

## **An Ecological Path for Australian Nativism**

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March 1911

Nature-study in our schools is fast producing a generation of Australians trained to look upon the characteristic beauties of our Australian skies, our trees, our flowers, our birds with a passionate appreciation almost unknown to our pioneering fathers and mothers. It was natural that newcomers from the Old World should have been impressed, and often unfavorably impressed, by the oddness of things here.

Rural sights to them had hitherto been sights of trim meadows bordered by neat hedgerows, of well-cultivated fields and comfortable farmsteads, or of stately homes set in fair gardens and far-reaching parks of magnificently-spreading trees. What wonder, then, that they were at first almost repelled by the strangeness and unfamiliarity of their new surroundings!

How could eyes accustomed to the decided greens and to the somewhat monotonous shapeliness of the trees in an English summer landscape find beauty all at once in the delicate, elusive tints of the gum trees, or in the wonderfully decorative lines of their scanty boughs and light foliage shown clear against a bright sky? And so a land which is eminently a land of color, where the ever-present eucalypts give in their leaves every shade from blue-grays to darkest greens; where the tender shoots show brilliantly in bright crimson, or duller russets, or bright coppery-gold; and where tall, slender stems change slowly through a harmony of salmon-pinks and pearl-grays, has been called a drab-colored land. Even now, the beauty of the gum tree is not sufficiently appreciated by Australians, and we see all too few specimens in our suburban gardens. For an appreciation of the decorative effect of our young blue gums, we must go to the Riviera or to English conservatories.

Australia has suffered greatly from phrase-makers. There is still much popular belief that our trees are shadeless, our rivers are waterless, our flowers are scentless, our birds are songless. Oddities in our flora and fauna have attracted the notice of superficial observers, and a preference for epigrammatic perfection, rather than for truthful generalization, has produced an abundance of neatly-expressed half-truths, which have been copied into popular literature, and even into school books. Our English-bred poet, Gordon, writes of lands—

"Where bright blossoms are scentless,

And songless, bright birds."

and these lines are remembered better than his description in the same poem of Spring—

"When the wattle gold trembles

'Twixt shadow and shine,

When each dew-laden air draught resembles

A long draught of wine."

It is true that we have scentless, bright blossoms; but Australia is the home of the richly-perfumed wattle, and the boronia, with its never-cloying fragrance; while there is, perhaps, no forest more odorous than a forest of eucalypts. It is true, too, that we have bright birds that have no excellence in song; but it is also true that, in this favored land, there is a far greater proportion than usual of fine song-birds.

The first generations of Australians were not taught to love Australian things. We "learned from our wistful mothers to call Old England home." Our school books and our story books were made in Great Britain for British boys and girls, and naturally they stressed what was of interest to these boys and girls. We read much about the beauty of the songs of the Lark, and the Thrush, and the Nightingale, but we found no printed authority for the belief that our Magpie is one of the great song-birds of the world; we read of the wonderful powers of the American Mocking-Bird, and did not know that our beautiful Lyrebird is a finer mimic; we learned by heart Barry Cornwall's well-known poem on "The Storm Petrel," and did not know that one of the most interesting of Petrel rookeries is near the harbor gate of Melbourne; and I remember well a lesson I heard as a boy on the migration of birds, in which the teacher took all of his illustrations from his boyish experiences in the South of England, and gave us no idea that the annual migration of our familiar Australian birds to far-off Siberia is a much more wonderful thing.

But all this is being rapidly changed. In the elementary schools Nature-study is steadily improving, and children are being given an eye for, and an interest in, the world of Nature around them. Our school books are now written from the Australian standpoint, and more use can, therefore, be made of the child's everyday experience. Field Naturalists' clubs are doing much to extend the area of specialized Nature-study, and their members are giving valuable assistance to the schools by taking part in the programs for Arbor Day, Bird Day, and the like. The growing interest in the Australian fauna and flora is further evidenced by the frequent reservations by Government of desirable areas as national parks and sanctuaries for the preservation of Australian types. Last, but not least, is the production by capable Nature students of special books on some form of Nature-study, such as this Bird Book by Mr. Leach.

