My life with eggs

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In an autobiographical account, which was presented as a special presentation because of his retirement, Michael Walters summarizes the unusual circumstances which resulted in him becoming curator of the world's largest bird egg collection at Tring. It also highlights the special curatorial problems and idiosyncrasies involved with this collection and its constituent components.

Introduction

When the great English rose-grower, Harry Wheatcroft, wrote his memoirs, he called the book "My Life with Roses", and I happened to be reading the book when Robert Prys-Jones asked me if I wanted to go to Leiden and if I'd be prepared to give a talk. I thought, yes, why not. And I knew at once what I was going to call it! However, the title is capable of more than one interpretation. It could mean that it is about eggs, and my life with them, or that it is about me primarily, with some information about eggs thrown in. As there is going to be quite a bit about me in this talk, I am trying to steer a middle course between the two extremes. It is said that some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. I think I must come in the final category (in a relative sense) for I always wanted to do something involving birds, but never in my wildest dreams did I dream that I'd end my career as curator of the largest bird's egg collection on earth.

Childhood

I was born in Portrush, a small seaside town on the north coast of Co. Antrim in Ireland. It was in the years during World War 2. My parents met when my father, who came from Dublin was billeted in Portrush. They were married in June 1941, and spent their honeymoon at Ballygally Castle, a medieval castle turned into an hotel. They stayed there from 28-30 June 1941; the total bill for three days full board and lodging (including drinks and telephone calls) came to 6 pounds, eleven shillings and sevenpence, which, I am informed is just under 9 Euros. I mention this to indicate the degree of inflation that has occurred in our finances since then.

Apparently my parents had a long discussion as to whether they'd have a baby then and there, or wait till the war was over. Fortunately for me they chose the former option, otherwise I wouldn't be here now. My father was killed on active service when I was a few months old, so I never met him, and I was brought up by my mother and my great aunt. Life was hard, we didn't of course realize how much. Everything was rationed; children didn't have many toys. We made entertainment out of nothing. My mother

had a tin box in which she kept buttons (in case they might be useful - nothing of potential use was ever thrown away). Buttons could be played with and had many uses, but most often they were birds. Cliffs could be built with piles of books, and the buttons were gulls, terns and auks that lived on the cliffs, and could all be given names and have stories told about them. There was no television, radio was listened to a lot, food was scarce, and mostly nasty. We couldn't be picky, we hadn't the luxury of saying we were vegetarian, or wouldn't eat this or that. We ate what was put down in front of us and thought we were lucky to have enough.

Portrush being a seaside town seabirds were omnipresent. You couldn't look out the window without seeing Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) perched on the roofs of houses overlooking the harbour. To this day the Herring Gull is my favourite bird. It is the epitome of my childhood, it meant as much to me as the White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) presumably meant to many continental children. When I read the stories of Hans Andersen I immediately identified the Storks of his stories with the Herring Gulls of my home town. There was no doubt in my mind from the outset what I wanted to do, but precisely what I could do with birds, was a point that was vague in my mind, and was not resolved till many years later. I was besotted by birds. At primary school one of my schoolteachers once remarked to my mother that no matter what was the subject of the essay he set the class, I always managed to bring birds into it somehow.

A few of my old school reports have survived. One, dated June 1953, when I was eleven, said: "A very good year's work. Michael can do better at arithmetic than this mark shows but carelessness with figures is one of his weaknesses." The mark was 11 out of 20. The following year (1954), the mark was 4 out of 20, but the report said: "A good term's work (no "very" this time). Michael has done very well this year and although his results do not show it his mathematics have improved considerably". Who were they trying to deceive? Not many letters from this period have survived, but I found one, dated 10 December 1953, written when my Mother was in hospital:

> *"Dear Mummie, I hope you are much improved after your operation. I am going in for the Intelligence test tomorrow and I hope I will do well. I am looking forward to my holiday in Dublin. I hope to get to the Zoo and see the penguins. In my next letter to you I hope to send you the first installment of a story I am writing called 'The case of the Flying Penguin'."*

If that story was ever written, it hasn't survived, but I do vaguely recall that the punchline was that the penguin in question had stolen the artificial wings of another bird. But the point here, is that these two fragments of my history indicate two things which have never left me. Firstly: I am useless at mathematics, and secondly, I have always been hooked on birds, and particularly the most bizarre and curious aspects of them.

After leaving school I made several unsuccessful attempts to enter university, but was repeatedly told my results were not good enough. I took a job in the civil service as a clerk, working in Belfast. I joined the British Ornithologists' Union, and my icon at that time was Reginald Moreau, whom I had met at Union conferences, who had started out in life without any academic qualifications, and had made it to President of the Union. I thought, if he can do it, maybe there's hope for me. I won't get to be President of the Union, but perhaps there's another niche.

