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ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN
CASSOWARY (*CASUARIUS AUSTRALIS*, Wall).

By ALFRED J. NORTH, C.M.Z.S., C.M.B.O.U., Ornithologist.

(Plates viii-ix.)

Casuarius australis was the only avi-faunal type secured during Kennedy's ill-fated expedition in 1848, from Rockingham Bay to Cape York, when so many valuable lives were lost. Singularly enough its early history is associated with the second, third and fourth Curators of the Australian Museum,¹ which was the first Institution to receive a specimen.

For my purpose it will be necessary to transcribe the following extracts relating to *Casuarius australis*.

The existence of a Cassowary inhabiting Australia was first made known in 1849 by the late Mr. Wm. Carron, Botanist to the Kennedy Expedition, who remarks in his "Narrative" ^{1a} November 4th (1848):—"This morning Jackey went to examine a scrub through which we wanted to pass, and while out, shot a fine Cassowary; it was very dark and heavy, not so long in the leg as the common Emu, and had a larger body, shorter neck, with a large red, stiff, horny comb on its head; Mr. Wall skinned it, but from the many difficulties with which he had to contend, the skin was spoiled before it could be properly preserved."

Referring to this specimen the following is the gist of Gould's remarks in his "Handbook to the Birds of Australia"² under the name of *Casuarius australis*, Wall. "All that we at present know on the subject is comprised in the following extract from the 'Illustrated Sydney Herald' of the 3rd June,

¹—The first Curator of the Australian Museum, 1838-45 was the Rev. William Branthwaite Clarke, M.A., the "Father of Australian Geology," Rector of St. Thomas Church of England, North Sydney, 1846-70 and Elective Trustee of the Australian Museum, 1853-74. (R.E.)

^{1a} Carron—Narrative of an Expedition undertaken under the direction of the late Mr. Assistant Surveyor E. B. Kennedy for the Exploration of the Country lying between Rockingham Bay and Cape York, 1849, p. 64.

² Gould—Handbook Bds. Austr., 1865, ii., p. 206.

1854.—A specimen of this bird was procured by the late Mr. Thomas Wall, Naturalist to the Expedition commanded by Mr. Kennedy. It was shot near Cape York in one of those almost inaccessible gullies on that part of the Australian continent. This Cassowary when erect stands about five feet high; the head is without feathers, but covered with a blue skin and like the Emu, is almost without wings, having mere rudiments, the body is thickly covered with dark brown wiry feathers; on the head is a large prominence or helmet of a bright red colour, and to the neck are attached, like bells six or eight round fleshy balls of bright blue and scarlet which gives the bird a very beautiful appearance. The first and indeed, the only specimen obtained of the Australian Cassowary was unfortunately left at Weymouth Bay, and has not been recovered. Mr. Wall being most anxious for its preservation had secured it in a canvass bag, and carried it with him to the spot where it was unfortunately lost. In the ravine where the bird was killed, as well as other deep and stony valleys of that neighbourhood, it was seen running in companies of seven or eight. On that part of the north-eastern coast therefore it is probably plentiful, and will be met with in all the deep gullies at the base of high hills. The flesh was eaten and found to be delicious; a single leg afforded more substantial food than ten or twelve hungry men could dispose of at a single meal. The bird possesses great strength in its legs and makes use of it in the same manner as the Emu. Its whole build is more strong and heavy than the latter bird. It is very wary but its presence may be easily identified by its utterance of a peculiarly loud note, which is taken up and echoed along the gullies; and it could be easily killed with a rifle.

The above account was furnished by Mr. Thomas Wall's brother, Mr. William Sheridan Wall (the second) Curator of the Australian Museum."

Gould had previously supplied virtually the same information to the Zoological Society of London, and it was published in the "Proceedings" for 1857 (p. 271).

According to Dr. P. L. Sclater at a meeting of the Zoological Society of London, held on the 28th February, 1867, the Secretary (Mr. now Dr. P. L. Sclater) read the following extracts from a letter addressed by Dr. (afterwards Baron) F.

von Mueller, of Melbourne, to a newspaper, "The Australasian," of the 15th December, 1866, giving further particulars as to the Cassowary of Australia:—"For the intelligence of the existence of an Australian true Cassowary, and for the means of defining preliminarily its specific characters, I am indebted to G. Randall Johnson, Esq. who in September last, while on a visit to Rockingham Bay, shot in the Gowrie Creek scrub, the only specimen of this remarkable bird as yet obtained, and whose name I wish it should bear; and I cannot do better than to give in the first instance publicity to the lucid remarks transmitted to me by that gentleman." Here follows Mr. Johnson's, not Dr. Mueller's, description of the bird, and for which Mueller has in so many instances been placed as the authority for the description of *Casuarus johnsoni*, instead of only suggesting a specific name to Mr. Johnson's description. "In referring to this letter Mr. Sclater called attention to the communication he had made on the same subject to the meeting on December 13th, 1866³ and remarked that the bird was, no doubt, the *Casuarus australis*, Gould."

