

## OBITUARY

TOM IREDALE

Ornithology in Australia, and indeed ornithology at large, lost a distinctive figure when Tom Iredale died at Harbord, Sydney, on 12 April 1972. He was aged 92 years, having been born on 24 March 1880, at Stainburn, near Workington in Cumberland, England, the eighth of a family of nine. He was survived by a son and two daughters. His second wife, the distinguished bird painter, Lilian Medland, FZS (London), had predeceased him by seventeen years.

Iredale's father was a market gardener and pulpiteer. The lad felt no special desire to follow the paternal example in preaching, but he did benefit from an extensive library that his father had inherited. He read considerably among the books at hand, and one of them, Goldsmith's *Animated Nature*, stimulated what appears to have been a natural leaning towards zoological study. 'As a youngster', he once said, 'I spent a good deal of time watching birds, but as I had no textbook I had to "christen" them myself'. On almost all excursions he had a companion, a youth named Will Lawrie, and the two remained friends over the years. Meanwhile Tom gained formal elementary education at a small private school near his birthplace. It used to amuse him to recall that the owner of that school took to teaching when flushed with pride by having scored well in one of the spelling bees that were then popular.

Young Iredale's first employment was as assistant to a chemist. It is intriguing to speculate how his future would have developed had he stayed in that business and remained in England. The fact was, however, that he developed lung trouble, and upon medical advice decided, with only partial family approval, to emigrate to New Zealand. 'Why choose New Zealand, Tom?' one of us once asked him. Tom grinned as he replied, 'Well, the choice lay between Australia and New Zealand, and Australia seemed too dashed big for me!'

On arriving in New Zealand the financial status of the young migrant, then aged twenty-one, was restricted to five pounds. Obviously it was desirable that he should get a job quite quickly, and he did that by revealing to the proprietor of a general store that he had remarkable ability with figures. Put to a test, he ran over columns of pounds, shillings and pence with alacrity and accuracy, and in the event he not only gained a job promptly but remained in that store seven years.

In part of this period his boyhood's interest in natural history lay dormant. But it revived in time, partly through contact with local ornithologists and partly because of the attraction provided by the seabirds with which New Zealand is endowed. Seabirds were in fact to become a special subject of study for Iredale, and, apparently by a process of marine association, he was to develop such an interest in shells that in later years he became a conchologist of world status.

The first definite result of this developing interest came in 1907, when at the age of 27 he abandoned his clerical job in order to conduct with four associates a detailed survey of the fauna and flora of the lonely Kermadec Islands, north-east of New Zealand. He reported briefly on this project in a letter to A. H. Mattingley in Melbourne (see *Emu*, April 1908). His associates were W. R. B. Oliver, S. R. Oliver, W. L. Wallace and C. E. Warden. The party left New Zealand in January 1908 and remained on the Kermadecs for almost the whole of the year.

Iredale had promised Mattingley that he would report his ornithological results to Australia, and the outcome of that undertaking appeared in July 1910 (*Emu* 10: 2-16). An additional paper, 'Concerning the Kermadec Islands avifauna', was published in the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute* in 1912 (XLV: 78-92). (These two basic and important papers by Iredale, being geographically sited outside Australia, are not noticed in the list of his ornithological writings given in Whittell's bibliography of 1954, and in the New Zealand publication the author himself gives a wrong date for the *Emu* article.)

After the Kermadec adventure Iredale returned to England, the idea being to indicate that his health was restored and also to seek work as a museum zoologist. While at the British Museum of Natural History he met Gregory Mathews, then engaged in the early stage of what was to be a comprehensive work on the birds of Australia. Mathews needed aid: Iredale needed employment. So the two men became linked. They were to remain linked, in production of the Mathews project, for about fourteen years.

