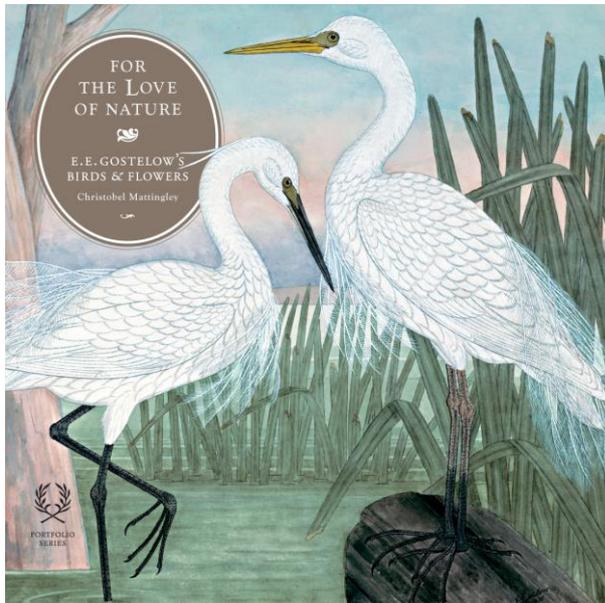


***For the Love of Nature: E.E. Gostelow's birds & flowers*** by Christobel Mattingley. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2010, pp. 158, AUD \$29.95 Hardback, ISBN: 9780642276964.



The National Library of Australia (NLA) holds a very rich collection of natural history illustrations, many accessible online. The importance of its holdings is indicated in the number of illustrations from its collection Helen Hewson used in *Australia: 300 years of botanical illustration* (2009). The NLA catalogue includes works by the historically very important First Fleet artist George Raper, engravings from Dampier's *A Voyage to New Holland*, James Sowerby's engravings illustrating Smith's *A Specimen of the Botany of New Holland* (depicting the first Australian flora), as well as the works of well-known flower painters such as Ellis Rowan. The NLA has also published accounts of some of its collections,

including an exhaustive treatment of Raper (Linda Groom, *First Fleet Artist: George Raper's birds and plants of Australia*, 2009), a slim selection of Rowan's work (Margaret Hazzard and Helen Hewson, *Flower Paintings of Ellis Rowan*, 1982, 1987) and early animal illustrations (Penny Olsen *Upside Down World: Early European impressions of Australia's curious animals*, 2010).

The Library has now published more of its collection, providing a sample of some 850 catalogued bird and flower paintings of the schoolteacher-naturalist Ebenezer Edward Gostelow (1866-1944). During his 50-year career as a teacher in New South Wales he served in 36 rural and metropolitan schools, but it was during his time in Broken Hill that he produced a major series of 150 paintings of native flowers, benefiting from – and perhaps stimulated by – the blossoming of the desert after a deluge in 1920 broke a drought. He continued to build his collection of botanical paintings, also eventually including species from Queensland and Western Australia and coastal New South Wales. After retirement he embarked on a major project to depict all known species of Australian birds, working from museum skins lent by the Australian Museum, using his own field observations to produce appropriate stances and backgrounds.

The appendix describing each reproduced painting shows that the originals are large, with some of the bird paintings around 63 x 50 cm, and the flowers typically on 33.5 x 22.2 cm sheets, so it is fortunate that there are some detail plates (although the scale of these is not given).

While the full collection at the NLA is useful, especially the documentation it provides of the Broken Hill flora 90-odd years ago, one has to ask what audience is being served by the publication of the selection in this small format: the 19 x 15 cm pages of the book do not do justice to the paintings, and the artist's annotations become tiny. The illustrations are not botanical or bird identification guides; they are good, but not outstanding technical illustrations, being clearly recognisable, but not always with the clarity expected of scientific drawings. While attractive, they are not as uniformly aesthetically pleasing as those of great flower painters: for example compare Rowan's painting of *Grevillea Acanthifolia* and *Hakea*

*Nitida* (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an6649822>) with Gostelow's *Grevillea Acanthifolia* and *Leptosperum Trinervium* (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an6134386>).

Mattingley's nine page biography has value in outlining an interesting career which might inform footnotes in general social and educational histories. Otherwise it is a pretty picture book for browsing, rather than serious study.

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