

# BULLER, HUTTON, HAAST AND HECTOR: A STORM IN A VICTORIAN TEACUP

By C. A. FLEMING

In *George Edward Lodge. The unpublished New Zealand bird paintings* (1982: 194), I made the statement that Walter Buller (1838-1906) was not a little piqued at Hutton's publication of his *Catalogue of the birds of New Zealand, with diagnoses of the species* in 1871, just before the appearance of Buller's *History of the birds of New Zealand*, issued in parts during 1872-73, the first of which was dated March 1872. This article documents the reasons for that statement, which was based on three letters now in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Captain Frederick Wollaston Hutton (1836-1905), after joining the navy, studying geology at Sandhurst, and serving in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers at Crimea and in the Indian Mutiny, resigned his commission in 1866 and settled in the Waikato. He wrote reports on geology for the Geological Survey and was curator of Auckland Museum, but in 1871 he joined the Geological Survey, moved to Wellington, and spent three productive years writing catalogues of New Zealand fossil and living animals, which the Colonial Museum and Geological Survey published in accordance with the policy of its Director, Dr James Hector (1834-1907).

The first of these was the *Catalogue of the birds of New Zealand*, "prepared by direction of Dr. Hector, with the view of enabling naturalists in New Zealand to name correctly any bird . . . It has been drawn up chiefly from the collection of birds purchased from Mr. Buller for the Colonial Museum, which contains type specimens of all his new species, except *Gerygone assimilis* and *Creadion cinereus*; but in addition, I have examined all the public Museums in the Colony . . ." In addition to the Introduction, from which this extract is quoted, there is a bibliography, an analytical key to the families, a section called "Birds introduced by European Settlers," and 10 pages of "critical notes" justifying changes in nomenclature and containing comments. For example, Hutton states that the spider's webs "of loose texture and dull green color" mentioned by Buller as used in a warbler's nest "are fresh water algae." There are also indexes to English and Maori names and an arrangement of the genera according to "the modern system." The main *Catalogue* gives scientific and some vernacular names, author, a brief description, generally with dimensions, egg description (when available) and distribution. In this catalogue Hutton named *Larus bulleri* and *Colluricincla concinna*, which proved to be an Australian straggler (Black-faced Cuckoo Shrike).

Hutton and Buller disagreed on many minor points in their publications on birds in the early 1870s, Buller perhaps being especially 'prickly' about Hutton's comments on his *Birds of New Zealand* first published in the *Ibis* for January 1874 and reprinted, together with Buller's replies to criticisms, in *Trans. NZ Inst.* vol. 6, pp. 126-138 (1874). I think the honours were just about even at this stage and that most of Hutton's comments were reasonable, even if some were misjudged. Hutton admitted his error in dismissing the green spider's cocoons as fresh-water algae, even citing an identification of the spider responsible, but he did not credit Buller with the correction, in spite of what he says at the end of the letter below. Buller certainly gave grounds for complaint when he published Hutton's name for the Chatham Island Black Robin before Hutton's description of it had appeared because Hutton had sent the specimen to London for Buller to see, as a courtesy, on Hector's instruction, after Hutton had drawn up his description. This type of competition and jealousy was part of the excitement of being an ornithologist in a pioneer age when there were still new birds to name, but some things obviously rankled, as the following correspondence shows. The letters that follow were given to me by Sir James Hector's grandson, Mr Stephen H. Saxby of Lower Hutt, for ultimate lodgement in the Turnbull Library.

Otago Museum  
Dunedin  
15 April 1875

My dear Buller,

Dr. Haast was here last Tuesday and in the course of conversation he mentioned that you had been saying, on Dr. Hector's authority, that I had urged Dr. Hector strongly to allow me to publish my catalogue of birds of New Zealand, and that at last he had consented. I should be much obliged to you if you would inform me whether this is correct or not, for if it is I must take steps to contradict it, as it is altogether untrue.

The truth of the matter is this. You will remember that before you left New Zealand I drew up for you short diagnoses of all the petrels. Dr. Hector saw me doing this and asked me whether I could do the same for all the New Zealand birds. I replied that it would be very easy, and he then told me to do so. I stated at the time that perhaps you might not like it, and he said that it would do you a great deal of good, as it would popularise ornithology in the colony, and make your book sell; and also that the Museum had bought your collection of birds and ought to make use of them. All this was of course before you had left New Zealand. Subsequently he gave me definite instructions to begin the catalogue, which he said was to be the first of a series that he had determined to bring out on the New Zealand fauna (see Museum Report 1871). Of course I naturally thought that he had written to you about it; at any rate I, as his subordinate, had only to obey orders. I feel sure that Dr. Hector will not deny this and you are quite at liberty to send him this letter.

