

## Anecdote and Anthropomorphism: Writing the Australian Pied Butcherbird

HOLLIS TAYLOR

Research Fellow, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris

In interweaving the themes of Australian music and social history, Australian musicologist, critic, and author Roger Covell acknowledges the aesthetic possibilities of birdsong:

Literary nationalists have always been indignant with Adam Lindsay Gordon for referring, inaccurately, to Australia's 'bright birds' as songless; yet it remains one of the cliché images of Australia that it is a vast, brooding, silent land. Silence is certainly one of the properties of any large, sparsely populated country and particularly of the remoter deserts. But much of Australia, including many of its outback areas, is anything but silent. Birds such as the white-backed magpie or the pied butcher bird are as capable of brilliant and beautiful melodic flights as their European counterparts, even though it might sound absurdly like patriotic boosterism run wild to say so. (3)

Despite Covell's enthusiasm for Australian birdsong, composers and musicologists have not typically applied themselves to its study. With the advent of sonographic analysis, biologists occupied the field of birdsong research, although not with a trained ear so much as a trained *eye*. Many species remain virtually unstudied, and most of what is known about birdsong is based on laboratory studies of a few 'white rats' of the avian world (Baptista 1). As an American violinist/composer on my first trip to Australia, I had an epiphany upon hearing a songbird and determined to devote myself to studying and illuminating the musicality of that species' vocalisations. In the next section, re-worked excerpts from my book *Post Impressions* detail this event (28-30).

### From my first pied butcherbird encounter

My story begins in 2001 at Wogarno Station, Western Australia: 152,000 acres of spectacular granite outcrops and breakaway country (Fig. 1). It's the kind of place



where pastoralists assign acres to a sheep rather than sheep to an acre. I wander around, collecting grass fishhooks on my socks, checking out the paddocks and fences, the equipment huts, and the shearers' quarters. Macca, their Border collie pack leader, chaperones me everywhere. Is he looking for a way to pass time, or am I, God forbid, a personality so lacking in self-confidence as to be sheepish?

**Fig. 1** Wogarno Station, Western Australia  
(Source: L.J. Campbell, used with permission)

When we return, he and the other dogs succeed in roping me into a game that can take three forms and suddenly switches from one to another for no apparent reason: Kick the Ball, Stare at Marmalade – the moody cat on hormone replacement therapy, or simply Stare at the Ball (Fig. 2).



While trying to pick up the rules, such as is this all that happens for an hour because I'm a good sport but I'm not an idiot, I hear a slow, rich, flute-toned birdsong. It's like nothing I've ever encountered, coming from a sturdy little black-and-white bird with a robust bill. Its song is answered by an explosion in another tree – a duet ensues, then a trio.

Fig. 2. Wogarno Station dogs' ball game (Source: Hollis Taylor)

'It's the pied butcherbird – they get their name from robbing other birds' nests of their eggs or hatchlings', explains Eva. 'Then they wedge their prey into the forks of trees or impale them on a broken branch. And they attack people's eyes', she warns, 'so some folks wear hats with eyes drawn on the back to confuse the birds'. It's hard for me to put this songster's name and savage reputation together with its angelic voice. I'm enchanted. I've fallen head-over-heels for a fiend. I begin notating the irresistible songs of pied butcherbirds as they exchange phrases across the paddock (Figure 3). Their choice of notes, rhythms, and phrasing brings to mind syncopated chimes, hip riffs, and blue notes. 'Jazz birds', I call them, feeling they deserve a better spin than 'butcher'. As my collection of song snippets mounts, I conclude many would make good compositional seeds. I imagine how I'll not so much improve on but rather celebrate their extraordinary musicality.

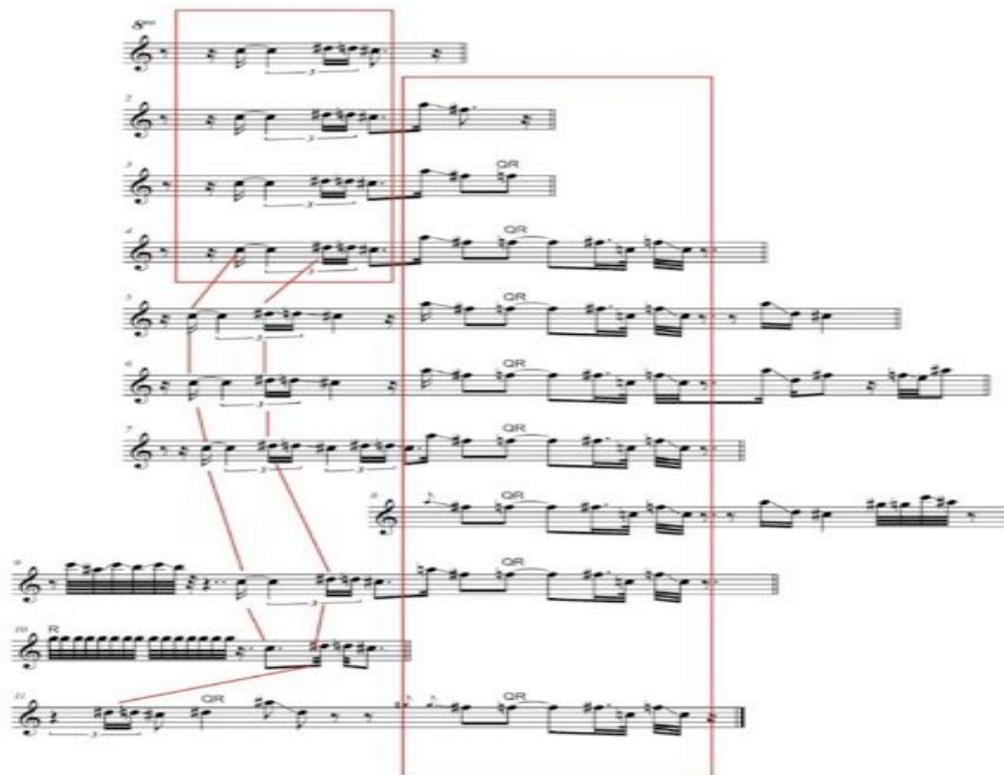


Fig. 3 © A transcription of pied butcherbird song

Savage habits be damned – every war has its propagandist. Meet the new Vice President for Public Relations for the pied butcherbird. We'll just add bass and drums, change their name but keep the naughty image, and put them on a world tour. I think I can pull it off. They can't be any harder to manage than a rock band, just so long as my star doesn't get caught with warm flesh in his craw (Fig. 4). Thus, I commenced my



