

## “A pair of every species”

Victor Gray follows a trail from the Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum in Tring back into the wilderness of northern Australia



THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT of Walter Rothschild's place in the pantheon of 20th-century naturalists. The sheer statistics of his lifework leave one amazed: a collection of some 2,000 mounted mammals and a similar number of birds, with two million butterflies and moths, 300,000 bird skins and 200,000 birds' eggs; more than 1,700 scientific books and papers published; more than 5,000 new species of animals described.<sup>1</sup>

Over some four decades, Walter and his two scientific colleagues, Ernst Hartert and Karl Jordan, laboured daily in the museum which Walter set up in the grounds of Tring Park, the family home in Hertfordshire. Yet they were but the hub of a huge network of contacts throughout the world. Each one of the hundreds of thousands of specimens that earned its place in the Museum had been tracked down in often hostile conditions and found its way to Tring by a slow and tortuous route.

Recent contacts with the Western Australia Museum in Perth have brought to light, through the help of the Librarian, Margaret Triffitt, a clutch of letters in the Museum archive which give some idea of the difficulties facing the collectors commissioned by Walter.<sup>2</sup> When set alongside a dozen or so letters sent to Walter by the Curator of the Museum in Perth and now held in the Natural History Museum in London as part of the huge and fascinating collection of Walter's correspondence, it is

Walter Rothschild by Joszi  
Arpad Koppay, c. 1910.  
(Courtesy of the Natural  
History Museum, London)

possible to piece together the journey of one of these specimen collectors into the wilderness of the Northern Territory of Australia at the turn of the 20th century.

John T. Tunney was something of a drifter. He had started work as a post office messenger, then worked on a construction gang erecting the overland telegraph and doing surveying work for various mining companies before coming into contact with the Western Australia Museum in 1895 and beginning to collect objects and specimens for them from the remoter parts of the country.<sup>3</sup> Only two known images of him survive. In one he sits primly for a studio portrait, his trade and personality completely obscured by the stiffness of the occasion; in the other he sits outside his tent, preparing specimens to send to the Museum, his face cast in deep shadow, leaving him still something of a mystery.

Walter appears to have first been in touch with the newly named Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery in Perth in July 1899 when its Curator, the London-born Bernard Henry Woodward, son of Samuel Woodward, a geologist and mineralogist in the British Museum, sent him by the S.S. *Britannia*, two adult emus “shot for you by our collector, near Kojonup in the south-west of this colony.”<sup>4</sup> In return for this and other specimens Woodward asked for specimens of British species – rabbits, hedgehogs, robins, thrushes and so on – to boost the museum's collections. Kojonup was Tunney's home town. He had been working for the museum as a collector for four years. In all he would complete nine collecting expeditions for them.

In sending the emus, Woodward little dreamt that he would unleash Walter's insatiable appetite for specimens. By August 1900 he was writing to Perth “Send me a pair of every species of Kangaroo and Wallaby from each locality i.e. region, throughout Australia and Tasmania including the surrounding Islands.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps to contain his ambitions within practical confines, Woodward proposed an expedition, sending Tunney off into areas of the Northern Territory as yet unexplored. A deal was struck in December. Walter would pay Tunney £100 a year for two years, paid through the Museum, which would be entitled to receive the second specimen of any species collected.<sup>6</sup>

Tunney was to pay particular attention to butterflies and moths, and would also collect aboriginal weapons and notes on their lifestyle and customs – in which Walter professed no interest whatever – for the Museum. More detailed instructions and requirements followed from Tring, together with a full set of apparatus and instructions for catching, killing and storing lepidoptera.<sup>7</sup>

The route Tunney was to take led him over 1500 miles, from Port Hedland in the Pilbarra region north of Perth, west to the border of the Northern Territory and then northwest into increasingly unknown land. Rothschild's hope was that Tunney would spend a year in the area of the Alligator River in the extreme north, to the east of Darwin, moving some 100 miles either side of the river from source to estuary. His expectation was that he would be able to send him up to 5,000 birds and as many mammals, plus moths and butterflies. He was also hoping for specimens to be caught en route to the Alligator.<sup>8</sup>



The area and route of Tunney's expedition, 1901 - 1903

Across the winter months of June, July and August 1901, Tunney prepared himself. The insect-catching apparatus arrived from England, he bought horses and looked out for a boat to take him around the coast to the mouth of the river. The most disturbing factor was that no-one seemed to know anything about the Alligator River. No-one had been there and there were no charts to be had. Furthermore, trying to get aboriginal labour to accompany him was not proving easy; they were all busy on the sheep stations.<sup>9</sup>

