Forgotten Feathers

AN OLD-TIME NATURALIST ON TASMANIAN BIRDS.

In West's History of Tasmania, written in 1850, published in 1852, a short section is devoted to the birds of the island. This was written by Ronald Gunn, F.R.S., at the author's request. He puts in a good word for the Hawks, which he says would be wise for the colonists to spare, as they are most powerful and persevering enemies of the snakes which infest much of the island. "The beautiful White Hawk (Achil novaehollandiae) erroneously called an albatross by Mr. Gould, once very abundant, is now becoming rare, having been nearly exterminated for the sake of its skin, by the zeal of collectors." Regarding Parrots: "The Green and Rosehill Parrots (Platycercus flaveolus et eremius) occur in immense flocks in some places, and White Cockatoos (Cacatua alba) were at one time to be seen in great numbers, but are now becoming scarce." . . . "Two Pigeons and four species of Quail are all the raptors in the island; the true gallinaceous birds being wholly wanting. One of the thirty species of gallicas is the Emu. Very few individuals now exist in the island, and it is to be feared that its total extinction will be effected ere it can be ascertained whether the Tasmanian bird is identical with that of New Holland. Tame Emus are common in the Colony, but the original stock of most of those domesticated was introduced from Port Phillip." This throws important light on the supposed Tasmanian birds seen by Mr. B. R. Dyer at Mona Vale and New Norfolk, in the late fifties of last century [Emu, XXIII, page 222]. Mr. Gunn does not seem to have taken much trouble to ascertain whether the island bird was actually extinct or not at the time of his writing (1850), but in all probability it was, and those seen by Mr. Dyer were most likely of the Victorian species.

The author mentions the immense flocks of Mutton Birds (Puffinus tenuirostris) existing in Bass Strait, and that Capt. Flinders, when near the north-west extremity of our island, saw a stream of them from 50 to 80 yards in depth, and 300 or more yards in breadth, flying as compactly as free movement of their wings would allow; and during a full hour and a half this stream of pelicans continued to pass without interruption. "This bird burrows in the ground, forming what are called by the sealers 'rookeries,' and a considerable trade was at one time carried on in their feathers, eggs and salted bodies." Mr. A. J. Campbell's friend, the domestic cat, which has "gone bush" [vide Emu, XXIII, page 175], was, even at that time, three-quarters of a century ago, a destroyer of our bird-life, for Mr. Gunn mentions that, although European rats and mice had become common all over the island, the domestic cat, gone wild, was proving very destructive to Quail, and to those species which are much on the ground.—H. STUART Doug, F.Z.S., W. Devonport, Tas.