**Fig. 4** A pied butcherbird with 'flesh in his craw' (Source: Hollis Taylor)

research into the vocalisations of the pied butcherbird, intending to foreground their apparent musical aesthetics over their hunting prowess and aggressive manners. My research consists of fieldwork (observation and recording), deskwork (transcription and sonographic and musicological analysis), and composition / performance based on pied butcherbird song.

My ongoing literature review not only encompasses field guides and ornithological journals, but also involves harvesting observations and anecdotes from all corners: from indigenous Australians, everyday people, periodicals, Australian children's literature, Australian poetry and prose, and composers' texts. It is along these lines of cultural narrativity that we shall proceed, examining what various pied butcherbird texts tell us about the species and even about ourselves. Pied butcherbirds are non-migratory, and their range includes much of the mainland to a greater or lesser extent, as well as several coastal islands, with a notable absence from the southern coast, Tasmania, and the driest desert areas (P.J. Higgins, J.M. Peter, and S.J. Cowling 516). Intriguingly, Eastern Gondwana (Australia and Papua New Guinea) is implicated as the birthplace of songbirds in recent papers citing DNA sequence data, and the pied butcherbird is assumed to considerably pre-date the human species in Australia (Edwards and Boles, 2002; Ericson, Christidis, Cooper, Irestedt, Jackson, Johansson, et al., 2002).

### **From indigenous Australians**

Upon the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, the population of indigenous Australians was between 250,000 and 900,000 people, living in about 700 tribes, according to Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey (1997). In his book *Some Indigenous Names of Australian Birds* (2006), ornithologist John M. Peter cites the importance that birds played in the everyday life of Aborigines:

... this is reflected in the rich and detailed bird-related vocabularies of many languages. The literal translations of many of the names are descriptive, either of a physical characteristic of the bird, or a rendering of its call.... Further, many birds have aboriginal names which are onomatopoeic, that is they reflect the sound of the bird's call. (3)

While my research is inconclusive as to whether any pied butcherbird names in Aboriginal languages are onomatopoeic for pied butcherbird song or call notes, it is nevertheless clear that the species does figure in aboriginal stories. Some stories speak of the species as a forecaster, indicator, interpreter, or even agent of events. For example, from the Alyawarr language group, we hear: 'The pied butcherbird makes fun of people. If there is a man sneaking up on game, it discourages them, 'Nothing, you are hopeless and you won't get any game.' It puts them off so they won't spear

anything. “Apapapapapa,” it laughs’ (poster). From the Anmatyerr language group, we learn that: ‘A pied butcherbird calls a dead person’s name and reminds people about them’ (poster). Peter also describes the role of aboriginal people in shaping ornithology in Australia. He argues that bird-collecting expeditions to remote areas owed their success to the ability and willingness of Aborigines to lend assistance (7). Let us turn our attention to the results of some of these early expeditions, followed by more recent field notes.

### **From field guides and ornithological reportage**

The Australian butcherbird family includes pied, grey, black, and black-backed butcherbirds. Only the first two are common; the black and black-backed species have a quite limited range in Australia’s sparsely populated far north (Pizzey and Knight 472). The pied butcherbird’s voice is usually considered superior to that of the grey (Frith 357; Sullivan 134; McGilp 175). Like many Australian bird species, the butcherbird’s European counterpart is a relative in name (and, in this case, feeding habits) only: widespread across Europe, the red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*) is nicknamed ‘butcherbird’ because, like Australian butcherbirds, it butchers smaller birds, mice, and insects, impaling them on spikes and thorns for later consumption (Farrow 185). Although in-depth research into pied butcherbird vocalisations is essentially absent from peer-reviewed journals until my studies, field guides and ornithological reports do give us glimpses of the species. Graham Pizzey lists the species’ other names as ‘black-throated butcherbird’, ‘break-o’-day-boy’, and ‘organ bird’ (404), while J. Neil McGilp reports that it is known as ‘jackeroo’ in Central Australia (175). The name *butcherbird* conjures up images of brutality, in contrast to the species’ French name, *corbeau-flûteur pie*, which emphasises the fluting voice over carnivorous feeding habits. Most of what is said about pied butcherbirds refers either to their voice, which is variously described as rich, clear, mellow, beautiful, magnificent, and superb, or to their ferocity, or to both: a ‘beguiling song ... [but] the habits of a fiend’ (Watson 18).

The first reference to the pied butcherbird in print appears to be from the English ornithologist and bird artist John Gould (1804–1881), who describes the species in his 1865 *Handbook to the Birds of Australia* (181). Gould does not mention the bird’s voice. The earliest vocal description in ornithological reports is from Thomas Carter (1863–1931), who writes in 1903, ‘I heard their beautiful notes.... I shot them both’ (90-91). Typical of the collecting excursions of that day, the episode reads differently to many of us now in this time of climate change and extinction. In a similar vein, on his 1905 trip to Western Australia, ornithologist Alexander Milligan (1858-1921) pens this report:

His notes suggest the vastness of the Australian bush and continent. At dawn his clear cornet-like notes ring out far above the great chorus of bird-song.... So charmed was I with the song and appearance of these birds that I determined to secure one to take home with me. Through the kind offices of Mr. Lee Steere, I eventually managed to get one from one of the station hands, and my captive has furnished me with many opportunities of study. (154-55)