Tunney filled in his time as best he could with short collecting sorties into the country around Port Hedland. The catch was sent back to England and in September Tunney, through Woodward in Perth, had a first hint of the more exacting side of Walter's nature. He was pleased with specimens received but, "I never saw anything so disgracefully packed in my life. The birds were just thrown into the box like potatoes into a sack and were rolling about loose and with no covering. Each specimen ought to be wrapped separately in soft paper and all the interstices filled out with hay".<sup>10</sup> Equally trying was the weather. The rains were now setting in and by mid-September he was forced to accept that an early start on his trek was now looking unlikely. Anxious to pick up time he sought leave to do as much of the journey as he could by sea.<sup>11</sup> Back in the mildness of a Tring winter, Walter appears to have been unsympathetic. His interest did not lie in sea creatures and the delay of a tough overland journey was not a key factor.

By February Tunney had moved on to Derby, some 400 miles eastward along the coast, but it was still raining. "The country is all under water now. A man was drowned on the main road last week crossing a small creek". Tunney's plea that it would take a strong vehicle, six horses and two months to do the overland trek still fell on deaf ears; he was forced to cancel tentative arrangements for a boat journey and to reconcile himself to the overland journey. Perhaps it was the rain, perhaps Walter's intransigence, but certainly frustration broke through in Tunney's letters. He had had an offer of £200 to work on a sheep station, he reported, clearly hinting that he had been tempted. He would go the long and hard way but, "If the Hon W.R. were to dispense with my services after a few months it would be very annoying". By now he reckoned it would take him four months to travel the 1,400 miles to Palmerston (renamed Darwin in 1911).<sup>12</sup> In mid-March the journey finally began, though even at the point of departure troubles beset Tunney. He had found an aborigine to accompany him, but he had died a week before they were due to start. He could only hope that he might find another en route. He had also taken out his camera and found it ruined by the climate. He had sold it for £6. This would be an expedition without photographs.<sup>13</sup>

It was to be more than the expected four months before Tunney wrote again to Perth. He was now at Brocks Creek, about a hundred miles from Palmerston and accompanied by his brother, for whom – perhaps in desperation for a trustworthy companion) he had sent, offering him £2 a week for the duration of the expedition. Even so, the journey had done nothing, it would seem, to lift his spirits. One of his six horses had fallen down a shaft; he had found no aboriginal companion, and, to cap it all after the rainy season, he had passed through an unseasonally dry landscape. There had been half the usual rainfall and game was scarce. "In fact the trip has been a failure so far. I travelled since leaving Derby about 1,300 miles and have not enough specimens to pay expenses. I am very disappointed and I know you must be, still I did my best." Clearly the spectre of Walter's cancelling his commission and leaving him high and dry still haunted him. The best he could do was to assure Woodward and Rothschild that there would be 150 specimens for him to send on from Palmerston and to remind them that the Alligator was now only about a hundred miles away, though by the time he reached there the rains would be back. The expectation was for 60-70 inches of water.<sup>14</sup>



There is no way of knowing whether all Tunney's letters back to Perth have survived. The next letter we have, dated 3rd February 1903 at Eureka, talks of damage to his arm. It is now "fairly strong again, though I do not think it will ever be quite straight". We can only speculate on what had happened. By now he had made sorties up to the head of the South Alligator River into the granite mountains in search of specimens, and had been driven back only by shortage of rations.<sup>15</sup>

Six months later he was back at his base camp at Brock's Creek and admitting to having only been able so far to work half the district. He was exploring the area in a series of trips, darting up into the hills and mountains while he left his brother to keep camp. The coastal area was flooded and mosquitoes plagued him morning and night. He had been suffering from fever, though this seemed now to have retreated. Indeed, the tone of Tunney's letter is quite changed, falling over himself to describe the rich game he was finding and pursuing. His tally of specimens was rising rapidly. He had recruited aborigines to make fires and drive out specimens of a black kangaroo which he thought and hoped might be a rarity, living only in the mountains to the east of the Alligator. There was a black and white pigeon he could not find in any book, a *malurus* (a small bird, the fairywren) the identification of which was problematic and lots of small mammals. He was even planning to send samples of the mosquitoes! Indeed, all in all, he was about to send a consignment of "about 183 birds and 150 mammals, also about 400 specimens of native implements, etc."<sup>16</sup>

That is the last letter we have from Tunney on this expedition. We know from his journal (now sadly lost)<sup>17</sup> that he stayed in the Alligator region until November 1903 and then he and his brother took ship around the coast to Fremantle.

