



Painting of John Gould with a specimen of Count Raggi's Bird of Paradise, 1878.

ARTIST HENRY ROBERT ROBERTSON, 1839-1921

John Gould

His Family and Life



AUTHOR

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OF ALL THE PROMINENT AND WIDELY experienced ornithologists living in England in the 19th century, the name John Gould became the best known. His humble beginnings as a 13-year-old apprentice gardener in the Royal Gardens at Windsor Castle contrasted greatly to so many other avian enthusiasts of his era who came from affluent families. Many of them graduated university in medicine or theology and then chose not to follow their profession but instead to become amateur naturalists—in particular, active ornithologists who lived a gentleman's life.

THE EARLY YEARS

John Gould was born on 1 September 1804 in Lyme Regis, a small fishing village in Dorset on the south coast of England. His father was a gardener and, despite his educational and social barriers, through hard work, natural ability, enthusiasm and determination, John Gould gained recognition. By the time he was 21 he had set up his own taxidermy business in London. Here he eventually made both his name and fortune.

Due to the incredible number of animal specimens arriving at the London docks from overseas, animal dealers and taxidermists were kept busy with the natural history craze flourishing in the UK. In 1828 Gould became Curator and Preserver to the Museum of the Zoological Society of London, and in 1829 was famously commissioned to taxidermy King George IV's giraffe.

A study of Gould's long professional career makes it abundantly clear that no other ornithologist, before or since, exceeded the number of his discoveries or the superb quality of his folio publications, especially *The Birds of Australia* on 1 December 1840. The final parts of this book were the result of his highly successful 19-month trip to Australia in 1838–1840. He spent time in the field studying, describing and organising the illustration of Australia's hitherto unknown and unnamed avifauna. The entire project, produced in folio size format, published in 1848 was beautifully illustrated with 681 colour plates at a cost to subscribers of £115. It is claimed as the finest of John Gould's 18 major publications.

In 1938 in a special tribute to his work, Neville W Cayley, the doyen of 20th century Australian ornithology wrote, 'Amongst writers on natural science John Gould stands alone. The amount and quality of his work are unsurpassed, his writings will ever be a source of reference and inspiration, and the beautiful illustrations remain unchallenged.'

JOHN AND ELIZABETH

Little is known about Elizabeth Coxen except that she was born on 18 July 1804 in Ramsgate, England, the sixth of Nicholas and Elizabeth Coxen's nine children. She was considered 'an educated young woman, with experience as the governess of a prosperous family living in St James St, London'. One biographer believed John Gould 'had discovered the perfect partner to fulfil his publishing ambitions: Elizabeth was determined, intelligent, educated, practical, obedient and she possessed the one attribute he most desperately lacked, she could draw'.

Gould met Elizabeth in 1828 and they were married in St James Church, Piccadilly, London, on 5 January 1829, both aged 24. It is on record that, 'In marrying Gould, Elizabeth entered a household dominated by ornithology but brought to it her own invaluable contribution as a draughtsman. She painted birds with great care and delicacy and made an attempt to portray them in a like-manner at a time when they were usually portrayed in stiff profiles'.

THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

At the same time, Gould was fortunate to meet Nicholas Vigors, an outstanding UK naturalist and co-founder of the recently formed *Zoological Society of London*. Vigors was looking for a taxidermist for the society's museum and Gould was chosen as the society's first curator and preserver. Gould's multi-oriented life was becoming more professional and extremely busy, resulting in his eventual appointment as the museum's Curator of the Ornithological Department.

At that time he was not recognised as a person with special avian knowledge or as a professional zoologist. However, following attendance at his first meeting of the Zoological Society of London on 12 July 1832, he gradually became well known through his presentation of papers on the vast number of bird specimens he was receiving from Australia. His astute business acumen enabled him, by naming each species after himself, to ensure the name 'Gould' became established within zoological and aristocratic circles—even though he hadn't discovered any of the species he described. In one meeting of the ZSL in 1836, he described 27 different species of Australian birds!

The success of his first major publication, *A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains*, January 1830–1832 (a folio-size volume set, in partnership with Nicholas Vigors, who wrote the text, and Elizabeth as the artist), set the trend for 15 titles in the same format that he published from



A Synopsis of the Birds of Australia and of the Adjacent Islands, published in 1937–1938 is unlike all Gould's other illustrated work. The 73 bird head illustrations by Elizabeth Gould are exquisite

their London home. Between 1832 and 1837 John Gould published a five-volume work titled *The Birds of Europe* which added to his credibility as an ornithologist and successful publisher of natural history books.

On 26 January 1838 Gould advised the committee of the Zoological Society of London of his resignation as he planned to leave in the spring for Australia and would be absent for two years. Thus, began the valuable Australian connection with John Gould.