My early years at the British Museum

During the "barren" years (if I may put it that way) I never ceased to hope that I'd achieve my ideal - to get a post at The Natural History Museum, and made several unsuccessful applications. One day in 1970, I received a letter from David Snow, saying that he'd heard from Reg Moreau that I wanted to get into the Museum, that there was a vacancy in the Bird Room and that if I applied I might get it. I was by this time living in London, having obtained a transfer to a London civil service department. I applied and was interviewed. One morning, I received another letter from David Snow telling me that I had been successful. Elated, I set off for work, bought a newspaper at the station, and staring me in the face was Reg Moreau's obituary. I don't think anything in my life has hurt me so much as the juxtaposition of those two events. I so badly wanted to go to Reg and say, "thank you for all you've done for me", but Fate had stepped in and said, "No, you can't do that". But life must go on.

Eggs were something that had never particularly interested me up to then. I'd never really thought much about them. But when I joined the Museum staff, the then egg curator, Colin Harrison, was trying to find an assistant to pass the egg collection on to. So I came to eggs, and (if you will pardon the expression) they stuck to me. Looking back on it now, my appointment was ironic. If I had had a degree I wouldn't have got in to the Museum, because at that time, graduates had to be brought in at a much higher grade than I, and the Museum wanted a lower grade officer. Had I being applying now, I wouldn't have got in *without* a degree because the Museum are taking in graduates at a lower grade than non-graduates were taken in 30 years ago. Reginald Moreau was the right man at the right time, and, maybe, so was I? Or am I being unduly arrogant?

Some contemporary ornithologists

When I joined the Museum staff we had a number of distinguished Associates working in the Bird Room, as it was then called. On an upper floor a small office housed the British Office of Birdlife International, or ICBP as it was then. This was staffed by the formidable Phyllis Barclay-Smith and a female assistant. This remarkable woman who gave so much of her life in voluntary work has never really received the credit that was her due. When she suffered a massive stroke in the middle of Christmas dinner and died a few days later without ever having regained consciousness, everyone commented that she would probably have preferred it that way. She was such an active woman that incapacitation would have been intolerable to her.

Cyril Mackworth-Praed (co-author with Claude Grant of the African Handbooks) was a regular visitor. In London the skins were stored in vast mahogany cabinets about double the height of those at Tring, and the ladders to reach the higher sections were tall rickety wooden edifices that would now cause EC officials to foam at the mouth with horror. They were highly dangerous, but no-one bothered about things like that then. Moreover, the cabinets were unwieldy, the drawers often stuck and you had to use brute force to open them. At the age of 30 they worried me. To see this frail old man of nearly 90 scrambling up these rickety ladders and struggling to pull out the drawers was one of the most frightening experiences of my life. But he wouldn't allow anybody to help him. He would get quite indignant if anyone suggested he might require some help.

Rachel Warren was putting the final touches to the Types Catalogue. A charming woman, she was also one of the more scatterbrained, as subsequent workers on BMNH types still discover on occasion. Previously, she had worked on the egg collection, and made out a number of handwritten cards in a highly illegible scrawl. I had to replace most of these when I was recataloguing the collection, though a few remain for historic reasons, and overall her work on the egg collection did not greatly improve its curatorial condition.

Pat Hall was working on the African Atlas. Charles Pitman was a frequent visitor. He used to take delight in pointing out that he was almost as old as Mackworth-Praed, but much more robust. Pitman had been for many years a game-warden in East Africa and claimed with pride that he was the only man in history to be gored by a buffalo and live to tell the tale. He was also inordinately proud of his wife's Christmas cakes. Traditionally, one of these would be turned over, a whole bottle of brandy poured into the bottom, and then left for six months to be eaten in the summer.

History of the egg collection

The egg collection was built up largely in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; but parts of it date back before that. The original collection was on display in the public galleries, the eggs being glued to wooden boards. This collection was dismantled in 1837, and a system of registration or cataloguing begun. The eggs dating from before 1837 are almost all without information and are termed the Old Collection. In view of the Philistine way they were treated it is surprising the number that still survive. These include two Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) eggs, badly broken on the side where they were glued to the wood. Only one of these old eggs is dated. It is a Gannet's egg (*Morus bassanus*) collected on the Bass Rock, off Scotland, in 1807 and was probably collected by William Bullock who was on the Rock in that year, though there is no documentary evidence to prove it. This is the oldest datable egg in the collection. A collection from Colonel Montagu, received in 1816, is probably older, of eighteenth century vintage, but none of the eggs is dated.

