

H.L. White the book collector by Andrew Isles

Good collectors share many obvious personality traits, some more attractive than others. They are invariably tenacious, meticulous, obsessive, competitive, enthusiastic and intelligent. Henry Luke White (HL) the book collector was surely all of these, as evidenced by his handwritten listing of the major books in his library dated 12 December 1913.

This list is by no means complete but nonetheless a good snapshot of the collection; many books were of course purchased after this date. The better Australian exploration and travel are strongly represented. There are the First Fleet books such as Governor Phillip's *Voyage to Botany Bay* and Surgeon John White's *Journal to New South Wales*, as well as a set of Flinders' *A Voyage to Terra Australis* with the atlas. The standard inland Australian explorations, such as Mitchell, Sturt and Leichhardt, are strongly represented as well as books on horse racing, agriculture and pioneering history. One subset of books that catches the eye is the fourteen academic books on sex and social mores.

However, the natural history is the centrepiece of the collection and certainly its most valuable component. HL managed to purchase many fine books up to this time including John Gould's monumental *Birds of Australia* of course (a duplicate set was donated to the Royal Australasian Ornithologist Union), Gould's *Synopsis of the birds of Australia*, Gould's *Mammals of Australia*, Gerard Krefft's *Snakes of Australia*, John Lewin's *Birds of New South Wales* (the 1822 edition), Godman's *Petrels* and Rothschild's *Extinct Birds*. I was pleased to see him record his copy of Vigors and Horsfield's *Description of birds in the Linnean Society*, a book that probably had modest value at the time but HL understood its ornithological importance and scarcity.

His book collection is justifiably well known among Australian collectors not least because of his wonderful Lionel Lindsay designed bookplate of a Lyrebird inspecting a pile of books. All Australiana collectors are pleased to have a HL copy in their collection. Apart from owning a famous bookplate, HL books are among the best examples. They are usually in the publisher's or contemporary binding and invariably in fine condition. HL did not just buy any old copy, he trained his booksellers to offer him the best.

There are two other personality traits possessed by H. L. White which are summed up best by A. H. Spencer in his autobiography (Angus and Robertson, 1959). Spencer approached HL for a loan to help him set up his Melbourne bookshop, "his last words to me on the transaction were 'Here is the money Mr Spencer, try not to lose it, but if you do your best and fail, and lose this money, try not to worry too much about it'. Many, many times I have thought about H. L. White of Belltrees, and still think about him, and shall bless his large-hearted trust and generosity while I live ...". Thus he was not only generous but also a good judge of character. "In three years I paid back the loan, plus seven per cent interest ...".

The final word on HL's library is also Spencer's. "He put the energy and imagination he showed in all his activities into acquiring rare Australiana, and at his death left a splendid collection".