

## BOOK REVIEW

### Letters of a Naturalist – The Field Accounts of Richard Henry of Resolution Island.

Edited by Susanne Hill, John Hill, & Victoria Jaenecke.

Putangi Publications, 2022, xii + 458 pp, hardback 300 x 233mm, illustrated colour. ISBN: 978-0-473-64328-7.

Richard Henry (1845–1929) is an underappreciated figure in the early history of natural history and conservation in New Zealand. Born in Ireland and raised in Australia from the age of six, Henry emigrated alone to New Zealand in 1874–5, eventually settling in 1883 at the southern end of Lake Te Anau and making a living through a range of backcountry work. He spent his spare time observing and collecting birds, and began writing articles for local newspapers – although self-educated, he had been fascinated by ecology and animal behaviour from an early age. In 1894, Henry was made curator and caretaker of Resolution Island in Fiordland, and over the next fourteen years made extensive observations and reports on the native fauna and conducted the first conservation translocations in an attempt to save

kākāpō (*Strigops habroptilus*) and kiwi (*Apteryx australis* & *A. haastii*) from the rapidly encroaching invasive mustelids. Although his efforts to preserve native species on Resolution were unsuccessful, he pioneered many elements of modern conservation and took a behavioural focus at a time when academia was generally more interested in anatomy and classification.

*Letters of a Naturalist* is primarily a collection of Henry's writings, presented alongside notes and curated illustrations to help a reader visualise the locations and species mentioned therein. The book itself is colossal, both in terms of size and content, and aims to present Henry's writings in as complete a manner as possible, with enough added contextual and supporting material for a reader to fully absorb and appreciate. To avoid burying the lede,

the editors have done an excellent job – this book is a comprehensive and beautiful piece of work with no significant weaknesses, and I wholeheartedly recommend it.

*Letters* is divided into three main parts and eleven appendices, plus substantial introductory material and end matter. The first part contains Henry's letters, the majority of which are from his time in Dusky Sound. The second part presents extracts from Henry's book *The Habits of the Flightless Birds of New Zealand* (Henry 1903), and the third is split into sections covering miscellaneous natural history observations, speculations, and reminiscences by Henry. The eleven short appendices are a mixture of additional writings from Henry, further details about his work, and new material on topics relevant to Henry and his story. The book is illustrated and contains footnotes throughout that greatly enhance the value of the material and its readability.

Henry's letters represent about half of the total page count of the book. Letters from Dusky Sound (1894–1908) are the largest fraction, but the collection spans well over thirty years from shortly after his arrival in Te Anau to his time at Katikati. While at Dusky Sound, Henry clearly desired not just to report his activities to his employer but to build broader support and interest in conservation, as he wrote over one hundred pieces for newspapers, journals, and societies across the country. As a conservationist Henry was far ahead of his time, being the first to translocate species to predator free islands, the first to train a conservation dog, and the first to understand the irregular breeding of kākāpō – just one example of his keen abilities in observing and recording behaviour.

The letters are not merely dry reports of Henry's work or dispassionate observations – his attitudes and emotions shine through the collection, and a number of letters deal with more personal subjects. Henry's life contained more than its share of tragedy, and in 1893 a gathering gloom fuelled by the loss of a friend, his deteriorating health, and frustration at the slow progress of making the Resolution reserve a reality led to a suicide attempt. Thankfully he survived, received treatment, and was greatly heartened by a supportive telegram from his employer – in his reply letter Henry seems almost cheerful. After three weeks a recovered Henry was ready to get back to work, and in the meantime the bureaucracy preventing his appointment to Resolution had been resolved.

Henry's letters paint a picture of a man deeply troubled by the damage introduced pests were doing to the native avifauna, and the ultimate failure of his efforts on Resolution and the broader apathy around conservation weighed heavily on him. Henry would no doubt be delighted that more than a century later the battles he started

are still being fought, and that the techniques he pioneered remain as cornerstones. Although largely unappreciated in his lifetime and for many years after, Henry has begun to receive his due in recent years, with the Department of Conservation marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (2019). Hopefully *Letters* will also contribute to wider appreciation of Henry's legacy.

The book contains an almost complete selection of Henry's letters, but the editors have excised some parts containing long digressions or which are repetitive; these omissions are noted in the text. I have not read Henry's original letters so cannot comment on the editors' judgement around what was removed, but their reasons are sound and are presented transparently. Other than those omissions, the editing of Henry's material is light throughout to preserve his unique style, with only punctuation changes and some minor corrections to spelling or for consistency. Overall, the letters do not form a continuous narrative, and the discussions are unfortunately only one-way; but in this the editors had little choice as very few letters written to Henry have survived. Two of the editors of *Letters* previously authored the biography *Richard Henry of Resolution Island* (1987, reprinted 2015), which would serve as a companion volume.