To our parents, Australia was a stranger land, and they were sojourners here. Though they lived here, they did not get close enough to it to appreciate fully its natural beauty and its charm. To us, and especially to our children, children of Australian-born parents, children whose bones were made in Australia, the place is home. To them Nature makes a direct appeal, strengthened by those most powerful of all associations, those gathered in childhood, when the foundations of their minds were laid. The English boy, out on a breezy down, may

feel an exaltation of soul on hearing a Skylark raining down a flood of delicious melody from far up at heaven's gate, but his joy is no whit greater than his who hears, in the dewy freshness of the early morning, the carol of the Magpie ringing out over an Australian plain. To those who live in countries where the winter is long and bitter, any sign that the genial time of flowers is at hand is very welcome. All over the countryside the first call of the Cuckoo, spring's harbinger, arouses the keenest delight in expectant listeners. This delight is, however, more than mere delight in the bird's song. And to those brought up with it year by year there comes a time when the call of the Cuckoo stirs something deep down below the surface of ordinary emotion. It is the resultant of multitudes of childhood experiences and of associations with song and story. I first heard the Cuckoo in Epping Forest one delicious May evening four years ago. It charmed me, but my delight was almost wholly that of association. All the English poetry I knew was at the back of the bird's song. Here in Australia we have no sharply-defined seasons, yet I find myself every spring listening eagerly for the first plaintive, insistent call of the Pallid Cuckoo. For me his song marks another milestone passed.

Marcus Clarke wrote of the Laughing Jackasses as bursting into "horrible peals of semi-human laughter." But then Marcus Clarke was English-bred, and did not come to Australia till he was eighteen years old. It makes all the difference in our appreciation of bird or tree or flower to have known it as a boy. I venture to think no latter-day Australian who has grown up with our Kookaburra can have any but the kindest of feelings for this feathered comedian. For myself, I confess that I find his laughter infectious, and innumerable times he has provoked me into an outburst as hearty and as mirthful as his own. More than half of our pleasure is due to the fact that the bird is

"The same that in my schoolboy days I listened to."

and to such a one we can say—

"I can listen to thee yet,

Can lie upon the plain

And listen, till I do beget

That golden time again."

It is time that we Australians fought against the generally received opinion that the dominant note of our scenery is weird melancholy. This is the note sounded mainly by those who were bred elsewhere, who came to us with other associations and other traditions, and sojourned among us. It will not be the opinion of the native-born when they find appropriate speech.

"Whence doth the mournful keynote start?

From the pure depths of Nature's heart?

Or, from the heart of him who sings,

And deems his hand upon the strings,

Is Nature's own?"

This little book should do much to popularize bird-study and to spread a knowledge of our common birds among our people. I hope devoutly that an effort will be made to give them suitable names. We should give them names a poet or a child can use. A Chaucer poring lovingly over his favorite flower, the daisy, could call it by a name which is itself full of poetry. Even the unimaginative clown, Nick Bottom, could sing of

"The Ouzel Cock, so black of hue,

With orange-tawny bill,

The Thristle with his note so true,

The Wren with little quill,

The Finch, the Sparrow, and the Lark,

The plain-song Cuckoo gray."

And a Burns can invoke the Thristle in lines as musical as the song of the bird itself—"And thou mellow mavis, that hails the night-fa'."

But how shall an Australian bard sing of "The Red-rumped Acanthiza," or of that delightful songster, "The Rufous-breasted Thickhead"? Australian Nature-poetry will be handicapped until our children give names like "Bobolink," and "Chickadee," and "Whip-poor-will," and "Jacky Winter," to our birds.

"Oriel," in the Argus, some time ago, showed how hard it is to write of love's young dream in Australian verse.

"Sweetheart, we watched the evening sky grow pale,

And drowsy sweetness stole away our senses,

While ran adown the swamp the Pectoral Rail,

The shy *Hypotaenidia philippinensis*.

"How sweet a thing is love! Sweet as the rose,  
Fragrant as flowers, fair as the sunlight beaming!  
Only the Sooty Oyster-Catcher knows  
How sweet to us, as there we lingered dreaming.

"Dear, all the secret's ours. The Sharp-tailed Stint  
Spied, but he will not tell—though you and I  
Paid Cupid's debts from Love's own golden mint,  
While Yellow-Bellied Shrike-Tits fluttered nigh.

