

REVIEW

Walter Buller – the Reluctant Conservationist, by Ross Galbreath. 1989. Wellington: G P Books. 33 pages, 8 colour plates, 31 in-text illustrations, 5 maps. \$44.95.

Like the author of *Walter Buller*, I too grew up on school pad 'Buller's Birds'. It was only years later that I comprehended the full magnificence of the 'Second Edition' but my personal preference must, however, lie with the classic individuality of the 1873 edition. It was, then, with considerable expectation that I awaited the publication of this biography. Ross Galbreath has, however, destroyed my youthful conception of Buller, the God-like ornithological paragon.

The individual that emerges from these pages is far more exciting! Walter Buller, the person, the 19th century naturalist/lawyer, complete with all the foibles of humanity and imbued with the mores of Victorian society; an eminently successful man of his time. Because of his social stature and manifold interests, his biography paints an intriguing picture of 19th century New Zealand's social and political elite with such luminaries as Von Haast, Bell, Featherston, Hector, Mair, Keepa, and Whitmore; their machinations and political wranglings and their vigorous tenacity on attack or defence. Galbreath impresses as a writer and researcher. He successfully draws together the many strands of Buller's life to create a detailed but readable account. Background material is concise but well incorporated to give those with meagre historical knowledge an adequate perspective of colonial politics. One of the minutiae which fascinated me was the identification of Whitmore's annotation on Buller's War Medal application (p.149). It is detail such as this that inspires confidence in the author's research.

What must remain of prime importance for all ornithologists, however, is the incomparable record of our avian fauna which Buller left to posterity in his published works – we would be very much the poorer if he had not been the man he was; singleminded, obdurate and self-opinionated. The background to this aspect of his work, to the production of the first and second editions of his *Birds of New Zealand*, and to his relationships with other naturalists, makes intriguing reading indeed.

Buller's personal struggle, especially in later years, between the instincts of the archetypal European collector and that of a more enlightened conservationist brings to mind the probably apocryphal story of the Australian doctoral thesis which ended with the terse note... "such was the intensity of sampling that the species is now extinct."

The volume itself is an impressive well-designed production from an upmarket Government Printer. Well footnoted with appendices of particular relevance, the text is remarkably free of typographical errors – I found only one repeated line of text. Perhaps the only small annoyance was the difficulty in finding the appropriate footnotes while reading the text.

The Reluctant Conservationist is a must for all those interested in our fauna. It may even initiate a desire towards a *wider* historical horizon!

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