The pied butcherbird voice is favourably appraised by a number of other ornithologists on outback collecting trips. In 1909, Alan Fairfax Crossman (nd) praises ‘its magnificent notes’ (89), and in 1918 Gregory M. Mathews (1876-1949) declares, ‘This is certainly a King of Songsters, and as soon as the first dawn appears, his clear notes

ring out' (179). F.C. Morse (nd) writes on his 1922 excursion to the Moree district of north-central New South Wales: 'I always think the note of this bird is the most beautiful of all our songsters' (36). 'The Pied Butcher-bird's song is a glorious gipsy warble' Alec H. Chisholm (1890-1977) observes (71). Positive evaluations of the vocal abilities of the pied butcherbird can be found in each decade, right up to the present time, where the Australian Museum's 'Birds in Backyards' website proclaims: 'Many people consider the Pied Butcherbird to be the best singer of all Australia's birds' (accessed 20 June 2011). The species' feeding habits and fierceness are also common in ornithological field notes. Chisholm reports that 'In one case a "Butcher" accepted four chop-bones thrown by picnickers and contrived to hang them all in his larder up aloft' (233). On his 1922 collecting trip to Cape York Peninsula in far north Queensland, Henry Luke White (1860–1927) writes: 'Pied butcherbird – Several nests found with three and four eggs. At one the birds savagely attacked me, repeatedly striking me on the head' (116). Patrick Albert Bourke (1915- ) also meets with aggression from butcherbirds: 'Three species of Butcher-bird (Grey, Pied and Black) have, at various times and places, struck me with sufficient force to draw blood. In each case I was examining a nest containing young birds' (94).

While praising their 'beautiful, clear flute-like piping and lower mellow notes', Jo Wieneke in her field guide on the birds of Magnetic Island (Queensland) warns: 'Butcherbirds can become very tame in suburban areas but please DO NOT FEED THEM. They prey on sunbirds and increased numbers of butcherbirds will mean fewer sunbirds' (13). Similarly, in his field guide Alan Bell praises the pied butcherbird—'its voice truly peals'—but then warns: 'Like a stern officer of the watch the shrike [butcherbird] makes his rounds, an overbearing and resented presence. He arrives quietly but spurns concealment, "like a cop on a New York corner", said an American guest' (90). Thus, we find the black and white colouring of the pied butcherbird echoed in the stories field guides and ornithological reportage tell about the contrast between their voice and their ferocity.

### **From my personal collection of stories from everyday people**

My zoömusicological approach marshals concerns and methods from musicology, ethology, philosophy, ecology, neurobiology, and anthropology, but it also welcomes narrativity, anecdote, and contributions from everyday people in everyday language. Therefore, along with consulting field guides and ornithological journals, I am keen to collect pied butcherbirds stories, including how this songbird serves the human imagination. While today's scientific culture avoids anecdote and any hint of anthropomorphism, this stands in opposition to Charles Darwin's methodology. American sociologist Eileen Crist argues that Darwin's

... employment of a subjective terminology with respect to animals is closely connected with his view of genealogical common descent. Darwin's anthropomorphic language reflects his understanding of evolutionary continuity, which includes behavioral and mental continuity between humans and animals. (33)

Anthropomorphism, the unwarranted attribution of a supposedly uniquely human trait to non-human animals, is a problematic term. Firstly, it is loaded with cultural bias – what is anthropomorphism to one group could be accepted orthodoxy to another. Secondly, since so few species have been studied, we scarcely know what is indeed uniquely human and what is not. Science's refusal and/or inability to take account of

anecdotal data may keep out embellishment and hyperbole with respect to animal capacities, but it also eliminates exceptional or rare activities. American philosopher Bernard E. Rollin specialises in animal consciousness and animal rights. He argues: ‘Since far more ordinary people than scientists observe animals, it would be a pity to rule out anecdote, critically assessed, as a potentially valuable source of information and interpretation of animal behavior’ (133). Critical assessment is indeed key; the more I learn about pied butcherbirds, the better able I am to harvest information from anecdotal sources. Fellow campers encountered during my fieldwork often pose questions or share anecdotes with me. As expected, many comments focus on the pied butcherbird voice, such as these (the comments are anonymous unless cited otherwise):

- You know how they never seem to finish their song? [Indeed, their phrases can seem to strain against resolution, especially when they appear to end on a weak beat. (Taylor, ‘Four meditations’ 4)]
- Who was that bird who sang so early and so beautifully and sort of went blue? [Some birds’ songs have nuances of intonation, timing, and pacing reminiscent of the blues. (Taylor, *Towards* 59)]
- That bird, that bird is driving me crazy. He’s been singing outside my bedroom window for hours every night.
- Oh, a wonderful bird – beautiful! To wake up in the morning and to hear it is enough to start your day.

These kinds of comments draw attention to nuances of pied butcherbird song that influence how I think and write about the birds’ vocal abilities. I have also come across a victim of pied butcherbird ferocity:

My wife and I got a free lunch at a local hotel thanks to a pied butcherbird. I had dropped her at the door and had to park quite some distance away in the car park. I didn't know there was a baby butcherbird, until one of the parents hit me. Then it was on. I whistled a butcherbird threat call, and both parents attacked. They couldn't put a beak on me once I knew they were there; but neither did I manage to hit them with my fist. All good fun for me and maybe for the birds, too – but the initial attack had drawn blood, and the pub staff was most solicitous. They explained that they had several times moved the baby away, but it kept coming back – and insisted that lunch was on the house. (Syd Curtis, personal communication, 5 August 2006)



Fig. 5 Used with permission from DECC (Department of Environment & Climate Change). PO Box A290 Sydney South NSW 1232)

A pied butcherbird featured in a warning poster used by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service during spring nesting season when birds can become aggressive. During spring nesting season, pied

butcherbirds occasionally become aggressive towards humans who enter their territory. A warning poster used by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service speaks to this (Fig. 5). This next story describes pied butcherbirds hunting:

