

TO HONOUR A NOTED BOTANIST

by Ruth Dwyer

Ruth Dwyer is a free-lance researcher. She has contributed to a number of publications, notably A History of Hawthorn, the suburb in which she lives. The areas of research generally undertaken include work on the non-British in nineteenth century Victoria, and the documentation of silver, jewellery, furniture and dwellings of that period. She is at present contributing to a number of publications including the 'von Mueller Project'. She also has a particular interest in agricultural and viticultural research using early Victorian records, including material pertaining to the various sections of the Land Acts of the 1860s.

Paolo Dattari was one of the original members of The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, formed in June 1880, the objective being to collect, document and name the flora and fauna of Australia. Many members undertook field trips collecting specimens. Over the months Dattari exhibited a number of specimens, including the King Stag Beetle, at the meetings which followed the establishment of the club. Another member of the Field Naturalists' Club was the august Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, at that time the Government Botanist of Victoria. Between 1857 and 1873 the German-born von Mueller was also the Director of Melbourne's magnificent Royal Botanic Garden in South Yarra. On 10 October 1896, Baron von Mueller departed this earth. The centenary of his passing has been celebrated by many events held in Melbourne, and elsewhere in the world during the past year, 1996. The following article celebrates the relationship which developed between Dattari and von Mueller. It has been reprinted, with kind permission, from the special commemorative issue of *The Victorian Naturalist*, Volume 113(4) August 1996.

Baron Ferdinand von Mueller was honoured in many ways, with noble titles, decorations and through certain living species being named after him. Most of these were botanical, but there were also fossils and insects. One of the more spectacular is the King Stag Beetle, *Phalacrognathus muelleri*. On 14 June 1886, The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria held their monthly meetings, as usual, at the Royal Society's hall. A paper was read by Mr Paolo Dattari titled

'Notes on the new Australian beetle' which outlined the history of 'this splendid insect'.¹ In distributing the paper, illustrated with enlarged coloured drawings, Dattari expressed an opinion that the specimens exhibited would probably be found to be more than one species. Lithographic plates of the beetle were also distributed. It was found to be a new genus, and was named *Phalacrognathus muelleri* in honour of his friend and mentor, the Government Botanist, Baron Sir Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von Mueller. A copy of the paper, with coloured plate, was presented to the library of The Field Naturalists Club.² It cannot now be found. However another copy is held by the Museum of Victoria.

Paolo Dattari, a cultured Italian gentleman, had emigrated from London in 1877 as an unassisted passenger aboard the *Somersetshire*.³ Dattari, born c1850 in Leghorn near Florence, the son of Luigi Dattari, gentleman, and Enrichetta, formerly Maneschit, was an architect by profession.⁴ Unfortunately no buildings in Victoria can be attributed to him, but there is evidence of his involvement in associated disciplines. He contributed two pen-and-ink drawings to the Adelaide Exhibition of 1881, one being an allegory for *Punch*, the other a frontispiece for a scientific publication. Both were well designed and delicately executed.⁵ The handsome and costly gold and silver presentation casket of 1880 for Captain Standish, Chief Commissioner of Police in Victoria, was one of Dattari's manufacture⁶ and showed a distinct Italianate influence. Dattari also applied for the registration of at least two patents in Victoria,

the first in 1882 for a Parallel Ruler combining ruler, protractor and scale, and the other in 1883, in conjunction with J.E. Edwards for an Electro 'Control'.⁷ His interest in scientific matters is further evidenced by the existence of a letter from Professor McCoy of 7 August 1886 identifying a species of fish found locally.⁸

In June 1880, Dattari had been elected to The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria as one of the original members, and remained as such until 1886, after which time there is an inexplicable absence until his re-admission on 13 July 1891.⁹ A letter from Mueller of 7 September 1886 enclosed a map of New Guinea, possibly indicating a field trip by Dattari to that northern area.¹⁰ The birth of a son, Paolo, to Dattari and his wife, the former Margaret Elizabeth Victoria Yeomans, indicates a presumed residence in Carlton in 1887.¹¹ The last Sands and McDougall directory entry is for Station Street, North Carlton in 1888. It is believed that Dattari returned to the Florentine area some time after 1891.

Baron von Mueller had presented to Dattari a copy of his *Description and illustrations of the myoporinous plants of Australia*, Vol. 2, inscribed 'To P. Dattari Esqr & c. with regardful remembrance from his sincere friend Ferd. von Mueller. Sept. 1886'.¹² Other relevant correspondence, including advice on the terminology to be used when documenting botanical specimens,¹³ is held at the library of the National Herbarium of Victoria and by The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ *Argus*, 15 June 1886 p.6. Collection State Library of Victoria.
- ² *The Victorian Naturalist*, July 1886 p.26, August 1886, p.37
- ³ P.R.O.V. V.P.R.S 7666 Unit 358
- ⁴ Index to Marriages in Victoria, 1881, Certificate No.2513.
- ⁵ M. Lewis, *Australian Architectural Index* Edn 2; *Argus*, 20 July 1881 p.5. Collection State Library of Victoria.
- ⁶ *The Australasian Sketcher*, 28 May 1881, in J.B. Hawkins, *Nineteenth Century Australian Silver*, Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, 1990, Vol. 1, p.258.
- ⁷ Index to Patents Registered in Victoria, 1856-1904. Collection State Library of Victoria.
- ⁸ National Museum of Victoria, letter book No. 7, p.430.
- ⁹ Personal communication, Sheila Houghton to Ruth Dwyer, 17 August 1995.
- ¹⁰ Mueller to Dattari, 7 September 1886, copy National Herbarium of Victoria.
- ¹¹ Index to Births in Victoria, 1887, Certificate No.18015. Library of The Huntington, San Marino, California.
- ¹² Mueller to Dattari, 14 April 1886, copy National Herbarium of Victoria.