

Eliza



ABOVE
Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841)
Platycercus adalaidiae
hand-coloured lithograph
49.3 x 32.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11127236

OPPOSITE TOP
Unknown artist
Portrait of Mrs John Gould
reproduced from *The Emu: Journal of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union*, vol. 60
b&w picture; 17.3 x 12.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3799791

OPPOSITE BELOW
Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841)
Apteryx australis
hand-coloured lithograph
25.5 x 31.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11133144

THE GOULD LEAGUE OF BIRD LOVERS first came to my attention as a primary-school student in New South Wales in the late 1950s. Encouraged by teachers to join the League, members took a pledge to protect native birds and not collect their eggs; and to endeavour to prevent others from injuring native birds and destroying their eggs.

The Gould League was established in 1909, with Prime Minister Alfred Deakin as President, and celebrates its centenary this year. When school children joined the League a half-century ago, they were told that its name honoured the ‘Birdman’—John Gould (1804–1881), the celebrated nineteenth-century British naturalist who pioneered the study of birds in Australia, and whose path-breaking publications, *The Birds of Australia* and *The Mammals of Australia*, identified and depicted Australian native birds and animals. Visitors to the Gould League’s website (www.

gould.org.au) are now informed that the League was so named ‘to honour the work of John and Elizabeth Gould’.

Who was Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841), and why has her name now been elevated to equal status with that of John Gould? The only person to date to embark on a biographical work on Elizabeth Gould, naturalist Alec Chisholm, described her in 1944 as ‘Mrs John Gould, pioneer woman painter of Australian fauna and flora, and the virtual “mother” of bird-study in this country’. Given that Chisholm also described John Gould as the “father” of Australian bird-study’, these two people are acknowledged as the parents of Australian ornithology.

John Gould’s name had the limelight for many years,

but biographical works in recent decades have examined his working methods, and have focused on the contributions made to his phenomenal success as a naturalist-entrepreneur by others more talented artistically than he, whose skills he turned brilliantly to account in his lucrative and popular natural history publications.

There is no doubt that John Gould’s vision of how a bird or animal should be represented informed the final, polished work of illustration. However, it is widely acknowledged that his preliminary sketches made in the field, on which the finished works were based, were crudely rendered and their colours muddy and blurred. A series of more accomplished artists then took his sketches and transformed them, creating delicate works of art that captured the bird or animal’s essential qualities under Gould’s direction. The first of these artists was Gould’s own wife, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Gould

ROSLYN RUSSELL
DESCRIBES THE
EXTRAORDINARY LIFE
OF THE TALENTED
FEMALE ARTIST WHO
WAS BEHIND JOHN
GOULD'S SUCCESS

'MOTHER' OF AUSTRALIAN BIRD STUDY

Born Elizabeth Coxen in Ramsgate, England, on 18 July 1804, the third surviving child of a middle-class couple, Nicholas and Elizabeth Coxen (née Tomkins), she was the only girl in the family to attain maturity. Two brothers, Stephen and Charles, who flanked her in the family birth order, both migrated to Australia. Elizabeth found herself condemned to the fate of many an educated middle-class girl, working as a governess teaching Latin, French and music to the nine-year-old daughter of a prosperous family in St James' Street, London. She was liberated from this 'wretchedly dull' existence by one of the few means open to young women of that era—marriage.

Gould family legend has the two future life partners and artistic collaborators meeting, appropriately, in the aviary of the London Zoo, where Elizabeth had taken her charge for an outing. Isabella Tree, in her 1991 biography of John Gould, *The Ruling Passion of John Gould: A Biography of the Bird Man*, provides a more prosaic explanation of how these two people met and formed a relationship. John Gould, who worked as a gardener and taxidermist, had advanced to the positions of Animal Preserver at the British Museum, and Ornithology Superintendent at the Zoological Society. A visit to a close relation of Elizabeth, a Mr Coxen who worked as a bird-stuffer in Broad Street, Golden Square, was most likely, says Tree, to have been the occasion for a meeting between the two. Whatever the circumstances, Tree writes, the connection worked brilliantly to Gould's advantage:

He 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.

