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A Little Flute Music: Mimicry, Memory, and Narrativity

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ABSTRACT *A lyrebird chick was raised in captivity in the 1920s in Australia's New England Tablelands, or so the story goes. The bird mimicked the sounds of the household's flute player, learning two tunes and an ascending scale. When released back into the wild, his flute-like songs and timbre spread throughout the local lyrebird population.* We count ourselves among those who admire the sonic achievements of this bioregion's "flute lyrebirds." These Superb Lyrebirds (*Menura novaehollandiae*) do indeed deliver an unusual and extraordinarily complex, flute-like territorial song, although often with a musical competence exceeding what a human flutist could achieve. In this paper, we engage with both the living and the dead across a wide-ranging cast of characters, linking up in the here and now and grasping a hand across the span of many years. Memory and narrativity are pertinent to the at times conflicting stories and reminiscences from archival and contemporary sources. Ultimately, accounts of "flute lyrebirds" speak to how meaning evolves in the tensions, boundaries, and interplay between knowledge and imagination. We conclude that this story exceeds containment, dispersed as it is across several fields of inquiry and a number of individual memories that go in and out of sync.

A Little Flute Music is presented through special arrangement with and authorized by all living interviewees. There will be two acts and one intermission.

Cast of Main Characters
An unnamed lyrebird (doubling as a flutist)
Daniel Jones (potato farmer and blacksmith) and his family
Martha Manns (farmer and housepainter)
Martha's brother, Thorald Manns (farmer and gardener)
Neville Fenton (park ranger)
Norman Robinson and Syd Curtis (lyrebird experts)
Gordon and Thelma Pitkin (farmers)

Overture

At night, he roosts in the forest canopy. In the morning, he glides down in search of a high-protein diet. His powerful legs and claws rake the soil and leaf litter for worms, grubs, and beetles. A winter songster, he vocalizes for hours in June and July.[1] This "glorified pheasant" with long, elaborate tail feathers is the Australian Superb Lyrebird. His spectacular courtship displays see him bringing his lyre-shaped tail 180˚ over his body, vibrating his spread tail, stepping from side to side, strutting and jumping around on a cleared mound, and beating his wings against his sides while singing.[2] Copulation takes place on or near the mound.[3] His enemies include land clearing, feral predators,[4] cars, sportsmen's guns, and milliners. Although a poor flier, he runs well. He leads a scratch and scramble life.

Figure 1 *An adult male Superb Lyrebird with its tail folded over its body at a cleared mound where he conducts courtship displays. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, used with permission from user "Fir0002/Flagstaffotos."*

[1] Female lyrebirds also sing but only do so briefly and infrequently (P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds* vol. 5 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163.

[2] P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook,* 127.

[3] Ibid., 153. Also see Carol Probets, "Survey of Superb Lyrebirds at Scenic World, Katoomba," (Katoomba: Scenic World, 2010), 37; in this study, one individual's territory contained 26 display mounds.

[4] Cats, foxes, and dogs prey on adults and nestlings (P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook*, 145).

Our paper gathers together archival and contemporary texts—letters and emails; field guides and ornithological monographs and journals; periodicals; and tape-recorded, telephone, and in-person interviews—as we attempt to unpack a tale of wonder. It draws attention to a group of Superb Lyrebirds in the New England Tableland bioregion of northeast New South Wales, a rugged area that is high in both altitude and rainfall. Mist regularly obscures the Tablelands' summits, and its coastal streams have cut deep gorges. More than 70 species of eucalyptus grow here, with a high number (about a third) endemic to the bioregion.[5] At once spectacular and gloomy, it seems an ancient world, and the stands of Antarctic Beech (*Nothofagus moorei*) bear this out. Native to the cool temperate rainforests of the eastern highlands, some individuals of this evergreen species are extremely old—remnants from a cooler time. Covered in fungus and moss and sprinkled with orchids, an Antarctic Beech typically grows to 25 metres in height, but some soar to 50.

Oral history indicates that Aboriginal people occupied the Tablelands in summer and autumn, with communities moving either to the coast or the western river systems for winter.[6] British explorer and Surveyor General for New South Wales, John Oxley first visited this bioregion in 1818, and squatters began to arrive in the 1830s, seeking land suitable for grazing.[7] Early letters and diaries indicate that the first white people who settled in this area often died prematurely from illness and accidents, largely due to the area's isolation.[8]

In 1911, 254 acres in the Dorrigo shire were designated as Portion 52, which Daniel Robert Jones took up at an annual rent of four pounds, 17 shillings, and sixpence.[9] As one of the earliest settlers in the escarpment area around Allan's Water, he and his family would go on to purchase the acreage and build a home, clearing old-growth scrub to make way for potato growing.[10] Around 1935, the Jones family carted some timber for the newly arrived Manns family at nearby Meldrum and mentioned that they were selling up. The Manns moved into the Jones homestead, hoping to buy it.[11] The sale fell through, so they bought the neighbouring 280 acres of Portion 51, also mostly old-growth scrub. There was neither wireless reception nor cars, and homesteaders rarely met up with their neighbours. Schooling was by correspondence. If they came home after dark, they would be followed by a pack of seven or eight dingoes, so they always had to carry a waddy (a short, stout stick). Although it appears they never met again, a curious tale links the two families to this day.

