

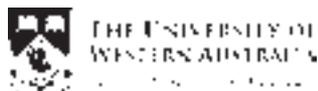
Lines for Birds

BARRY HILL & JOHN WOLSELEY
poems & paintings



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*When the people of this land hear the teachings in the form of bird
song, their minds are in perfect concentration...*

THE SMALLER AMITABHA SUTRA

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them...

NORTH HAVEN, ELIZABETH BISHOP



Introduction

We have a feeling that many people have in them a bird book that is trying to get out.

In this case, where a poet and a painter have been creating their various lines for birds, a book has been hatching a decade. At one level, it began when Hill responded to a painting in Wolseley's 2001 exhibition, *Tracing the Wallace Line*. The image showed an Olive-backed Oriole ravishing a pawpaw. The poem celebrates, with Darwin in mind, the union of beauty and savagery; and it was to become the first of many poems to birds, most of them, at the early stage of making this book, first spotted on the walls of the artist's studio. At the same time the poems sought to be in keeping with the painter in the field—most dramatically when he was drawing and painting in habitats burnt by bushfires. But not only in that; before long the poems, like birds themselves, were shadowing an artist who has long seen himself as

a painter of the geological and living forms that make 'landscapes'—and to which birds belong as parts of the Earth's dynamic systems, the larger energies that might be expressed within the winged forms. 'Sometimes,' as Wolseley says, 'it's almost as if I am looking at the Earth with a bird's eye view—the birds suggest new ways of telling stories about the Earth.'

In the making of this book, we spent time together in various places—from the Victorian Mallee to the forests of South-East Asia. In this period we were also returning to places we knew already—Hill to Japan, Wolseley to the south of France. From these distant and different places, birds entered the currency of our communications—poems and paintings changing places to become a kind of *lingua franca*. Hence the organisation of this book, which begins in habitats where we have either lived or worked a good deal (the scrub land and the wetlands and shorelands of Sites 1 and 2, respectively); and then, in the way of many birds, we migrate north from our ancient continent. We stop at Fraser Hill, a famous birdwatching spot in the forests

of Malaysia (Site 3), the region where many birds are similar but different from those in Australasia, a fact of evolution that has absorbed the painter for many years. Southern France has more burnt country, as well as marsh (Site 4). Wolseley does a picture of a Chaffinch at Picasso's grave; and he feels he is in the sphere of the music of Messiaen, whose *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* is an inspiration to him, as well as to the poet, who happened to be, at these points in time, in Japan (Site 5). Our book is, you see, as much a product of Culture as it is of Nature, assuming the two can be separated, which is very hard to do. Then we return home—south again, back to our scrub land (Site 6). We settle to thoughts about habitat and the gift of birds, as well as the grave danger they share with us as climatic changes accelerate.

The birds the reader will meet in this book have been very largely determined by our contact with their place. We were often drawn to certain birds as emblematic of their habitat. For example, the Bronze or Glossy Ibis invoke the dark shimmer of the marshland pools. The Zebra Finch's intense attunement to the variability of rainfall is quintessentially of our desert. The Bassian Thrush becomes its leaf-litter. Apart from these elective affinities, no attempt has been made to be comprehensive

or systematic with regard to species and their distribution. Other kinds of books have done this well enough. Yet there is no conflict or space between our book and the science of birds. The opposite is the case: we have chosen to be more personal about what we know and what we have experienced of birds. Many of these birds are simply part of our life: they came or come into our lives as presences almost as if they are meant to be, as much for us, as one species of life, as for them, our ornithological wonders.

We did not set out to compose a politically urgent book. But the shadow that falls upon the lives of many birds has, to some extent, made it so. The more we value a living thing the more we are unavoidably anguished at the idea of its extinction. That said, our collection of birds are registrations of the happiness that they bring. Joy in their presence remains the principle *raison d'être* of this collection. At the same time the process of making this book has been a reminder of how we came of age with birds, each in our own way.

Wolseley has been with birds since he was a boy in Somerset, England, where he spent his early years in a remote valley on the edge of Exmoor, wandering among birdsong in the woods and meadows that were only a few miles, as the crow flies, from the Quantock Hills where Coleridge and Wordsworth produced their *Lyrical Ballads*, a seminal moment of Romanticism. Later in London at boarding school, the only cure for intense homesickness was listening to the song of blackbirds in St James's Park. When Wolseley migrated to Australia, 'birds and their song followed me in a succession of homes and campsites in the scrub'. He now lives in the Whipstick Forest, on the way to the Mallee, an aviary of songbirds.

