

Obituary

WILLIAM THOMAS COOPER

6 April 1934–10 May 2015

William Thomas Cooper AO, Hon. DSc, died at his Atherton home on 10 May 2015, aged 81. He had not been well for a couple of years, but his death was a shock for his many friends and admirers.

Bill, as he liked to be known off canvas, is internationally renowned among the bird world, yet he deserves even more: Cooper should be a household name in Australia, much as Gould is, and Audubon in the United States. Not that Bill would have wanted that degree of attention – he avoided fanfare and fuss.

Regardless of this reticence to take centre stage, Bill is widely loved and respected. The man as well as his art had the ability to move people. A measure of this is that within a few days of his death, an online tribute by the National Library of Australia, which published his biography *An Eye for Nature: The Life and Art of William T. Cooper* (2014), had nearly 26 000 visitors. Christine Milne, until recently leader of the Australian Greens, tweeted: ‘The wonderful, globally renowned wildlife artist has died. His keen eye for nature and birds lives on in his work.’ Andrew Isles, natural history bookseller, circulated a farewell via an email that ended: ‘Belinda and I will miss him terribly.’ All this action in cyberspace would have left Bill bemused.

Bill had a remarkable life. He was a self-made man, unassuming, gentle and gentlemanly, with a quiet sense of humour and an inquiring mind. While confident in his knowledge and talent, he was never arrogant or opinionated. He gathered friends readily, but hated crowds. He loved ‘the bush’ and never lost his affection and curiosity for the natural world. As he once said, he always had his boots on, ready to fly out of the studio to see nature in action.

In many ways, Bill’s start in life was unpromising. He grew up in a squat built from scrap material on the outskirts of the then industrial city of Newcastle. The family had little. Yet the bush was his playground and his father taught him to recognise the birds and other inhabitants of land and sea, to fish and hunt and to respect nature. He also taught his young son how to box, in preparation for school, where fisticuffs was part of the culture. His mother did what she could to foster Bill’s interest in natural history books and drawing. She bought Bill drawing materials, encouraged him to enter competitions (which he did with some success) and, when they went shopping in Newcastle, would deposit him at the Pope Library, where the librarian came to trust him enough to leave him poring over the illustrations in a volume of John Gould’s *The Birds of Australia*. Bill filled the margins of his schoolbooks with sketches, usually of birds. He was school captain in primary school, but high school disappointed him. He wanted to be a taxidermist – he honed his skills to some acclaim at the local zoo – but he received no encouragement from his teachers. In anger, he left school soon after turning 15 and before completing his Intermediate Certificate.

Bill’s next few years were filled with a variety of jobs, exploits and interests, not least girls – ‘many girls’, by Bill’s own admission. Delivery boy, court-martialled conscript,

hand-painted tie salesman, amateur boxer and ballroom dancer. For some years in his twenties, his main employment was as a window dresser. With his friend Billy Freeman, he began exhibiting his artwork – mainly land- and seascapes – in local competitions, with great success. With help from the eminent artist William Dobell, in his early thirties Bill began to sell his landscapes through a Sydney dealer and took up art fulltime. He is represented in the National Gallery of Australia by two of his landscapes from this time.

It was not until the late 1960s that Bill turned, or returned, to his childhood obsession: birds. In 1966, he purchased a copy of *Birds of the World*, illustrated by Arthur Singer. Inspired by Singer’s paintings, Bill made a small oil painting of a Yellow-faced Honeyeater. Then, realising that oils did not allow him the detail he sought, he switched to watercolour to paint an Emerald Dove and an Eastern Rosella. At the Australian Museum in Sydney, he was introduced to prominent amateur ornithologist Keith Hindwood, who became something of a mentor. Together, they published *A Portfolio of Australia Birds* (1968), covering 25 species, including the dove and rosella. Little did Bill know that this modest book was to set him on the path to becoming the ‘Portrait Painter to the Birds’, as David Attenborough later dubbed him. The timing was perfect: the sixties brought the beginnings of the conservation movement and greater wealth; more Australians wanted to know about birds, the first modern field guides were appearing and there was a growing appetite for large format, lavishly illustrated bird books.

The year that *Portfolio* was published, Bill contributed two paintings to a display of avian art at the Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Congress in Canberra. Alerted by Hindwood, young ornithologist Joseph Forshaw sought them out at the exhibition. Joe asked Bill whether he would be interested in doing some of the paintings for a book he was planning on parrots of the world. Brashly, Bill said he would do all the parrots and, contrary to expectations, he did – and in record time. The two formed an extraordinary author–illustrator alliance that was to last more than 40 years. Between their first monograph in 1973, *Parrots of the World*, and their last, *Pigeons and Doves in Australia*, released early this year, they covered thousands of species and their variants.

Wendy was Bill’s wife and partner in life since the 1970s. In 1989, they moved from Bungwahl, near Macquarie Lakes, to a rainforest block on the Atherton Tablelands. Together, they set out to explore the poorly known plants of the Australian tropical rainforest. Some 17 years and two books later, Bill had drawn 1230 luscious fruits and Wendy (self-taught) had become the international expert on several botanical groups. Many of Bill’s illustrations were reconfigured in their third collaboration, *Australian Rainforest Fruits: A Field Guide* (2013).