When I first came to the Museum in 1970, the birds were still housed in London, and much of my first two years were spent packing them up to be sent to Tring. But I was able to spend some time on eggs because Colin Harrison wanted someone to help. Colin's interest in eggs was rather nominal, and when he discovered that I had a "feel" for them, he was more than happy to leave me to do the work, while he got on with his studies of fossils. In South Kensington, the eggs were stored in two separate locations due to pressures of space. The main series was in the basement of the Entomology block, while the overflow was in a separate area called the egg corridor. The catalogue cards would be annotated either "Sy" to indicate that that clutch was in the systematic series, or "Eg" to indicate that it was in the egg corridor, which meant that it was not easily accessible. The catalogue cards are not standardized; they have changed from hand-written to typed, to computer-generated, over the years, and a number of collections came with their own catalogue cards made out by the original collector.

The eggs were housed in a series of mahogany cabinets, on top of which had been placed a similar series of cheap and nasty cabinets of wood painted a creamcolour, and

the collections expanded upwards from the mahogany cabinets into the cream ones. Within these cabinets the eggs were laid out in glass-topped boxes of variable sizes. When the egg collection was moved to Tring, it was moved in the cabinets in the boxes, a temporary staff member being employed to lay thin layers of coarse cotton wool over the top of the eggs to protect them from damage against the glass during the move. It was an inappropriate decision, eggs should not really be transported in glass topped boxes, but then the entire move of the bird collections was organised on a basis that I can only describe as amateurish and there was a considerable amount of damage to the egg collection during the move.

When we got the egg collection to Tring, it was stored temporarily in what is now the spirit area; the spirit collection had not yet been moved, partly because the dexian racking to accommodate it had not been installed. Each of the cabinets had to be lifted, placed on a light trolley and wheeled down the link corridor, and up the bumpy ramp to the egg area. Getting trolleys up this slope without the egg cabinet falling off, or the trolley running away from you, was not a science, but an art. Once, a trolley (mercifully empty) did run away from me on its return journey and crashed into the wall, making a sizeable dent, which is probably still there after 30 years, but now concealed by wallpaper. Once the cabinets were safely in the egg area, the boxes were transferred to the standard Tring cabinets, which are in two sections, with the contents of the mahogany cabinets going into the bottom halves and the contents of the cream cabinets into the top halves.

Max Schönwetter had visited the collection in the middle part of the 20th century and gleaned much information for his Handbuch der Oologie. He was, of course, long before my time, but in my work on the collection I found little notes in boxes written and signed by him. He could be quite vehement. I recall more than one instance where a piece of paper in a box with a tentative identification was annotated by Schönwetter with the scathing comment "Nonsense".

I met a number of other distinguished egg visitors. John Colebrook Robjent from Zimbabwe arrived one day, totally unannounced and demanded to see x, y. z. He arrived just as I was about to be taken out to lunch by another visitor. I had to make my apologies to my friend. I didn't get any lunch at all that day. The controversial Leslie Brown came in once and said that he had a small egg collection which he wanted us to have. I found him utterly charming, but alas, we never did get his collection, for after his tragic and unnecessary death, his widow gave the collection to Elgin Museum in Scotland.

The egg collector Desmond Nethersole-Thompson, who visited Tring on several occasions, was one of the loveliest men I've ever met. His utter naivety was totally disarming, and I heard him give quite the most memorable lecture of my life at a BTO conference in Swanwick. All the other delegates to the conference had masses of slides, overheads, and graphs. This man just stood up with nothing except his personality, and talked to us about his Greenshanks (*Tringa nebularia*) on the Scottish moors. He was a born actor. As he spoke, you were out on the moors with him, you could hear the wind howling, you could see the Greenshanks, you could feel the coldness of the snow. Of all the conference papers I've ever heard in the whole of my life, that is the one that will stay with me till the day I die. He knew all his Greenshanks personally, had names for them all, and could recognise them by their eggs. Someone in the know once told me

that he had seen clutches of eggs labeled as Greenshanks that were obviously Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*), in private egg collections, that were "authenticated" by Nethersole-Thompson. What he reckoned had happened was that Nethersole-Thompson would go out early in the morning, remove the Greenshank's eggs from the nest, and put in a clutch of Redshanks. He would then take the visitor out to the site. The collector would see the Greenshank get up off the nest, and go and collect the eggs. Later Nethersole-Thompson would go back and replace the Greenshank's eggs. In this way he protected his birds.

The Rothschild collection of eggs was already at Tring, not having been sent to the American Museum of Natural History with the skins, and since Rothschild had a lot of birds collected with their nests and eggs, we now have the anomalous situation that we have eggs at Tring, but the birds that laid those eggs are in New York. It is a fine collection, but not without anomalies. For example, we have a cassowary egg, supposedly laid by the type of *Casuarius edwardsi*. The problem is that *Casuarius edwardsi* is known only from the holotype, which according to the literature was an adult male. I never got to the bottom, or should I say the oviduct, of that one!