The second part of *Letters* reproduces extracts from Henry's 1903 book *The Habits of the Flightless Birds of New Zealand*, with some minor unpublished revisions and additions made by Henry in 1904. While well-received at the time, few copies of *Flightless Birds* are now in circulation and to my knowledge the complete book has not been digitized. This new work is hence the only readily available source for this material, and the only source for Henry's unpublished 1904 edits. As with part one, some material has been omitted – in this case digressions about other topics of interest to Henry but not about the birds in question.

*Flightless Birds* was written for a general audience and for a longer format, and as a result the writing in this part is more engaging and has more depth than many of his letters. It is evident that Henry was an excellent natural historian, and had the advantage of living at a time when many species were far more abundant. The editors have added substantial value to this section with their footnotes, which include not only additional information on locations or common knowledge at the time, but also comments from modern scientists on Henry's observations in the context of our current understanding of the bird in question. Weka (*Gallirallus australis*), kākāpō, kākā (*Nestor meridionalis*), Southern brown kiwi (tokoeke, *Apteryx australis*), Fiordland crested penguin (tawaki, *Eudyptes pachyrhynchus*), and paradise shelduck (pūtangitangi, *Tadorna variegata*) are among those given the most attention. Those

interested in seeing a sample of Henry's writing can find an extract on kākāpō online via Papers Past (Henry 1904), and will immediately understand the value of the additional material provided by *Letters*; in this case including comments from current kākāpō Science Advisor Andrew Digby, photos of kākāpō, and botanical illustrations of common plants that they eat.

In the third and final main part, the editors present miscellaneous observations, speculations, and reminiscences by Henry. The observations cover a range of topics, from his attempts to poison sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), to former locations of Māori settlement, to extensive notes on the fishes in Dusky Sound. Henry's speculations are likewise varied but interesting – one attributes the decline of the takahē (*Porphyrio hochstetteri*) since European arrival to the introduction of brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), although here (and elsewhere in his writings) Henry regards rats to be a greater threat as food competitors to birds than as egg predators. This part concludes with Henry's reminiscences on aboriginal Australians from his time living in Western Victoria as a child and young man, in the traditional territory of the Gunditjmara people. Although many of the terms Henry uses to refer to aborigines are now pejorative, he clearly had great respect for their skills, strove to understand their thoughts and customs, and pushed back on the negative narratives of the time.

Works such as *Letters* that primarily collate and present existing material stand or fall on how much value is added by their organisation, editing, and new contributions, and here the book excels. The six-page introduction gives a thorough overview of Henry, his work, and his time on the islands. The titles and one-sentence summaries before each letter or extract are clear and helpful. There are 1,444 footnotes, which provide additional context or explanation when Henry makes more obscure references or assumes knowledge a modern reader may not possess. The index – invaluable for a work such as this – is detailed and accurate, and a bibliography is also provided. Some other nice touches include a 'portrait gallery' near the start of individuals that are often mentioned in the letters, and a glossary that clarifies some of the alternative names of the species that Henry discusses.

The Illustrations – over 500 in total – are a delightful mixture of modern and period photography, maps, artwork, sketches by Henry, and a few sections of his original letters. They range in size from full-page to small insets within a column, and each has an informative caption including the source collection for historical photographs and documents. The overall

production quality is excellent, and the layout and spacing are consistently professional and effective.

In short, there is almost nothing I can criticise about this book. Often labours of love – which *Letters* clearly is – succeed in terms of content but somewhat miss the mark on presentation and overall 'polish' because those aspects of publishing happen last and are outside the spheres of interest or expertise of the authors or editors. *Letters* is the counterexample – the editors were clearly determined that this book would not be released until it could stand as a work of scholarship and alongside any professionally published coffee-table book. How the book came to be is an interesting and poignant tale in itself, but I encourage those curious to read it from the editors themselves in the book's introduction. Commendably, the editors have also committed to donating any proceeds to conservation organisations and recovery programmes.

This is not a book that will appeal to everyone, as it focuses on the details of one man's life and work in one corner of New Zealand during the earliest days of modern conservation. It should also be acknowledged that Henry's letters, while always interesting, are not always riveting reading. However, this book succeeds completely in what it sets out to do, and the editors should be praised for presenting Henry's work so effectively and adding so much value with their illustrations, notes, and organization. I highly recommend this book for anyone with an interest in the history of conservation or of Fiordland, or who simply enjoys large, beautiful books that celebrate New Zealand's wild places. I look forward to dipping back into *Letters* many times in the future.

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