EXPERIENCING AUSTRALIA

Elizabeth Gould's two brothers, Stephen and Charles Coxen, had migrated to New South Wales in 1827 and 1834 respectively, and were granted land as early settlers at Yarrandi in the Upper Hunter region. They became wealthy pastoralists, employing convicts from England who were described as 'servants'.

As Gould made his feverish preparations, obviously with much enthusiasm and some trepidation, his training as an ornithologist by Nicholas Vigors and his membership of the Linnean and Zoological Societies, gave him the confidence for the hazardous sea voyage to Australia. Leaving their three younger children at home with their maternal grandmother, John and Elizabeth Gould sailed from England in May 1838 in the *Parsee*, a small 349 ton barque. With them were their eldest son John Henry aged 7, a 14-year-old nephew William Henry Coxen, who they had fostered when his father died in 1825, a male and female servant, and ornithologist John Gilbert. Gilbert, who had worked with Gould in the Zoological Society's museum for five years, became an outstanding zoological collector for John Gould prior to Gilbert's tragic death in Australia on 28 June 1845 during an expedition with explorer Ludwig Leichhardt.

The Gould party arrived safely in Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land on 18 September 1838. Gould had already been in contact with Sir John Franklin, an esteemed naval man who had been appointed the first Governor of van Diemen's Land. Sir John was also interested in natural history, and the families became friendly. In time the Goulds were invited to stay with the Franklins in a wing of Government House.

Gould's plan was to spend as much time as possible in the Australian countryside studying Australia's diverse and amazing birdlife. It began immediately, in the main street of Hobart. Then, accompanied by the servant James Benstead, he devoted his time to Van Diemen's Land and adjacent islands for several months.

When John was out in the field studying Australian birds, Elizabeth stayed with the Franklins in Hobart. She gave birth there to son, Franklin, in May 1839. On one occasion she wrote to her mother in England, *'I find amusement and employment in drawing some of the plants of the colony, which will help to render the work on Birds of Australia more interesting... I trust we shall be enabled to make our contemplated work of sufficient interest to ensure it is a good sale'*.

After about four months, John Gilbert went to Western Australia, where he followed natural history pursuits for nearly a year. Gould travelled to South Australia and joined Captain Charles Sturt, the Surveyor-General, on the first exploratory expedition from Adelaide to the Murray Scrubs—an incredible experience for both Sturt and Gould.

With the Coxen property as his base in the Hunter region, Gould as a diligent and determined zoologist, did a lot of valuable field work both by walking and horse riding in a large area of virtually unknown

country. He was greatly impressed by Gilbert's record in the field. It is a tribute to Gilbert that he discovered so many Australian birds and was author of many field notes quoted by Gould in his publications. The Australian Museum in Sydney had been open for three years and while in NSW, Gould visited it.

RETURN TO ENGLAND

Upon returning home to England, Gould was incredibly fortunate in choosing the recently developed method of lithography—the original form of planographic or surface printing—that was used by one of his colleagues, Edward Lear, an excellent draughtsman who later became one of his artists. As this printing method offered a new freedom for both artist and printer, Gould used it for all future colour plates, enabling him to employ specialist colour artists to complete all the plates to the same excellent standard.

The husband and wife team—John sketching the species in pencil and Elizabeth executing the drawings—plus Gould's outstanding text on all the species that he compiled in their London home, combined to make *The Birds of Australia* a mammoth publication. In the words of Alec Chisholm, noted Australian ornithologist and natural history author, *'The total number of colour plates in the eight volumes is 681, and the whole production is undoubtedly the greatest of Gould's 18 major works'*.

The irony of the Gould publishing empire is, that despite the long-held claim John Gould never painted a bird in any of his 18 major publications, he is still regarded as the outstanding bird artist of the 19th century!

Gould studied Albert's Lyrebird during his travels, describing and naming it in honour of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband. It was published in the *Proceedings of the Linnean Society*, London, on February 5, 1850. He had to choose from the Prince Consort's five common names—Francis, Albert, Augustus, Charles and Emanuel.

In the preface to the *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, a two-volume work published in London in 1865, containing 1290 pages, Gould wrote: *'Nearly 20 years have elapsed since my folio work on The Birds of Australia was completed. During that period many new species have been discovered, and much additional information acquired respecting those comprised therein; it therefore appeared to me that a careful resume of the entire subject' [in octavo format] 'would be acceptable to the possessors of the former edition, as well as to the many persons in Australia who are now turning their attention to the ornithology of the country in which they are resident.'*

The *Handbook* is a major updating of the text of *The Birds of Australia* and is Gould's final contribution to Australian ornithology. It is still considered useful for anyone interested in the science of ornithology in our country.