The Rothschild eggs were stored in glass-topped boxes of standard size, in steel cabinets. While rebuilding was taking place, these cabinets had to be moved around the building, and considerable damage to the eggs was done by the firm employed not following its instructions closely. This is just to let you know that it wasn't all a bowl of cherries. But there were compensations. When the cabinets were to be built in the nest basement somebody found an old wooden cabinet in the basement almost empty, but with a certain amount of "rubbish". They were about to take the cabinet to the tip, but in the nick of time, I said, well, let me have a look in it first. In one of the drawers were a couple of very scruffy nests, and a few old eggs rolling around unprotected on the wooden base of the drawer. I removed them. Subsequent research revealed that these were the only known nests and eggs of the extinct Laysan Millerbird *Acrocephalus familiaris*, described by Rothschild. They are safe in the collection now, but they were very nearly lost to posterity.

The British Museum collection had been last completely catalogued in 1895, by Henry Seebohm who at the same time wrote a manuscript catalogue. This formed the basis of the published Catalogue of Eggs by Eugene Oates during the years 1902-1912. In the intervening years, a great many eggs had been added, either catalogued or uncatalogued. It was decided that I should go through the collection and do a total recataloguing. This was necessary because since Seebohm's time, nomenclature and taxonomy had changed a great deal, and many of the boxes were labeled with obsolete names. As well as card-indexing everything that had not already been catalogued, I checked Seebohm's MS catalogue and Oates' Catalogue, and in a considerable number of cases extra information could be added from these, to that which had previously been noted as accompanying the eggs. Perhaps not surprisingly, a large number of eggs listed by Oates, were not to be found in the collection, but more surprisingly, a considerable number of eggs listed by Seebohm were not listed by Oates. I found it astounding that in the space of a decade so many eggs could have disappeared or been discarded. Most lamentably, I discovered that there were a few instances (though happily not many) where the loss of eggs listed in Seebohm and/or Oates meant that there are no eggs of that species currently in the collection.

I was actually taught very little about the egg collection and the cataloguing problems it presented. I had to learn this as I went along, and it revealed to me that my predecessors had made quite a lot of errors through failure to correctly interpret data written on eggs. For example the collection numbers on the eggs in Tristram's collection consist of a number followed by a Greek letter. These refer to page numbers and egg numbers on the page, in Tristram's own manuscript catalogue. This had not been realised. Many, but by no means all of the eggs in Henry Seebohm's Collection had numbers of up to three digits followed by a dot and then another figure of one or two digits. They were all consistently written in the same hand. It was quite a long time before I discovered that these referred to the collection of Edward Hargitt, whose collection Seebohm had obtained and incorporated. Moreover, these referred to Hargitt's own manuscript catalogue and once again, quite often, extra information about the sets or the correction of erroneous information could be added by reference to this. So I started to check all the entries in Hargitt's catalogue as well, and found that a lot of eggs were not present in the collection, nor had they been listed by Seebohm. It transpired that many of the missing eggs had been used, before cataloguing, in the displays in the public galleries. Some of these eggs were recovered when the various public displays were dismantled and returned to the collection. These were of course, readily identifiable to me by their Hargitt numbers. However, a lot of Hargitt eggs were not recovered, and one must presume that they were lost on the various occasions when the public displays were broken into and eggs stolen. There are many other manuscript catalogues in the egg library which would repay a similar checking, but unfortunately, I was never given the time to do this.

The present situation

The current staff seem to spend a lot of their time giving free lectures to the public, and a great deal of time in bureaucracy and researching various things. This is not a criticism of them; I mention it merely to point out, that in my era, one was expected to just keep one's head down, and do nothing but catalogue the specimens and get them into the collection as quickly and efficiently as possible. Had I not done this I might have achieved maybe 50 per cent of what I actually did get done in my working life. I do not believe that my successors will be permitted the time to register and incorporate more than a small fraction of what I managed to do. I reckoned that on a good day, working flat out and with no interruptions, no tea breaks and no more than 5 minutes for lunch, I could register, database and incorporate 200 clutches in a day. I think this is a record that will be hard to beat. I'm not boasting. In many ways I envy my successors.

Another thing I had to cope with was synonyms, for many eggs in older collections were labeled with obsolete scientific names. As an example: in my curation, I came across an egg in the collection labeled by a previous curator *Schetba rufa*, one of the Vangidae. We do not have many Vanga eggs in the collection, but this one looked distinctly odd. It had *Lanius rufus* written on it, and was evidently 19th century. It looked uncomfortably like the egg of a Shrike rather than a Vanga. If you look up "*Lanius rufus*" in Peters Check List, it will lead you directly to *Schetba rufa*, for which the original name was *Lanius rufus* of Linnaeus. But further investigation reveals that *Lanius rufus* of

Bonaparte was in use during the 19th century for the bird now called *Lanius senator*, and this was what the egg subsequently proved to be!