That association appears to have been entirely harmonious. Especially did Iredale carry out documentary research and acquire knowledge of bibliography, as a result of which the two workers discarded (not always justifiably) many scientific

**PLATE 1**

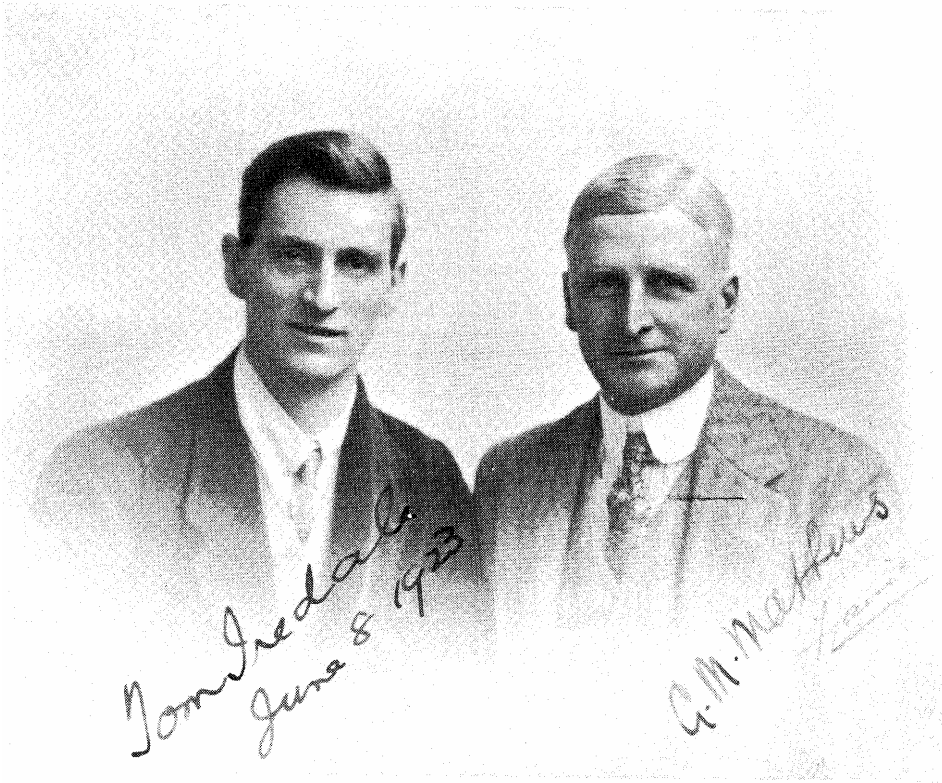


Plate 1. Tom Iredale and Gregory Mathews.

names that had long been in use. They also split a considerable number of genera, and, because neither of them was well 'learned in languages', they adopted the expedient, abhorred by Gould, of manufacturing a coinage based on proper names; e.g. *Harriwhitea*, *Colcloughia* and so forth.

His undertaking with Mathews completed, Iredale emigrated again, travelling with his wife, son and daughter in the RMS *Narkunda* in 1923, this time to Sydney to become conchologist at the Australian Museum. At that stage I received, at the *Daily Telegraph*, a visit from a spare masculine figure with an aquiline face surmounted by a crushed felt hat with a gay little feather. My visitor grinned a greeting and simply said 'Iredale'. So began an acquaintance that was to extend over almost fifty years. It developed through association at the Museum, in the field, and occasionally in a certain tavern where Tom always drank his Scotch neat!

Incidentally, in all that period our 'New Australian' never lost, while living in Cumberland County of New South Wales, the distinctive accent he had acquired in England's Cumberland. [And his features in middle age remind me vividly of many other Cumbrians whom I used to know. Ed.]

At the Museum the versatility of the man became manifest; for, while attending to his own department he frequently gave aid to the mammalogist, the ichthyologist, the ornithologist and even the entomologist. If this aid related mainly to bibliographical research, it also included 'living' material, a fact that has drawn from Professor J. A. Keast (an Iredale 'pupil') the reminiscent remark: 'After a mere half-hour in Tom's company one wanted to spend the rest of one's life studying seabirds.'