[5] NSW Government: Environment & Heritage, "New England Tableland Bioregion," accessed 5 May 2013, http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/bioregions/NewEnglandTablelandBioregion.htm.

[6] Roshan Sahukar, Catherine Gallery, Julianne Smart, and Peter Mitchell, *The Bioregions of New South Wales: Their Biodiversity, Conservation and History* (Hurstville: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), 159.

[7] Sahukar, Gallery, Smart, and Mitchell, *The Bioregions of New South Wales*, 159.

[8] Robyn Crosslé, *Turnbull: Lives and Letters* (Kyabram: Waterwheel Press, 1994), 146.

[9] NSW Government: Land and Property Information: Historical Parish Maps, "Parish of Allans Water," accessed 5 May 2013, http://images.maps.nsw.gov.au.

[10] Roger Jones, personal communication, 12 July 2009.

[11] Thorald Manns (to the end of this paragraph), personal communication, 19 April 2009.

Figure 2 *Detail of historical parish map of Allan's Water, 1909 edition, showing portion 52 (Daniel R. Jones) and 51 (later held by the Manns family). Annotation "H.S. Area Notd. 5.7.11" indicates that Daniel Jones took up portion 52 as a Homestead Selection Area in July 1911. Used with permission.*[12]

[12] NSW Government: Land and Property.

ACT ONE

Martha's memory of 1936

Martha Manns was born in 1907, the second child and only daughter of Ada and Thomas Henry Manns (he would later be wanted by police for wife desertion[13]). Sometime in the early 1970s, Martha purchased a reel-to-reel tape recorder and taped her low, matter-of-fact voice, describing her arrival at Allanbank when she was 29:

> In 1936 I first went to the Allan's Water district, and later we purchased a property there known as Allanbank. It was on Allanbank I first heard the lyrebird mimicking the flute. It gave wonderful flute imitations of the *Mosquito Dance*, *The Keel Row,* and the scales.[14] I made enquiries and was informed that some years before, one of the neighbours had a lyrebird in captivity. The man played the flute, and the lyrebird learnt to mimic the sounds. Later, he released the bird, and then the other lyrebirds also picked up the sounds. The present generation of lyrebirds still make the flute-like sounds but not nearly as good as the original bird. It was a wonderful experience to listen to the original bird during the days and some nights as well. This is a recording of the Allanbank lyrebirds.[15]

What follows is about 30 minutes of lyrebird vocalizations.

Figure 3 *Martha Manns as a girl (left), undated, The Crown Studios, Sydney; Martha Manns at age 86 (right), 1993, at the Wongaburra Nursing Home Christmas party, Beaudesert, Queensland. Photos courtesy of Thorald Manns.*

[13] *New South Wales Police Gazette*, 21 August 1907 and 2 April 1913, accessed 15 March 2013, http://www.ancestry.com/.

[14] Paul White's *Mosquito Dance* is part of his Opus 7, one of *Five Miniatures.* Judging from the dates of Opus 6 (1924) and 10 (1927), *Five Miniatures* was apparently composed between 1924 and 1927 (http://www.harpcolumn.com/forum/message-view?message_id=246010, accessed 21 October 2011). It was probably first published in 1934 (Philadelphia: Elkan-Vogel, 1934). The Boston Pops' 1935 recording with Arthur Fiedler seems to be the earliest recording (Camden: RCA Victor Red Seal, 4319-B). However, we cannot completely discount the possibility that the music made its way to Australia in the 1920s. Neither the Jones nor the Manns had a record player in the 30s. *The Keel Row* is much older. A well-known traditional Northumbrian folk tune, it was first published in 1770 ("All Music Guide to Classical Music," http://www.answers.com/topic/the-keel-row-for-voice-piano-northumbrian-folk-song, accessed 21 October 2011).

[15] This untitled tape recording (c.1970s, likely 1973) was provided to the authors by Thorald Manns in April 2009.

Neville's story, 1969+

Neville Fenton was the ranger in charge of Dorrigo National Park from 1966 to 1982 and the first to investigate and tape-record the flute-like calls of lyrebirds at Allan's Water. CSIRO[16] lyrebird expert Norman Robinson spoke to him in 1972 concerning the "flute lyrebirds" [NR = Norman Robinson, NF = Neville Fenton].[17]

Figure 4 *Norman Robinson (left), undated c.1970s, recording birds in Western Australia. Photo courtesy of Vicki Powys.*[18] *Ranger Neville Fenton (right), 1976, at Dorrigo National Park. Photo courtesy of Neville Fenton.*

NR: Neville, how did you get on to this Allanbank lyrebird?