As well as recataloguing the main collection, I had to catalogue and incorporate many collections which came in over the years, and deal with a backlog of existing but unincorporated collections. Many of these had their own problems. The collection of James Davidson, for instance, had eggs identified only by a species number, a date and a locality all written in just about the worst writing I have ever encountered. Davidson was in the Indian Forestry Commission and was based in the area inland from Bombay though he made several expeditions to Kashmir. Over the years, I became used to his writing, and to the names of the localities he habitually frequented, so was able to decipher the names, but not always with a hundred per cent certainty, and a number have been appended with a query. The species numbers were either those of Hume or Oates, authors of the two main numerical species lists of Indian sub-continent birds. There is no way of knowing at the outset whether the number is a Hume number or an Oates number, but fortunately, the two are so distinctive that it is quite easy to tell by identification. In other words if you have eggs of what are obviously a bulbul, you will find that the number on the eggs refers in one list to a species of bulbul, but in the other list to something completely different. Of course you have to know your eggs!

Davidson's colleague T.R. Bell also had eggs identified only by species numbers and by dates - no localities in this instance. Bell collected insects as well as birds' eggs, and his detailed field diaries are held in the Entomology library in South Kensington. When working out his collection, it was necessary to type out a series of cards identifying the species and indicating the date. I would then take a bundle of cards (enough to give me a day's work) up to the Entomology library and go through the Bell diaries looking for information. Having found a date, it was often necessary to read back several days or even weeks to find out where Bell was at any particular time. Entries like "went nowhere" were singularly unhelpful. Bell, like Davidson, traveled from one forestry commission villa to another, inspecting timber and collecting as he went. He was the first to discover the nest of the Spotted Creeper *Salpornis spilonotus* and all the eggs in our collection, though received from a number of collections, seem to have originated from Bell. It may well be that all the known specimens of this species were collected by him.

One of the most controversial collections was that of E.C. Stuart Baker. He actually built up two collections, one of "Indian Eggs" and the other of "Cuckoo Eggs". The first of these covered the Indian sub-continent, i.e. former British India. It was the most comprehensive egg collection ever assembled for this area. I can think of no species of the area for which the eggs are known and for which Baker did not have eggs. And there are species for which he had the only eggs known. Knowledge of the nidification of Indian sub-continent birds has hardly progressed at all since Baker's time. The other collection, of cuckoo's eggs, was scarcely less comprehensive. Needless to say it is based on the same area, where Baker spent most of his collecting life, but he also had eggs sent to him from other parts of the Old World - indeed everywhere where parasitic cuckoos occur. The problem with his collection is that his data are often suspect. His handwriting is difficult, but I have got used to it. He wrote with his left hand, not because he was left-handed but because he had no right arm. In his youth he was on a tiger hunt, and a leopard suddenly leaped out of the bushes and attacked him. The only thing he could think of to do was to plunge his right arm down the tiger's throat with all the force he

could muster. This action so startled the tiger that it stopped it for the few vital seconds necessary to allow the beaters to rush up and kill it. So, Baker lost his arm, but saved his life. When I began to curate the Baker collection, I discovered that in lots of clutches there were single eggs which did not seem to match the rest of the clutch. The difference was subtle but, when one had got used to it, distinctive. If you examined the writing on these eggs, sometimes one found that the date was slightly different from that on the rest of the clutch. But then again, sometimes one found the same anomaly on eggs which didn't perceptively differ from those of the rest of the clutch. The question was always: is this a genuine clerical error, or is it an attempt to deceive? Baker lived in an era when egg collecting and the buying and selling of eggs was perfectly legal and indeed big business. Large clutches were more collectable and therefore more valuable than smaller ones. The temptation in front of dealers (and Baker "dealt" in eggs in a big way) was to add eggs that sort-of matched to existing clutches to make them into larger ones. A story is told of Baker, though it may be apocryphal. A visitor called to see him one day and the door was answered by one of his children, who said "Oh Daddy's upstairs making up clutches". As I said, I have no proof that this story is true, but it inevitably raised doubts as to Baker's integrity. There were a number of suggestions over the years, by, I think, Charles Vaurie among others, that the Baker collection was so unreliable that it should be destroyed. But the collection is so vast and so well written-up in the published literature that it cannot be ignored. All one could do was to go through it with a toothcomb and note carefully every little thing that seemed to be doubtful, which is exactly what I did. Future workers must take it from there.