In the conchological quarter he could usually be seen peering intently at small shells and meanwhile uttering a 'swish' of pleasure, or perhaps standing at a high desk and scribbling vigorously. Almost all his writing then was done in the erect posture! And it flowed along at such a rate that it sometimes got a trifle out of hand, not in relation to facts but in the construction of sentences. That, no doubt, is why a bewildered Sydney layman, when reviewing Tom's book on birds-of-paradise and bowerbirds, felt impelled to write: 'Some of Mr Iredale's prose resembles the trackless jungles frequented by his subjects'!

Out-of-doors, the Iredale ornithological interest continued to centre mainly on seabirds. He was one of a party that investigated the avian life on Lion Island (Broken Bay) in 1924, and in November 1927 he and I visited the Five Islands, about 100 kilometres south of Sydney. That experience was somewhat startling. We had been rowed out to the small islands by a Port Kembla fisherman who was to

return for us in mid-afternoon. But we made the mistake of paying him in advance, the result being that he expended the money in a local tavern and became incapable, so that we were marooned on an island at the mercy of a rapidly developing southerly buster.

Fortunately for us, however, the landlord of the hotel at which we were lodging realized what had happened, and so he ran to the beach, rowed out and retrieved us and our equipment, and in the teeth of the gale rowed us back to the mainland. He was a skilled oarsman, but there were times during the journey when it appeared that we would not make it, and so on the basis of surfing experience I began to wonder if it would be possible to catch one of the high waves and, leaving the boat behind, shoot in. Indeed, I said so to Tom, only to be astonished to learn that he could not swim—astonished because of his experience on islands and also the fact that his son Rex and his daughter Beryl were both accomplished swimmers.

I doubt however if my companion was really scared during the journey. He had, as Allen Keast has reminded me, a particular spot of philosophy regarding what the insurance people term 'life expectancy'. Having been in danger of fading out through lung trouble between 15 and 20 years of age, he regarded each subsequent year (or even day) as something of a bonus, a trifle of time to be used fully. That, no doubt, as Prof. Keast further suggests, was why he worked so steadily at science, never allowing himself to be caught up in petty disputations at the Australian Museum.

Subsequently Iredale wrote an account of our adventure, describing in detail our experiences with terns, gulls, penguins and shearwaters on the islands. Having by that time shaken off the effects of the battering and drenching we received, he made only passing reference to the 'dangerous homeward trip' and concluded that the experience had been 'well worth while'. In point of fact, he gave his article the caption, 'It was well worth while', but that seemed to me rather too airy and so I amended it to read, 'A wave-guarded kingdom of birds' (*Emu* 27: 271–274).

After retiring in 1944 Iredale continued often to attend the Museum and always made himself useful. Also, in his cottage at Harbord, near Manly, he wrote much material of a bibliographical nature—this was published in the *Australian Zoologist*—and he continued writing (though now while seated!) until well into his eighties. His output was, indeed, quite extensive. It can be best summarized by Dr Serventy.

A.H.C.

## A SCIENTIFIC APPRAISAL

I had always urged the younger contemporary ornithologists, when visiting Sydney, to be sure to meet the ageing Tom Iredale, a living link with some famous ornithologists of the past—R. Bowdler Sharpe, Ernst Hartert and Gregory Mathews. Additionally, he was living history himself. Until one had met him and appreciated his life story, his tremendous influence on Australian ornithology in the Mathews era and later could not be fully appreciated. Certainly the published record, if one depended solely on that, would give sadly inadequate information.

Those of us who knew Tom Iredale can fairly echo the following tribute by Dr C. A. Fleming, of New Zealand, in a letter to me: 'I have always considered Tom Iredale as a hero-figure even if I reject lots of his names, and I recall my two meetings with him in Sydney with the same pleasure (a direct link through the century-bridging generations) as I recall meeting Guthrie-Smith and Gregory Mathews. Yes, he was a great influence on N.Z. zoology and on some of his colleagues.'