Hill grew up near the coast at the edge of a suburb in Melbourne—seabirds in one direction, the birds of swamp and grassland in the other. 'The whole experience of heading west on foot, out across those paddocks miles from the built-up area, was inseparable from a sense of being as free as the hawks above us. Fragility and

wildness—that's how birds penetrated me as a kid.' Since 1976 he's lived in Queenscliff, once called the parish of Paywit, a white-settler word taken from the sound of an Aboriginal term for the Magpie Lark. It's an area blessed with birds that belong to the ocean, bay and estuary—the latter is the aptly named Swan Bay, to which many birds migrate from the far north: Dotterels, Oystercatchers, Snipes and Godwits, and the increasingly rare Orange-bellied Parrot.

Wolseley has never ceased to respond to birds and their songs. He writes:

For the last ten years a large part of my oeuvre was devoted to drawings using the graphic representation of birdsong—sonograms—as images in my paintings. Sonograms are made by passing the sound of the birdsong through a computer program. And they are a graph of the two most important variables of sound, harmonic frequency and the passage of time. They are able to depict the timbre of a bird's song in a more visual way than traditional musical notations.

While camping at Newhaven, in Central Australia in 2005 as part of a Birds Australia project, I wrote the following entry in my diary: *I spent the day high on a red quartzite ridge where I found spindly skeletons of grevilleas and wattles burnt by bushfire. The Minni Ritchi Wattle had the most beautiful lizard scaly bark, and in a kind of stumbling dance I moved my paper on drawing boards across and within them. The burnt carbon marks they made looked almost like the notations of a musical score, and had an uncanny synaesthesia with the song of Singing Honeyeaters which flickered through those trees. Later when I had drawn the minutiae of leaves and feathers within my rubbed charcoal marks, I started to draw a 'sonogram' or graphic representation of a Singing Honeyeater's sweet scratchy voice. Suddenly one of these*

birds perched on a branch two metres from my drawing and sang the very notes I was inscribing and for a moment its stream of notes seemed to connect my little drawing, all that vast landscape, pulling them together into one complete and harmonious whole.

In fact, as we have been creating this book, we have come to realise it has much to do with the harmonics of birds—what they are in themselves, and with their songs in their habitats.

'Or perhaps another way to put this,' Hill says, 'is to speak of the timbre of things at different levels—as it pertains to paintings, to words by others who have attended to birds, and to music pertaining to birds. I've been taken up by some of the texts important to Wolseley, especially Paul G eroudet's *La vie des Oiseaux*, with its illustrations by L eo-Paul Robert. These are different ways of pinning birds on the maps that inhabit us. When a bird arrives, quite literally, into our space, it constitutes a burning moment in time, one which instantly seems to possess a memorable vibration. Birds have a natural, real presence. It is unqualified. That is their power. At the same time,

their presence is constantly mediated by our culture, which sets off other vibrations, including spiritual ones. Not for nothing did the Sufi poet Attar use birds as vehicle for instruction in his *The Conference of the Birds*. Every now and then in the course of creating this book I felt that we were assembling our own conference of birds—for pleasure's sake as well as the instruction which might be implicit in it.'

Finally, we hope readers will find in this book the book that they desire; if not, that they imagine their own and keep doing so. Our book is not meant to have an ending. In so far as it might seem to have one—with the woodcut of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, an endangered species carved into the wood of the endangered Tasmanian Huon Pine—it is an ending about which we still have some choice. When a bird arrives in our midst, its presence signifies at least one clear thing: that it is not too late, not yet.

Barry Hill & John Wolseley
May 2010



Strings in throats

Perched on the deep keys

Chromatic the notes, all of a feather...

That's what they are—
lines that arrive, phrases, feathers

A presence of song
nothing titled—

Illuminations, poems





Two Spiny-Cheeked Honeyeaters in the dune-cradles
one looking to the surf, the other to clouds
each filled with the spirit of marram grass
spumes of pale green in the air

The seed of each note blowing full force
The throat of one as open as a clarinet
the breast of the other cello fat

Grasses performing around them

And the ocean rolling acclamations—
that they have come downriver
that they have the Cobboboonee Forest to return to



I Scrub Land

Wathe Reserve Ventifact with Singing Honeyeater, 2008





Above *Bush Notations, Curra Moors with Regent Honeyeater* (detail), 2002
Left *Scrub Land Map*



Eagerly We Burn

From the war-zone of burnt goodbyes
charcoaled bodies on the moor
long shadows under warming skies
with a cold southerly whipping the nape
we create.



And here, after the fires
there's amber growth from tubers
frisky ginger everywhere
tiger tufts from earth, a tricky life
those hakea have

disguising their spring. The reeds, too
and the spear of the Black Boy
its thrust of yellow flower is sweet
making greedy bees us
plus all the virgin greens—
rapacious.



At night, in ocean moonlight
a kind of phosphorous gathers along the thickest trunks
where out of armpits and pubescent
breasts, in succulent scallops
leaves from sudden juicy stems
suck on the laurel morning.

And here comes Harlequin
unfurling himself as paper
Harlequin in Pierrot guise, prince of frottage and the breeze
touching and rubbing and almost free
as a breeze, if randomness is free.
In this particled amorous air
eagerly we burn.