For her part, Elizabeth appreciated the expanded vistas that opened to her on her marriage to Gould in January 1829, when she was 24 years of age. For the next 12 years Elizabeth combined motherhood and art, bearing eight children (two of whom died in infancy) while working on the illustrations for Gould's works of ornithology, completing a total of 600 works over that period. She learned to produce works using the lithographic technique, drawing pictures of birds from Gould's sketches onto limestone slabs.

Even the resilient Elizabeth faltered at times though: when her third child died, another artist, Edward Lear, later celebrated as much for his nonsense verses as for his art, gave her temporary assistance. Elizabeth's artistic technique, which had been rather stiff and stilted, advanced under Lear's influence. Her work acquired depth, character and motion. Gould's ornithological publication, *Birds from the Himalaya Mountains* (the first of a series, *A Century of Birds of the Himalaya*





ABOVE
Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841)
*Parrot Crossbill (Loxia
pictyosittacus)*
hand-coloured lithograph
52.3 x 35.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11137167

Mountains), gave Elizabeth an international reputation for producing works of great accuracy and beauty. It also earned her the honour of having a species of Himalayan bird, *Cinnerys gouldiae*, named after her by naturalist Nicholas Vigors.

A Century of Birds of the Himalaya Mountains was followed by a five-volume series, *Birds of Europe*, for which Elizabeth travelled to Europe with John to visit natural history collections, and produced about 300 plates. In the meantime she gave birth to her fourth, fifth and sixth children, Charles, Eliza and Louise.

Then John Gould asked his wife to make her greatest sacrifice to his work and art—to leave these three beloved young children with

her mother and travel with him to Australia to prepare a work on the birds of that distant country. On 16 May 1838, Elizabeth and John set sail on the *Parsee* for Australia with their son John Henry, nephew Henry Coxen, naturalist John Gilbert and three servants. They planned to be away for two years.

Eleven letters from Elizabeth Gould to her mother, Mrs Coxen, and a close friend, Mrs Mitchell, survive to give insights into her experiences over the more than two years she was away from England. These alternate between poignant glimpses of the young mother's anguish at being parted from her tiny children; to reflections on life in Australia and her husband's activities there; to her experience of being befriended by Lady Jane Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin, Governor of Tasmania. Elizabeth, who had not been raised in elevated social circles, took all this in her stride. She kept working during the extended periods when John was away on field trips, 'drawing as many native plants as I can, I mean branches of trees, some of which are very pretty' (Letter to Mrs Coxen, 3 January 1839). She wanted to capture on paper the environments in which Gould and she would depict the birds and animals he had discovered. And she gave birth to yet another child, her 'little Tasmanian'.

Ironically, given the goals of the Gould League of Bird Lovers, the man it honours had, according to his wife, 'already shown himself a great enemy to the feathered tribe, having shot a great many beautiful birds and robbed various others of their nests and eggs' (Letter to Mrs Coxen, 8 October 1838). This was standard natural history practice at that time, essential to obtaining the material from which the description and depiction of species could be derived.

In the same letter Elizabeth reassures herself as much as her mother that 'As for the dear children, I feel perfectly satisfied that they will not miss me, for I know well that you and my dear Mrs. Mitchell will do all for them that I could wish done'. Then the mother in her gets the better of the stoic, as she asks: 'I hope my dear little Louisa is not suffering from her teeth. How does my Charley like school and does Lizzy look as rosy as before her illness?'. Questions and admonitions recur across the letters:

My dear little Louisa too is just at a critical age, teething in all probability. I did not forget the darling's birthday. Bless their dear little faces. How I love to recall their looks to my mind's eye. Does Charles feel happy at school? I hope Mrs. Berryman will not press him too much with his books. I do not think he is at present of an age to make it important. My dear little Eliza, too, is she Mr. Mitchell's pet or yours or both? Do not, my dear Mother, quite spoil the dear children.
(10 December 1838)

Elizabeth's last letter to her friend Mrs Mitchell, written from Sydney as she and John were preparing to sail back to England, shows that time, and the birth of another child, had not diminished her anguish at being parted from her children: 'I do hope I may not be obliged ever again to leave them—it is too much' (Letter to Mrs Mitchell, 4 September 1839).