At the meeting of the Zoological Society held on the 9th May of the same year⁴ "A letter was read from Dr. G. Bennett, F.Z.S. (Trustee of the Australian Museum) dated 21st February, and addressed to the Secretary, in which details were given respecting the re-discovery of *Casuarus australis* in Queensland, and photographs were enclosed of a specimen of this bird recently received by the Sydney Museum. Dr. Bennett's communication enclosed a copy of the following letter, addressed to the Editor of the 'Sydney (Morning) Herald' by Mr. W. Carron, one of the three survivors of Kennedy's Expedition, during which the original example of *Casuarus australis* had been procured:—

"Botanic Gardens, Sydney,
8th February, 1867.

"Sir—In the 'Herald' of to-day is a letter from Mr. G. Krefft of the Sydney Museum, giving the description of a Cassowary lately obtained by Mr. G. Randall Johnson at Rockingham Bay, and also alluding to one shot by Mr. Thomas

³ Sclater—Proc. Zool. Soc., 1866, p. 557.

⁴ Bennett—Proc. Zool. Soc., 1867, p. 473.

Wall while on the expedition to Cape York with the late Mr. E. B. Kennedy.

"I have just seen the bird sent to the Museum by Mr. Johnson, and I think it is identical with that shot by Mr. Wall in the vicinity of Weymouth Bay, in November, 1848; but the description given of the latter as quoted from Gould's work on 'Australian Birds' is not correct. I am aware that in the few remarks on Wall's bird, which appear in my narrative of Kennedy's expedition, there is an error as to the colour of its helmet or comb, which was *black* not *red* (the redness referred to the wattles) an error which I have before corrected. As I was present when Wall's bird was shot, and helped to eat it, I had a good opportunity of knowing something about it. Instead of going in flocks of five or six together, it is certainly a solitary bird, and would appear to be very scarce, as only two others were seen by our party during the whole journey from Rockingham Bay to my furthest camp at Weymouth Bay in latitude 12° 25'S. This bird had shorter but larger legs, heavier body, and shorter neck than the Emu, the colour very dark, its habits, too, being unlike those of the Emu. It appears to confine itself to the gullies in the thick jungles with the Brush-Turkeys and Jungle Fowl, feeding on the various fruits found there, even swallowing the large seeds of *Castanopermium* and *Pandanus*. Mr. Wall took every care of the skin he was able to do; but it was completely destroyed before he died, together with my own specimens at Weymouth Bay. This bird was certainly very large, and furnished our whole party with a better supper and breakfast than we had enjoyed for some months, or than poor Wall was destined to enjoy again (as he and all his companions, with the exception of myself and one other, had died in six weeks after from want of food); but there was not one in the party who would not have eaten more if he could have got it, every meal being divided with the greatest nicety, and having been so for a long time.

"I am, Sir, yours etc.,

W. CARRON."

At the same meeting, and recorded only a few pages farther on, Mr. Gerard Krefft, the third Curator of the Australian Museum, remarks⁵:—"The existence of a species of Cassowary

⁵ Krefft—Proc. Zool. Soc., 1867.

in the northern part of Australia has been known for many years, from native ornaments in which Cassowary feathers form a part, and from the report of the survivors of Kennedy's Expedition, who state they actually shot one of these birds. Mr. W. S. Wall, late Curator of this Museum, has even gone so far as to give a very brief description in a defunct Sydney newspaper, published in June 1854. Gould has quoted this description in his 'Handbook on the Birds of Australia,' accepting the name proposed by Wall, of *Casuarium australis*, though Wall's description (?) was founded on nothing more than the remarks of one of Kennedy's men, that they had shot a bird unlike an Emu with wiry feathers and a top-knot or helmet."

"The brief account which Wall gives us is as follows:—'The body thickly covered with dark-brown wiry feathers; on the head is a large prominence or helmet of a bright red colour, and to the neck are attached like bells six or eight round fleshy balls of bright blue and scarlet.'" Mr. Carron who gave some notes to Wall about this bird, has assured me that this specimen had no red helmet, that its plumage was not brown, but black, and that it was not true that twelve hungry men made a meal off a single leg, and had enough and some to spare. So much therefore for this very vague account quoted by Mr. Gould.