The crucial early event in Iredale's scientific career was the Kermadec expedition of 1908, referred to by Mr Chisholm. It had its genesis in a newspaper advertisement seeking volunteers for a visit to the islands, but it developed differently. Iredale and his companions managed it themselves, aided with a grant of £10 from the New Zealand Institute. For two of the members, Iredale and W. R. B. Oliver ('Reg' in the published accounts of the expedition), it was the means by which they climbed to scientific eminence. Dr Fleming, who knew Dr Oliver well, writes: 'It might be hard to find a greater contrast, Oliver being staid and scholastic (in the mediaeval sense) with limited humour; but both sprang from the people and had to make their way using the Kermadec expedition as a springboard. Oliver worked in the Customs Department and after the [expedition] put himself through Varsity till he got a Museum job, taking a fully responsible position in the scientific community, while Tom, one imagines, was always iconoclastic.'

Loaded with scientific spoil from the Kermadecs (bird and molluscan specimens and field data) Iredale returned to England. Why he decided to do so is not clear. He had married and had a family, but these did not accompany him to England. Dr A. W. B. Powell, of the Auckland Institute and Museum, gives a whimsical explanation offered by Iredale himself: 'It was when the New Brighton council put up a notice at the beach, stating that the removal of shell from the beach was prohibited! This has passed into history as a typical Iredalean extravagance of expression (or diversionary tactic!)

akin to Mr Chisholm's anecdote of why he, earlier, had chosen New Zealand in preference to Australia.

In London, in 1909, he became a freelance worker at the British Museum of Natural History, South Kensington, working up his collections, and became well known in ornithological and molluscan circles. As far as Australian ornithology was concerned the critical moment came when Dr Bowdler Sharpe, then head of the Bird Room (and fated soon to die), introduced him to Gregory Mathews as a suitable person to be his assistant in the production of the *Birds of Australia*. Mathews accepted him. I will deal with this association presently.

Coincidentally with his ornithological work for Mathews, Iredale continued his molluscan studies, where his extraordinary bibliographical talents made him as formidable a figure as he became in ornithology. Dr Fleming recounts: 'Iredale had a remarkable bibliographic memory and A. E. Salisbury (deceased) told me in 1948 how Tom would astound and confuse the pundits at the Malacological Society meetings in London, standing with his raincoat pushed back behind, his thumbs in waist-coat pocket (hat on too, perhaps) and spout forth actual references in nomenclatural discussions in which his iconoclasm knew no bounds, i.e. he liked to topple well-known names for priority. At this time he got to know C. D. Sherborn ("Squire") and had pre-publication access to his card indices.'

Dr Powell has another anecdote of these occasions: 'Old Tom was always given to colourful and extravagant statements which one soon learned to reduce to reality. For instance if he could not put into words the supposed differences between two species, he would exclaim: "Of course they are not the same species, they are as different as day from night".'

Iredale retired from Mathews's service in 1923. He tried for the post of Curator of Conchology at the British Museum, to succeed E. A. Smith. He was not really surprised at failing to get the appointment, and when Charles Hedley invited him to Sydney to work on land shells and chitons he emigrated again. Events did not turn out as scheduled at first and he was unemployed for a time. However, when Hedley resigned his post at the Australian Museum Iredale was appointed as assistant in the shell department.

The ornithological union in England of Mathews and Iredale was a partnership of two highly individualistic men. The resulting production of the team has given Mathews much the greater public renown, and there is a curious parallelism with the rather similar earlier association between John Gould and his secretary, Edwin C. Prince\*. However, Gould gave Prince rather more public recognition than did

Mathews to his secretary. Nowhere in the *Birds of Australia* is it stated or inferred that Iredale was in the remotest degree a collaborator. Yet it would appear that Iredale wrote most of the text that was published after he entered Mathews's service!

Iredale was the named author of a few ornithological items during this period and it is revealing to note what some of them were: articles in which genera or subspecies were named after Mathews, e.g. *Mathewsia* (later amended to *Mathewsena* and *Mathewsiella*) for the Brolga, and *Cincloramphus rufescens mathewsi*. A few general papers also appeared under Iredale's name and several under the joint authorship of the two men. One of these was a 'A reference list of the birds of New Zealand' which was published in IBIS in 1913; this first introduced trinominal nomenclature on the New Zealand avifauna (a parallel paper to the Australian list of 1912, which appeared under Mathews's name). The most notable publication of joint authorship was *A Manual of the Birds of Australia*, 1921, the first and only part to appear of a projected multi-volume work. It was 'killed' by the announcement of *Australian Bird Biographies* to be published by Angus & Robertson, but this, too failed to reach completion.