Paper as waterfall—tree-made, tree-born.

How we scroll ourselves

these shorter, older days after the blaze

with the dead all around

the things we thought were gone breathing again

exhaling, offering their scratchings.

The page we are recovers the world.

Twigs of hands, our bird marks

the fields we are in, waves of retrieval

the smudge we make of the abstract

an elegy for Plato—

around we go, in new greens

dancing with Lao Tzu.

Haiku as fire song

wilful syllables on one side of the mountain

whisper snowflakes on the other.

Brevities of opposites on each side of the scroll

make a singing space

for a regal honeyeater, look

is that one now?

Flame has charred its back

yet kept its yellow alight

it's here but not really here

in country that's been burnt.

If it died it would live in the lines you make.

Loves marks the time, we can print the world in a dream

of white on white.

Eagerly we burn.

Their Throats, the Artist's Wave

1

And did not need
to cock an index finger
or raise a musket
but seemed to make a natural
thumbprint of the bird's breast
a pale ochre, a sun-parched cadmium:
it sat for him in a warble
letting the honey of his gaze
make its slow mark
that thickened as he coloured the song.

Then the sketch, the first
painting of the bird
plump in mountain light
it was still there
as evening settled into mauve:
it was a wonder
the way gold in the new country
—such a hard place—
held to soft forms.

The thick leaves of his notebook rustled.
A bird man longs to caress a woman's throat.



2

Middle panels we make of our place in the wood.
The middle passage we come to when we care
for their song, for the others that pass through.

Where are we now? Where they were and are
those that feast in a white fire of nectar.
We can only be where we sway in quick song.

Sometimes, in a fury of down, the journey stalls
As if the song we make in time
must waver or perilously fall

as if we find ourselves in flight and wild hunger
alighting then departing, aloft only to return
to the wavering twig's suffocating gift.

All is flight, air, back-tracking and hapless addiction.
The passage becomes darkness, satiated middle.
The gold one wears, the gold on breast and back



flecks the light, washes through the pannikin
returns to the delicate spot we thought we knew.
Though still in the middle, we know our passing through

and the strange sadness of eating and singing—
the way our faces, buried in blossom, briefly
hold the eye to a point

the eye and the mouth we have for the journey
the feast and song we have for the long middle
and our end, the plumage we have for terror.

See, it is possible to feast and flee.
you can swoop right in, plummet into honey—
then arc off golden, ill-fatedly free.

Last Journey of the Regent Honeyeater, 2004

3

The shape you give is bark
brutally skinned by light
stripped of feather.

With the last panel I see
a Gothic attempt at absence
a figure of speech to silence.

Now, today in the post,
your card from the tropical forest,
one side showing Courbet's *La Vague*

the other your note on tropical parrots
the 'embarras des Oiseaux'
and the five Barbets that hang

'upside down with doleful eyes
filling their niche on the Wallace line'.
You say

'Big parrot paintings on the way'
and I look again at the naked bark
barely sustained by an artist's wave.

I Scrub Land 17





Painted Finch

*The Painter of the world created me...
but this celestial wealth you see
Should not excite your hearts to jealousy.*
Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*

Yes, and the Painter did this—
touching the throat up crimson
blood-spotting the tail.

That dusty khaki coat
protecting its quivering back
ever ready for bivouac.

In the bunker of spinifex—
chunky-beak stamina
a salt and pepper attack.

Its breast, its belly
is porous with white dots
speckled with fragility.

Pecking life, pecking death.



Masked Woodswallows

They fluff and huddle—
a dark grey cap
a light grey cap
beaks ice-flow blue.
Snow cloud ancestors?

But here they are
with sweet chap chaps
in the warm sway of coolabahs.
And in the heart of the heart
of their patter
in dappled winter light—
they chatter off shadows.

One comes, as it must.
The little flat heads
jerk back, thorn-beaks open
point skywards
as the cage darkens
to the raggedy crossing
of one of the
endangered

Red-tailed Black Cockatoos
that lands
above and indifferent
to the sleek ones—
their noisy
hurling of life
into its high relief.

Bush Curlew

And now this
post-colonial
Bush Curlew meditation.

Stone-still.
Limpid
sloping shoulders—
wing-feathers Zen.

It stretches
a henny neck
for the white hat
to catch the sun
and you can see
in the leaf-litter back

its weariness
and the quaver
in its step
its silly, eggshell stealth
and parched look—
before sitting loosely
like a mound of leaves.

An old eyelid
rolls the eye upwards—
pupil yabby green.
The idly curious will
snare themselves.

Later, much later still
it stood once more
to adventure, cross
the path in its cage:
spider legs, short wings,
a wary tread pausing
blind to Leica and Nikon

and then the long
hesitation
in the middle of the path:
a leg raised
an Alice in Wonderland gaze.

You'd think it had
all the time in the world
to gauge
the sound of hooves
the roar
of stampeding herds.

