

RICHARD LAISHLEY 1815 - 1897 PRIEST, PAINTER, NATURALIST

By R. B. SIBSON

Richard Laishley came to my notice as I was turning the pages of the sumptuous volume *The book of birds* edited by Averil Lysaght (v. *Notornis* 29: 79-80) and published in 1975. Plate 128 took me — and many others to whom I showed it — by surprise. It is a reproduction of a watercolour showing Blue Penguins against the background of a storm at sea. The brief accompanying text says that “Laishley appears to have been rather a melancholy amateur naturalist . . . This group may well have been painted on the outskirts of Wellington with a southerly storm blowing up.”

Since the discovery of this exciting painting, I have been able to spend two mornings in the library of the British Museum of Natural History, examining a fat folio-sized folder which contains many of Richard Laishley's original paintings and drawings. They depict nearly 50 species of New Zealand birds and, as Figure 1 shows, also plants, geckos, insects and other items that would have appealed to a curious and artistic naturalist. They are not in exact chronological order.

About the same time Janet Paul, Art Librarian of the Turnbull Library, had become interested in two “fine portrait drawings signed R.L.” and had traced them to Richard Laishley. I have had the benefit of discussions with her. I am also grateful that she apprised me of RL's original diary *Notes of a voyage to New Zealand 1860-1861*, now in the possession of the Turnbull Library. Ian Thwaites, librarian at the Auckland Institute and Museum, has also been most helpful.

Richard Laishley was born in 1815 at Southampton in Hampshire, the county which had inspired Isaac Walton and Gilbert White. His boyhood rambles took him beside the River Itchen and into the New Forest. Many years later he wrote “My love of natural science and objects was stimulated at this period by the attractions of the surrounding scenery, by the acquisition of some works on natural history and by the friendship of two gentlemen of kindred tastes with my own.” What he called his “bias for drawing” was encouraged, and at the age of 18 he was entered as a student of painting at the Royal Academy School, Burlington House. His sponsor was W. Etty R.A., whose paintings were later to earn the admiration of that great novelist and poet, Thomas Hardy.

On 23 June 1860 RL sailed from Gravesend with his wife, three sons and one daughter. *Caduceus* was a “fine roomy ship” of

