

The Life and Times of Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841)

By Graeme Hyde OAM – Australia

My five-year part-time employment, with the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union in Melbourne (now Birdlife Australia), and acknowledgement that aviculture is a relevant science of ornithology, "opened my eyes" to a greater awareness of the totality of how the avian world of aviculture in which we are all actively involved, has contributed to a better understanding of the wider world of birds.

In April-May 2024 my article, John Gould: His Family and Life, was published in the commercial magazine Australian Birdkeeper; it was as definitive as possible under the joint constraints of 'space and interest'.

The Australian Museum now believes that as John Gould's devoted wife, Elizabeth Gould, who died forty years before him, her story "was obscured in the wake of her husband's continued success". It was the collection of her letters discovered by her descendants in 1938 "that renewed interest in the life and work of Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841)".



Above the only known portrait of Elizabeth – holding a male Cockatiel

A STATEMENT:

The Melbourne Museum today claims that: 'As interest about Elizabeth Gould grew, information about her continued to emerge. Elizabeth Gould is now credited as the principal artist behind John Gould's early publications, without whom his early ventures into the world of ornithological publishing, would likely have failed.' (Melbourne Museum Archives and Research Library/John Gould/Elizabeth Gould). Elizabeth Coxen was born on 18 July, 1804 in Ramsgate, a seaside town of Kent. Her parents, Nicholas Coxen and Elizabeth Tomkins, were well-known as "firmly middle class, with links to the navy and the military". Sadly, of their nine children only four survived until maturity. Amazingly, Elizabeth was the only daughter to reach adulthood. Of her four brothers Henry died prematurely age 28 and her two other brothers, Stephen and Charles, emigrated to Australia in 1827 and 1834 . . . 'and were granted land as settlers at Yarrandi in the Upper Hunter Region of New South Wales. 'They employed convicts from England who they officially described as servants!

Not much seems to be known about Elizabeth's childhood or upbringing, many middle-class girls of the time were 'instructed in languages, music, and art, with an emphasis on drawing and needlework as desirable ladylike pursuits'. I find it of enormous interest to note that, "From the 18th century onwards many were instructed in botany and natural history to *round off their skills* - with an emphasis on scientific illustration".

Before John Gould entered Elizabeth's life and she was still in her early twenties she was in the employ of the daughter of William Rothery, the King's Proctor, 'teaching her Latin, French and Music". In the 1800's a Proctor was a solicitor who dealt with divorce.

Presumably the happy couple made the choice of a "church wedding" when choosing St James Picadilly, London, for their marriage on 5 January 1829, when they were both 24. This historic place of Anglican worship was built in 1685 and survived the rigors of World War 2: today Wikipedia, comments, "nowadays, it is a quiet places surrounded by terraces and the ubiquitous coffee shop !"

It has been recorded that, "That although John Gould had little formal education, his secure position within the Zoological Society as Curator and Taxidermist would have been a suitable match for Elizabeth. Recalling her loathing for governess work Elizabeth would quite likely have assessed that marriage was an escape into domesticity and child-rearing that were expected of married women. It may have come at a

surprise to her that, instead of expecting to devote herself wholly to 'hearth and home', her new husband would put her on the artistic arm of his business ventures almost immediately !

The following statement, extracted from my reading of Gouldiana writings, clearly summarises Gould's wisdom when choosing Elizabeth Cox as his wife: "She was patient, hard-working, loyal, obedient - and importantly - brimming with untapped artistic talent" - Ancient writing. "While she spent most of her life in his shadow, those who gazed upon Elizabeth's beautiful illustrations knew that she was the wind beneath his wings. And that coming to Australia would make her artwork soar to an unprecedented heights." - Present day writing.

Apparently in the early years of their life together John Gould used Elizabeth's drawing skills; for example, after receiving a delivery of bird skins from the Himalayan Mountains was delivered to the Zoological Society, London, John Gould entrusted his wife with the creation of the plates for his first folio publication: "A Century of Birds from the Himalayan Mountains". Elizabeth Gould learned the newly developed technique of lithography to execute John Gould's vision for the work, assisted by Edward Lear the ornithological artist and nonsense poet. Having personally handled examples of her lithographs I can say "they were fascinating works of art".



Bottom of previous page—Mrs Gould's Sunbird as illustrated in "The Birds of Asia". This illustration was chosen by the Bombay Natural History Society to be reproduced in a 4-part folio of Gould's work to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the society. A copy of this folio was sent to me as an 85th birthday gift by your editor Darren Sefton.

