

## Book Review

### Seen But Not Heard: Lillian Medland's Birds

by Christobel Mattingley

The National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2014. Hardcover, colour plates, 207 pp. RRP AU\$39.99.



*Seen but not Heard: Lillian Medland's Birds* is the first publication of all 53 of the beautiful bird plates that Lillian was commissioned to paint for the controversial ornithologist Gregory Mathews and his publication *Handbook of Australian Birds*. This publication never came to fruition and it is only now that these plates are published in all their glory...

and they are glorious.

As a professional ornithologist, it is important to me that my field-guide images look like the real thing, and this has always been one of my problems with Cayley or even Gould (and his employee Henry Richter)—although the images are beautiful, they are very much of their time, with a flat face, or a strangely elongated beak. These stylistic distortions are not apparent in Medland's work even though she was a contemporary of Cayley. There is, however, a unique taxonomy within the plates, reflective of Mathews' propensity as a 'splitter' of subspecies, but really this just adds to the history of the publication. It is the life and history of Lillian Medland (and her contemporaries) that I have found most intriguing in writing this review. Who would have thought that in reviewing a book of beautiful pictures I would have spent so much time delving into the history of Australian ornithology?

Born in London to a landed family, her father a Fellow of the Zoological Society, it seems that Lillian had a rather unique, if privileged, upbringing: raising lion cubs, mountain climbing in Switzerland and Austria, always with a sketch pad. I am particularly drawn to her as a rebellious and independent woman, who, contrary to convention,

rode bicycles and smoked, and was responsible for not only the vegetable gardens but also the electrical repairs in her home.

Lillian married Tom Iredale in 1923 and they sailed to Australia. Iredale, a self-taught ornithologist and conchologist would become a councillor for the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union as well as the head of conchology at the Australian Museum. Both Medland and Iredale continued to work with Mathews even though they were on opposite sides of the world, and it was in the 1930s that the images published in *Seen but not Heard* were first commissioned. Over 5 years, 53 coloured plates were completed, carefully wrapped and sent to England, only to be returned by Mathews for safekeeping as the second world war broke out. Unfortunately, even though the plates were returned to England once the war was over, Mathews ultimately shelved the project. This was not the first time that Lillian had work commissioned that never made it to print. Across her career, only three of her eight commissions made it to completion, the last of these, Iredale's *Birds of New Guinea*, being published in 1956 after her death. In my quest to learn about Lillian and Tom, I did manage to track down a copy of this last publication, and the images (although not as glossy as those in *Seen but not Heard*) are stunning and very much to form.

*Seen but not Heard* is a beautiful publication, which brings to light a collection of plates that should have been in the public domain long ago. It draws focus onto a remarkable woman whose talent and contributions to ornithology should be recognised in their own right, not just as an addendum to her husband's profile in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. It is unlikely that I will ever be able to afford Iredale's *Birds of New Guinea* (though one can dream), so I will happily accept the prints in *Seen but not Heard*, which will comfortably settle into my bookshelf alongside Cayley, Slater, Davies and Knight.

**Kerryn Herman**