In Mathews's autobiographical *Birds and Books* (1942), which is expansive in many ways about his ornithological career and curiously reticent in others, all that is admitted of the Iredale partnership is this laconic tribute (p. 64): 'I should like to place on record my deep appreciation of the work done by my private secretary, Tom Iredale, during the twelve years he was with me. No one had a more loyal supporter than he was, and his knowledge of the literature and his retentive memory were a boon to me during publication.'

When I lived in the Sydney area between 1938 and 1943, we in the intimate Australian Museum circle of which Iredale was a central figure used to chaff him about his association with Mathews and would humorously introduce him as 'Mr Iredale, the man who wrote Mathews's *Birds of Australia*'. Internal evidence in the books, with recognition of particular Iredalean turns of phrase, impelled us to this view. But Iredale would produce only an inscrutable smile and say nothing. Once I tackled him directly on this point, as to why he was not mentioned more prominently by Mathews. He replied that he was employed by him, found the post congenial and liked the work, and was well-satisfied with

the situation. Loyal he certainly was; I never heard him utter a word of complaint or criticism about his association with Mathews.

If, however, Iredale ever contemplated revealing more of the actual role he had played in the association he effectively burnt his bridges in an article he wrote when Mathews visited Australia during World War II to present his collection of books and papers to the National Library. This, 'The work of Gregory Mathews, Ornithologist' (Proc. R. zool. Soc. NSW, 1939-40, 1940: 31-33) is an uninhibited adulation of Mathews as an ornithologist and includes the sentence: 'He (Mathews) suggested that Sharpe was responsible for his success, but the man himself has surely showed that he owes little to anyone.' But was this really true?

One leading ornithologist at the Bird Room of the British Museum, and later head of it, Sir Norman Kinnear, who knew well both men and their work, told me in 1955 that he thought Iredale wrote most of the *Birds of Australia*, the fact being that Mathews had no skill in writing except stating the plainest facts and even in this was very awkward and confusing. Those of us who have seen any of Mathews's private correspondence must endorse this opinion of his standard of writing. Kinnear, however, believed that Mathews had the ideas but Iredale had to express them for him. Iredale's own admission as the writer of the Mathewsian texts came only a short while before his death. When Mrs Tess Kloot, the RAOU Archivist, called to interview him in June 1971 she asked him about his association with Gregory Mathews and the work that was produced during that time. Mrs Kloot reported: 'He told me "I wrote everything." A phrase he repeated many, many times.' There was no boasting about the claim. Realizing he was nearing the end of the road Iredale was at last calmly prepared to admit the realities of his association with Mathews.

The question now arises whether Iredale was merely the literary clerk recording the thoughts and decisions of the master or whether he played a more substantial role in the partnership in the formulation of ideas? The issue cannot be answered simply and briefly, and doubtless it will continue to be argued for a long time.

Sir Norman Kinnear's belief that Mathews had the ideas will be supported by those of us who argued nomenclatural and taxonomic points at the Australian Museum when Mathews was living in Sydney and Canberra between 1940 and 1945. I think I am the sole survivor of those discussions as the two other active participants, Keith Hindwood and Tom Iredale, are no more, but H. T. Condon figured in comparable talks when Mathews visited Adelaide.

\* Mr Chisholm tells me that he saw in England, at the home of one of Gould's descendants, a copy of the first volume of Gould's *Birds of Australia* inscribed by E. C. Prince as 'editor' of the work.

Those who wish to study the matter further should also consult the Whittell-Mathews correspondence now held in the Western Australian Archives.