Elizabeth had a keen eye—and a sharp wit—for depicting the features of human as well as avian and marsupial life in the Australian colonies. In common with many other visitors, she remarks on how expensive it was to live here and the difficulty in obtaining good servants. On several occasions Elizabeth comments that the financial motive was uppermost in the minds of many settlers:

The fact is that most persons come here with a determination to get money and return to England as soon as they can ... This has been a famous place for money making—and I think money spending. (Letter to Mrs Mitchell, 4 January 1839)

Her growing friendship with Lady Jane Franklin was of material assistance to Elizabeth when she discovered that she was to have another child. With John away yet again on his compelling task of sketching and collecting Australian fauna, Elizabeth was persuaded to spend her confinement in the comfort of Government House in Hobart. Her son, Franklin Tasman, was born on 6 May 1839, and 'Never before have I had so good a time or taken so little medicine' (Letter to Mrs Mitchell, 30 May 1839). The little boy was a great favourite with their Tasmanian hosts; Lady Franklin even asked if he could be given to her to raise but Elizabeth, despite her affection for her hostess, said no. She also declined to take an active part in the balls held at Government House in Hobart:

Can you imagine such a shy, reserved being as myself frisking about in the midst of 200 people? Don't fancy I attempt dancing—no, no. I am well content to look on. (Letter to Mrs Mitchell, 30 May 1839)

Elizabeth gives her verdict on the birds of Australia, and her husband's efforts to bring their distinctive features to the world, in her last surviving letter from Australia:

Many of the birds possess very curious habits, which have not ever been publicly noticed. I think the great mass of information John has obtained cannot fail to render our work highly interesting to the scientific world. (Letter to Mrs Coxen, 13 September 1839)

Over the time she was away from England, Elizabeth made hundreds of drawings from specimens for John Gould's publications, *The Birds of Australia* and *A Monograph of the Macropodidae, or Family of Kangaroos*, and 50 illustrations for

the ornithology volume of Charles Darwin's *Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*.

The Goulds arrived back in London in August 1840, but Elizabeth was never to complete the lithographs of Australian birds and mammals. She died a year later, on 15 August 1841 at the age of 37, of puerperal fever contracted after the birth of the couple's eighth child, Sarah. The great partnership of Elizabeth and John Gould, that had set him on the path to fame and financial success, was over. Elizabeth Gould was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, where many years later not only her husband but also her friend, Lady Jane Franklin, were also laid to rest.

John Gould surmounted his grief and located another artist, Henry Constantine Richter, who was able to work with him in a similar style to Elizabeth. Richter prepared her drawings, and when they were published her name was not noted in connection with them. Gould never married again, but he continued to produce his beautifully illustrated bird books, assisted by a number of artists including Richter, Edward Lear, Josef Wolf and William Hart. As the relentless Gould production process rolled on, the name of its first accomplished practitioner of the art of nature illustration slipped into obscurity. Over a century would pass before Elizabeth Gould's contribution to ornithology and to the Gould reputation was once again acknowledged.



ABOVE
Reproduction of *Portrait of John Gould at the Age of 45 Years* painted in 1849 by T.H. Maguire (1821–1985)
b&w picture; 16.4 x 10.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3799977

BELOW
Elizabeth Gould (1804–1841)
Herring Gull (Larus argentatus)
hand-coloured lithograph
36.3 x 52.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an1133138

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ROSLYN RUSSELL is a
Canberra historian

