

Obituary

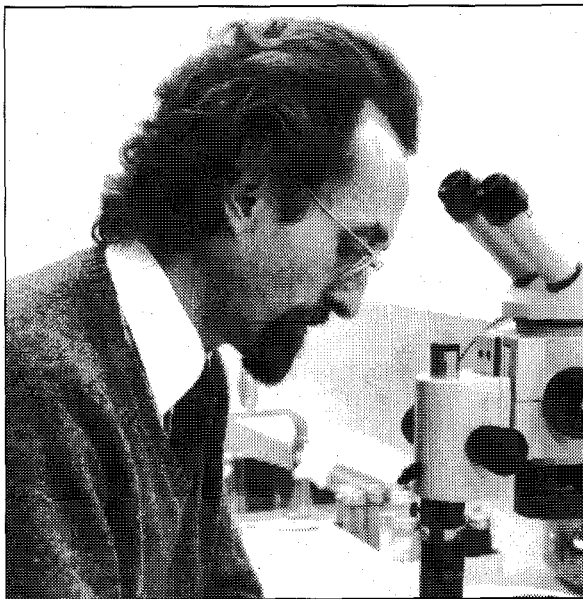
SHANE A. PARKER 1943–1992

Shane Parker, a long-time mentor and friend, died in Adelaide on 21 November 1992 at the age of 49 from a lymphoma. His humour and counsel will be missed by many. Though his latter years were marred by acrimonious debates, I believe that his great positive influence on Australian ornithology and ornithologists, evidenced by the many who recorded their thanks for his help in their writings, will endure.

Shane came to Australia in 1964 with the Second Harold Hall Australian Expedition from the British Museum (Natural History). After emigrating to Australia in 1967 he worked at the Arid Zone Research Institute, Alice Springs. On moving to Adelaide, he commenced five years of secondary and tertiary education, finishing in 1975 with a B.Sc. from the University of Adelaide. In 1976 he succeeded Herb Condon as Curator of Birds at the South Australian Museum (SAM), a position he held until 1991. After 1985–86 he was half-time in Ornithology and half-time as Curator of Lower Marine Invertebrates; he became full-time in the latter after 1991.

Avian distribution and taxonomy were his bread and butter. Long-standing taxonomic and distributional enigmas or issues swept under the carpet galvanised Shane's attention. His resolutions of such matters were scholarly and eloquent. An early example is Galbraith & Parker's (*Emu* 69, 212) account of the rediscovery of the Atherton Scrubwren *Sericornis keri* on the Second Hall Expedition. By following up a telling footnote hidden away in the early literature, he determined that *Microeca brunneicauda*, known as the Brown-tailed Flycatcher and thought to occur widely across northern Australia, did not exist (a complete listing of Shane's publications will appear in the *Records of the South Australian Museum*). Perhaps the *pièce de resistance* was his unravelling of the nomenclatural mess surrounding the grasswrens *Amytornis textilis*, *purnelli* and *modestus* (*Emu* 72, 157). He demonstrated that A.J. North, in recognising *textilis* and *purnelli* as conspecific despite understanding that they were not, set the stage for decades of confusion. He wrote several other important papers on grasswrens.

His critical book reviews always showed his profound knowledge of systematics and taxonomy. His own systematic contributions were numerous and perhaps the pivotal paper in this respect is his treatise on cuckoos of the *Chrysococcyx 'malayanus'* complex, a



56-page work resulting from intermittent study over nine years and offered as a basis for further studies.

With Julian Ford he announced the existence of two forms of the Wedgebill, now routinely described in field guides as the Chirruping and Chiming Wedgebills (*Emu* 73, 113) and they wrote a landmark paper on the distribution and taxonomy of birds in south-west Queensland (*Emu* 74, 177).

Distributional papers included works on the *Tyto* owls of South Australia, broader papers on the distribution of the State's avifauna with historical or geographical emphases, and the first two parts of the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia*. Other papers included an annotated checklist of the native mammals of the Northern Territory; an account of peregrinations in the Solomon Islands searching for the Solomon Islands Crowned Pigeon *Microgoura meeki*; description of the enlarged tympanic cavity in a number of desert-inhabiting birds; the taxonomic status of *Dromaeocercus* of Madagascar, and description of the extinct Kangaroo Island Emu as *Dromaius baudinianus*.

