridge’s Albatross and the Impulse to Seabird Conservation’

Albatrosses became known to Europeans in the eighteenth century but it was Coleridge’s poem about the terrible consequences of killing an albatross that gave the bird its prominence and determined its cultural significance. Despite the influence of the poem on the imagination and language of its many readers, it had remarkably little effect on the actual treatment of albatrosses which were readily killed for sport, food or feathers. As the impulse towards seabird conservation developed in the late twentieth century, the albatross has become the exemplar of the plight of seabirds and Coleridge’s poem has been recast as conservationist work, but its real significance is in the way it provided a conception of the bird and established its profile in the Western imagination.

LUCILE DESBLACHE

‘Writers on the Wing: Birds and the (De/Ee)construction of Cultural Memory in Patrick Chamoiseau and J.M. Coetzee’s Fictional Narratives’

This article considers representations of birds in Patrick Chamoiseau’s and J.M. Coetzee’s most recent fiction. Both writers include birds as real, non-human creatures and distance their vision from the imaginary tutelage inherent in tropic representation. Yet echoes of tropes are always perceptible and are re/ or deconstructed by both novelists, consciously or unconsciously. Chamoiseau’s and Coetzee’s approaches are entirely contrasting. For the Martinican writer, birds are instrumental agents of awareness of a present reality, and as such, are essential to the revisiting of colonial history. They are also indispensable mediators between human and non-human worlds. Coetzee’s visions of winged creatures on the other hand, and as we might expect, emerge as dark, lonely figures reflecting the perverse obsession of the human species with rationality and power.

ADRIAN FRANKLIN

‘Relating to Birds in Postcolonial Australia’

Drawing on a recent national survey of human-animal relations in Australia this paper asks the question: how do we relate to birds in postcolonial Australia? Most studies of relationships to animals in contemporary Australia emphasise the continuing significance of colonial and post-colonial conditions and this is particularly true in the case of birds since they were one of the first native categories to arouse different, conserving and proto-environmentalist sentiments. In particular, historical, literary and recent survey data will be deployed to address
an apparent anomaly in the pattern of human associations with birds in Australia: despite a strong track record of concern for birds, the proportion of birdwatchers in the population is low in comparison to the USA and UK and the proportion of people who keep native birds captive (in cages or aviaries) is comparatively high.

DOROTHY JONES
‘Flying Godwits and Migrating Kiwis: Towards Another Summer’

Janet Frame’s novel Towards Another Summer, written in 1963 but published posthumously only in 2007 by the Janet Frame Literary Trust, reflects on the process of migration. Vivid memories of her New Zealand childhood are provoked in the novelist heroine, Grace Cleave, after travelling from her London flat to spend the weekend in northern England with a couple who have strong New Zealand connections. Grace becomes convinced she has undergone an overnight transformation into a migratory bird, though her metamorphosis is psychic rather than physical. The novel, which contains allusions to Charles Brasch’s poetry and Robin Hyde’s 1938 novel The Godwits Fly, mingles fantasy with meticulously realistic descriptions of life both in England and in New Zealand to show how migration changes perceptions of oneself and one’s country of origin.

JULIA MARTIN
‘A Poem about a Bird Can be a Picture of the World: Reading “Heron’s Place” by Jeremy Cronin’

In ‘Heron’s Place’, a poem from Jeremy Cronin’s recent collection, More than a Casual Contact, the attentive observation of a particular bird fishing for minnows in a liminal realm at the edges of human habitation becomes an opportunity for reflection. At one level, the poem is concerned with the impact of the sugar industry in the Tongati river estuary, and with what this reveals about the manifestation of human power and culture in a specific place. At the same time, the heron who continues to dwell and fish in this ambiguous territory becomes one instance of a kind of resistance which human beings may also practice. Vigilance, tenacity, specificity … in the absorption she brings to her ancient task, the heron embodies a quality of attention, integrity and endurance within or amidst an environment infused with the globalised networks of business, money and power. Though she may not be free of its constraints, her awareness-in-place evokes the possibility of a resilient cultural practice which survives somehow, in spite of it all. Reading the poem, my response is situated in terms of my own location as a teacher of English literature in South Africa.
TRAVIS V. MASON

‘West-Coast Birding as Postcolonial Strategy: Literary Criticism in the Field’

This essay comprises three literary ecotones. Each one recounts the experiences of a fictional student, the Birder-Critic, as he considers the intersection of postcolonial and ecocritical reading strategies and struggles to enact the theoretical process of stepping out of the office and into the field. Appropriately, the ecotones are titled Field Marks, Field Guides, and Field Notes. They trace the Birder-Critic’s challenges in identifying/naming birds in the field, learning how to read/use field guides, and developing the discipline and skills to write field notes, respectively.

PENNY OLSEN

‘Raper’s Bountiful Birds: A First Fleeter’s Impressions of Australia’s Avifauna’

The First Fleet was dispatched to establish a British colony in New South Wales at a high point of interest in natural history, yet there were no naturalists or artists in the company. The task fell to the naval officers, trained draughtsmen and chart makers, whose drawings have both historical and zoological value. The most able and imaginative was young midshipman George Raper. His work provides a record of the bird life at the time of settlement and of species subsequently lost. It also hints at a different motivation for his brief, bright engagement with birds.