- This morning in a fallow paddock I saw two Pied Butcherbirds hunting a flock of Brown Quails. They [PBs] perched in nearby trees and then one flew down to flutter vigorously just above the grass level (c 1m) and drop repeatedly into the grass until the Quail flushed. Then the chase was on. Both Butcherbirds pursued the fleeing Quail, but each time the Quail was able to drop almost vertically at full tilt into cover, leaving the PBs overrunning and having to try again. Saw this three times, (different Quail each time), a first for me. (Tony Gibson, personal communication, 17 May 2009)

Sometimes, the stories take a totally different tack from the ‘voice of an angel / habits of a fiend’ theme:

- I once parked opposite an area of lawn behind our local butcher-shop in suburban Brisbane. As I pulled up, two magpies were vigorously fighting on the ground. One was clearly getting the worst of it, when a pied butcherbird flew down to them – didn't actually join in, but made as if to do so at a distance of maybe 30 cm. The bullying magpie took off. Butch stayed with the other on the ground for perhaps half a minute, then flew off. I proceeded into the shop. Aren't birds fascinating? (Syd Curtis, personal communication, 5 August 2006)
- I raised three pied butcherbird chicks right here in Charters Towers. The one became a real pet and went everywhere on my shoulder, you know. So, one day I walked into the local pub and ordered it a water. The publican immediately banned me from comin' back. I asked him why. ‘No dogs’, he said.
- While enjoying my customary lunch on a rock by the [Sydney] harbour today, I felt something brush against my back, and a butcher bird landed half an arm's length away from me to check out my apple core. We studied each other for a few moments, but alas, we did not converse. (Andrew Dixon, personal communication, 26 August 2005)
- On Friday 18th, my friend and I went out to the Somerset Dam (northwest of Brisbane), and stopped at a picnic spot for our morning "cuppa". This is a site where the birds would regularly be fed by the picnickers, and there were a few magpies nearby as well as the whole butcherbird family. One of the sub-adult Pied Butcherbirds immediately perched on the corner of the table, between us, and gave a glorious rendition of a MAGPIE song! No magpie could have done better! We were absolutely astounded, but he didn't get "paid" for his entertainment. (Robyn Howard, personal communication, 21 February 2005)
- Went to the Wetlands Centre (Shortland Wetlands) just west of Newcastle NSW yesterday (Monday 12/6/06). Every time I go there I say that I must go back more often. Highlight: Pied Butcherbird (heard it making a call that sounded like a reversing truck – cool!) (David Stowe, personal communication, 13 June 2006)
- I have had a couple of families of Pied Butcherbirds living at our home for 7 years. This morning about 4:50am I observed one doing something I've never seen before, and I watch them every day. The bird hovered above the ground about 10 meters for a full 10 seconds. He/she didn't hover like a black-shouldered kite or

letter wing kite but like a humming bird ... as in the upright position. The wings were going a hundred miles an hour! (Judith Lattaway, personal communication, 8 December 2009)

Discussing pied butcherbird habits invokes a source of wonder and awe in many informants. Animals are the same as us – yet somehow different. The complexity and mystery of ‘same and yet different’ is a source of unending speculation, contemplation, and amusement for humans. Animals can help us make sense of the world, even if we are not conscious of it.

### From periodicals (excluding children’s literature)



Newspaper reports of butcherbirds often focus on their ferocity, whether directed at human intruders or smaller birds. A search of the word *butcherbird* on the Australian National Library’s research website for digitised newspapers <http://trove.nla.gov.au> produces a number of archival newspaper reports. Casting aside those articles specifically on other species of butcherbirds, three of the first ten that I examined seem both representative and relevant to our discussion.

Fig. 6 A pied butcherbird (Source: Hollis Taylor)

We begin with an excerpt from a 1930 issue of the *Cairns Post* entitled ‘The Butcher Bird’ (a reprint from Melbourne’s *The Age*):

I shall be very impatient with anyone who dares assert in my hearing now that our Australian birds are songless (writes W.C.T. in *The Age*).

This morning not long after the autumn sun had come over the Darling Ranges and poured floods of gold upon the tawny leaves of my brown-turkey fig, the most entrancing bird notes rushed down to me from a butcher bird temporarily housing itself on a hidden branch. He may just have come from one of his gory breakfasts of a silver-eye, or he may have been letting his little heart pour forth its joyous song of welcome to the big glowing orb of gold that seemed to pause to listen to a bird’s exultation. This bird was singing in the true musical sense, not just that spasmodic staccato way of some birds of the northern hemisphere, sometimes sweet, sometimes strangely wooden, like the tapping of xylophone strips, wearily strung out at one time, then rushed without regard to rhyme or reason.

I knew it for a butcher bird – one never fails to recognize its song, only this time the soulful melodies had more expression in them and were remarkably prolonged. Usually the bird thrills you with a bar of two of sweet rounded notes, ending in one or two short, sharp flicks, as if it had surprised itself and become conscious of its talent, but this morning the song had many verses, and no line was the same, except that the motif remained throughout – one of delight in the beautiful autumn morning. (9)

First, we shall put aside ‘he may have been letting his little heart pour forth its joyous song of welcome to the big glowing orb of gold’— not because it is anthropomorphic or erroneous, but, put simply, we do not know if the writer has noted in a systematic way that butcherbirds sing more on sunny days than cloudy ones. The report is still of interest to us. ‘W.C.T.’ informs us that the bird’s sense of musicality closely aligns with his or her own, and that the bird sings expressively, continuously, and long. The word ‘continuous’ catches our attention because pied butcherbirds normally sing for a second or two, followed by an inter-phrase interval of perhaps three times that length— this regular pattern of sound and silence is called discontinuous singing (Taylor, *Towards* 178). Continuous singing in a pied butcherbird indicates that the singing is likely a mimicry cycle. Consisting of a non-stop montage of alien species, mimicry cycles are sometimes mixed with notes from their own song (Taylor, ‘Blowin’ 81). Such a feast of imitations resembles a DJ cut-and-paste session and may include not just other avian species but also the bark of a dog, the meow of a cat, and the whinny of a horse. I have also catalogued examples of pied butcherbirds incorporating the *human* world into their aesthetic practices, with imitation of human ‘readymades’ such as a siren, a car burglar alarm, and a mobile phone ring (Taylor and Lestel, publication in process). As British psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist explains, ‘[t]he process of mimesis is one of intention, aspiration, attraction and empathy’ (249). These birds are in our gaze, and we in theirs; we are both observer and observed.