"The Cassowary which I am now about to describe was presented to the Australian Museum by Mr. G. Randall Johnson, who informs me that it was shot by him when on a visit to Messrs. Scott and Co's. Herbert Station, in the Gowrie Creek Scrub, near Rockingham Bay. Mr. Johnson has furnished me with a description of the appearance of the fleshy part of the neck in the living bird, and is anxious to see some former statements made by him through Dr. Ferd. Mueller, corrected; and as the newspaper account given by Dr. Mueller will probably be quoted by other writers, I call the attention of the Fellows of this Society to the fact that it contains many inaccuracies.

"When announcing the discovery of a Cassowary, Dr. Mueller suggested that, if new, it should be named in honour of the discoverer; and acting upon this suggestion I beg to propose the name of *Casuarium Johnsoni* for it." Here follows Krefft's description of the bird described under this name.

Let us now revert to the original description of *Casuarinus johnsoni*, published in "The Australasian" and subsequently in the "Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London." It will be noted that Dr. Mueller, even then widely known for his high scientific attainments, whether intentionally or not, omits to make any reference to Mr. W. S. Wall's description of a similar bird, thirteen years before, under the name of *Casuarinus australis*, in the "Illustrated Sydney News" of 3rd June, 1854, and which Gould had transcribed into his "Handbook to the Birds of Australia" published in 1865⁶. Moreover, Carron had so far back as 1849 made reference to a Cassowary from Northern Queensland in his "Narrative of Kennedy's Expedition from Rockingham Bay to Cape York."

At a meeting of the Zoological Society of London, held on the 11th June, 1868⁷ "Dr. (then Mr.) P. L. Selater, exhibited a very fine and perfect skin of the Australian Cassowary (*Casuarinus australis*), which had been transmitted to him by Mr. Charles J. Scott, of Queensland, and was believed to be the first example of this bird that had reached Europe.

"The present specimen of the Australian Cassowary had been shot in the beginning of November last by Mr. Henry Stone, overseer to Messrs. Scott Brothers & Co., at their station in the Vale of Herbert, in the same scrub from which the specimen described by Mr. Krefft in the Society's 'Proceedings' for 1867 (p. 482) had been procured."

The late Baron von Mueller, although of world-wide fame as a Botanist, was not an Ornithologist, and it is remarkable that being in the same city he did not submit Mr. Johnson's description to the late Sir Frederick McCoy, the eminent Director of the National Museum, Melbourne, and a high authority on the Australian avi-fauna. This is more extraordinary seeing that both Dr. Mueller and Professor McCoy were members of the Council of the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, and their names among others appear next one another as having attended the usual weekly meeting on Tuesday, 11th December, 1866, only four days before Dr. Mueller

⁶ Gould—Handbk. Bds. Austr., ii., 1865, p. 206.

⁷ Proc. Zool. Soc., 1868, p. 376.

sent Mr. Johnson's description of the Cassowary to "The Australasian."⁸ Moreover, the latter is followed by a paper by Professor McCoy, entitled: "On a new Victorian species of Diamond-bird," *Pardalotus xanthopyge (xanthopygius)*. Professor McCoy could have told Dr. Mueller at once that the bird had been already described, and thus prevented the creation of a synonym. On referring to "The Australasian" of December 29th, 1866, not the 15th December as recorded by Gould, Salvadori, Rothschild and others, I find Dr. Mueller's letter on page 1221 under the heading "Discovery of a True Cassowary in North-east Australia." It consists of a letter over a column in length, and clearly shows that Dr. Mueller did not wish to appropriate the credit of Mr. Johnson's description, for the latter, placed between inverted commas, is wedged in the middle of Dr. Mueller's remarks, from which the following extracts are made. "From these notes and a sketch simultaneously received it is obvious that *Casuarus Johnsonii* must rank as a separate species. The size of the bird may be the same as that of the Indian *Casuarus galeatus* Farther discrepancies between the two species will unquestionably be pointed out by our learned professor of natural history, whenever that solitary specimen, which I intend to present to the Melbourne Zoological Museum shall have arrived." It was destined, however, never to reach Melbourne, nor Dr. Mueller to even see this specimen, for in "The Sydney Morning Herald," February 8th, 1867, p. 3, Mr. G. Krefft refers to the same specimen under the title of "The new Casuary—*Casuarus Johnsonii*," and among others, makes the following remarks:—"In the last December number of 'The Australasian,' Dr. Mueller announced the discovery of a new Casuary, which Mr. G. Randall Johnson shot at Gowrie Creek, Rockingham Bay. The excellent description by the discoverer, which Dr. Mueller quotes in his letter enabled me to see at once that this could not be the Casuary mentioned by the late Mr. T. Wall."

