

The foundation of the British Ornithologists' Club

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The foundation of the British Ornithologists' Club

by Nigel J. Collar 

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In providing a delightful account of the formation in 1892 of the British Ornithologists' Club, Robert Prÿs-Jones (2024) repeats the assertion in Richard Bowdler Sharpe's (1893) preface to the first ten issues of the *Bulletin* that the 'core reason' for establishing the club was to give members of the British Ornithologists' Union 'an opportunity for meeting more frequently than the customary once a year'. However, I suspect that Sharpe's explanation, while not untrue, was camouflage for another albeit (for gentlemen ornithologists of the 19th century) unsayable motive, which Prÿs-Jones only obliquely identifies towards the end of his account when referring to 'novelties [that] could be rapidly presented at BOC meetings... and then published very quickly in the ensuing *Bull[etin]...*' (see also Peal 1980).

In the period 1887–90 there was a considerable and at times somewhat fractious rivalry between Britain and Germany over the discovery and naming of new bird species. In the Canary Islands, Britain's Meade-Waldo and Canon Tristram vied to find ornithological novelties with Germany's Alexander Koenig, leading to some immoderately partisan language over publication dates and the issue of priority; and, in the Philippines, Britain's Sharpe (processing material from Whitehead) was beaten to at least one original description by Germany's Wilhelm Blasius (processing material from the Platens) because the latter got his new name published in a local Braunschweig newspaper seemingly only a day or two after the *soirée* at which he announced the discovery (see Collar 1999).

It can barely be a coincidence that within two years of Sharpe's frustration by the *Braunschweigische Anzeigen* he had been instrumental in founding a club which would publish, within a matter of days, a formal record of the proceedings—with himself their editor—of its monthly meetings (inauguration on 5 October 1892, first 'regular' event on 19 October, proceedings of both published on 1 November, establishing 15 new species within the first six pages). And it can barely be a coincidence that in Germany, in January of the following year, a similar venture began, in the form of the journal *Ornithologische Monatsberichte* ('Ornithological Monthly Reports'), edited by Anton Reichenow. Possibly the mollifying influence of elder statesmen in the respective ornithological establishments (Alfred Newton and Gustav Hartlaub, who from my limited readings enjoyed a cordial relationship, spring to mind) played a part, resulting in a gentlemen's agreement to forgo public newspapers in favour of appropriately targeted outlets where novelties could be announced at a decorously higher speed than permitted by the quarterly appearance of *Ibis* and *Journal für Ornithologie*. At any rate, after ten months and ten issues of the *Bulletin* Sharpe (1893), in the same preface already cited, was able to report—clearly as the club's single achievement—that:

Twenty-five new or amended names of genera have been proposed, and fifty-eight new species of birds have been described. The Club may therefore be congratulated on the work done under its auspices during its first session.

That second sentence has the satisfied ring of 'mission accomplished' about it. New descriptions in *Ornithologische Monatsberichte* were rather fewer (by my count two new genera, 39 new species and seven new subspecies—a taxonomic rank the British were then still reluctant to embrace), but the journal had a far broader span of topics and a

greater commitment to providing reviews of recent literature. In any case, by this time any differences based on patriotic loyalties had seemingly been set aside. Ornithology was and remains a far greater cause than nationalism, in token of which Ernst Hartert was long ensconced in Britain, working first for Sharpe and then for Walter Rothschild (*Ibis* 76 [1934]: 350–377), and Lionel Wigglesworth had moved in 1889 to work with first Blasius and then Adolf Meyer (*Ibis* 43 [1901]: 751–752).

It is of course inevitable that troublesome relationships between individuals, and between groups, are generally smoothed over in the published record, with the result that after perhaps two generations almost no trace of them remains. Nevertheless, if any early manuscript archives held by bird clubs and societies still exist, they may yet prove to be a valuable source of information on the various forces, noble and sometimes perhaps a little ignoble, that have shaped the development of ornithology over the best part of two centuries.

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