Among the more bizarre collections was that of Henry Munt, who collected only white or unpatterned eggs. Nothing much seems to be known about Munt or his collection except that most of his eggs are from aviary or captive birds. He must have been in touch with many breeders of his day and carried on a considerable correspondence. I have no idea if this correspondence still exists; it would probably make an interesting project for somebody sometime to research Munt and his motives. The collection was accompanied by three catalogues of the same size, called respectively: Pigeon's Eggs, Parrot's Eggs and Bird's Eggs. Well, as you know, pigeons and parrots lay white eggs. The other eggs in the collection include eggs like pheasants, which are not white, but Munt seems to have concentrated on the species for which the eggs are unpatterned. It can be said, therefore, that at least two thirds of Munt's collection consisted of white eggs, thus justifying the epithet applied to him as the white egg collector. He is also remarkable in that his collection is the only one that is not catalogued in the Museum's registers. Instead the registration numbers were written into his original catalogues. I have no idea why this was done. A number of eggs were left unregistered and unincorporated, evidently because the accompanying data was considered to be insufficient. But in a number of instances these eggs proved to be the only specimens of that species in the Museum collection. I therefore incorporated all the previously unincorporated Munt eggs.

When I started to go through the unincorporated collections, I came across a considerable number of boxes labeled "Salmon collection duplicates". In the years before I joined the Museum, "duplicates" was an expression that was applied to specimens which were considered to be of little value and therefore disposable. When I began to examine these eggs I found that they were far from that. Salmon had his own manuscript catalogue,

which previous curators must have ignored, which gave details of the eggs. They may not have had full dates and localities, but they did have probably half a page of discussion, which should not be regarded as of no relevance. The Salmon collection was formed in the early 19th century, and its very age alone accords it a vintage. Very few collections survive from this period, and the eggs in this collection could be potentially of importance to studies. The Salmon collection contained one egg, which has given mileage to those of us who have delivered in-house lectures on eggs. This is an egg of the Great Auk. Salmon's collection was bequeathed to the Linnean Society of London, and remained there for something like 50 years. After this time the Linnean Society decided that they had no use for it and presented it to the Museum. When the Museum received it, it was found that the Great Auk egg was missing and had been replaced with a Swan's egg which had had spots painted on it to mimic a Great Auk's egg. It was a very crude fake, but had evidently deceived a great many people for many years.

Graf von Rödern formed an important collection which was acquired by Rothschild towards the end of the 19th century. It was badly documented but contains a number of very interesting specimens, including a series showing wide ranges of colouring within selected species. The collection was accompanied by two catalogues, one printed, and one manuscript, written by Max Kuschel, a well known German oologist. W.E. Glegg mentioned them in a note in the Ibis (1951: 305-6) but they subsequently disappeared, and I presumed both had perished in the incineration of Rothschild manuscripts, which to the Museum's eternal shame, was perpetrated by a Museum Secretary in the 1960s. However, after 30 years of my assumption that both these documents had perished, some time ago Gill Cornelius, who is engaged by the Museum to catalogue books, called me to ask if a particular item she had in front of her was of any importance? I looked at it, and nearly had a heart attack on the spot as I realised that it was the long lost printed catalogue of the Rödern collection. It actually wasn't that useful in the context of sorting the collection, but it was a revelation that it still existed. Sadly, the manuscript catalogue, which would probably be infinitely more useful, is still missing.

A number of printed sources claim that the egg collection of Canon Tristram is now in Tring Museum. This is incorrect. Tristram's collection was acquired by Philip Crowley and incorporated with his own. In around 1902, Crowley's collection was auctioned, and the Museum was given the option of acquiring from it examples of eggs not already held in its own collection. After over a century, there are some species for which the only eggs in the Museum collection are from eggs ex the Crowley collection, though in some cases the accompanying data are so scanty or non-existent as to cast doubt on the identity of the specimens. The rest of the collection was dispersed. Quite a bit of the Tristram collection, therefore, is indeed in the Museum but the Tristram collection as a discrete entity no longer exists. I might add that Tristram's catalogue of his own egg collection did come to the Museum in its entirety. This would be another interesting project for someone with time and funding, to go through the Tristram catalogue, compare it with the collection, work out what eggs are present, which are missing, and comment on the importance of the extant and the lost specimens. Both the extant and lost specimens may be written up in detail in his catalogue, and may contain important unpublished information. Another potential project for someone. You may ask: why did I not research this point myself? The answer is that I never had the time.

The Venning collection exhibits another example of potentially publishable data that has never been exploited. F.E.W. Venning worked mainly in Iraq, Pakistan and Burma, in which areas he was probably one of the most important egg collectors of all time. He was exceptionally meticulous. The collection was accompanied by detailed notebooks containing a wealth of data on each clutch, mainly relating to nest site and nest construction, incubation, etc.