‘W.C.T.’ writes that the song was delivered in the autumn (not in the spring, when one expects songs for territorial defence and / or breeding enticement); this is also noteworthy. While the date is September, Australia’s spring, we must assume this reprint hails from the previous autumn, since the writer clearly states ‘autumn’. Biologists and neuroscientists typically present birdsong as a spring contest between rival males or between the skilled salesmanship of a male versus the equally well-developed sales resistance of a female (Williams, 1966: 184). Kaplan only recently broke rank with this accepted conceptualisation of birdsong by scientists (consisting largely of northern hemisphere researchers), writing that Australian magpie vocalisations do not fit this model, since in that species both sexes sing throughout the year and one finds ‘no specific song for breeding enticements’ (51). A careful reading of this 1930s anecdote points to a similar case in the Australian pied butcherbird, which my research to date confirms: pied butcherbirds actively sing in the autumn when no apparent breeding behaviour is present (Taylor, ‘Decoding’; Taylor and Lestel, publication in process).

A 1939 story in *The Sydney Morning Herald Women's Supplement* under the rubric ‘Feathered Minstrels of the Bush’ also contributes to the understanding of pied butcherbird vocalisations. Entitled ‘The Butcher Bird's Song’, it reads:

It is not always possible to recognise a butcher bird by his song. I have listened to many butcher birds, and at times have heard them sing songs entirely different from the usual pretty notes for which they are famous. One particular bird used regularly to entertain us at a farmhouse near Bega (N.S.W.). His song was never the same two days running, though it was always delightful to listen to. I have heard these birds imitate the songs of other birds, but I have also heard them sing as no other bird sings. They seem to compose their own music and sing the tunes that come into their bird minds.—"Eureka" (18)

A year later, again from *The Sydney Morning Herald* Women's Supplement, our writer ('Thorny') seems to take a page from 'Eureka'. The column is titled 'Songbirds of the Bush' and includes this under the subtitle 'A Varied Repertoire':

It is not always possible to recognise the pied butcher-bird by his song, as he seems to be always making up new tunes. I have heard one of these birds singing at intervals for half an hour, and each time the tune was different. On one occasion I was camped in the bush on the South Coast, and daily one of these birds came to within a few yards of my camp and entertained me. Each day his song seemed to be different. On rare occasion, he would mimic other birds. I would call the pied butcher-bird the best singer in the bush. Despite his reputation as a killer of other birds, he deserves protection on account of his songs.—"Thorny" (14)

Together, "Thorny" and "Eureka", be they one writer or two, observe that pied butcherbirds mimic other birds and display a special ability for song that overlaps with these human listeners' concept of musicality. In addition, we read that individual pied butcherbirds possess a wide variety of song phrases, and they sing differently one from another. In other words, their songs are dynamic and in a constant state of change. Ordinary people have documented this for decades, although it was not formally written up in the literature until my recent research (Taylor, *Towards*). Our initial examination indicates that a complete review of newspaper archives would be profitable to pied butcherbird studies.

#### **From Australian children's literature**

I catalogued seven items of children's literature that incorporate the image of the pied butcherbird. In 1928, *The Queenslander* published a short story by Ada Wood (nd) about Mr. and Mrs. Jack Butcher-bird, who faced great difficulties in procuring enough food for their three nestlings on account of a prolonged drought (44). The resident humans, Mr. and Mrs. Churchill, begin to throw food in the yard for the birds; the Churchills are soon rewarded with 'exquisite melodies of joy and thankfulness' (ibid.). This story speaks to pied butcherbirds' propensity to thrive, even in difficult environmental situations, by virtue of the fact that they can co-exist with and make liaisons with humans. I regularly encounter informants who feed pied butcherbirds meat scraps, and, as in this story, people have the sense that the birds reward them with song, although this has not been formally studied.

A fourteen-year old girl writing under the pen name "Indian Maid" published her story 'The Singing Butcher-bird' in *The Brisbane Courier* in 1932. Although she focuses on the voice, she credits the bird (and the violet) with human sensibilities:

As the butcher-bird gazed at the desolate scene around, it gave a sigh, for it could not help feeling lonely, but it brightened up again as it began to sing. Louder and louder grew the notes till all the little woodfolk came out to listen. A little violet, too, lifted its head and dropped a tear on the bright-green grass. (7)

Our next excerpt continues in a similar vein. In 1934, "Neelia" published Chapter IV, 'The Home Builders', from her book *Singing Creek Valley* in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This excerpt succinctly encompasses the 'voice of an angel / habits of a fiend' tension surrounding the species:

Meanwhile, back at the half-built home sat Butcher Bird. No one in Singing Creek Settlement liked Butcher Bird, who, in spite of his wonderfully sweet singing voice, was not allowed to join in the Spring concerts. He was a cruel villain, and for his misdeeds, had often to be chased right out into the Land Beyond. He always made his appearance at nesting time, then the trouble began. He robbed nests of eggs and fledglings, and even murdered some of the smaller parent birds. (23 S)

