



Book Review

Feather and brush: a history of Australian bird art

Second Edition

By P. Olsen

2022, Published by CSIRO Publishing, Clayton South

pp. 352,

Price AUD \$69.00, ISBN 9781486314171

Dr Penny Olsen AM has published more than 130 scientific papers and book chapters, although she is best known for her 30 something books (Kennedy 2021). In a career spanning over 50 years she has been Deputy Chair of the Australian Capital Territory's Scientific Committee, an Honorary Professor in the Division of Ecology and Evolution in the Research School of Biology at the Australian National University and an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow. She was also the recipient of the 1997 D. L. Serventy Medal for excellence in published work on birds. She is thus well qualified to author this book on the history of Australian bird art.

Feather and Brush (Second Edition) is an exploration of bird art in Australia. It begins with Aboriginal artwork and simple engravings from the earliest European depictions of Australian birds and then traces the history of bird art through to the diverse range of artwork available today. The bulk of the book is dedicated to the three centuries of European to Australian bird art. In doing so, more than 400 carefully selected images from 158 artists are presented. Dr Olsen's significant effort was rewarded with the first edition of *Feather and Brush* winning the Whitley Award for Zoological History and the Australian newspaper's award for Excellence in Educational Publishing (Boles 2013). In 2022, the second edition was given a Certificate of Commendation from The Royal Zoological Society of NSW Whitley Awards for historical zoology.

The book is laid out in chapters both chronologically and geographically. While the subject is the artwork of Australian birds, it was pertinent to discuss those painted in Europe separately to those painted in Australia, because many specimens were sent back to Europe to be formally described and painted. It was not possible for the European artists to see the

birds in their natural environment or predict their natural gist. The chronological approach allows the author to both order and develop the evolution of bird art. There is a useful introduction followed by another 11 chapters culminating with the artists of the Anthropocene and lastly a chapter on contemporary artists. These are followed by a bibliography, a list of artists and an index. This edition includes revised chapters and features 200 new artworks, including Indigenous artworks. The chapters are neither too long nor too short with a mean of 27 pages and all are adorned with the 400 plus pieces of artwork mentioned above. The pages are thick and glossy and of course lavishly illustrated with fine artwork; the result being a tome of approximately 2 kg.

The book addresses a general audience that surely includes people who want to see books on birds, on the history of bird discovery and on art focused historically around Australian birds. It will undoubtedly interest zoologists by giving background to the history of science. Yet, its relevance is much wider because it blends art, history, the history of science, and of course birds into one text. Beyond those particular banners it also presents as an educational read to all those who are interested in birds or the study of birds.

There are two obvious strengths to this book, the first is the artwork most of which is of the highest standard. I say most because the appeal of art is subjective. For my part, I enjoyed seeing the evolution from the early rather awkward looking depictions from 19th century, 'amateur' renderings to the more recent work of contemporary field guides. In particular, the sections on Bill Cooper and Peter Slater attracted my interest. The second obvious strength is the text. The text is informative, deeply researched, accessible and educational. I suggest that any text that examines the history of science (in this case through art) enables the

readers to see how current knowledge was formed and how future knowledge will evolve from where we are now and I believe this book has achieved that. Ironically, my only criticism would be that the artwork kept distracting me from the text. I knew bits and pieces of bird art history from my studies of the history of Australian ornithology and the Macleay Museum (e.g. [Fulton 2012, 2021](#)), but my knowledge was fragmentary. This book brings so much information together in one place; of course it has and will continue to substantially increase the understanding of this discipline – no doubt its main objective. Thus, its educational reach stretches from the amateur (most of us) to the professionals interested in the intersection of birds, art and science.

The organisation of the book in logical chapters is brought about by the author's understanding of the history and as such advances the book into a thoroughly researched exposition of the subject making it the leader in its field. Overall, it fills a niche that was required and sets a high benchmark for those that might follow.

The depth of research is evidenced in the 235 citations in the references, plus another 35 given for further reading. The depth of research into the scientific and historical ornithological literature was clearly necessary to explain the evolution of the artwork, but the research has gone further by incorporating the knowledge and artwork of those artists not interested in scientifically accurate depictions. The artwork itself could be described as ranging from the classical to the quirky, decorative to functional, monumental to intimate and historical to contemporary. The author's writing style makes the exposition accessible to all readers and not simply academics – another strength of this book. Beyond this all of the many figure legends throughout the book are

well detailed and neatly formatted, maintaining the high standard of presentation throughout this book.

I would recommend this book to a very wide audience, in particular to those interested in birds for historical, scientific and artistic reasons. It no doubt will be a sought after edition for bird enthusiasts wanting a talking point or to just look at the pictures. I will use it for deeper research into the history of Australian ornithology. I now look forward to a similar volume focused on the islands of the Pacific – my fingers crossed.

Graham R. Fulton

Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Science, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Qld, Australia
and
Environmental and Conservation Sciences, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA, Australia.
Email: grahamf2001@yahoo.com.au

References

- Boles WE (2013) Whitley special commendation award to Penny Olsen. *Australian Zoologist* **36**, 481–482.
- Fulton GR (2012) Alexander, William Sharp, and William John Macleay: their ornithology and museum. In 'Contributions to the history of Australasian ornithology. Vol. 2'. (Eds WE Davis Jr, HF Recher, WE Boles, JA Jackson) pp. 327–393. (Nuttall Ornithological Club: Cambridge, Massachusetts)
- Fulton GR (2021) A detailed report on the birds collected on the Chevert expedition to New Guinea, in 1875. *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* **143**, 9–36.
- Kennedy PL (2021) Biography of Dr Penelope (Penny) Diane Olsen AM; renowned ornithologist and author of books on Australian ornithological art and ornithological history. *Pacific Conservation Biology*. doi:[10.1071/PC21025](https://doi.org/10.1071/PC21025)

Conflicts of interest. The author declares no conflicts of interest.