Finding his niche as a natural history painter provided Bill an entree into a life of adventure, exploration, discovery and unique experiences of the natural world. He and Wendy travelled through India, east Africa, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and

Australia in search of Bill's subjects, meeting exceptional individuals – dignitaries, scientists, writers, artists, big game hunters, filmmakers and photographers – and people living extraordinary lives. In 1991, David Attenborough made a documentary on Bill:

I had long wanted to make a documentary film about Bill, showing him as the latest representative of this great tradition of scientific ornithological artists, and I had the idea that we might take this one species and show how it had been treated, with increasing accuracy, by various artists, culminating with Bill's portrait of it.

The species was Victoria's Riflebird, a favourite of Bill's and a resident on Chowchilla, the Cooper's rainforested property. Bill charmed a male riflebird into coming to his hand for mealworms, facilitating close filming, but he found the species difficult to capture on canvas.

Bill thoroughly researched all aspects of his subjects, their habitat and particulars. As he matured as an artist, his backgrounds became as spectacular as his birds, as Attenborough recognised:

Those of us who treasure the monumental books containing his portraits of all the world's parrots, kingfishers and birds of paradise, have also come to take particular delight in the tiny extra details that he occasionally tucks away in an unobtrusive corner of a picture – the delicate filigree pattern of a lichen encrusting a twig, a strangely shaped fruit, a spider spinning a web or a caterpillar industriously nibbling a leaf, unaware of the huge beak just above that is about to make a meal of it . . . that eye for detail is allowed full scope.



Bill and David Attenborough bonded over an early illustration of Lesser Birds-of-paradise that had captured their imaginations in childhood. In 1970, Bill first saw the species on a visit to Papua New Guinea. He painted it several times, completing this acrylic in 2002 for a private collection.

Not only did Bill have an eye for detail, but knowing his birds so well, he became the master of their jizz – whether an inquisitive Palm Cockatoo, a scrappy gaggle of Rainbow Lorikeets or a gaunt little jewel of a fairy-wren. With great delicacy, he could convey the pleasure of preening in a turaco, the communication between a pair of Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos or the enjoyment of a Dollarbird in a refreshing rainshower. When the first photographs of the long-lost Night Parrot were made public in 2013, Bill's furtive-looking Night Parrot from *Australian Parrots*, painted in 1980, proved to be uncannily accurate. No one had definitely seen the living bird since the 1880s. How did Bill 'know' its unusual stance? As I have written elsewhere, 'Open the pages of a book illustrated by William T. Cooper and birds fly out, fruits beg to be eaten and landscapes beckon.'

Bill was so busy painting for his monographs that little of his artwork is available to the public, except through his books.



Bill and Wendy after receiving their Honorary Doctorates at the Australian National University in December 2014. Photograph by David Parer.

His book illustrations were almost always purchased as a set, privately or by an institution. Sydney's Mitchell Library holds the complete set of paintings and sketches of fruits from the Australian tropical rainforest books and the National Library of Australia purchased the artwork for *Parrots of the World*. These beautiful monographs and portfolios were fashionable and expensive – the latter a necessity for their authors to make a living. In between books, Bill painted commissions, which hang in homes, galleries and museums around the world. He rarely had enough time to accumulate work for a solo exhibition, holding only two in Australia, in 2003 and 2013, and an earlier one in Nairobi – all sell-outs within hours.

Bill was generous with artists seeking advice and in 2011 he shared some of his knowledge in *Capturing the Essence*, a book that illustrates and describes techniques for bird artists. Over the years, he had picked up so much and solved so many problems, painted fur, scales and skin as well as feathers, not to mention backgrounds (landscapes) and plants, that he could easily have filled another volume.

In 1992, the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, presented Bill with their gold medal for 'artistic endeavors and life's work which have contributed to mankind's better understanding and appreciation of living things'. He was the first Australian recipient in the award's 190-year history. In 1994, Bill was awarded the Order of Australia (AO) for his contribution to art and natural history.

In December 2014, the Coopers were the first couple to receive Honorary Doctorates from the Australian National University: Bill for exceptional contributions at the intersection between art and science; Wendy for her achievements in botanical research. Bill was a reluctant recipient, but he was enormously proud of Wendy. They looked splendid in their bird-of-paradise robes. Afterwards, I was touched when, during a quiet moment, he admitted, 'I've done all right.'

Bill intended *Pigeons and Doves* to be his last book. He had returned to landscape painting and also wanted to paint more large 'landscapes' of birds and other animals, rather than illustrations showing key diagnostic features, as had been necessary for his monographs. The day before he died, he was putting the finishing touches to an oil painting of three Lear's Macaws, commissioned by an overseas fan.

There is little doubt the Bill is one of the finest bird illustrators ever. He left an extraordinary legacy in his artwork, which has already brought pleasure to so many and, as he hoped, raised awareness of his subjects. It was a privilege to be his biographer and to get to know him. He was a dear friend and will be sadly missed.

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