Also in 1934, "Miffanwy" published a story entitled *The Birds' Christmas Tree* in the column 'The Members' Own'. It focuses entirely on the pied butcherbird voice: 'Three butcher-birds on the she-oak sang a glad song of Christmastide. Then three bell-birds joined them, making it sound like silver Christmas bells pealing' (9). In her picture



book to teach numbers to children, Gwenda Turner (1947-2001) presents a drawing of four pied butcherbirds for the number '4' (unnumbered). Turner was born in Australia but settled in New Zealand. New Zealander author and illustrator, Dorothy Wall (1894-1942) reversed the trip, settling in Australia and producing the quintessential Australian children's classic *Blinky Bill: the Quaint Little Australian* (1933) about young koala with anthropomorphic gifts. In chapter one of *Blinky Bill Grows Up* (1934) the young koala leaves home rather than be forced by his mother

to attend Mrs. Magpie's finishing school. On his journey, he comes across a pied butcherbird larder, with 'rows and rows of little dead birds hanging from the trees' (6). Blinky takes the butcherbirds to task for their perceived cruelty, but

Hearing this, the big bird put back his head and pealed with laughter. Blinky stood amazed. Such beautiful clear flute-like notes rang through the air. There was Mr. Butcher-bird, the cruellest of birds, singing as no other bird could sing, except of course, Mrs. Thrush. Note after note rang out and his mate joined in the chorus. The trees seemed to hush their rustling leaves to listen to such beautiful music. (8)

Blinky Bill learns that the butcherbirds have hunted these small birds to aid Mrs. Possum's bazaar, which is being held 'in aid of the poor rabbits who came through the bush-fire' (7). Wall avoids simplifying the situation; instead, she skillfully incorporates the complexity of nature's predator / prey relationships, thus sending a message on the dangers of rushing to judgment and to stereotyping. We also learn that pied butcherbirds possess flute-like vocal tone and sing duets.

Our final example of children's literature comes from *A Butcherbird Story* (2000) by Donna Brink Reid, who recounts what she claims to be a true story about a pied butcherbird orphan cared for by conspecifics. The location is the garden of the 'big house on the hill' (originally built for Herbert Hoover in 1897) at remote Gwalia, Western Australia. Reid and her family lived in this ghost town's big house during the 1970s whilst they established a gold mining museum (unnumbered preface). Her short volume is jam-packed with pied butcherbird anecdotes that ring true on a number of fronts, including such events as nesting, helping at the nest (where a young bird stays on to help its parents with the next batch of nestlings), flying lessons, butchering methods, visits by non-resident pied butcherbirds, the broken wing of a young bird (including its care and recovery), and the frequent loss of life in both immature and mature birds.

We have noted that the pied butcherbird is not well studied. Although the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds* (2006) is a multi-volume and recent document, deficiencies in pied butcherbird research are acknowledged. For example, under the ‘Pied Butcherbird’ entry, we see: ‘Social Organization: Poorly known’; ‘Social Behaviour: Poorly known’; ‘Breeding: Not well known’ (P.J. Higgins, J.M. Peter, and S.J. Cowling 521, 521, and 523, respectively). While some children’s literature featuring pied butcherbirds may not add new knowledge to our understanding of the species (and might actually reflect on our species instead), Reid’s book is an example of the types of stories that are useful in filling out a more complete ethogram of pied butcherbirds.

### **From Australian prose and poetry**

Animals are rife in children’s literature, but adults are also fascinated with animals and animality. We can use animals to reflect on our human condition. The fiction debut of Australian corporate executive Geoffrey Cousins, *The Butcherbird* (2007), is a crime thriller about the corruption and excess of a Sydney insurance tycoon. The story’s villain owns ‘the largest private motor yacht anyone has ever seen’, christened ‘Butcherbird’ (ibid. 281). Cousins draws a connection between the covert villain and the secretive and seldom-seen black butcherbird of the remote Kimberley region of northern Australia (ibid. 225). (Pied butcherbirds are also more often heard than seen, since they spend most of their time in high trees or power lines).

To date, I have catalogued nine poems that mention either *pied butcherbird* or *butcherbird* (those poems that specify other species of butcherbirds are not part of this survey). In 1925, Reginald Godfrey (nd) published his poem in Adelaide’s *The Register* under the rubric ‘Poems & Rhymes: In the Bush’. The poem focuses on the pied butcherbird voice. Here is an excerpt:

Who will come and hear a tune –  
Come and lift the merry shoon?  
Where the grass is wet and sweet,  
Ground made soft for dancing feet;  
Leave the city’s joys deferred,  
For the fluting butcher bird. (4)

E.M. England published her poem ‘A Butcherbird at Dawn’ in 1930 in *The Brisbane Courier*. Also praising the butcherbird voice (as ‘heartbeat of the sparkling South’), it begins:

Orpheus is silent with his lyre,  
Pan has laid his feeble pipes away,  
But here is music still, of purer fire  
Than trembled in the far-off Doric lay.  
This is the heartbeat of the sparkling South –  
Shores that were ancient when swart Torres came.  
The spirit of a land of flood and drought –  
A country clean and ardent as a flame! (20)

Eminent poet and passionate environmentalist Judith Wright (1915-2000) wrote a series of avian poems in the 50s that were first collected into the 1962 volume *Birds*; re-issued by the National Library of Australia in 2003, it begins with the poem ‘Birds’:

‘Whatever the bird is, is perfect in the bird’ (1). Also from this book, ‘The Blue Wrens and the Butcher-Bird’ considers a pair of wrens in the process of building a nest until they hear the voice of the butcherbird. Here is an excerpt:

Great glorious passion of a voice –  
 sure all that hear it must rejoice.  
 But in the thorn-bush silent hide  
 the nest-builders side by side.  
 “The blue wren’s nestlings and his wife,  
 and he himself, that sprig of blue,  
 I shall kill, and hang them safe –  
 the blackthorn spears shall run them through.” (10)