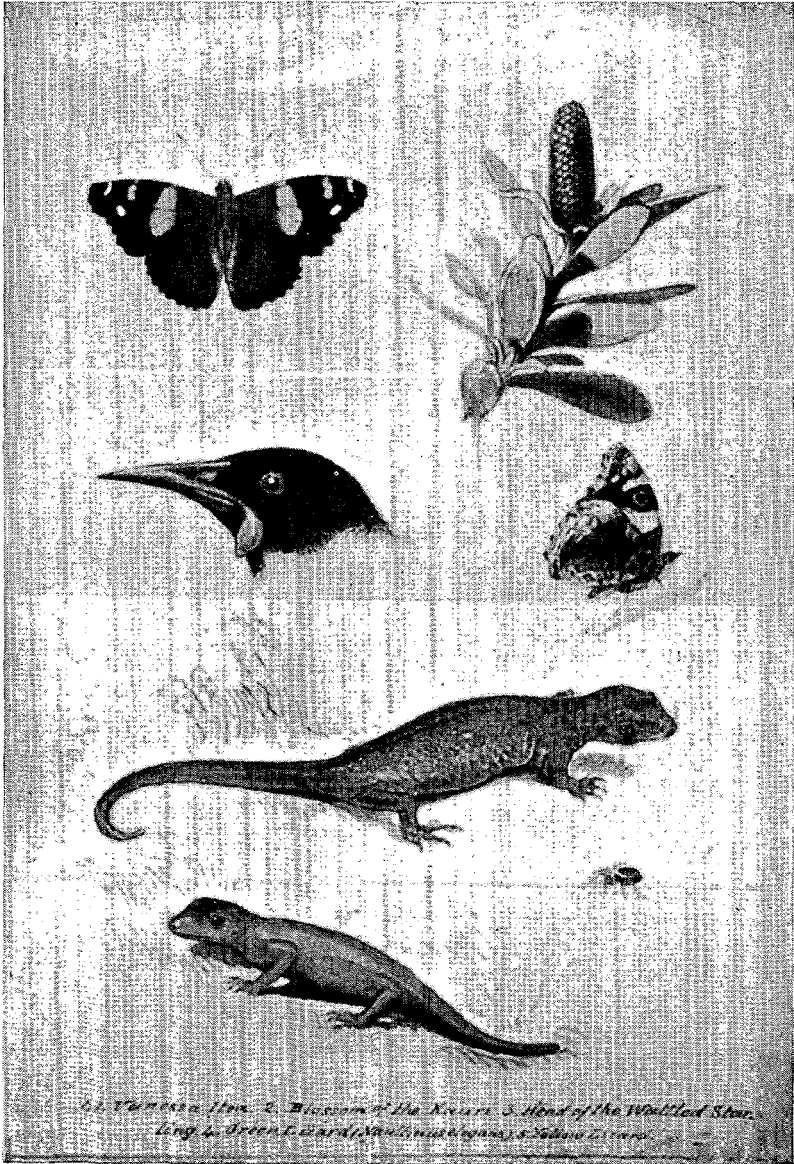


FIGURE 1 — By courtesy of British Museum of Natural History

more than 1000 tons and the Captain was "singularly well-informed"; but RL felt that certain large dark seabirds, which the Captain was calling Sooty Albatrosses, were in fact Giant Petrels. However, after a most favourable and pleasant passage of 111 days, *Caduceus* berthed at Auckland on 12 October. The diary which Laishley kept is a valuable seabird log. He continued it intermittently into 1861, and many of the entries throw light on his powers of observation and his eagerness to know the truth.

On 17 October, within a week of his arrival, he visited the Auckland Museum, "three rooms in a small one-storey cottage, not far from the Barrack Wall." There "I examined a specimen of our Captain's Sooty Albatross which went by the same name in the Museum, *Diomedea Fuliginosa*; but the nostrils were distinctly tubular and prolonged forwards through two thirds of the bill so that I still apprehend it may prove to be the Giant Petrel."

On 11 December 1860 he noted a Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) at Onehunga. Like Hardy's Wessex countryman, "he was a man who used to notice such things," even if his antipodean *Vanessa* belonged to a different subspecies from the one he knew in southern England. Lepidoptera delighted him. He painted at least three species of butterflies and also magpie moth.

Soon after his arrival he was installed as Minister to the newly established Congregational Church at Onehunga, which he described as "an extensive village and pioneer settlement." Competition for worshippers was keen. There were already at Onehunga several churches, three of which are clearly to be seen in Hoyte's fine contemporary painting. Auckland's 25 year reign as the 'Lively Capital' was drawing inevitably to a close. There had been no dearth of landscape painters. But as for inquisitive and observant naturalists, the cupboard was bare.

Buller, reared on the Kaipara and educated at Wesleyan Three King's College, had gone south in 1854. T. F. Cheeseman was still a schoolboy in his teens. Thomas Kirk did not arrive from Britain till 1863. On matters of natural history, whom could RL have consulted? A famous memorial window to Isaac Walton in Winchester Cathedral, the core of RL's home county, carries the advice "Study to be quiet," an exhortation which may have suited RL's gentle disposition very well. The birth pangs of what was to become the august Auckland Institute lasted over much of 1867-68; too late for RL, who by then had thoughts of Australia in mind. Those eight years near the shores of Manukau Harbour were happy and fruitful. Most of his paintings of birds belong to this period and they are all the more precious because they are precisely dated. In all his work his eye for significant detail is manifest, so that his claim that his birds are "illustrated from Nature" is well justified. It is also clear that he often had fresh specimens in the hand. The first painting in the folio is dated March 1861 and is of a Falcon which had been shot near the Manukau Heads.

His notes read "pale throat lightly streaked; underparts darkly streaked." He was not content to sketch birds as if they were stuffed specimens. He drew Wandering Albatrosses and Cape Pigeons on the wing at sea and made sketches of a Brown Kiwi in six different positions "from observation of a living specimen."