One conclusion is obvious: there can be no doubt that Mathews knew what he was about, and according to his lights was able to argue his case effectively and persuasively. He needed no assistance from Iredale. Indeed when the two differed (as in the *Turdus volitans* controversy, which was partly unfolded in EMU during 1942) it was Iredale who deferred ultimately, though possibly against his better judgement, to the opinions of Mathews. Mathews's oral eloquence, charm of manner and personal magnetism made him a dominating figure in English ornithology long after Iredale left his service. We, at these Muscum discussions, came to recognize Mathews's talents, even when we differed from him and refused to accept his arguments.

Yet Mathews's published records reveal that Iredale must have been the catalyst who originally shaped and profoundly influenced his thinking. Mathews's ornithology changed profoundly after Iredale joined him. I have alluded to this change, without mentioning Iredale by name, in my paper, 'Taxonomic trends in Australian ornithology—with special reference to the work of Gregory Mathews' (EMU 49: 257-267). Mathews's earliest work closely followed the principles introduced to England by Ernst Hartert, working in Lord Rothschild's museum at Tring. Though he retained the new concept of trinomial nomenclature Mathews reverted to the older ideas of narrow genera. He also became pre-occupied with old books and names, and was a rigid upholder of the Law of Priority. These were Iredalean traits and there is no doubt that Iredale had successfully implanted them into his chief.

The master mind was that of the employee but the employer imbibed the philosophy so completely and enthusiastically that he made this sort of ornithology his life. Mathews himself recognized well enough the change that had occurred but perhaps was never prepared to give a frank admission of the cause. Thus, in a letter he wrote to Keith Hindwood in June 1932, replying to a query concerning the Watling drawings, he said: 'Over a quarter of a century ago I worked through the "Watling" drawings with the great Dr Bowdler Sharpe and was dominated by him. As I became a specialist in the birds of Australia and worked many other works I was compelled to change . . .'

The partnership between Mathews and Iredale must have been mutually enjoyable. Though the disciple may have ignored or played down what he owed to his secretary, contemporaries recognized the influence of Iredale. Professor Erwin Stresemann

told me in Berlin in 1955 that Mathews began well and was all right as long as he followed Hartert. 'Then he came under the influence of Iredale, whom Hartert called his "*böse Geist*", and it was he who led him on the trail of old books and name hunting.'

Mathews's history as an Australian taxonomist was reviewed in my 1950 paper, just cited. The criticisms referred to therein must be shared by Iredale. How far they can be apportioned to each partner we will probably never know, but similar charges have been made against Iredale by workers in the field in which he worked alone, molluscan taxonomy.

My personal appraisal of the situation between Mathews and Iredale is that Iredale was the *eminence grise* behind the partnership but his ideas were thoroughly understood by the other, who absorbed them with enthusiasm. So while their co-operation continued they were two minds with but a single thought. It is permissible to mention that after he joined the Australian Museum on his arrival in Australia in 1923 Iredale exerted a similar powerful influence (it has been described by various critics as salutary or baneful, depending on the point of view) on several colleagues in different fields of zoology.

Iredale in my opinion was not ambitious in seeking public recognition for his role, as either a catalyst or a co-worker. He was content to watch his ideas, which he believed were the correct and logical ones, flourish in other men's minds and was indifferent whether or not the world at large appreciated the part he himself had played in the process. As an amateur he was grateful that fate (and Mathews!) had allowed him to carry on professionally the kind of work he loved, and he was well content to do so without worrying over-much about preferment or status. He was an old-time scholar.

To other naturalists he was a generous friend, with information, advice and help with literature. Indeed he was unusually liberal in giving, or selling at a very modest price, books from his extensive library to those he thought fit to be helped in this way. I pay tribute to this kindly benefactor for several valuable additions to my own library. He loved books for themselves, apart from their utility as items in zoological research, and showed other book-lovers how to care for and use them properly so that they would endure for the benefit of others. One could not help but acquire his spirit and, thus, like him I have developed a sort of reverence for the books I obtained from him, which bore the bookplates of famous ornithologists of a still earlier time. They are personal links between generations of ornithologists.

D.L.S.