We do not have a final tally of specimens collected on the expedition. By the end of 1905 Ernst Hartert had described in print 221 birds collected by Tunney, of which two were new species and three new sub-species. Michael Oldfield Thomas, the Curator of Mammals at

John Tunney on expedition. (Courtesy of the Western Australian Museum, Perth). The studio, reprinted from *The Emu*, 1954. below



the British Museum, was presented with a collection of mammals by Walter and published them.<sup>19</sup> Three were species new to science.

Of the three players in this small drama, Bernard Woodward, the curator in Perth, was honoured in the names of two new species of birds, a shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla woodwardi*) and a grasswren (*Amytornis woodwardi*) both collected on the hills near the South Alligator. He was also acknowledged in the naming of a new kangaroo, distinguished by its black coat, found by Tunney in the high granite ranges near the South Alligator and described by him as “a most striking and remarkable discovery, the finest that has been made in Australia for many years”. This was to be *Macropus bernardus*. Tunney lives on in a new species of black butcherbird (*Cracticus quoyi tunneyi*) which he had shot in the mangrove swamps near the mouth of the Alligator, in a white-bellied rat (*Mus tunneyi*) from the Mary River and in *Epthianura crocea tunneyi*, the yellow chat, a small bird of the Alligator flood plain, now threatened with extinction. For Walter, Thomas named a new rock wallaby, *Petrogale rothschildi*. Perhaps ironically, it had been caught by Tunney in July 1901 near the Cossack River, as Tunney filled in time waiting for the real travails of the expedition to begin.

Tunney never returned to the Northern Territory. It is claimed<sup>20</sup> the climate had taken too great a toll on his health, and his last two expeditions were in more temperate areas south of Perth. He stopped collecting in 1909 and lived out the remaining twenty years of his life on his farm close to his native Kojonup.

Walter's lust for specimens continued unabated. There were many more expeditions and many more collectors in any number of corners of the globe. Behind each of their journeys must lie similar confusion, pain, disappointment and elation. Like the specimens themselves, the sources may prove elusive, but may well await discovery in unexplored collections.

#### NOTES

1. The most detailed account of Walter Rothschild's life and work is Miriam Rothschild's *Dear Lord Rothschild: birds, butterflies and history*, London 1983.
2. The papers, comprising 21 pieces, are among correspondence held in the Western Australia Museum Archives, Perth, Western Australia. Through the generosity of the Librarian, photocopies are held in The Rothschild Archive London, Acc. No. 1276.
3. On Tunney, see M Whittell: 'Notes on field trips of J T Tunney' in *Emu*, Vol. 38, 1954
4. Bernard Woodward [hereafter BW] to Walter Rothschild [WR], 21 July 1899, Natural History Museum Archives, papers of Walter Rothschild [NHM] TM1/151/25.
5. WR to BW, 20 August 1900, Western Australia Museum [hereafter WAM]
6. WR to BW, 10 December 1900,
7. WR to BW, 12 February 1901, WAM
8. WR to BW, 19 May 1901, WAM
9. John T. Tunney [hereafter JTT] to BW, 25 July, 12 and 19 August 1901, WAM
10. WR to BW, 12 September 1901, WAM
11. JTT to BW, 14 September 1901, WAM
12. JTT to BW, 16 February 1902, WAM
13. JTT to BW, 19 March 1902, WAM
14. JTT to BW, 8 August 1902, WAM
15. JTT to BW, 3 February 1903, WAM
16. JTT to BW, 18 July 1903, WAM
17. G.M. Storr: 'J T Tunney's itinerary in Northern Australia 1901-1903' in *Emu*, Vol. 66, No.1, 1966, pp.59-65 reconstructs Tunney's route by way of surviving specimen labels.
18. Ernst Hartert, 'List of birds collected in north-western Australia and Arnhem-Land by Mr. J.T. Tunney', *Novitates Zoologicae*, vol.12, 1905, pp.194-242.
19. Oldfield Thomas, 'On a collection of mammals made by Mr. J.T. Tunney in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of South Australia', *Novitates Zoologicae*, vol.11, 1904, pp.222-229.
20. M Whittell: 'Notes on field trips of J T Tunney' in *Emu*, Vol. 38, 1954