



Small white tag with text: *Eudynamis melanoleuca* (likely a species of tern), with other illegible text.

Small white tag with text: *Eudynamis melanoleuca* (likely a species of tern), with other illegible text.

Small white tag with text: *Eudynamis melanoleuca* (likely a species of tern), with other illegible text.

The Holotype

Stephen Orr

This only happened a decade or so after the lighthouse was built. The passage through Investigator Strait, from west to east, under the bottom of the boat of New Holland, this deep blue ripple of life and love and possibilities for the hundreds of thousands who passed on their way to Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart. Problem being, the shoals. Troubridge Shoals, sand shifting and settling in the anti-clockwise ocean. By the time Job Caswell and Hedley Davis rowed their boat across the warm, gull-flecked sea, 33 ships had already been wrecked, some salvaged by the Edithburgh locals, others left to rot. The old colonists said there had been more (the government had called a commission, but the members had never reported). All the fault of Matthew Flinders, rushing past, forgetting to show the shoals. Even then, they were so changeable that maps could hardly be relied upon.

The high point of the shoals was Troubridge Island, an acre of marram- and mallow-covered sand, not far from where Gulliver had crawled ashore. And the highpoint of this, Troubridge Island lighthouse, made in England, shipped to South Australia, its three segments erected on the shifting island in 1855. There'd been a ceremony on the mainland (the island too small for the dignitaries), the cost invoked (£9396), the lantern described (a new holophotal reflector), and the particulars of weight (340 tonnes) and mechanics (the chains that would need to be wound every four hours) explained. Sherry was drunk and Cornish pasties, minus meat, consumed in the hundred degree heat as flies descended and nipped arms, trying for the little bit of moisture in people's eyes. Hedley Davis had been there with his wife, Margaret, and neighbours, the mayor, and dozens of children running about, marvelling at the new structure on the horizon as the currents lifted the sand, undermining the foundations of the candy-striped tower.

Less than a decade before. And now Hedley, a local farmer with a few acres of wheat, a few sheep, a few thirsty cattle, was rowing a small boat towards Troubridge Island.

Over the ridgeback shoals, with their daily muscling, their hide, their skin, like a rhino (Hedley would tell his son, when they went fishing). At times, one could step out, stand up to the hips, feel the current on thighs, the gap between leg and scrotum, the belly. Hedley did this; his son did too, his feet sinking into the sand. But not today. Today (for a pound) Hedley was rowing Job Caswell to the island. Hedley was doing the work as Caswell watched, mumbled a few words now and then, examined the seascape, the shoals, with his binoculars. Caswell had supplied the shotgun, now lying between them. He'd explained what it was for (the previous evening, at the front bar of the Royal Hotel). He'd said how he was a scientist, and made his money, filled his days, his years, his life, providing holotypes for the British Museum. But he'd explained how he was no great shooter, like Mr Darwin's, and relied on others to do that work for him. Lately (the last three years), he'd had a helper, Lewis, but he'd selfishly died and left him at a loose end. So now you, Mr Davis, have been recommended. Hedley (finishing the one drink his wife allowed him every week) had said, 'I'm no better than a hundred others, Mr Caswell.'

'That's not what I hear.' Producing the pound note, flattening it on the bar and saying, 'One day's work.'

Hedley had picked it up, finished some quick sums in his head – how many pints it might buy, a spade, bread even, for the wife and boy. He'd said, 'A day?'

'That's all.' Explaining how he needed to be rowed out to this island where, from all reports, there was a good number of sea birds, and plenty (this time of year) of black-faced cormorants (*Phalacrocorax fuscescens*). He didn't say what the museum paid him for a decent specimen, but he did say, 'And terns ... there should be some around?'

'I think so, sir.'

'The Caspian tern. You know it?'

'No, sir, but there are plenty of birds, day and night, and Blake, the keeper, says it's just as well he works at night, because he certainly couldn't sleep.'

So the pound was accepted, handshake shared, and

Hedley Davis offered for Mr Caswell to come and stay the night in his hut, but Mr Caswell explained he'd already settled into the Royal's one remaining room.

Back in the boat, Hedley said, 'You do a lot of this?'

But Job didn't seem to hear him. 'This Mr Blake ...?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You know him?'

'He's alone, now, sir.'

'You needn't call me sir.'

'His wife came with him, but only lasted a month. She said they should return to Adelaide, but he wouldn't go.'

Hedley Davis rowed. The island, the lighthouse getting bigger, gaining definition. He could make out the patches of boxthorn and sea rocket. He still wasn't sure about this Caswell character. Why come all the way to Troubridge Island for a bird? 'You stuff them, sir?'

'I don't.' He was caught up in the view.

'And then what?'

'They're sketched, described, mounted.' And looking at his rower. 'So people might understand what's happening in this country. What it looks like.'

This made sense to Hedley. Australia was nothing like the old country, and how would people know, except for these scientists with their pound notes and guns.

'You're a good shot?' Job asked, looking at his rower again.