"The discoverer has presented this interesting novelty to the Trustees of the Australian Museum, on whose behalf I beg to thank Mr. Johnson for his valuable gift.

⁸ "The Australasian," Dec. 15th, 1866, p. 1170.

“The bird will be set up at once, and I hope to find a corner for it in the now overcrowded Museum.”

Kreff's version of Wall's original description of the first Australian Cassowary obtained is somewhat misleading for he quotes only a part of what the latter really did record in the 'Sydney Illustrated News' (not "Herald" as has so persistently been used by every writer giving a reference to the original description, from Gould downwards), of Saturday, June 3rd, 1854, p. 88. As to Kreff's statement that Wall's description of *Casuarinus australis* was published in "a (now) defunct Sydney newspaper" let me here quote a letter received by me from Mr. H. Wright, then Acting Principal Librarian of the Public Library of New South Wales, under date, 26th April, 1911:—"In reply to your letter of yesterday's date, I beg to inform you that 'The Illustrated Sydney News' was first issued in October, 1853, and the last issue is dated February, 1894."

On turning up the original description of *Casuarinus australis*, at the Public Library, Sydney, published nearly fifty-nine years ago, I was astonished to find that Wall accompanied his description of *Casuarinus australis*, with unmistakable figures (wood-cuts) of a Cassowary, one bird standing up, the other crouched down. This fact has not been previously recorded. Following on after his description is this paragraph:—"The above discovery of the Australian Cassowary, was together with the description taken from rough sketches and notes belonging to the late Mr. Thomas Wall, the discoverer of the bird, and kindly forwarded by his brother, Mr. William Sheriden Wall, Curator of the Australian Museum."

Little knowledge can be gained from the "Australian Museum Report" for 1867, of the type of *Casuarinus johnsoni*, beyond the fact that Mr. Johnson presented the specimen in that year, but in the minutes of the Board Meeting of the Trustees for February, 1867, the Curator has found that it was received during the previous month. No Registers were kept in those days, neither has any communication from Mr. Johnson been preserved respecting it. The accompanying figure has been reproduced from the original photograph of the type taken by the late Mr. Henry Barnes, and which is still in the Museum.

Count Salvadori in the "Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum"⁹ in referring to *Cyclopsitta macleayana* described by Dr. E. P. Ramsay in the "Sydney Morning Herald" remarks:—"According to the rule followed in the Zoological Catalogues of the British Museum, right to priority cannot be claimed for specific names published in newspapers." In the present instance, however, Wall's name of *Casuarinus australis*, was made good by Gould in his "Handbook to the Birds of Australia," and that of *C. johnsoni* (a synonym of the former) suggested by Mueller, properly described later on by Krefft in the "Proceedings of the Zoological Society."

Dr. E. P. Ramsay, the fourth Curator, in addition to writing the most perfect life history of this species, was also the first to make us acquainted with its eggs, and young and immature birds in the "Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London," in 1874-6. Read in conjunction with what has been put together by Gould in his "Supplement" to the "Birds of Australia" in 1869 where *Casuarinus australis*, is beautifully figured from the specimen sent by Mr. Scott to Dr. Scater, little has subsequently been added to our store of knowledge.

Finally, Carron's "Narrative of Kennedy's Expedition," printed by Kemp & Fairfax, Lower George Street, Sydney, in 1849, within a year of Carron being placed, in an exhausted state, on the "Ariel" and which left Weymouth Bay for Sydney on Sunday, 31st December, 1848, but Kennedy's papers, after his death, were secreted by Jackey Jackey in a hollow tree and were not recovered by the latter until the 11th or 12th May, 1849. Carron's pathetic story, has never had an equal, in the annals of Australian exploration, for of the thirteen persons who left Sydney on the 29th April, 1848, death at the hands of the Cape York aborigines, and disease, left only Carron, Goddard and Jackey Jackey of the expedition to return and tell the tale.

Nearly seven years ago¹⁰ when writing on Gilbert, with the kind permission of the Rev. W. I. Carr-Smith, I had the privilege of figuring the mural tablet erected to his memory

⁹ Salvadori—Cat. Bds. Brit. Mus., xx., 1891, p. 95.

¹⁰ North—Rec. Austr. Mus., vi., 1906, p. 128, pl. xxvii.

by the colonists of New South Wales in the historic S. James Church of England, Sydney, built in Governor Macquarie's time in 1820. I am now able to supplement this through the courtesy of the present Rector, the Rev. W. F. Wentworth Sheilds, M.A., with the tablet next to Gilbert's, erected by the Executive Government to the memory of Kennedy, who was killed by the natives, and those who perished on the same expedition. In contradistinction to the Gilbert memorial tablet of which the tent, tree, and recumbent figure of Gilbert are in fairly high relief, the figures in the Kennedy mural tablet are in intaglio. It represents Kennedy, recently speared by the natives, dying in the arms of the faithful Jackey Jackey, while in the background are several hostile savages brandishing their weapons.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE VIII.