While on the subject there is another point between us that ought to be cleared up. In the *Ibis*, and in the *Trans. N.Z. Inst.*, you accuse me

of having concealed the fact of you having pointed out to me that my *Colluricincla concinna* was *Grauculus melanops*. This was a very natural error for you to fall into, nevertheless it was an error. I found out my mistake myself when unpacking the collection of foreign birds in the Colonial Museum, and my letter to the *Ibis* was posted and had left New Zealand about a fortnight (if I recollect rightly) before I got your letter on the subject. The dates of your letter from Melbourne, and mine to the *Ibis* will probably prove this, but I have not got them here.

I would not do such a mean thing as that which you impute to me, and I think that you must know that I have always fairly acknowledged my mistakes, and said to whom I am indebted for correction.

Yours truly,

F. W. Hutton.

The Terrace  
Wellington  
April 19, 1875

My dear Hutton,

I received today your letter of 15th instant.

I am sorry that Dr. Haast said anything to you about "Cat. B. of N.Z." because it seems like raking up old grievances to no good purpose.

I felt very sore at the time that my own Collection of Birds was made use of for your **Descriptive Catalogue**, in direct anticipation of my book, and I told Hector so. He assured me that he did not know the exact nature of your 'Catalogue' till it was actually in print — that in fact he directed you to prepare merely a synoptical list for the purpose of identifying the specimens.

I think he said he was away from Wellington when the "Catalogue" was published; and he called my attention to the circumstance that in this instance his name as Director does not appear on the title page. He admitted that the publication of your Catalogue was unfair to me; but he disclaimed on your behalf any intention of doing me harm.

This is a simple statement of the facts and just as I gave it to Haast, although as it would appear, not exactly as repeated to you. Hector never said that you had "strongly urged" the case, but simply that you had done the work without his seeing it, and that, although technically responsible, its character was quite unknown to him till after its publication.

As you demanded an explanation I have given it; but I think it is a great pity that Hector's name is made the subject of ungenerous discussion while he is away from the Colony and cannot be heard for many months. For my part I was satisfied with Hector's statement, and time had removed any little soreness I had felt. So it was a pity Haast raked the matter up.

Unless we all manage to pull more together, I fear we shall lose the good name we have at Home for co-operation.

Now for the other matter. Your explanation is quite satisfactory; and if you wish it, I will put the matter right, as regards *C. concinna*, in my next budget of "Notes."

You sometimes acknowledge mistakes but not 'always.' Remember the case of the "fresh-water *Algae*" !!

In my History of *Gerygone flaviventris* I gave you a cutting footnote; but when the proof sheets came, I magnanimously struck it out!

The "Trans. Vol. VII" makes good progress, and will be issued in about four weeks. I am glad you have given us Finsch's "Revision," which will be useful.

With Mantell's permission I have added an Editorial footnote re *Podiceps hectori*.

Faithfully yours,

W. L. Buller.

Wellington

May 8, 1875

My dear Hector,

We hope soon to hear of your safe arrival with Mrs. Hector, in the Old Country.

We are *jogging on* as usual out here. The Volume of "Trans" VII is making satisfactory progress. The reprint of Vol. I will be out, I understand, in about a month.

You will see from the enclosed that I have been in correspondence with Hutton about the "Catalogue." He has replied to my letter of April 19 in a very nasty spirit and says he is forwarding the correspondence to Newton. However, I will send you his last letter after I have replied to it and you will see how the case stands.

Haast has returned from Melbourne and I am happy to add that his wife is perfectly restored. He is naturally very angry with me for bringing up his private letters and says it was a "breach of trust." But he left me no alternative and has no right to complain. The following appears in this morning's Telegrams.

Believe me

Ever faithfully yours,

W. L. Buller.

The press cutting mentioned in the last sentence is no longer attached. This correspondence took place after Hutton had become Provincial Geologist in Otago and Curator of Otago Museum. As recorded by Heinrich von Haast (1948), Hutton's relations with Hector were not always cordial. Julius von Haast (1822-87) had been deeply upset by the Moa Bone Point Cave controversy (fully described in his biography by his son), which began in August 1874. His bitterness towards Hector persisted at the time of the above correspondence, and so his role as a "stirrer" is understandable. Hutton's reply to Buller, mentioned in the last letter, is not available but may turn up in other collections. Hector received the letters in London and maybe for this reason kept them at home among his private papers. He was wriggling a little, as he walked on a tightrope, to avoid falling out with his colleagues and was too good a politician, perhaps, to put any reply in writing.