As John Gould's talented and extremely busy artistic partner in matrimony Elizabeth Gould "continued to create illustrations for her husband" throughout the 1830's" that included the Monograph of the Trogons (1834-36). Around this time Elizabeth worked in partnership with Edward Lear on Gould's 5-volume publication "The Birds of Europe from 1832-1837" and it became obvious within the art-world of London at the time that Elizabeth's artistic style, under Lear's guidance "would develop, becoming more fluid and lifelike."

Elizabeth Gould was obviously extremely talented and willing to tackle all types of challenges with, maybe, creating 50 plates for Charles Darwin's Second Voyage of HMS Beagle in 1838 rather daunting? Her greatest challenge, however, was agreeing to accompany her husband John Gould on a two-year collecting trip to Australia in 1838-1840: in support of his ambition publish the Birds of Australia. Although their eldest son, Henry, travelled with them Elizabeth was apparently heartbroken to leave her three younger children in the care of her mother.

However, they landed safely in Hobart Town, van Diemen's Land (now island state of Tasmania), on 18 September 1838. Although heavily pregnant {again!} it was well known that she, "spent much of her time illustrating the native plants while staying at Government House", in the care of Lady Franklin, the Governor's wife" the rest is now history!

In Elizabeth's first letter home from Van Diemen's Land to her mother in England she describes their first impressions of Van Diemen's Land: 'The country is very fine, teeming with beautiful natural productions, both in the animal and vegetable kingdom. Persons we have been introduced to are exceedingly kind and John is acquiring a vast fund of information in the ornithological department, which must, I think, prove interesting to the lovers of the science. We got here in just the right season, and I assure you he has 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. Indeed, John is so enthusiastic that one cannot be with him without catching some of his real

zeal in the cause, and I cannot regret our coming, though looking anxiously forward to our return ...".

Footnote

Charles Coxen (1808-1876) was five years younger than his sister Elizabeth and followed his elder brother Stephen to New South Wales in about 1833. He appeared interested in birds before leaving England and soon after reaching New South Wales was reported sending specimens to John Gould. Upon receiving the Red Faced Fig Parrot, a sub-species of Double-eyed Fig Parrot, John Gould named the bird *Cyclopsitta coxeni* in honour of his brother-in-law Charles Coxen, who eventually, became the first (Honorary) Curator of the Brisbane Museum in Australia.



Editor's footnote

Mrs Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae*, as pictured earlier, was named in Elizabeth's honour by Nicholas Vigors when he described it for science in 1831.

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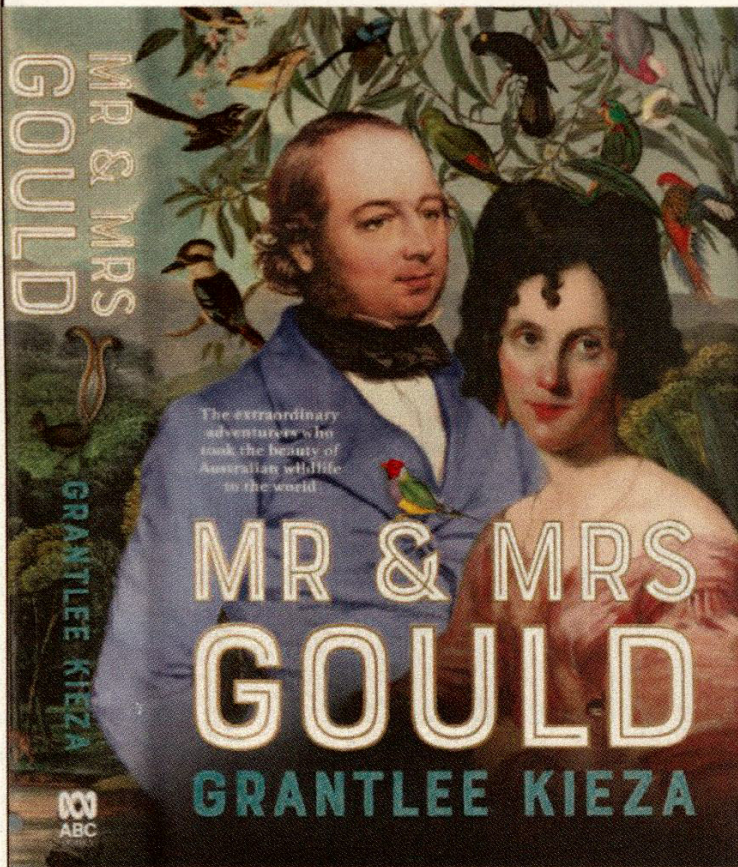
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The front dustcover of the book recently published in Australia. A copy of this was gifted to the author for Christmas by his wife Margaret.

Although available in the UK as a downloadable E-book, a printed version is currently not on sale and carriage from Australia would most likely be quite expensive as the book has 419 pages.