'Passable.'

But then returning his gaze to the island, the silver gulls descending and lifting, coming and going like the current.

'Is there a demand?' Hedley asked, stopping for a moment, spitting in his hands, rubbing them on his pants, then continuing.

'Of course.'

Hedley wondered if this work mightn't be easier than farming. He *was* a good shot. His father had taught him well, taking him to Bool Lagoon as a child, training him to be patient, to scan the whole landscape at one time, to hold his gun steady and only ever gently squeeze the trigger.

Hedley said, 'Where are you headed next?'

'West.' Half-smiling at his new friend. 'Why do you ask?'

'You'll need someone?'

'You have a farm.'

Hedley didn't reply. Yes, he had a farm, but his few sheep could get along, and his crop wasn't worth harvesting. 'How far west?'

'We'll see.' Returning to his binoculars. 'I can't see anyone.'

'Can you see his boat?'

'No.'

'He might've gone to Edithburgh for supplies.'

This time, Job Caswell had a full smile. 'Good.'

'Sir?'

'Why are there two cottages?'

Hedley seemed to be struggling with the rowing. He sat up, straightened his back and said, 'That didn't work out.' But continued rowing. 'The first keeper lived in the lighthouse. The tide was at the door. When the sands shifted they built a cottage, but it was washed away. Then another, and Blake moved in. Then they employed another keeper, and he had a wife and two girls, and him and Blake didn't get along, so they built another cottage, but then this second fella, this Quaid, left anyway, and they haven't been able to replace him.'

Caswell didn't seem concerned. 'For supplies, you reckon?'

Hedley strained to see the beach, the many beaches, the all beach of the small island. 'Looks like we're alone.'

As they came closer, Job said, 'Penguins too?'

'Plenty of penguins. You after some, sir?'

'No, I've collected several. But there, see, cormorants.' Indicating.

'Yes, sir.'

Job studied them, reached for his shotgun, opened the breech and checked for shells. 'I'll take a male and female if I may?' As though he were asking Hedley for permission.

There was a lot Hedley Davis didn't know about Job Caswell. For a start, that he was born in Edinburgh, and grew up with an angry father, a banker, a man who'd never seen the point of having children, who'd compromised to keep his wife happy. So Job was only ever in the background. He'd worked out, and accepted, his ghost status early on. When the family had toured the Old Town under the Royal Mile, the musty earth-hacked rooms, pens and passageways where hundreds had lived like moles, Job had heard his father say things like, 'Good place to keep children.' Smiling, laughing. Although it was no joke.

So Job had kept to his small, sparse, rug-less room overlooking Dalry Cemetery in Edinburgh West. His Saturday morning walks between the gravestones, the stories of taken too soon and in God's arms. That's what he learned about life. That people were born, fed porridge, sent to hospital, then deposited in their burying ground. Some, the stones explained, only lasted long enough to taste the fog and shadows. Others, seventy, eighty years. He couldn't see how anyone could last this long (or would want to), ears



against walls, smelling the damp mortar, listening to shouting fathers. Better to line up for death, to join the symmetry of an awkward eternity, add to the pattern that repeated for no purpose and little effect. Then across the road, up to his room, and a similar collection – this time, matchboxes from around the Empire, tin soldiers, a collection of advertisements he kept in scrapbooks, a box of cigarettes smoked to various lengths.

Hedley pulled the boat up onto the sand. He stepped in and retrieved the shotgun, and stood waiting for Job, who said, ‘It’s not much of a place.’

‘Full of ghosts, they reckon.’

Hedley pointed to a few wrecks, persisting on the shoals around them. ‘And a boy called Luke, Blake reckons, who lives at the top.’

They both looked up to the lamp. No boy, but Job waited with recognition. The view from his window, the shipwrecks of Edinburgh West. ‘He died?’ he asked Hedley.

‘Blake kept him alive for a few hours, then buried him. The *Adella*, see, out there.’ Looking at an iron hull waiting patiently in the offing.

They circumnavigated the island by foot. Once around, thirty minutes, perhaps. Job said there was no rush, he wanted to be sure of what was worth collecting and lugging back to Edithburgh, to Adelaide, to package and return to England. That all cost money, and believe it or not, he told Hedley, I don’t make that much. The terns, the Pacific gulls, the little penguins. Plenty, as promised. But Job didn’t seem excited. Someone had used a rope to make a swing, anchored from a rusted frame. Hedley said, ‘Let me know what it is you want.’

They returned to the lighthouse, went in, but there was no sign of Blake. To the cottage, and the cheese left out, the bed unmade, the smells of a man who had no one to care for, and cared for no one, who only ever bothered washing when he had to, who hadn’t cleaned his toilet, ever, who scraped the mould from his bread before eating it. Hedley and Job sat down and drank warm, sandy water. There was a fob watch, taken apart, and a picture that had been coloured in with five or six crayons. They spent a few minutes talking about firearms, and Job explained how, after years of trial and error, he’d settled on a 16-gauge, 28-inch gun. There was nothing worse than a mutilated bird. But then the conversation had flagged, and Job studied the four white-washed walls and said, ‘This place would be enough to send a man mad.’