Hector, however, could hardly evade responsibility for the *Catalogue*. In the Sixth Annual Report on the Colonial Museum and Laboratory, dated 31 July 1871, kindly brought to my notice by Dr Ross Galbreath (DSIR, Mt Albert, Auckland), Hector reports the

donation of the Buller Collection of 265 bird specimens "in consideration of his receiving assistance towards the publication of an illustrated work on the Ornithology of New Zealand" and then continues:

"From this collection and that in the Christchurch, Dunedin, and Auckland Museums — and assisted by an excellent critical notice of the New Zealand birds in the European collections, published in the German language by Professor Otto Finsch, of Bremen, — Captain Hutton has been enabled to draw up a complete catalogue, with a diagnosis of each species of bird in New Zealand, both native and introduced. This work will shortly be published, and it is hoped will prove of great assistance towards stimulating the study of Natural History in the Colony." (Hector 1871, p. 4).

Hector, Hutton and Buller were about the same age, 12 to 18 years younger than Haast. Hector, whom Buller (1872) called "the father of the scientific institutions in the colony," had a seniority that sprang more from his position as the Government's chief scientific adviser and from his academic status, as the only university graduate and a Fellow of the Royal Society since 1866, than from his slightly greater age. In 1874, Buller and Hutton both knew that their scientific advancement, in particular their chance of election as F.R.S., depended on Hector's good will. In 1875 the Colonial Museum was extended by erection of a two-storey office block, designed by William Clayton, on the frontage of Museum Street, the last major extension on that site (Dell 1965). Hector, 41 years of age, had justified his appointment as Director of the Colonial Museum and Geological Survey and Manager of the New Zealand Institute by many services to the Government. By 1881, he directed the Geological Survey, Colonial Laboratory, New Zealand Institute, Colonial Botanic Garden, Colonial Observatory (and time service), Meteorological and Weather Department, the Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures (and custodianship of standard weights and measures), and the Patent Office Library and the Wellington Public Library, which apparently embraced the combined libraries of the Museum, Institute, Geological Survey and Wellington Philosophical Society. Hector faced criticism from scientific colleagues, especially Hutton and G. M. Thomson in the South Island, and his organisation and influence declined in importance after the Liberal government came to power in 1891 under John Ballance and especially when Seddon succeeded Ballance as Premier in 1893.

Apart from Haast's biography, few studies of early New Zealand naturalists have been published; yet letters like those here published can shed a good deal of light on the history of ornithology and the relationships between the leading figures in Victorian science. I hope that reading these examples will lead to publication of other correspondence between our pioneer ornithologists. The final sections of the first two letters are here reproduced in longhand so that examples of Hutton's and Buller's handwriting may be available for comparison with museum labels, registers and other manuscripts.

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Yours truly  
J. N. Hutton

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of his "fresh-water Algae"

In my History of Periphrasis  
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a cutting for note; but  
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The "Trans. Vol. VIII" makes  
good progress, and will be  
issued in about four weeks.

I am glad you have given  
us Fries's "Revisions", which  
will be useful.

With Mantell's Revisions  
I have added an editorial  
note on Podiceps hectori  
Fred. Lamour A. H. Buller

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## SHORT NOTE

### ORIENTAL CUCKOO IN SOUTHLAND

On 15 January 1983, I received a phone call from Mr C. S. Nicol, farmer of Kapuka, Southland, to report that there was an unusual bird in his garden. He further said that he thought it was a cuckoo but not a Shining or Long-tailed Cuckoo, both of which he was familiar with. From his very good description we provisionally identified the bird as an Oriental Cuckoo (*Cuculus saturatus*).

The following day I visited the area and had excellent views of the bird at a distance of 5-20 metres through the open window of the Nicol homestead. The bird was about the size of a large Tui and obviously a cuckoo. Conspicuous features were a barred black and white breast, blackish-white spotted tail tipped with white, yellow legs and feet, head and back bluish grey.

The bird was actively feeding on earthworms which were emerging from a rain-sodden lawn. From sundry perching positions around the lawn, the bird was frequently flying to the ground to catch worms, which were eaten on the ground.

Colour photographs of the bird were taken in a poor light. To enable closer photographs to be taken, earthworms were collected and thrown from the open window. The bird approached with a minimum of caution to about 5 metres to eat these worms.

Having consulted New Zealand, Australian and British and European field guides, I have no doubt that the bird was in fact an Oriental Cuckoo.

R. R. SUTTON, Lorneville, No. 4 R.D., Invercargill

[Copies of colour photographs are on file with the Rare Birds Committee. — Ed.]