



A passion for parrots

Edward Lear down under

2012 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Edward Lear, celebrated British wildlife illustrator, landscape artist and travel writer, best remembered for his limericks and whimsical comic verse such as *The Owl and the Pussycat*. His book on the parrot family, with its stunning hand-coloured lithographs, included new species for Australia and pre-dated the work of John Gould. Lear started work on it when he was just 19 years old.

PALÆORNIS NOVÆ-HOLLANDIÆ.

New Holland Parrakeet.

in the Possession of the Right Hon: the Countess of Mountcharles

1. Male 2. Female

by Robert McCracken Peck

In his popular collection of limericks and illustrated children's verse, the prolific British artist, traveller, and nonsense poet Edward Lear (1812–1888) lovingly celebrated the exoticism of foreign lands. He enjoyed the sounds of their names, the idiosyncrasies of their national costume, and the curious nature of their native plants and animals, and played with them in a light-hearted but affectionate way. Some of his surviving letters suggest that he was intrigued and amused by the 'upside down' possibilities of antipodean life, but strangely, except for one poem about a duck and a kangaroo, he made not a single reference to Australia in any of his literary work. Such a conspicuous absence might lead

one to conclude that Lear had no interest in life down under, but a little-known group of spectacularly beautiful paintings of Australian wildlife made by Lear early in his life demonstrates quite the opposite.

During a highly productive 10-year period in the 1830s, before he became known as a nonsense poet or landscape painter, Lear immersed himself in the field of natural history and dazzled the world with hundreds of paintings of birds and mammals the like of which no one had ever created before. Although he never saw them in their native habitat, many of his wild subjects were of Australian origin. His depictions were original, creative, full of life, and rigorously accurate—a powerful merging of

science and art that stood out from all that had preceded them—and captured a breathtaking freshness that can still dazzle us today. Few of these paintings have ever been reproduced. They are offered here at the close of a year-long commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of one of the most talented natural history painters of all time.

Modest beginnings

Lear's story is a fascinating one, and his success as an artist and writer all the more remarkable in light of his unusual upbringing. The 20th of 21 children born to a prosperous middle-class family in a suburban village just north of London, Lear was raised by his oldest sister after his father suffered a financial reversal in the stock market and the family was forced to disperse when Lear was just four. He began his artistic career at a very young age by drawing what he called "uncommon queer shop-sketches ... coloring prints, screens, fans ... [and] making morbid disease drawings for hospitals and certain doctors of physic". The work was hardly inspiring, but it generated a modest income and encouraged Lear to believe that he might one day gain financial independence through his brush, pen and pencil.

As a teenager, in the late 1820s, he shifted his artistic focus to the far more appealing and vital occupants of London's Zoological Gardens. He was particularly attracted to the exotic animals that were then being sent to London from Australia and elsewhere in the British Empire as new discoveries. In the newly built enclosures in Regents Park, and at the Zoological Society's administrative



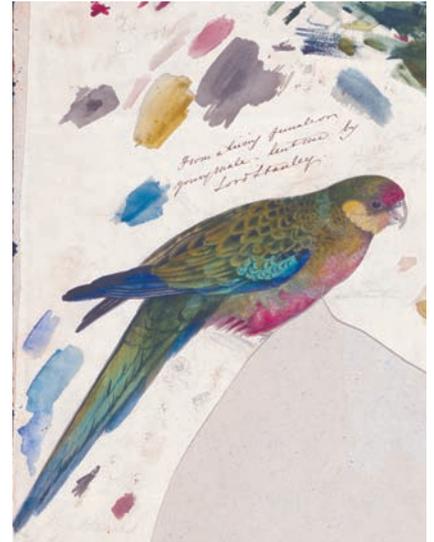
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The cockatiel was published in Lear's *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*.

Illustration – Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Drexel University)

Left Eastern grey kangaroo.

Illustration – Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.12 (fol. 17)



Above left One of Lear's paintings of an eastern spotted-tail quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*).

Illustration - Houghton Library/Harvard University MS Typ 55.12 (25)

Above A working sketch of a western rosella (*Platycercus icterotis*).

Illustration - Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.9 (6)

Left Major Mitchell's cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*).