Hedley thought he was joking, but as the narrator of this true story, I can tell you, he wasn’t. Living alone is enough to send anyone mad. A small, cold Scottish bedroom, where you ended up passing a needle through your finger to see if you could get to the other side, to see if you could bear the pain. Because there was never anyone at the door (except Missy, the maid), and you weren’t allowed to go downstairs during the day, especially on the weekend when father was home.

‘I’d be happy to have you along,’ Job said to Hedley.

‘The west?’

‘What would your wife say?’

‘She’d agree, sir.’

‘Call me Job.’ The same half-smile as when he saw a specimen that would do, nicely.

So Job grows up, is sent to boarding school, runs away and jumps a ship out of Glasgow. He arrives in Port Adelaide

and, straight away, sets off for the distant country, the red soil, mallee, the skeletal trees shedding branches through hot summers, the waterless creeks and birdless skies. He takes a wife and finds, after all, he's just as angry as his father. Or more correctly, the land *makes* him angry. The way there's no water for months, years, and his animals die, and he finds out what it's like to be poor, to live in the Old Town of the New Country, endless land but the worst sort of claustrophobia. Like you can ride forever, but go nowhere except the same small room with its mutton cooking, its flies, its heat, its wife, telling you what a failure you are, after all.

'Come on then,' Job said.

Out, through the nitre bush, towards the low part of the island, the water lapping at their feet, the cormorants wading offshore. Job handed Hedley the shotgun, indicated a bird, and said, 'That one looks the goods.'

Hedley lined it up, then said, 'We should get closer.'

But Job had seen something more interesting. He turned towards the boxthorn on what passed as a hill and said, 'Is it really?'

Hedley put down his gun, and looked.

Because, reader, it was the same gun Job had bought upon his arrival in Port Adelaide. He'd had this idea from the beginning. He'd thought, each animal is a tintype, and might be harvested, lined up, marched as an army across the bedroom floor. He'd thought, I could collect the night parrot, and be paid well. He'd even gone on an expedition with a Mr Calvert, roamed the state for months, shot mammals, birds, anything that moved, really. Mr Calvert had taken some, but left piles of corpses to rot. Which made Job Caswell, himself, a holotype. Although not now. He couldn't bear to shoot anything now.

'Who is he?' Job asked Hedley.

Both men walked the ten or fifteen yards, across sand that moved as they moved, through hairy spinifex that left burrs on their pants and socks.

I should explain why Job Caswell employed a shooter. It was his twenty-first birthday. He and his wife were sitting on what passed as a porch, watching for the nothing-in-particular that made up their life. There was an argument about returning to town, Job saying they hadn't given it long enough, his wife saying more than enough! – going in and starting to pack her bag. Enraged, Job had picked up his shotgun and followed her.

Her name was Kate, and she was his first holotype, his first perfect specimen, dragged outside into the tea-tree, laid in a shallow grave and covered.

'What's your name?' Job asked the six- or seven-year-old boy.

No reply.

A small, bony boy. A black boy. A swinging boy. A boy with coloured fingers and jam around his mouth. It was ridiculous to think that Blake, or any man, could live without companionship.

The boy, who'd been watching them, who'd been squatting, sat in the grass and managed, 'He's gone for bread.'

Job looked to Hedley for an explanation, but he couldn't provide one.

Job turned a full revolution, studied the island, the sea, the acres of emptiness that had so often marked his feeling, his need, his desire to describe things, to have them understood, pinned to a board, copperplate Latin in the Linnaean mode. 'Imagine what I could get for him,' he said to Hedley.

'Sir?' Confused.

Job had then burned his cottage, and scattered it as best he could. This is the story he never told because, simply, he'd got away with it. Indeed, it wasn't hard to get away with anything. The specimens were salted, packed and dispatched.

But then Hedley realised what his new boss meant. 'But he's ...'

The boy was pissing himself. Job went to take the gun from Hedley, but he wouldn't give it up. Job explained that it belonged to him, and as they argued the boy ran away, across the island, into the lighthouse.

'If you want the work?' Job said, calmly.

So slowly, Hedley yielded. He sat in the damp grass. Job walked towards the lighthouse. Through such means of diligence, observation and science, he would create an understanding of this continent, the one he'd adopted, and which had adopted him. A new history of Australia, with plentiful illustrations and a handsome frontispiece. To help him understand, at last, the view from his Edinburgh bedroom. ▼

Stephen Orr is a South Australian writer and teacher. He has published eight novels, a short story collection and a range of nonfiction. He is fascinated with barren, abandoned landscapes, and the sorts of people who try to fit into them. He suspects he's probably one of them.

Image p. 52: photograph of Troubridge Lighthouse, and holotypes of a penguin, Caspian tern and cormorant from the Auckland Museum

Image p. 55: Caspian tern holotype, Auckland Museum