The human mind delights in contrasts, and our brain appears hard-wired to seek out opposites. Even if we take Wright at her word that for butcherbirds to pre-meditate the wrens’ slaughter is ‘perfect in the bird’, we sense the tension inherent in the extremes of a ‘voice of an angel / habits of a fiend’ characterisation. Further, as McGilchrist puts it, ‘the left hemisphere is concerned with what it knows, where the right hemisphere is concerned with what it experiences’ (78). We know one thing, that pied butcherbirds are predators by nature and necessity, but we experience another – and we pity the poor little blue wrens. Francy de Gryys’ poem ‘Butcher Birds’ follows a similar path:

limpid, liquid,  
 Morning is a shine of sound,  
 A lilt of light  
 so purely new  
 you can’t believe butcher birds  
 are butchers –  
 that their voices  
 only praise heaven  
 in anticipation  
 of the day’s kill. (147)

Bribie Island poet Harold Gascoigne’s 1991 self-published volume, *Our Friends the Birds*, features a poem entitled ‘A Butcherbird Sings’ that focuses on vocal ability:

Meg fed the bird a tiny scrap of meat  
 and in return, or so it seemed,  
 it opened the fullness of its heart,  
 touched by the glory of the morning,  
 sang an aria of trills, warbles and tremolos,  
 notes scaling high in a brilliant cadenza,  
 brackets of melodies rippled from her throat  
 as she displayed the full range of her voice. (Excerpt; 18)

Gascoigne’s description of elaborate daytime song likely refers to a mimicry cycle (underlined by ‘many verses’ and ‘no line the same’). Why would a songbird with such a rich repertoire of its own learn, memorise, and deliver the acoustic constructs of other species in mimicry cycles? This question continues to confound biologists – the function of mimicry is not understood (Kelley 2011). My research suggests that pied

butcherbird song is not merely an exercise in filling time and space; their elaborate song culture overreaches biological necessity, indicating an aesthetic appreciation of sound is present in the pied butcherbird (Taylor, *Towards*; Taylor, 'Blowin'). In her poem 'Call Her Butcherbird', Aileen Kelly catalogues how the names 'butcherbird' and 'Organ Bird' invoke, perpetuate, or modify the angel / fiend dichotomy of this species' reputation:

Call her butcherbird you conjure no  
 sunsong expanding into evening  
 certainty of shaped breath no young  
 voices breaking from guttural to aria  
 coached by unhurried experts nor  
 the older children staying home to babysit

but call her Organ Bird Cool Lady  
 and where's the small defeated corpse  
 she jams adroitly on a handy hook  
 to pick the eyes of expertly disjoint

where's the dried moss of furry blood  
 that started in a single perfect phrase  
 bright as liquid whistling (9)

In his 2001 Australian pastoral *The Hierarchy of Sheep*, Western Australian poet John Kinsella finds the liminal area between angel and fiend in the words 'force of character':

Above Lake Polaris –  
 turquoise shot through with sunset  
 where miners and farmers meet,  
 sunset and pied butcher birds  
 that get into the picture  
 by force of character (73)

While scientists might complain that crediting a bird (no less a sunset) with 'force of character' is anthropomorphic, this phrase pushes the reader to move beyond the oversimplification of angel / fiend. Kinsella seems to be privileging right-brain experience over left-brain knowledge. Francis Duggan's 2008 poem 'The pied butcherbird' begins:

In the bright morning sunshine i hear that flute like song  
 And there can be no mistaking to whom the voice belong  
 I close my eyes and visualize and distance disappear  
 And the voice of the pied butcherbird i fancy i can hear. (Accessed 20 June 2011)

Duggan goes on to advise us that schoolboys imitate this species, which can be regularly heard in the dawn chorus, much like an aubade, the human musical (or poetic) equivalent that greets or celebrates the dawn. In the same year, Robert Adamson includes 'Pied Butcher Bird Flute Solo' in his collection *The Golden Bird*. On a boat heading up a river, Adamson cuts the motor, allowing his boat to drift. Here is the middle third of the poem:

The river narrows and there's eucalyptus  
 in the atmosphere. Silent now

and almost blind. The fog envelops us.  
 At first, a few wobbly notes  
 coming from all sides, a deep-throated  
 fluting climbing the bird-scales,  
 it loops into a theme, then notes cascade  
 into a melody that drifts over  
 the silk of the surface, under the rolling  
 blank of fog. So lovely a song  
 it almost sounds like human-whimsy  
 becoming a liquid bubbling,  
 almost a blue yodel, the ghost of Jimmy  
 Rodgers, then fades again.

The boat continues to drift, then:

... Almost silence awhile  
 until that murderous avian spirit  
 player resumes the masterpiece –  
 now concert flute, mellow-toned  
 with a sort of back-beat, an amplified pulse  
 underneath it sweet mock caroling. (Accessed 10 July 2011, unnumbered)

Timbre is notoriously difficult to describe (Malloch), but Adamson does an admirable job, in particular noting the ‘bubbling’ notes, a common pied butcherbird technique. He makes it clear that this songbird has a wide range of timbral techniques at its disposal. Our tally for poetry finds four poems focussing on the pied butcherbird voice (Godfrey, England, Gascoigne, Duggan), four on both voice and ferocity (de Gryys, Wright, Kelly, Adamson), and one on ‘strength of character’ (Kinsella). One final investigation under this rubric is part prose and part poetry, but is not fully contained within these genres. It concerns the Luritja aboriginal people of Central Australia. About the Luritja’s songs, H.H. Finlayson notes in 1943:

... the songs themselves are arresting. In spite of their almost skeletal simplicity, there is something in them akin to our own music; and the springs of emotion which give them origin are not strange and remote as they often seem to be, to an untrained ear, in much Oriental music. Further, each tiny song is a single rich theme, complete in itself, carried swiftly to a logical conclusion, unweakened by meanderings or side issues. It has all the artistic force of a thing free from flaw. (91)

This observation could as well have been a reflection on pied butcherbird song. While the subject of whether birdsong is music is not the subject of this enquiry, it is of peripheral interest to us, since we are encountering anecdotes on how the human sense of musicality overlaps with that of pied butcherbirds. Those who deny birdsong musical status often compare it to a Beethoven symphony (or something similar), and then conclude that birdsong does not measure up (such as Ball 23). Finlayson’s passage about the Luritja’s approach to song reminds us that pied butcherbird song possesses structural similarities with some human cultural traditions. We shall return to this text shortly.