Australian Cassowary.

CASUARIUS AUSTRALIS, *Wall.*

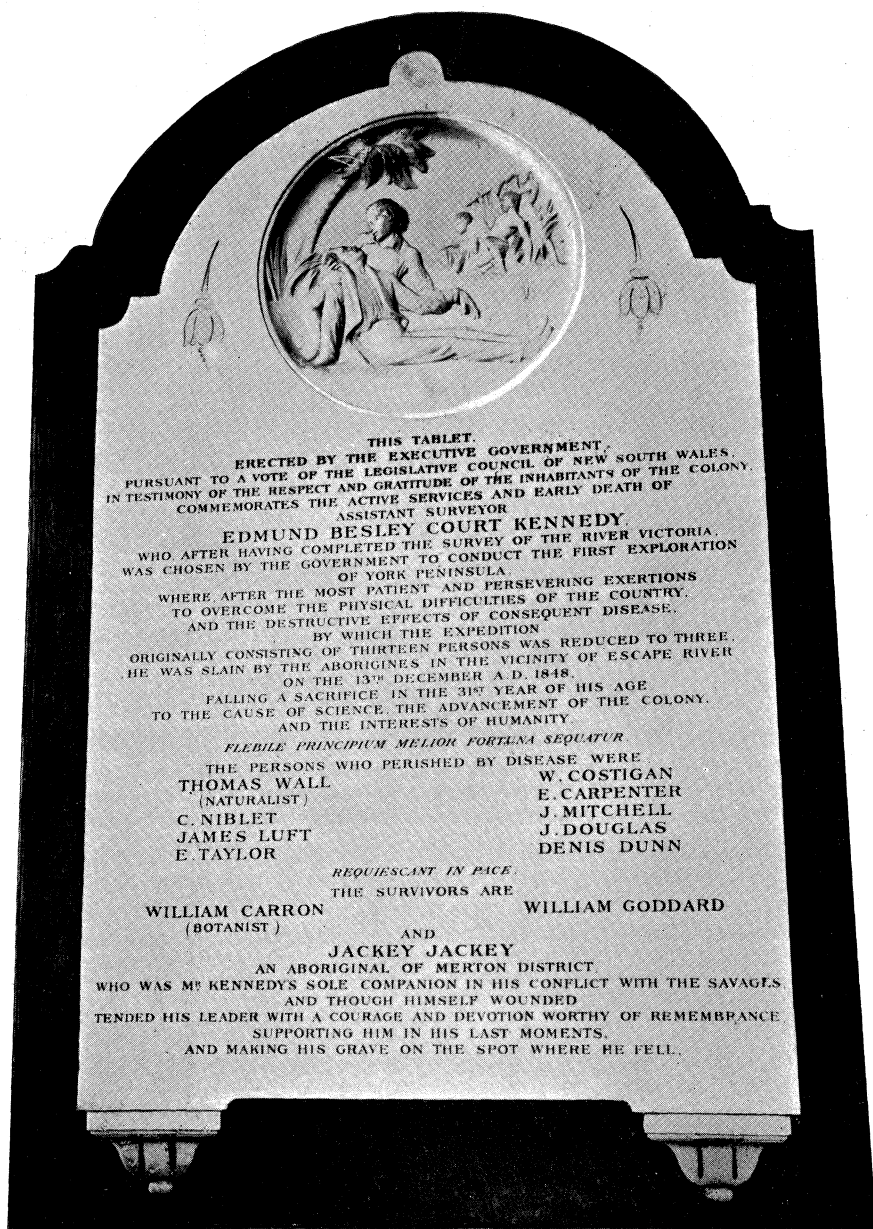
Reproduced from the original photograph of the type
taken by the late Mr. Henry Barnes.



H. BARNES, photo.,
Austr. Mus.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE IX.

Mural Tablet in S. James Church of England, Sydney, erected by the Executive Government of New South Wales in memory of Edward Besley Court Kennedy and his nine companions, who perished during the first exploration of Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland.



A. J. NORTH, photo.,
Austr. Mus.

CATALOGUE SLIP.

North, Alfred J.

On the Early History of the Australian Cassowary
(*Casuarus australis*, Wall).

Rec. Austr. Mus. x., 4, 1913.