RECOGNITION FOR THE GOULDS

Sadly, Elizabeth Gould died on 15 August 1841, aged 37, from puerperal fever. It was five days after the birth of their eighth child. Following her death, Gould appointed Henry Richter (1821–1902), to continue the colour illustrations for *The Birds of Australia*, of which Elizabeth had completed 84. Richter completed 595 of the 597 lithographs required for the project.



The Mammals of Australia, compiled and published 1845–1853, features 182 hand-coloured lithographs by Gould and Henry Constantine Richter. Gould's descriptions of Australian mammals, including 45 for the first time, is almost as important as his contribution to Australian avifauna



The Handbook of Birds of Australia, published in 1865, is an elaboration of Birds of Australia in Gould's final contribution to Australian ornithology



The Gouldian Finch was described by John Gould in 1844 as *Amadina gouldiae*, in honour of his deceased wife Elizabeth
PHOTO DAVID PACE



Orange-bellied Parrot
PHOTO DAVID PACE



Wood Duck painted by Elizabeth Gould and published in *Birds of Australia* 1972 Edition



New Holland Honeyeater painted by Elizabeth Gould and published in *Birds of Australia* 1972 Edition

Gould lived with his family in their five-storey Georgian terrace house at 20 Broad St, Soho, for several years after the tragic death of his beloved wife. In 1869 they moved to Bedford Square, Bloomsbury Street and John purchased next door on Great Russell Street, converting both into one house. All the publishing and natural history items were located in the Great Russell Street building and the 26 Charlotte Street section became the private family living premises.

Elizabeth's outstanding contribution, which generated the success of John Gould's major publications, was estimated as 'more than 600 drawings and paintings made from [both] specimens and live birds in Australia'.

Of all the birds bearing Gould's name, the most widely known around the world is without doubt the Gouldian Finch *Erythrura gouldiae*. In Elizabeth's honour he wrote, 'It was with feelings of the purest affection that I venture to dedicate this lovely bird to the memory of my late wife'.

Gould himself died in 1881. He left as his legacy, a priceless collection of 12 395 specimens, as well as his publications and the knowledge he had shared. He chose as his epitaph: John Gould the Bird Man.

In the 1972 facsimile edition of *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, Allan McEvey, curator of birds at the National Museum of Victoria for 30 years, wrote that the publication of *The Birds of Australia* 'was perhaps his greatest work in scope, personal enterprise and pioneering quality, and its groundwork was shared by his artist-wife, the loyal Elizabeth Gould...The essential status of the Handbook emerges from its historical position; it looks back to the beginning of Australian ornithology, summarising the known, and forward to the great Catalogue by Sharpe and others...offers pleasing samples of natural history prose of the 19th century which, verbose or not, reflect the dignity that the age expected of its science.'

Hubert M Whittell OBE, in *The Literature of Australian Birds* (1954), acknowledged the great gift John Gould had given to Australian ornithology.

'From 1837, when he produced his first work on Australian birds, to the day of his death in 1881, Australian ornithology was dominated by John Gould; it may be said that practically every new Australian bird discovered during this period passed, in some way, through his hands'.

A TASTE OF GOULD'S WORK

Certainly, Gould's excitement upon seeing Australian birds in the wild is evident in the Handbook, and the following extracts convey some of his enjoyment:

Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo

Calyptorhynchus funereus xanthonotus

'It is plentifully dispersed over all parts of Tasmania, where it evinces a preference for the thickly wooded and mountainous districts; and is always to be observed in the gulleys under Mount Wellington, particularly in the neighbourhood of New Town.'

Wood Duck *Chenonetta jubata*

'During the early days of the colony of New South Wales, it was very common on the rivers near Sydney, particularly on the Hawkesbury...It presents a very pleasing appearance while flying up and down the brooks in flocks of from six to 30 in number, and is equally interesting when perched in small companies on the branches of fallen trees which have found a resting-place in the beds of the rivers and water-holes.'

Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster*

'Although the present bird is not so elegant in form, nor graced with so brilliant a frontal band as several others of the [*Neophema*] group, it has received an ample compensation in the rich orange mark that adorns the under surface, a character by which it may be distinguished from every other known species.'

Beautiful Firetail Finch *Emblema bella*

'Tasmania may be considered the principal habitat of this species, for it is universally and numerously dispersed over all parts of the island suited to its habits and economy...I generally observed it in small communities varying from six to a dozen in number, searching on the ground for the seeds of the grasses and other small plants which grow on the plains and open parts of the forest. It also frequents the gardens and pleasure-grounds of the settlers, with whom it is a favourite, few birds being more tame or more beautifully coloured.'

Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes*

'The chasteness of its colouring, the extreme elegance of its form, and the graceful crest which flows from its occiput, all tend to render this pigeon one of the loveliest members of its family...Its flight is so rapid as to be unequalled by those of any member of the group to which it belongs; an impetus being acquired by a few quick flaps of its wings...Upon alighting on a branch, it elevates its tail and throws back its head, so as to bring them nearly together, at the same time erecting its crest and showing itself off to the utmost advantage.'

New Holland Honeyeater

Meliornis novae-hollandiae

'... it is one of the most abundant and familiar birds inhabiting the colonies of New South Wales, Tasmania, and South Australia: all the gardens of the settlers are visited by it, and among their shrubs and flowering plants it annually breeds...The strikingly-contrasted markings of its plumage, and the beautiful appearance of its golden-edged wings, when passing with its quick jumping flight from shrub to shrub, rendering it a most conspicuous and pleasing object.'

Superb Lyrebird *Menura superba* (now *novaehollandiae*)

'Were I requested to suggest an emblem for Australia among its avifauna, I should without the slightest hesitation select the Lyrebird as the most appropriate...'

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Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo painted by Elizabeth Gould and published in Birds of Australia 1972 Edition

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The Gould League History

The Gould League is recorded as Australia's oldest environmental education organisation, established in 1909 and honoured by having then Australian Prime Minister Sir Alfred Deakin as its first president. It was devoted to bird protection, prevention of egg theft, promoting education about birds, and campaigning for the formation of bird sanctuaries.

One of the league's main sponsors was the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, now part of BirdLife Australia. The league had considerable success during this period, particularly in publishing educational material and in activities including field days to introduce the public to birdlife.

According to a 2011 *Sydney Morning Herald* report of those early years, 'Members—mostly school children, who joined for life for a penny—signed the Gould League Pledge, 'to protect all birds except those that are noxious, and to refrain from the unnecessary collection of wild bird eggs'. The movement spread rapidly. Within a year branches had been formed in more than 1000 schools. At the league's peak in the late 1950s, membership had reached about 155,000.'

Time Brings a Broader Focus

After the 1960s, the league focused more on overall environmental education, and the more general name Gould League was adopted, without specific reference to birds. The league basically blazed the trail for environmental education in Australia, promoting its teaching in schools, publishing material, establishing field study centres and organising excursions.

Numerous independent state Gould League organisations have existed over the past century. Only the Victorian and Western Australia (Herdsman's Lake Wildlife Centre) leagues survive. The New South Wales league announced its closure in 2011, just after celebrating its centenary. When formed in Wellington in 1910, it had reportedly been virtually the only organisation involved in educating children about nature, the bush and native animals, but it

was believed other groups and the Education Department now filled these roles. South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania leagues have also closed.

The Gould League Today

In the 2000s, the Victorian Gould League states it won numerous national and international awards for innovation and excellence. It began the state's Sustainable Schools pilot with government funding and involved over 1000 schools in a Waste Wise Schools Program, as well as establishing a Community Multicultural Gardening Project in schools.

In 2008, with Etech, the Gould League launched Sustainability Wiz, which it claims as the world's first international online climate change education program, and partnered with Liverpool Plains Land Management Inc, a NSW-based sustainable agriculture and nature conservation group. From 2012, the Gould League also offered forest education services to Victorian schools, taking over the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre, which had been threatened with closure.

And celebrating 110 years in 2019–2020, the league has introduced new workshops and courses for teachers, business and the community around the 'Blue Economy—100 innovations inspired by nature with zero waste that in 10 years can create 100 million new jobs'.

Over one million Australians have reportedly been Gould League members since it began. Children, families and adults make up the current 300-strong membership base, still supporting the organisation's legacy. The Gould League's key ongoing message it says is: 'We can all do something—be that plant a tree, protect a species, reduce waste, book a program to become better educated, take action, inspire others, become carbon neutral, donate to environmental charities like Gould League. Everyone can take action!'

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GOULD LEAGUE PUBLICATIONS

In the late 1920s, celebrated Australian author, artist and ornithologist Neville Cayley wrote and illustrated the bird guide *What Bird is That?*, which was published in 1931. For a long time it was the most popular bird identification guide, and remains a comprehensive and authoritative reference. As well as a member of the Gould League, he was council member of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales (president 1932-33), the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (president 1936-37), and the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia.

In 1934, the League published *Gould League Songs and Poems*, focussing on bird content and including photographs and two colour plates by Neville Cayley. The songs were written mainly about Australian birds and set to the music of well-known British folk songs. Bird poems and articles about birds and Gould League matters were included.

In 1935, *Feathered Friends* was published. It was illustrated with numerous photographs and full-page colour plates painted Neville Cayley and copies were given to every public school in NSW. 



**For more information
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