Illustration - Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Drexel University)



Although Lear's book lacked a scientific text, its visual quality was so extraordinary that it drew enthusiastic praise from the most knowledgeable and exacting of critics. William Swainson (1789–1855), a leading English naturalist of the period, declared Lear's plate of a red and yellow macaw "equal to any figure ever painted by [Jacques] Barraband or [John James] Audubon for grace of design, perspective, or anatomical accuracy". Another of England's leading ornithologists, Prideaux John Selby (1788–1867), praised Lear's other parrot plates as "beautifully colored and I think infinitely superior to Audubon's in softness and the drawings as good". Even Audubon, who was disinclined to concede the superiority of any other artist, was so impressed with Lear's book that he stretched his own limited resources to buy a copy.

Lear proved amazingly versatile in his talent. Although he confessed that he found mammals "so much



Top A portrait of Edward Lear by Wilhelm Marstrand.

Illustration – National Portrait Gallery, London

Above 'The duck and the kangaroo' is an example of Lear's cartoon work.

Illustration – Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.14 (101, sheet 3)

Right A working sketch of a sulphur-crested cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*).

Illustration – Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.9 (62)

more trouble [to paint] than birds and require so much more time", he was equally skilled at both subjects. Australian mammals seemed to bring out the best in him. From kangaroos to possums and bettongs to quolls, Lear had a knack for capturing their distinctive personalities and poses. Unfortunately, he rarely indicated where he found his subjects. Since he never travelled to Australia, we can only assume that most of the Australian animals he immortalised were residents at the London Zoo or one of the many private collections to which Lear had access through his network of wildlife-oriented patrons and friends.

It is unclear why Lear painted so many Australian subjects. Were they private commissions from the owners of these highly valued specimens? Could they have been for a book on Australian fauna that never came to be? Or were they simply creatures whose colours, shapes and behaviours he



found appealing? Whatever the reason he made them, they number among his finest natural history paintings.

An ornithological focus

Unfortunately for Lear, his enormous talent rarely brought him the economic security he craved. Despite its critical acclaim, *Illustrations of the Family of ... Parrots* was not a financial success. Within a few years of its publication, Lear felt compelled to

sell his inventory of unsold plates to John Gould (1804–1881), then chief taxidermist at the Zoological Society. Gould had recently begun his parallel career as an ornithological publisher. He recognised Lear's enormous talent for illustration and did not wish to have him as a competitor. He soon employed him to instruct his wife on the fine points of scientific illustration and to create plates for his own series of large format bird books including



Edward Lear and the French connection

Two species of white-tailed black cockatoo are endemic to the south-west of Western Australia—Baudin's cockatoo, the long-billed form, and Carnaby's cockatoo, the short-billed form. Both birds have extremely high profiles among the Western Australian community as iconic species and feature strongly in local Aboriginal mythology. They are both listed as endangered fauna in state and federal legislation as their numbers have declined dramatically since European settlement due to habitat loss.

Baudin's cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus baudinii*) was named by Edward Lear in his book *Illustrations of the Family Psittacidae, or Parrots*, published in 1832. The female bird he figured as the type specimen was indicated by Lear in a note at the base of the plate as, "In the possession of Mr Benjamin Leadbeater". No measurements, description or locality accompanied the illustration.

The bird illustrated was assumed, from the drawing, to be the long-billed form. Carnaby's cockatoo (*C. latirostris*) was described by Carnaby in 1948, and differentiated from Baudin's cockatoo by being short-billed. However, recent research by Ron Johnstone, Curator of Birds at the Western Australian Museum and Dr Clemency Fisher, Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at the National Museums, Liverpool, has brought into doubt the true identity of the Lear plate illustrating Baudin's cockatoo. Ron noticed that Lear's style was to over emphasise the length of the upper beak in many of his parrot paintings. Lear was known to have prepared his paintings from both living and preserved bird specimens. In order to confirm the identity, Ron needed to determine if a specimen of a prepared skin was still in existence in a museum collection. So began some detective work.

The type specimen of Baudin's cockatoo is presumed to have been collected from the vicinity of Eagle Bay (near Cape Naturaliste) in May–June 1801 by a member of a French expedition which was mapping the coast of Australia. More than 200,000 natural history specimens were collected during the expedition, including at least 80 species of Australian birds, and were back in France by 1804. Some material was mounted for the Paris Museum and duplicates were given to dealers in zoological objects. Some of these specimens were acquired by Mr Leadbeater, who ran a natural history business in London. Both Lear and Leadbeater, were members of the Linnean Society. Between 1832 and 1836 Lear spent much of his time working at Knowsley Hall near Liverpool, the home of the President of the Linnean Society, Lord Stanley, who in 1834 became the 13th Earl of Derby. Lord Derby purchased many specimens from Leadbeater around 1840 and in 1851, after his death, his collection was donated to the Liverpool Museum.