First, let us examine a Luritja text from a song translated by the linguist T.G.H. (Ted) Strehlow (1908-1978), who was born in Hermannsburg, Central Australia. He was the sixth and youngest child of German-born parents Carl Strehlow, a Lutheran missionary,

and his wife Friedericke. Ted Strehlow grew up with Western Arrernte children, speaking their language along with English and German (Hill 2002). Strehlow has paired his literal German translation of a Luritja pied butcherbird song with a second, more interpretative translation. Brian Elliott (1910-1991), one of the founders of Australian Literary Studies, brings the Luritja and two German translations together and also offers us an English translation based on his study of Strehlow's work.

'The Pied Butcherbird':

The pied butcherbird  
Has wings to fly

In the form of a bird the butcherbird came flying,  
He flew into the face of the sun.

The butcherbird has a crest  
The butcherbird has wings to fly.

I the butcherbird am perched in the good figtree,  
I set the spear into the throwing-stick.

The butcherbird wept with longing for sex,  
The butcherbird.

He spears the owl.  
As they two fight their spears click together.

O butcherbird, be pacified,  
Leave off your loud song.

The black lizard runs staggering out,  
Her legs give way, she can run no more.

The butcherbird is now sitting there quietly  
Having sung loud with the others.

A great smoke rose up,  
the butcherbird (ancestor) is roasting the lizard.  
(49-50)

Now the butcherbird is sitting there quietly  
After he sang loudly he flew away.

High in the air he flew, very far,  
Having sung loud he flew away.

Elliott clarifies that

Strehlow's translation, *Krähen-Würger*, which literally renders the Luritja, is not necessarily the name of any bird; it simply means 'crow-choker'. It might have been better to use that in the English, seeing that 'jackeroo' is unacceptable, as it seems tautologous to say 'the butcher bird has bird's wings'. But it should be remembered that the *kurbaru* is not a bird *merely*: he is the totemic ancestor and in the ritual he takes the form of an aboriginal man, suitably decorated (with a crest of feathers, for example), who has no wings and cannot fly, but represents these things in the dance. (50)

While we do not have the music, either as an archival recording or as a transcription, in pairing the poem with Finlayson's description of the sound of Luritja singing, we might hope for a small insight into how this aboriginal song / poem on the pied butcherbird sounded. We can only speculate if pied butcherbird vocalisations might have influenced its 'performance'. Australian aboriginal culture is not my area of expertise, but it would seem that since this was used in ritual, 'song / poem' does not suffice to fully describe the artefact.

### **From composers' scores and texts**

Birdsong has long inspired musicians, artists, writers, philosophers, and casual listeners. Like Covell, Melbourne composer Henry Tate (1873-1926) called for composers to tap into Australia's birdsong resources (1923). He singled out the pied

butcherbird as of particular interest (ibid. 22). While to date few composers have applied themselves to *formal* birdsong research (including fieldwork and its analysis), composers have nonetheless sought inspiration in birdsong. To date, I have documented 23 composers who credit the phrases of the pied butcherbird as the source of inspiration (Taylor, ‘Composers’ appropriation’). Some works present birdsong imitations, caricatures, or reference points for an excursion into nature, while others resonate with pied butcherbird strategies such as repetition, cells, sequences, microtonality, and more (ibid). While a detailed survey of composers who have incorporated pied butcherbird vocalisations into their compositions is not within the scope of this enquiry, we shall make space for one representative example. David Lumsdaine (b.1931, Sydney) has recorded environmental sound as the basis for compositional material. ‘Pied butcherbirds at Spirey Creek’ is a track from his 1996 CD of composed Australian field recordings. Lumsdaine appraises the song in the liner notes like this:

The Pied Butcherbird is a virtuoso of composition and improvisation: the long solo develops like a mosaic, through the varied repetition of its phrases. In the course of the song, some elements remain constant, some elements transform through addition and elimination .... there is an extraordinary delicacy in the way it articulates the harmonic course of its song with microtonal inflections, or places its cadences with a bird's equivalent of tremolandi and flutter-tonguing. (unnumbered)

Lumsdaine frames the birdsong with the care one might reserve for the opus of a respected senior composer. This is not a metaphor; this is indeed how Lumsdaine considers this bird's musicianship (personal communication, 15 February 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In our examination of texts and oral stories that humans tell about pied butcherbirds, we have found that the voice and the ferocity of the species are recurrent and often competing themes. For many of our informants, if an avian species is carnivorous, it is negatively marked. Nevertheless, in measuring each aspect of these stories against my accumulated fieldwork results, we find that anecdotes and anthropomorphism can contribute to our understanding of the species. The American ecologist Paul Shepard believes that the human mind and the earthly terrain, the unconscious and the environment, are intertwined (34). Shepard is intrigued with

... the ways in which the human mind needs animals in order to develop and work. Human intelligence is bound to the presence of animals. They are the means by which cognition takes its first shape and they are the instruments for imagining abstract ideas and qualities, therefore giving us consciousness (249).

In combining developmental psychology and evolutionary theory, Shepard suggests that anthropomorphism is a natural part of being human, something we have witnessed in our survey of pied butcherbird stories. In addition, it would seem that animals can create or enhance a conviviality of place, and the stories we tell about them are part of this. Whilst humans sometimes credit animals with characteristics that they may, may not, or clearly do not possess, few species have been studied at all, let alone in depth. Entomologist E.O. Wilson reminds us that ‘[e]very species is a magic well’ (19). The pied butcherbird has been our instrument for imagining not just their vocalisations but also our place in the world. Their stories are our stories.

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