Pastoral duties did not keep RL so tied that he could not travel. In 1863 he visited Nelson where he made a 'Sketch from the Shore' and took the opportunity to observe South Island Robins, Yellowheads and Jackbirds. He must also have gone north because a portrait of a North Island Robin carries the note "seen near Kerikeri." 1866 was a busy year, marked among other things by paintings of *Earina autumnalis* "beautiful and very fragrant" and of a Least Dotterel which he called *Charadrius minutus*, the first evidence that Red-necked Stints may be counted among New Zealand's migratory arctic waders. There is also a fine drawing of a waka-huia, an elaborately carved feather-box in the possession of Robert Graham, whose name appears in the list of subscribers to the first edition (1873) of Buller's *History of New Zealand birds*.

After eight years of what may be called his prolific Onehunga period, the call of duty and perhaps the need for a change of scene took RL to Melbourne. Evidently before he left, his name had come to the notice of Buller, for on page 306 of the famous first edition, with reference to the then virtually unknown Cook's Petrel, we read "Captain Hutton informs me that there is a specimen in the collection of the Rev. R. Laishley." How extensive was that collection and what became of it?

RL was not happy in Australia. The magic of "to-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new" did not work. Houses were difficult to rent and expensive. He wondered when the bubble of prosperity was going to burst. He gladly accepted an offer to rejoin New Zealand friends at Thames, where a Congregational Church had been established in 1871. The first minister was Rev. B. C. Butland, who in 1874 was succeeded by RL. Thames was prosperous. Gold production had reached a peak in 1871. When RL returned he found that the chapel and other buildings had burned down but had been rebuilt "with great spirit at a cost of £900." Thames was to be his home till 1886, apart from an absence of 18 months in 1883-84 when he revisited England and rejoiced "in its spring loveliness."

The folder holds delicate paintings or sketches of several species of ferns and orchids. One labelled 'Orchis' shows three aspects of a *Pterostylis* "growing near the Hape Creek Thames."

How much time was RL able to devote to art between 1874 and 1886 when he was based at Thames? He was then into his sixties. Janet Paul tells me that an oil painting of a 'Maori girl with a basket of peaches' may be dated about 1880; and two portrait drawings signed RL belong to 1885 and 1886.

Did RL meet any kindred spirits in his later years? Resulting from the botanical explorations of Kirk and Cheeseman, there was a growing interest in the natural history of the Firth of Thames and the Coromandel Peninsula. In August 1877 Cheeseman had written to Buller that he believed he had frequently seen Knots on the extensive mudflats near the mouth of the Thames river. Today three typical birds of the Firth are Pied Stilt, Bar-tailed Godwit and Knot. None of these appears in any of the plates included in the big folder. In 1880 James Adams was appointed Headmaster of the new Thames High School. He and Cheeseman had been colleagues on the staff of the Church of England Grammar School, Parnell. Adams was soon at work on the flora of the goldfields and in due course he had a celmisia and a mistletoe named after him. It is difficult to believe that RL and Adams did not sometimes meet and discuss finds of common interest. Theoretically RL had retired in 1884, but he stayed on at Thames performing light duties till 1886.

When RL finally left Thames, he moved to Devonport. In November 1888 he wrote "This volume of drawings accompanied by a manuscript volume of notes, I have given to my eldest son, Richard." His hand was slow to lose its cunning, for an oil-painting entitled 'Track through New Zealand bush,' now held by the Turnbull Library, is dated 1895. He was an octogenarian when he died.

RL was in the prime of life in 1860 when he arrived with his family in New Zealand. His trained eye was quick to appreciate the surprises and novelties of an unfamiliar land. Fortunately for us the artist in him was sometimes tempted away from the problems of a struggling missionary. Perhaps he was at his happiest and most successful when he was painting natural objects.

For historians of New Zealand ornithology RL's notes and paintings are of outstanding interest. Justice cannot be done to them in a preliminary outline such as this. Not only naturalists but also connoisseurs of New Zealand art will find much to delight them in the work of this sensitive Congregational minister whose name has lain in obscurity for nearly a century.

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