

Charles Sturt, a man of science

Captain Charles Sturt is known as a soldier, explorer and public servant but few realize his abiding passion for natural history. As a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, he was very much the 19th century gentleman with a wide range of intellectual interests. His journals of exploration indicate his interest in climate, geology, geography, flora and fauna as do his paintings of the native birds and fauna. He was not only an observer but also a collector, sending numerous specimens to English museums. On his return from the River Murray expedition in 1830, he despatched to the Museum of Edinburgh University, three cases of specimens which included 18 birds, 6 emu eggs 7 sponges and 4 specimens of coral. (1)

Of these 18 birds, representing 15 species, three still bear on their labels "Banks of the River Murray." They are :

1. *Threskiornis spinicollis*, "Glossy Ibis." *Ibis spinicollis* Jameson, *Edin. New Phil. Journal*, xix., p. 213 (1835). This, the type specimen, has at one time been mounted; it is now dismounted and is in excellent condition.
2. *Licmetis tenuirostris*, "Small White Cockatoo." This has also at one time been mounted. It is in poor condition. This bird is mentioned by Sturt in Vol. II. of his book of "Travels."
3. *Ocyphaps lophotes*, "Crested Dove." This is also a dismounted specimen and in poor condition. It is figured in Vol. I. of Sturt's book. and is several times mentioned as the "Crested Pigeon of the Marshes."



His friendship with John Gould, the renowned British ornithologist, saw both men venture into the scrub lands of the Murray River in South Australia in 1839 collecting bird specimens for Gould's "The Birds of Australia" – a 36 volume colour-plated masterpiece recording the birdlife of Australia, published between 1840 – 1848.(2) Sturt had previously corresponded with Gould, sending him specimens from both his River Murray Expedition in 1830 and his overland cattle drive in 1838. In fact it was Sturt's appointment in Adelaide as Surveyor-General that prompted Gould's to visit South Australia.(3)

His passion went beyond the natural environment to the cultivated. He served on the first Committee of Superintendance of the Australian Museum and Botanic Gardens in Sydney in 1836. His property at Mittagong, New South Wales covered 1950 acres and said to have had an excellent garden.(4) A year later he purchased another farm of 1000 acres at Varroville which Cumpston quotes to "gratify his passion for gardening." It was here that John Gould first visited Sturt in 1838. He "admired Sturt's large original collection of water-colours of Australian parrots, for which he offered a large sum. But these paintings had been the delight of Sturt's leisure: he had collected the rarer specimens at great trouble and he would not part with them "(5)

On arrival in Adelaide in 1839 he was appointed a Vice-President of the inaugural Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia and later held the same position in the South Australia Agricultural Society and the Botanical & Horticultural Board.(6) At the Grange he cultivated a vast orchard of 4,000 fruit trees – pear, orange, lemon, apple, peach, fig and vines-Beatrix Sturt, Sturt's biographer, quoting that "he delighted in wandering over his garden with his two beautiful boys Napier and Charles."

Sturt wrote to his old friend George McLeay in Brownlow Hill, Camden New South Wales, requesting him to send bulbs and couch grass for Grange, as well as pine seeds, seeds of *Cupressus callitris*, the white cedar and the loquat. From Loddige's in London he received "some fine fuchsias, laurel, chestnut and white roses" and several times in 1842, he sought fruit, flower seeds and bulbs from his brother William in India instructing him to "put up cuttings of various trees, stowed close in a barrel with wet moss at the bottom; or a case of orange trees in pots. Send me also pineapples, but above all, indigo seed, which I am very anxious to try". He further

wrote that “if you are in Calcutta ... send me seeds and cuttings. Put the cuttings into damp moss in a box, and the seeds into dried sand. Send pineapples, bananas, arrowroot, sugar-cane, but at all risks indigo seed” (7)

Unfortunately in October 1842 he wrote William that a flood had wiped out his garden. “Oranges, lemons, figs, 1,800 vines and more than 3,000 trees of all kinds are killed” (8). Not to be deterred he writes to William “Dr Wallick’s (of Calcutta) two cases of plants for our Horticultural Society came in excellent order. None of those you sent me did I ever get, much to my mortification...Send me melon seeds of varieties, pumpkins, Bengal chillies and any other. I want to try indigo, cotton and other things. Forward them via Sydney, addressed for me to the care of Major H. Smyth there.(9)

We will never really know exact plan of Sturt’s garden. Charles Sheppey Sturt prepared a plan in 1896 for Beatrix Sturt for the writing of Sturt’s biography, and while the plan denotes some of the plantings particularly trees and vines. We know that Sturt planted artichokes, Oleander, Brown Turkey Fig, Heliotrope, Fuschia, Asplenium Australis, Aspenium Marinum fern and Woodsia but the plan lacks detail to garden beds and plants. Drawn from childhood memory some 50 years later, he can be excused for lack of detail. Sturt did maintain a vegetable garden and flower beds but the location is not revealed.



Heliotrope



Aspenium Marinum



Cosmos



Artichoke



Asters

As a testament to Sturt’s love of horticulture, the Museum holds some relics of Sturt’s garden, pressed flowers, ink drawings, plant lists and instructions for planting, a list of the trees and shrubs planted at the Grange in 1842 and 10 packets of flower seeds labelled – Acacia Decurrens (Black Wattle), Asters, Blue Hardenbergia, White Hardenbergia, King George Sound Hardenbergia, Poppy, Cosmos, Clianthus Dampieri (Sturts Desert Pea) Sturt Pea (Lady Sturt) and Hibiscus Sturt Rose,

The library collection holds five volumes of *Familiar Wild Flowers* by F.E. Hulme published from 1877 – 1885, fifteen volumes of *Paxtons Magazine of Botany* by Joseph Paxton published 1834-1849, *The Management of Bees* by Samuel Bagster 1835 and *British Ferns and Their Allies* by Thomas Moore 1859.



References:

1. Stenhouse, J.H., MBOU, *Rear-Admiral, Birds Collected by Capt Sturt in 1830 on the "Banks of the River Murray"*, Edinburgh Scotland, The Emu Vol XXX 1st October 1930
2. Chisolm, Alec. H., *From Sturt to Gould and Australian Dictionary of Biography.*
3. Carpenter, Graham, Black, Andrew, *John Gould in South Australia and a reappraisal of his type locality, 'The Belts of the Murray,* December 2015
4. Cumpston, J.H.L., *Charles Sturt: His Life and Journeys of Exploration,* Hawthorn Press Melbourne 1951 p77
5. *Ibid* p78
6. *SA Record & Austrn. & South African Chronicle* 11/7/1840 p5.
7. Sturt, Beatrix, *Life of Charles Sturt Smith,* Elder & Col London p222
8. *ibid* P223
9. *Ibid* p225



A simplified version of Charles Sheppey Sturt's hand drawn plan and developed as a sundial for the Museum's heritage garden.

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