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The Goulds

John Gould (1804-1881)

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Known as the '*Bird Man*', John Gould was a self-taught ornithologist as well as a businessman and artist. Although he spent less than two years in Australia, his monumental seven-volume publication '*The Birds of Australia*' remains the definitive work on the subject. The magnificent colour plates, some 681 of them, were executed by his wife, Elizabeth, a talented artist who shared his natural history interests.

Born at [Lyme Legis in Dorset, England](#), Gould received little schooling and worked under his father, a gardener in Windsor, thus acquiring at an early age his life-long interest in plants and animals. Subsequently he worked at [Ripley Castle, Sir William Ingilby's](#) estate in Yorkshire; and in 1827 was appointed as a taxidermist to the [Zoological Society of London](#).

Gould's marriage to [Elizabeth Coxen](#) in 1829 was fortuitous for Australian ornithology for her brothers Stephen and Charles Coxen had emigrated to the Hunter Valley in New South Wales and sent back specimens which generated his interest in Australian bird life. He began to publish a work on the birds of Australia, always with colour plates by his wife, but discontinued it when he realized he would have to visit Australia for more firsthand material. An Italian nineteenth century scientist, [Count Salvadori](#), described this decision as:

'The most important moment in Gould's life, and the consequences of which have never been equalled in the annals of ornithology'.

Ever in complete jumble

The preparations necessary for the trip were feverish, Gould with his brain '*ever in a complete jumble*', but the subsequent success of the expedition was attributed to thorough organisation. Ever an astute businessman, Gould's financial interests in London included publishing and taxidermy firms and these were placed in the capable hands of a secretary, E C Primer, who later edited Gould's publications. Another wise move was his engagement of a field assistant, [John Gilbert](#), an able and diligent zoologist of his own age whose contributions to Australian natural history rank with those of Gould himself.

Elizabeth Gould also had momentous decisions to make. As well as providing hundreds of paintings for her husband's publication, she had raised four children by this time. Torn between her desire to accompany her husband as companion and artist, her wish to see her two brothers in Australia, and maternal love, she was obliged to leave the three youngest children with her aging mother and take only Henry, aged seven, with her.

The party consisted of seven persons — the three Goulds, John Gilbert, Mrs Gould's fourteen year old nephew en route to join his uncles on the land, a man-servant, James Benstead, and Mary Watson, maid and companion Mrs Gould. [Sailing May 1838 in the Parsee](#), they arrived in [Hobart Town](#) in September where they were soon befriended by the Lieutenant Governor and his wife, [Sir John and Lady Franklin](#). Gould and Gilbert set to work immediately to explore [Van Diemen's Land](#) and adjacent islands which Mrs Gould described in letters home as '*very fine, teeming with beautiful natural productions*'. By the end of 1838, the two naturalists had discovered most of the thirteen bird species native to Tasmania.

Budgerigars – the most popular pet

While Gilbert went to Western Australia, Gould and James Benstead visited the Coxen brothers at 'Yarrundi', their property in the Hunter Valley. Gould was particularly entranced by vast flocks of [budgerigars](#) and took several live pairs back to England where they soon became one of the most popular pet birds in the world. In the Illawarra region south of Sydney, he found the majestic [lyrebird](#) of which he wrote:

'Were I requested to suggest an emblem for Australia among its avifauna, I should without the slightest hesitation select the lyrebird as the most appropriate, it being not only strictly peculiar to that country, but one which will always be regarded with the highest interest both by the people of Australia and by ornithologists in Europe'.

Gould's next expedition was to South Australia where, in company with explorer [Charles Sturt](#), he explored the wildlife of the [Mallee scrubland](#) and also visited [Kangaroo Island](#). In September 1839, the whole family arrived in Sydney en route to the Hunter where Elizabeth Gould was finally reunited with her brothers. In company with two Aborigines, Gould explored the bush of central and northern New South Wales. He was particularly impressed by the large numbers of [flock pigeons he saw which he named harlequin bronzewings](#).