The Tait collection was put together by a well-known English ornithological family who lived for many years in Portugal. The collection was presented to the Museum after the death of the last surviving Portugal-living member of the family. The collection had for many years been stored in an open cabinet and the eggs were filthy with dust and totally disarranged. A good many years ago, two volunteers (Richard Stevenson and Philip Howes) sorted and put the clutches together and married the data slips with the eggs. The collection contained the only known eggs of the Portuguese population (?subspecies) of the Guillemot. We have recently received an offer to clean these eggs from the conservation department in London.

Salvatori Venturi presented his collection of eggs of Argentinean birds to Rothschild in 1909 and the notes were written up by Hartert in a paper (in Spanish) in *Novitates Zoologicae* for that year. His collection is one of the most important for the northern part of Argentina, but it unfortunately suffered some damage in the move of 1972. One of the remarkable items it contains is the type specimens of *Anthus venturi.* These are a clutch of three obviously aberrant pipit eggs, which Venturi had, most probably jocularly, named after himself. It may be possible one day to sort out what birds these eggs refer to, but I never had the time. It would be nice to fit this name into synonymy.

Henry Leybourne Popham collected in northern Siberia, and was the first person to discover the nest of the Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*). The first clutch that he collected is in the Museum collection, and is still the only clutch of this species represented.

The great egg robbery

In the late 1970s, the Egg Collection received one of the greatest challenges ever to its integrity. A man called Mervyn Shorthouse turned up with a story that he had suffered an electrical accident while at work, and was as a result off work for life. His only solace in life (he said) was looking at birds' eggs, and he begged the Museum to permit him to visit on a regular basis and study the collection. The Museum took pity on him, and he was permitted to visit over a period of about five years. He was a nuisance, but we did not wish to be accused of prejudice against the disabled. On his first visit he was in a wheelchair, but later was able to manage with a walking stick. This disability was the one thing that was genuine about him; one of his legs was shorter than the other, which necessitated the use of the stick. That something was wrong was established by Nigel Collar, who was examining eggs of the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*). He had looked at all our eggs of this species. A month later he came back to look at them again and found that a clutch he had looked at a month before was no longer in the collection. We called in the police, and a young constable turned up, eager, but a bit naïve. He spoke to me for a while, and then said, "Can you be absolutely sure that the eggs haven't hatched?" I explained that the specimens were over a century old, and were empty

shells with nothing inside them! The police made a list of all the visitors who had been to the Museum over the past month and sought some of them out and interviewed them, but failed to identify the culprit.

The breakthrough came when I started finding empty boxes on the tops of egg cabinets where I knew I hadn't put any. The only person who could have put them there was Shorthouse. We alerted the police and laid a trap. I cleared away all the boxes, and the next time Shorthouse came in I watched from a distance. Within a short time, empty boxes started appearing all over the place. We said nothing, but after he left, the police, waiting outside the Museum, picked him up, with about 500 clutches of eggs on his person. These were eventually restored to the collection, but sadly few of the earlier thefts were, for Shorthouse had cleaned off all the registration numbers, and identifying marks, which made it impossible to reconcile the eggs with the data. After his arrest, about 10,000 eggs were recovered from Shorthouse, and the total taken may well have been higher. A number of eggs were found missing from the Stuart Baker collection of Indian eggs, but as Baker's collection had its own problems (which I have already discussed) many of the eggs supposedly in Baker's collection were either suspect or missing, it was often very difficult or impossible to be sure which anomalies were due to Baker, and which to Shorthouse. Or indeed, to a combination of both!

We later discovered that the "electrical accident" supposedly suffered "at work" by Shorthouse, was the result of criminal activity. He had been trying to steal cable from an electric pylon, and had been sawing through the outer plastic casing with a metal hack-saw, resulting in him getting a very high voltage through his body. Moreover, we were told that he had a criminal record for housebreaking and petty larceny. He was given two years, which meant in effect that he served something like 18 months. But for the next 25 years (indeed up to my retirement) I was recataloguing the collection, and keeping my eyes skinned for "Shorthouse-isms". Part of the problem was that he had the habit of removing eggs and substituting others on which he had written false registration numbers. I can recognise the style of his writing, but this may not be possible for future curators not steeped in the ambient situation. I was pretty careful, but, when pressed for time as I was towards the end of my career, I may not have checked every single egg.