"The Honey-eaters heard; the Fuscous—yea,  
The Warty-faced, the Lunulated, too;  
But this kind feathered tribe will never say  
What words you said to me, or I to you.

"The golden bloom was glorious in the furze,  
And gentle twittering came from out the copses;  
It was the Carinated Flycatchers,  
Or else the black *Monarcha melanopsis*.

"That day our troth we plighted—blissful hour,  
Beginning of a joy a whole life long!  
And while the wide world seemed to be in flower,  
The Chestnut-rumped Ground-Wren burst forth in song."

It surely would not be amiss if the Bird Observers' Clubs throughout Australia, and the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, enlisted the aid of the State Education

Departments, and endeavored to find out what names the children use for the birds of their district. Executive committees upon bird names are good; but a good name is not evoked by arguments in committee. It oftentimes comes from the happy inspiration of some child who loves the bird. At present the names given by classifiers are often an offence. A few evenings ago I was charmed with an unaccustomed song coming from out a big pittosporum tree in my garden at Kew. I took careful note of the little warbler, and then consulted Mr. Leach's Descriptive List. Judge of my satisfaction when I found that my little friend was "The Striated Field Wren or Stink Bird"!

The Australian boy is responding splendidly to the Nature-study movement. Bird observers tell me that shy native birds, formerly unknown near the haunts of men, are making their appearance, feeling safer now from molestation. Nest hunting for the sake of egg spoliation is happily becoming rarer, although children are developing keener eyes for nests. To-day every country school has its nests under loving observation for the purposes of bird-study and of bird-protection. Walt Whitman might have been describing many a Victorian school boy when he wrote—

"And every day the he-bird, to and fro, near at hand,

And every day the she-bird, crouched on her nest, silent, with bright eyes,

And every day, I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them,

Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating."

This loving study must bear good fruit. If we believe the scientific men, Australia is, par excellence, the land of birds, song-birds, plumage-birds, and birds of wonderful interest, such as the Satin Bower Bird. The collection of Australian birds in our National Museum at Melbourne is certainly one of the finest sights of the city, and it should be studied by all who wish to know how favored this continent is in bird distribution. But we must get to know and to love our feathered friends. Mr. Leach in his lecture has dwelt sufficiently on the economic and scientific value of bird-study. Let me enter a plea for bird-study as a source of æsthetic pleasure. Before our Australian birds can be to us what the Thrush and the Blackbird and the Linnet and the Lark and the Nightingale are to the British boy, we must have a wealth of association around them from song and story. And this association must grow up with us from childhood if it is to make the strongest appeal to us. It can rarely be acquired in later life. British birds owe much to the poets for the charm that surrounds them. When I heard the Nightingale in England, although I had no association with it gathered from my boyhood's days, I heard more than the bird's song. I was listening to Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare as well. There is something very fine in the thought that such bird songs go on for ever, that these immortal birds are "not made for death," that

"The voice I hear this passing night was heard

In ancient days by emperor and clown:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn."

The Nightingale's song, as a bird song, I thought disappointing. I remember having the same feeling with regard to the Thrush and Blackbird. The charm of their songs is largely in the associations they evoke. Our city children are now growing up in familiarity with these two birds, which are becoming as common in our gardens as in England. And wherever they go they carry so much that is fine in literature with them. But there has not yet been time for our native birds to endear themselves to us. And so we hear only their song. Wise Shakespeare says—

"How many things by season seasoned are

To their right praise and true perfection."

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"The Nightingale, if she should sing by day,

When every goose is cackling, would be thought

No better a musician than the Wren."

He knows that to the song of the bird must be its appropriate setting, and that when Nature has done her part there is still much to be supplied by ourselves.

The outlook is, however, a hopeful one. Nature-study is bringing our boys and girls into kindlier relationships with our birds; suitable popular names will be forthcoming for them; our poets will sing of them; our nursery rhymes and our children's tales will tell of them; and the time will come when even the birds now trying so hard to sing their way into our hearts, while cursed with the names of "Rufous-breasted Thickhead" and "Striated Field Wren or Stink Bird," will mean to an Australian what "the Thristle with his note so true" and "the Wren with little quill" do to an Englishman.

Mr. Leach's valuable little book is a powerful contribution to this much-to-be-desired result.

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