Having amassed hundreds of specimens, skeletons, nests and eggs, he became anxious to return home to begin publication of his book. In Sydney, he nominated [John Fairfax](#), then working in [Australian Subscription Library](#), as an agent to market his forthcoming books. He also issued a four page prospectus about his work listing as subscribers [Queen Victoria](#), the [King of Prussia](#), and the [Grand Duke of Tuscany](#) as well as forty six Australians. Only two copies of this prospectus have been discovered in England. In April 1840, the Gould party departed from Sydney.

Death of John Gilbert (1845)

John Gilbert continued his work in Western Australia, travelling vast distances and collecting hundreds of specimens. After a visit to England, he returned on Gould's instructions to discover many new specimens and, enthusiastic to explore the wildlife of new regions, joined [Ludwig Leichhardt](#)'s ill-fated expedition to Port Essington. On 28 June 1845, he was speared by Aborigines near the Gulf of Carpentaria. He is remembered by the Gilbert Range and Gilbert River in Queensland, by the species of fauna and flora he discovered and by Gould's writings.

Death of Elizabeth (1841)

Meanwhile, back in England, further tragedy was about to strike the Gould family. In August 1841, less than a year after her joyful reunion with her children, parents and beloved homeland, Elizabeth Gould died of [puerperal fever](#) shortly after giving birth to their eighth child. In retrospect, a letter written to her mother telling of praise for her work in Hobart is particularly poignant:

'But at the end of it all, I sigh and think if I could yet see old England again, and the dear, dear treasures it contains I would contentedly sit down at my working table and stroke, stroke away to the end of the chapter, that is health permitting'.

She is commemorated by the lovely little [Gouldian finch](#), discovered by Gilbert in the [Port Essington](#) area.

Little was known about her until 1938 when a collection of her letters written from Australia was discovered. These letters were the basis for the book, *'The Story of Elizabeth Gould'* published by the eminent Australian naturalist [Alec H Chisholm](#) in 1944. Now housed in the [Mitchell Library](#), the letters reveal her as a charming, cultured, and musically and artistically talented woman whose contributions were overshadowed by the fame of her husband.

Shattered by the loss of his wife, John Gould carried on with the mammoth production of '[The Birds of Australia](#)'. Begun just after his return to England in 1840 and completed in 1848, this publication cost subscribers £115 and consisted of seven volumes, with a supplement in 1869, and a total of 681 colour plates. From 1845 to 1863, he published '[The Mammals of Australia](#)', a three volume work, and in 1865 the two volume '[Handbook to the Birds of Australia](#)'. He pleaded for conservation of Australian fauna in the interests of Australia but also as an obligation to the entire world.

Death of John Gould (1881)

At the time of his death in 1881, he was busy compiling '[The Birds of New Guinea and the adjacent Papuan Islands](#)'.

Work will never be surpassed

Gould's output consisted of forty one large volumes with about 3,000 plates.

One of his contemporaries described him as:

'So proficient that he left a series of works which may never be surpassed, and he also united the qualities of naturalist, artist, and man of business'.

He was honoured by several scientific societies and was made a [Fellow of the Royal Society in 1843](#).

Gould's memory survives in the '[Gould Leagues](#)', inaugurated by a Victorian school teacher in 1909. Originally called the '[Gould League of Bird Lovers](#)', the name was amended to encompass all Australian fauna and plants. With a membership of over a million school children, the league aims to promote an awareness of wildlife and the environment. As well as developing a love of wildlife in children, the Leagues publish journals, booklets and guidebooks, make films and recordings of birdsong, and erect memorials.

John Gould, publisher and author, has been described by a modern zoologist as '*the first and greatest ambassador with which Australia has been blessed*' and he is generally regarded in scientific circles as the '*father*' of ornithology in Australia.

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