JAMES TAR TSAAIOR

‘The Significance of Avian Metaphors in Akachi Adimora-Ezeibgo’s Children of the Eagle’

This essay argues that avian metaphors in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s novel, *Children of the Eagle* are representative of specific gender politics and ideologies of patriarchal Igbo society in south-eastern Nigeria. In the novel, women radically contest male power through their creative mobilisation and appropriation of particular avian metaphors — previously an exclusive phallic preserve — to reconstitute the patterns of socio-political and cultural relations in Igbo and the wider Nigerian society. The eagle for example is appropriated to represent the renewed energy of female principle in order to subvert or undermine patriarchy. The author submits that the avian metaphors in the novel valorise a revolutionary temperament which is capable of re-defining the structures of Igbo and Nigerian society and is aimed at the re-configuration of gender relations in a manner that rehabilitates women, giving them a prominent, if not leading, role in fashioning the society of the future.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

GRAHAM BARWELL teaches English, Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong. He has a long-standing interest in birds, particularly in their place and role in human cultures. He nurtures his fondness for albatrosses by frequent participation in the pelagic trips run out of Wollongong by the Southern Oceans Seabird Study Association.

CHRIS WALLACE CRABBE’S recent books have included a ‘postmodern epic’, *The Universe Looks Down* (Brandl & Schlesinger), and the Dante translation, *The Flowery Meadow*. He is Professor Emeritus in The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. In prose, his latest volume is *Read It Again* (Salt). A new collection of poems, *Telling a Hawk from a Handsaw*, will appear from Carcanet in 2008.

Born in South Africa in 1949, JEREMY CRONIN studied at the University of Cape Town and the Sorbonne in Paris. He served a 7-year prison term as a political prisoner during the apartheid period. Jeremy is currently an African National Congress Member of Parliament and deputy general secretary of the South African Communist Party. His publications include three collections of poetry.

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ADRIAN FRANKLIN is currently Professor of Sociology at The University of Tasmania, Australia. Trained as an anthropologist in the UK, he has held Professorial positions at the University of Bristol, UK and the University of Oslo (Norway). He is best known for his work on the relationships between humans and the natural world, especially with animals. His books include *City Life; Animal Nation: The True Story of Animals and Australia; Animals and Modern Cultures; Nature and Social Theory* and *Tourism*. He is currently working on *A Culture of Fire: Eucalypts, Australians, Fire*. He is Co-Editor of *Tourist Studies* (with Mike Crang). Current projects include work on the social life of bush fires, acclimatisation landscapes, the anthropology of the effervescent city and the relationship between individualism, freedom and loneliness.

A former English professor at the University of Johannesburg, STEPHEN GRAY (born in Cape Town in 1941), currently lives in retirement as an independent scholar. His first of several pieces contributed to *Kunapipi* was carried in Vol.2, No.1 (1981). He was a writer in residence at the a University of Queensland in 1982, the year the Dangaroo Press brought out his slim volume, *Season of Violence*. His most recent collection is *Shelley Cinema and Other Poems* (2006).
DOROTHY JONES is an expatriate New Zealander who has experienced the transforming effects of migration through spending most of her adult life as an academic teaching literature in Australian university English Departments. Currently an honorary fellow in the English Literatures Program at the University of Wollongong, Dorothy has published widely in the area of postcolonial women’s writing, with papers on several New Zealand writers — Janet Frame, Keri Hulme and Patricia Grace among them.

JULIA MARTIN lives in Muizenberg and teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of the Western Cape. She has published widely in the field of literature and ecology, including a collection of three narrative essays, Writing Home (2002). Her forthcoming book, A Millimetre of Dust (2008), is an extended reflection on a visit to archaeological sites in the Northern Cape.

TRAVIS V. MASON teaches Canadian and world literatures at the University of British Columbia, where he completed his PhD, ‘Ornithology of Desire: Birding in the Ecotone and the Poetry of Don McKay’. His articles appear, or are forthcoming, in Mosaic, Canadian Literature, ISLE, and Studies in Canadian Literature. Current projects include a collaborative book about non-native species in the Pacific Northwest and a comparative study of postcolonial ecologies in Canadian and South African writing. He has recently been awarded an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship to research the latter project at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

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LOU SMITH grew up in Newcastle and is now based in Melbourne. Her poetry has appeared in *Overland, Wasafiri, Kunapipi, antiTHESIS, Strange* and various other publications. Lou has recently co-founded the small publishing company Breakdown Press.

RABINDRA K SWAIN’S poetry has been published in *The Kenyon Review, Shenandoah, New Letters, Verse* (US), *Critical Quarterly, Contemporary Review, Wasafiri* (UK), *Ariel* and *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* (Canada). Published books include three volumes of poetry, the latest being *Severed Cord*, a work of literary criticism on the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and *Dear Jester*, a translation of Oriya short stories. *Susurrus in the Skull* is her latest collection of poems.


MARK TREDINNICK is an Australian poet, essayist and writing teacher. With Kate Rigby, Mark was the cofounder of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment–ANZ. His honours include the Calibre Essay Prize (2008), The Newcastle Poetry Prize (2007), the Wildcare Nature Writing Prize (2005), and the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize (2005); his writing has appeared in many journals and anthologies. Mark’s books include *The Little Red Writing Book* (to be published in the US as *Writing Well: The Essential Guide* in 2008), *The Land’s Wild Music, A Place on Earth*, and the forthcoming landscape memoir, *The Blue Plateau*, from which his prose selections in this issue of *Kunapipi* are drawn. For many years Mark lived in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. After a stint in the city, Mark now lives with his family in the southern highlands.

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