

# John Latham, *A General Synopsis of Birds ...* [and] *Index Ornithologicus*

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Acquired 2002

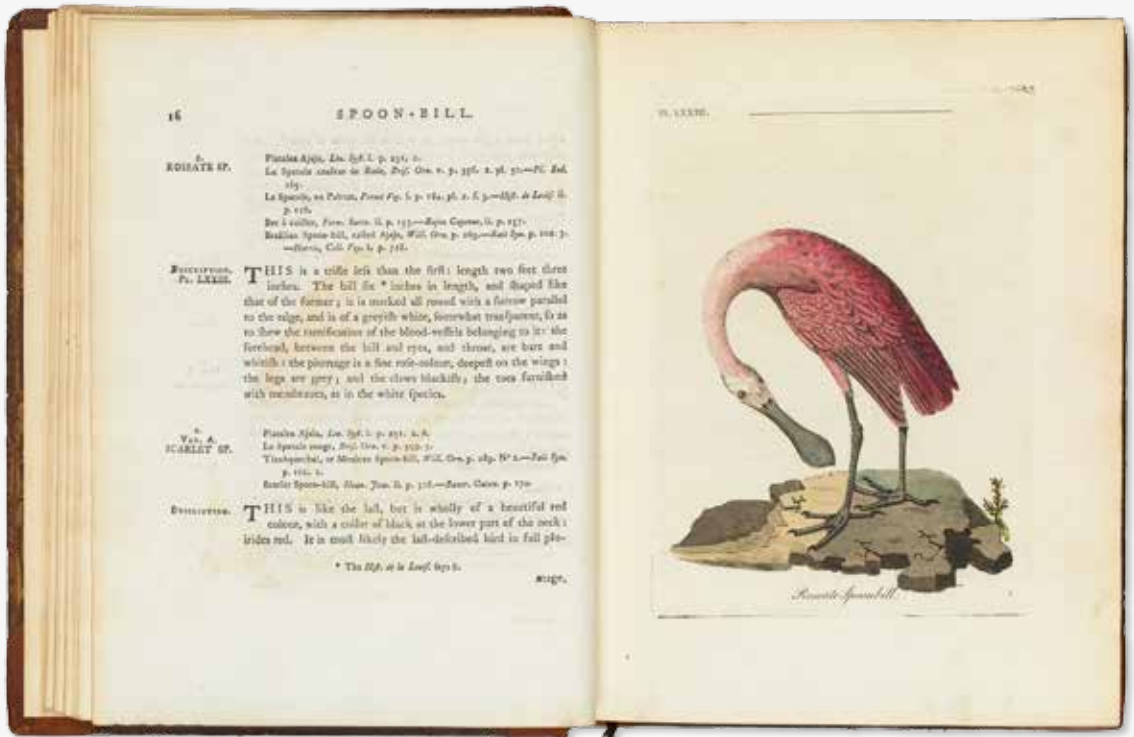
The State Library Victoria Foundation assisted with the acquisition of John Latham's multi-volume *A General Synopsis of Birds ...* (1781–1802), one of few complete sets held in this country. It complemented the Library's existing holding of the 1821 revised edition of this crucial text by Latham, who has been described as the 'grandfather' of Australian ornithology.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Kent, England, in 1740, Latham began practising as a surgeon at age 23. He retired at 56 and devoted the rest of his long life (he died in 1837 aged 96) to his real passion: ornithology.<sup>2</sup> A keen collector of bird skins and a talented artist, he conceived a plan to publish a complete illustrated descriptive list of all known bird species, expanding and clarifying the earlier work of John Ray (1627–1705) and Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) in this field.<sup>3</sup> Ray had separated birds into species that lived on land and those that ventured into water, a taxonomy then adapted by Linnaeus in his great work of binomial nomenclature, *Systema naturae* (1735). Latham disagreed with Linnaeus's alterations:

*Linnaeus separates the Land Birds into two parts, and thrusts the Water Birds between. This is certainly unnatural, and therefore will not be admitted in the present undertaking.*<sup>4</sup>

John Latham was one of the first to print names, descriptions and illustrations of Australian bird species, including the New Holland thrush and the pied oystercatcher, working from descriptions by explorer William Dampier (1651–1715) and from sketches lent to him by Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist aboard the first voyage of Captain James Cook's *Endeavour* in 1768–71.<sup>5</sup> Aside from one plate of a rainbow lorikeet, published in Peter Brown's *Nouvelle illustrations de zoologie* (1776), these plates are the only contemporary Australian bird illustrations published in the wake of Cook's first voyage.<sup>6</sup>

Latham's Australian plates thus form a significant part of the complex network of specimens and drawings that circulated among the English scientific community in the early years after the First Fleet's arrival at Port Jackson. Many represent the type specimens of these newly described species. Latham's *A General Synopsis* was able to expand the number of bird species identified, from Linnaeus's 444 in 1758 to 3000 in 1802, the year the final volume of *Index Ornithologicus* was published.



SPOON-BILL.

**ROSBATE SP.** *Fasciata* Linn. Syst. L. p. 271. n.  
*La Spoon-bill* in *Reise*, Zool. Orn. v. p. 376. n. pl. 37.—*Ed.*  
*La Spoon-bill*, in *Patron*, *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* p. 174. pl. n. 5. p.—*Ed.* de *Linn.* n.  
 p. 116.  
*See* *Illustr. Faun. Bern.* n. p. 117.—*Ed.* *Quercus*, n. p. 117.  
*Reddish Spoon-bill*, called *Alga*, *Will. Orn.* p. 219.—*Ed.* *Sp.* p. 108. p.  
*Illustr.*, *Col. P.* n. p. 118.

**DESCRIPTION.** **PL. XXXII.** **T**HIS is a little less than the first: length two feet three inches. The bill six inches in length, and shaped like that of the former; it is marked all round with a furrow parallel to the edge, and is of a greyish white, somewhat transparent, by its to show the ramifications of the blood-vessels belonging to it: the forehead, between the bill and eyes, and throat, are bare and whitish: the plumage is a fine rose-colour, deepest on the wings: the legs are grey, and the claws blackish; the toes furnished with membranes, as in the white species.

**V. A. SCARLET SP.** *Fasciata* Linn. Syst. L. p. 271. n. 2.  
*La Spoon-bill*, *Reise*, *Zool. Orn.* v. p. 376. n. 2.  
*Tussock-bill*, or *Minster Spoon-bill*, *Will. Orn.* p. 219. n. 2.—*Ed.* *Sp.*  
 p. 118. n. 2.  
*Scarlet Spoon-bill*, *Illus. Zool. Bern.* n. p. 117.—*Ed.* *Quercus* p. 117.

**DESCRIPTION.** **T**HIS is like the last, but is wholly of a beautiful red colour, with a collar of black at the lower part of the neck: the iris red. It is most likely the last-described kind in full plu-

\* The *Ed.* de *La Linn.* n. p. 116.

*Ed.*



John Latham, *A General Synopsis of Birds ...*, London, printed for Benj. White, 1781–1802. Rare Books Collection, RARES 598.2 L34G