Shane helped anyone who asked. He read entire draft texts of the *Atlas of Australian Birds* and Joe Forshaw's second edition of *Australian Parrots*. And it seemed to me that even after the grim affair I shall describe below, many of the papers I saw in new Australian ornithological literature contained an acknowledgement to Shane for his comments.

A museum man through and through, he insisted on the need for sensibly conducted scientific collecting: the evidence had to be 'palpable'. Indeed, the availability of only a limited number of specimens is connected to the affair over Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* that ended his ornithological career.

The issue at stake had little to do with the validity of *C. paramelanotos*; indeed, Cox himself finally published the hypothesis that it is a hybrid (*South Australian Ornithologist* 30, 169). We need to ask what drove Shane to the uncharacteristically hasty and naked publication of the name in the journal of an amateur field naturalists club with no accompanying analysis? This departure from the procedures he rigorously endorsed indicated that he really was not ready to publish the name when he did. So why did he do it? I believe that it is the issue of *professionalism* in ornithology (whether in the work of professionals or amateurs) that holds the key to the whole sorry saga, which started with two *Calidris* sandpipers collected by John Cox in South Australia. I know that since about 1977 John and Shane had been considering whether the birds were a new species, or Cooper's Sandpiper *C. cooperi* (described from one specimen collected last century in North America), or hybrids. A collaboration then arose between Shane and a leading interstate birdwatcher who had been identifying certain birds for a number of years in Victoria as Dunlins *C. alpina* but who in 1981 realised that they may have been the same as Cox's specimens. His role in the collaboration was to describe these birds and Shane's was to work up an account of the specimens. One event and Shane's response to it then shattered not only the collaboration but Shane's involvement in ornithology.

On the invitation of a well-meaning editor, the collaborator, who had been using the name '*perplexa*' conversationally for the birds since 1981, in 1982 published a note with the good intention of alerting others to the characters to look out for in these birds. As the name '*perplexa*' had come into fairly wide, informal usage amongst the journal's readership it was used in the article. I also note that Shane liked the name and if not for his reaction to the article's publication, it probably would have been formally bestowed upon the birds. Shane learned of the impending publication from his collaborator only when publication was so close that Shane's requests for changes could not be fully accommodated. Why did he want to alter it? For one thing, it suddenly seemed that all of the birds described by the collaborator did not match Cox's specimens. Perhaps

more importantly, *publication of this paper without prior consultation from his collaborator saw something snap in Shane and he persisted in attempts to right what he saw as an assault on his professionalism*. Abandoning any reference to the name '*perplexa*', he rushed the description of Cox's specimens as *C. paramelanotos* into print fearing, perhaps unrealistically, that someone else might describe the bird first should it prove to be a good species. And that's it, in a nutshell. 'The collaboration had dissolved', as John Cox put it in his 1989 clearing of the air (*Australian Bird Watcher* 12, 50) to which in mid-1993 no reply has appeared.

What followed until Shane's death was an ugly, drawn-out and acrimonious affair involving the South Australian Museum, lawyers, opinions from the Australian Society of Archivists and the RAOU, with which he became disenchanted. Somehow, though, he did maintain his sense of humour through it all.

Most importantly, what can we learn from this issue? I think it is simply that whatever our motive for studying science and ornithology and absolutely regardless of whether we might be professional, amateur or something inbetween, there are *professional ways* to conduct the doing and writing of research and there are other ways. Perhaps, also, if anyone is to 'win' in these disputes, it must only be the birds that we study.

And so, Australian ornithology had in many ways lost Shane by 1990 though he retained an interest in some matters.

Of Shane's humour, which was such a pervading part of knowing him, it might be difficult to convey a description. I will remember his delight in using the colour and sound of English words, specially the more obscure ones, his delivery of jokes and quips in the vein of Saki's (H.H. Munro) parodies of turn-of-the-century England and his love of the tales of Nigel Molesworth and his 'skool', St Custard's.

Shane had a special love of linguistics and I finish this brief account of his life with a little Portuguese and the one Latin word with which he always concluded his letters:

Good-bye friend,
seja livre,
semper,

Leo Joseph

I thank John Cox, Peter Curry, Sandie Degnan, Philippa Horton, Ian Rowley and Jenni Thurmer for their help and comments though I stress that the interpretations above of certain major events in Shane's life are mine.