A box of eggs, supposedly of eggs of the Eastern Jackdaw, *Corvus dauuricus,* indicated this. The numbers on the top set ought to be in the same style, but they are written in a horrible spidery scrawl which indicates a fake, i.e. Shorthouse. No clerical Museum or other worker would ever have been allowed to write so badly in 1902. This was one of the keynotes to detecting Shorthouse's work – to know the style of writing in which a particular collection ought to have been scribed. Anything that was obviously the wrong style was most likely a fake. This set of eggs are almost certainly not the eggs of *C. dauuricus*, but a dataless clutch of the Common Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*. Shorthouse perpetrated this sort of faking in a number of instances with eggs from the Seebohm Collection, but gave himself away by omitting to write on the Hargitt numbers which the eggs ought to have had, but of which he did understand the significance.

Not long before I finished work on the collection, in checking the eggs of Hooded Crow *(Corvus corone cornix)*, I came upon a terrible mix-up, which took me quite a while to sort out. There were three supposed sets involved, all from the Seebohm Collection, and apparently identifiable by Hargitt set marks. But, as I pointed out, previous curators were not aware of the meaning of the Hargitt numbers.

The three sets had been card indexed as follows:

1901.1.2.7882-5 Dorrisduan, Ross-Shire, Scotland. E.H. Seebohm Coll. 23 April 1877 set mark: 143.7 c/4.

1901.1.2.7886-88, 90. Balmacara, Ross-Shire, Scotland. E.H. Seebohm Coll. No date, set mark: 143.9 no of eggs: c/4/5 (one egg transferred to Exhibition series. Not recovered).

1901.1.2.7938-41. Dorpat, Estonia, Collector: Russow, Seebohm Coll. April. Set mark: 143.7 c/4.

Firstly, there was no such person as E.H. Seebohm. The initials E.H. on the old label obviously referred to Edward Hargitt, but the then curator had not realised that. That was easy to correct. It was the last set that started alarm bells ringing. It was not a Hargitt clutch but it apparently had a Hargitt number on it. Something wrong. Reference to the eggs revealed that they did indeed bear the Hargitt number 143.7, but they also had "Dorpat, Baltic Provinces" written on them. Hargitt's catalogue revealed that no. 143.7 was 10 eggs (not a clutch) from Balmacara taken late April or early May (no year given but obtained by Hargitt 20 July 1871. However, neither of the two "sets" as indexed, accords with the information in Hargitt's catalogue. And one must assume Hargitt is more likely to be correct. The only logical explanation I can find for the Dorpat anomaly is that Seebohm himself made a mistake, and lost the original eggs from Russow, inadvertently writing the data on to four of the Hargitt eggs. In his catalogue he lists 143.7 as five eggs from Balmacara and the Dorpat eggs as with "full data" and without a set mark. Seebohm and Hargitt agree that 143.9 is a c/4 from Dorrisduan taken on 23 April 1877, yet it was registered as a c/5. However, one of the four remaining eggs is actually a 143.7 with the last digit altered to a 9! Hargitt gives the additional information that this clutch of four was taken at Linnisle, Dorrisduan, Loch Alsh, Ross-Shire by Farquhar McLennan.

143.7 was, as stated above, 10 eggs taken by Dr. Chisholm in late April or early May at Balmacara. Four of them are registered here, wrongly as a clutch of four, four were mistaken for eggs from Estonia, and one got mixed up with a clutch from another locality. One egg of the 10 remains unaccounted for. This is no doubt the fifth egg from the spurious c/5 that was transferred to the public gallery and never returned.

Conclusion

One thing more I'd like to discuss. At one point it was the practice for any clutch of eggs which did not agree in colour, shape or texture with the rest of the series for that species, to be interpreted as wrongly identified, and rejected from the collection. The eggs would be removed and ostensibly destroyed. The register would be annotated to this effect. The folly of this practice was revealed when Con Benson came in to look at a clutch that he had collected, to discover on looking in the register, that it had been deemed misidentified and destroyed. Con was most upset. The clutch, he declared, did not agree with the rest of the series for that species, because it represented a different subspecies which was in fact, probably a separate species. Moreover they were the only known eggs of that taxon.

Subsequent to this, I found a large box containing a large number of mixed eggs in various stages of disintegration. Some were only cracked, some were in fragments with

every gradation in between. At least some of the eggs supposed to have been destroyed had not in fact actually been so. I restored a few of the eggs to the collection, some of those for which the registration numbers could be deciphered. Some were hopeless. But the box remains, for one or more of my successors to contemplate and work on when he or she has nothing else to do!!!

Well, as you will have seen, my job has been both fascinating and frustrating. But it's over now. Fifty years ago, when Sir Edmund Hillary was asked about his achievement of being the first man to stand on the top of the highest mountain on earth, he replied disarmingly, "I just happened to be on the right mountain at the right time". I think, maybe, that sums me up too. I'm just a very ordinary small town boy with no academic qualifications, whose only claim to distinction was that I happened to be in the right place at the right time to tumble upon the largest egg collection on earth.

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