

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Captain S.A. White

Rob Linn. "Nature's Pilgrim. The Life and Journeys of Captain S.A. White, naturalist, author and conservationist", 1989. S.A. Govt Printer: Adelaide.

Captain S.A. White lived from 1870 to 1954, a time scarcely documented in the natural history of South Australia or Australia. Most historical works tend to concentrate on earlier explorers, many of whom were naturalists or were accompanied by naturalists on their expeditions. By the time S.A. White began his work Australia had been mapped and numerous natural history items had been sent back home to the 'Old Country'. Just as his father, Samuel White, had provided bird specimens for John Gould at an earlier time, S.A. White provided bird skins for the Australian born but English-based, Gregory M. Mathews for the latter's large work "The Birds of Australia." Many of the type specimens in this work were based on S.A. White's collections.

But Captain White did not only collect bird skins, although this was his field of expertise. On his expeditions into the area between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs in 1913, between Oodnadatta and the Musgrave Ranges with the Royal Geographical Society in 1914 and between Farina and Innamincka with the South Australian Museum in 1915-16, White and his helpers collected mammals, lizards, frogs, fish, molluscs, spiders, insects, crustacea, stomach contents of birds, water samples and plants. All scientific results were written up in the Transactions of the Royal Society and a number of newly described insects and plants were named after him or from his collections. Amongst the plants described as new by J.M. Black were *Panicum whitei*, *Toxanthus whitei* (= *Millotia greevesii*), *Trichinum whitei* (= *Ptilotus parvifolius*), *Eremophila neglecta* and *Bassia inchoata* (= *Threlkeldia inchoata*).

Linn provides a thorough background to White's forebears, but unfortunately in Chapter 1 fails to distinguish carefully enough between Samuel White the father and Samuel White the son. It was not until reaching the end of this chapter that this reader (and others) realized it was the father who was the subject of the first chapter. Perhaps the title of the chapter is at fault or alternatively reference to a simple family tree may have saved this confusion.

Chapter 2 covers the development of S.A. White as a naturalist along with his Boer War experiences and collecting expeditions in East and South Africa. On his return from South Africa he married Ethel Rosina Toms, a fellow ornithologist, who participated in all of White's earlier forays throughout South Australia and who is deserving of a higher profile in South Australian history. The rest of the chapters cover the various expeditions undertaken by White along with his growth as an outspoken supporter of conservation matters.

White was instrumental, in his role as chairman of the native fauna and flora protection committee of the field naturalist section of the Royal Society, in the establishment of the Flinders Chase nature reserve on Kangaroo Island, the first park allocated for conservation purposes in South Australia. He personally, and at his own expense, travelled the East-West railway line in 1917 destroying the 'imported pest', the sparrow, in an effort to stop it reaching Western Australia, a practice which continues to this day. He was also an outspoken supporter of tribal Aborigines, bemoaning many times the effect of the white man and the "debasing effects of civilization" on these people, although his concern did not extend to those Aborigines who were not "full-blood".

Captain White was continually at odds with others. His support of the concepts of Gregory M. Mathews introduced him into a heated nomenclatural debate with the rest of the Australian ornithological community on the use of trinomials rather than binomials, an area of the book perhaps not clearly explained to the general reader or even those with some knowledge of

systematics. In his expedition with the South Australian Museum in 1915-16 he clashed with the Board about ownership of photographs and who should write up the ornithological account of the expedition. In his public lectures and writings in the press his support of the Aborigines' cause and his criticism of farmers for wanton destruction of the native fauna can hardly have endeared him to many. Allegations that he "was a crank" and interfered in things that didn't concern him show parallels with views encountered concerning the conservation movement today. What a pity that much of what he fought for is now lost to us today.

S.A. White's botanical specimens from his expeditions are now housed in the State Herbarium of South Australia and botanists working on South Australian plants are familiar with his name. I recommend the book as a background to the man although those searching for background detail on specimens collected on his expeditions other than birds would do better to consult the original accounts published in the Transactions of the Royal Society between 1913 and 1918. My major regret on reading the book has been the incompleteness of the scientific side. Documentation of the collections of S.A. White and where they reside, his scientific publications and perhaps a list of those organisms which received their names as a result of White's collecting activities would have been valuable as an appendix.

After his epic journey by car from Adelaide to Darwin and back in 1923 S.A. White withdrew from scientific societies and the conservation movement. Why he did so at the peak of his career and at a time when his influence was probably greatest is not really established. However it does leave the reader with a feeling of deflation, especially when it is known that he lived for a further 30 years.

Rob Linn. "Nature's Pilgrim. The Life and Journeys of Captain S.A. White, naturalist, author and conservationist", pp. 172, 56 photographs and maps. (S.A. Govt Printer: Adelaide). Hard-bound. \$39.95.

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## Ecology and Conservation of Tasmanian *Sphagnum* Peatlands

Whinam, J., Eberhard, S., Kirkpatrick, J. and Moscal, T. "Ecology and Conservation of Tasmanian *Sphagnum* Peatlands", 1989, Tasmania Conservation Trust Inc.: Hobart.

This is the first time management proposals have been put forward for this valuable and little understood ecosystem. These management recommendations follow on from extensive collections of field data and are timely in view of the threat to the future of the Tasmanian *Sphagnum* peatlands from peat-mining and moss-harvesting.

The authors give an overview of the types of *Sphagnum* peatlands in Tasmania, describing both vascular and non-vascular plants, their communities and the invertebrates associated with them. The likely effects of grazing, fire and harvesting on the ecology of the *Sphagnum* peatlands and their implications for management and conservation are discussed. The data are presented in 10 Tables and 16 Figures which include 18 maps.

Whinam, J., Eberhard, S., Kirkpatrick, J. and Moscal, T. "Ecology and Conservation of Tasmanian *Sphagnum* Peatlands", pp. 107, 16 figs and several pen and ink illustrations (unnumbered) by Jo Eberhard. (Tasmanian Conservation Trust Inc.: Hobart). Softbound. \$9.50 plus postage.

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