At the Liverpool Museum, Dr Clemency Fisher searched through their vaults and found a female black cockatoo specimen from the 13th Earl of Derby's collection purchased on 8 February 1840. It had an old parchment label that appears to be in Lear's bold black handwriting "*Calyptorhynchus Baudinii* (Lear)". Ron Johnstone and Clemency Fisher will undertake measurements of this specimen and if it is, as they suspect, the short-billed or Carnaby's cockatoo, a new type based on a long-billed form will need to be made for Baudin's cockatoo. This study highlights the value of collaborative research on an international level and the importance of natural history specimens housed in museum collections to resolve important biodiversity questions.

Contributed by Kevin Kenneally



Above far left Lear named the Baudin's cockatoo, *Calyptorhynchus baudinii*, based on his illustration of a female specimen of the bird.

Illustration – Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Drexel University)

Above left Ron Johnstone with prepared museum specimens of female birds, Carnaby's (left) and Baudin's (right).

Above A Lear cartoon entitled 'Manypeeplia upsidownia'.

Illustration – Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Typ 55.14 (13)

The Birds of Europe (1832–1837), *A Monograph of the Ramphastidae, or Family of Toucans* (1834), and *The Birds of Australia* (1840–1848). The first of these works, published in five volumes with 449 colour illustrations, included 68 plates by Lear that were so outstanding they caused a contemporary reviewer to declare the young artist who made them "one of the best Ornithological Draftsmen the world has yet seen". Gould's smaller toucan monograph, published in two volumes with 34 colour plates, featured 10 of Lear's spectacular illustrations.

By the time Gould was ready to publish *The Birds of Australia*, Lear had given up scientific illustration in favour of landscape painting and was not available for new commissions. This did not prevent Gould from using Lear's



Above Western rosella.

Illustration – Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Drexel University)

previously published pair of cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) in his seven-volume masterwork.

Patronage

Among the many people who admired Lear's talents as a bird painter was Edward Smith Stanley (1775–1851), who was president of the Zoological Society when Lear first sought permission to sketch in its aviary. Lord Stanley (after 1834, the 13th Earl of Derby) owned an enormous collection of exotic animals, many from Australia. Lear sought out Lord Stanley's collection, the largest in Britain, as a source of subject matter for his parrot book. The Earl was so favourably impressed by Lear's book, he concluded that Lear was the artist to record the other rare birds and mammals in his menagerie. When invited, Lear leapt at the opportunity.

Beginning in 1830 and for the next seven years, Lear divided his time between London, where he continued to create illustrations for John Gould and others, and Liverpool, where he made more than 100 life portraits of the birds, mammals, and reptiles in Lord Stanley's remarkable menagerie. Seventeen of these paintings were

subsequently reproduced as lithographs for a privately printed book entitled *Gleanings from the Menagerie at Knowsley Hall* (1846) which the owner proudly presented to his friends throughout the Empire.

It was during his extended visits to Knowsley Hall that Lear saw and sketched his first eastern grey kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*), part of a free-roaming herd that the Earl had established on his estate as an experimental food source. He saw and painted several other Australian mammals there as well. But natural history illustrations were not the only things to grow from Lear's time at Knowsley Hall. It was at Lord Derby's estate that he began to create the endearing limericks and other nonsense verse for which he is so well known today. Self-illustrated in a loose, seemingly childlike style, these flights of whimsy may have provided Lear with just the relief he needed from the pressures of his demanding scientific commissions. At the urging of friends, he would later publish many of these irreverent poems, but because he feared that they might undermine his scientific reputation, he hid his responsibility for them behind the pseudonym Derry Down Derry ("who loved to see little folks merry") until 1861.

Despite his enormous talent for natural history illustration, Lear found the close, exacting nature of that work

both physically challenging and, over time, emotionally unfulfilling. His few surviving letters from this period reveal that he longed to devote more time to travel and to exploring the pleasures of landscape painting. A generous grant by Lord Derby and his cousin, Robert Hornby, enabled Lear to travel to Rome in 1837 to pursue these other avenues of artistic expression, and this brought to a close his short but distinguished career as a natural history illustrator. Claiming poor eyesight, Lear never returned to the professional field in which he had established his first international reputation less than a decade before. Fortunately, he left behind an extraordinary collection of paintings, many of which documented the wildlife of Australia.

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