NF: I received a phone call from Merv Kedzlie, one of the logging operators in the Dorrigo area, back in 1969. Merv wanted to know what the actual lyrebirds' normal call was, his *own* call—not one of his mimicked calls. Merv said that they were making a chimes-type of call up where he was working, which was the type that I thought was normal for lyrebirds [from about 1958 onwards Fenton had heard the flute type of song when he managed the trout hatchery at nearby Ebor]. It was a week or two before I was able to get up there and hear his birds. When I did, I was quite amazed at the beautiful chorus. The call that I had mentioned to Merv *was* the call that they were making. I was so familiar with that particular call in the New England National Park that I thought lyrebirds made that call everywhere, but on comparing the call with those in the

[16] The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation is Australia's national science agency.

[17] This untitled tape recording was supplied to Powys courtesy of Norman Robinson in July 1995. While the cassette was untitled, a list with it says: "Superb Lyrebird ABC Programme FNR. (Flutebird). Superb Lyrebird Interview of N. Fenton. (Flutebird). Superb Lyrebird Interview of Martha Manns. (Flutebird)."

[18] This photo is from R. Buckingham, "Obituary: Frank Norman Robinson," *AudioWings* 2, no. 1 (1999): 12-13.

Dorrigo State Park, I found that the Dorrigo birds weren't making a call anything like that. So, I immediately attempted to tape the call. I thought that it was a superior and more beautiful call than any I'd ever heard.

Figure 5 *New England National Park from Point Lookout, 13 August 2008. The rugged Allan's Water district is on a plateau to the left. Photo by Neville Fenton.*

NR: At this stage, had you any idea that it might have been in any way associated with a musical instrument?

NF: Not at all, no. I played it to various other people. Some said it sounded like other birds. The log cutters said that they thought it might be associated with an organ that one of the ladies has on a farm—that's the only explanation that they could make. I felt that this particular farmhouse was too far away from there, and too many birds had the call at any rate, and the only thing that I could associate it with was bulldozer tracks squeaking in the dry dust during logging operations that may have happened there years before. But nevertheless, nobody really had any idea just exactly where this could have originated.

NR: How did you discover that this was in fact an imitation of the flute?

NF: Well, I had a friend at Dorrigo that was interested in orchids and also a keen bushwalker, Mr. Stan Beaumont, and Miss Manns, who lived up in the area where the lyrebirds were calling in the early days—she went along to Stan to see about some orchids, and he mentioned that I had a tape recording of the lyrebirds up there. Very shortly afterwards, she rang me [1970-71] and said could she hear the recording

> because she felt she had the explanation to the peculiar call that these birds were making.

Martha told Neville that the sounds were mimicry of a flute. She took him to the site of a homestead at Allan's Water where she believed a captive, flute-mimicking lyrebird had been kept, and he recorded the birds there.[19]

Figure 6 *Allan's Water homestead ruins (elevation 1600 metres), dated November 1980. Photo by Neville Fenton.*

Norman's interview with Martha, 1972

In addition to Martha Manns' self-taped account, Norman Robinson taped her story [NR = Norman Robinson, MM = Martha Manns].[20]

> NR: Martha, why do you call it the Allanbank lyrebird?
>
> MM: It was on our farm known as Allanbank, on the banks of Allan's Water, in the Ebor district. I went to live up there, and late in the night or in the early hours of the morning I heard this weird and wonderful sound—it seemed just outside the bedroom window. I couldn't imagine anything like a flute being played there at that hour of the day or night. Investigating later, I found the sound came from a lyrebird. I made some further

[19] Neville Fenton, personal communication, 4 March 2013. See archival audio clip #1 at http://environmentalhumanities.org/archives/a-little-flute-music. Further information available at www.flutelyrebird.com.

[20] See footnote 17.

enquiries as the years rolled by and found that a lad had a lyrebird in captivity, and he also learned to play the flute. The lyrebird picked up notes and finally musical songs like *The Keel Row* and the *Mosquito Dance* and the scales.

NR: Did the bird learn the whole of the tunes?

MM: Yes, but never at any time did he play the tune straight off. He'd play a section, and then mimic and imitate other birds and things, and then he'd revert back to another section.

NR: He'd cut the tune up into about four or five different sections?

MM: Oh, a number of sections, and they may not even continue and finish in the one day. It could go on, but he always continued from where he left off—he never went back on his tune—that is, the original bird. It was almost like an orchestra in a way, with the main bird whistling or singing his tune and in the distance other birds singing parts of the tune, but not the full sort of tune of the original bird. I found in the years that I lived on Allanbank that they made their most beautiful music in the early hours of the morning, shortly after daylight. They continued through the day from time to time—some days and some days not, and quite a few nights through the year you would hear this one bird singing his song.

NR: And these other birds, were they as good as the original bird?

MM: Oh no, definitely not. The sound was in many ways the same, but it was only a small portion of the original tune. I've heard the recording that Mr. Fenton played for me—it's not nearly as good, the sound, as it was from the original bird, but my knowledge of the bird dates back to about 1936.

Norman's ABC radio interview, c.May 1973

Norman Robinson compiled a cassette tape to document the "flute lyrebird" story. In addition to his interviews with Neville and Martha, the tape contains an ABC radio interview on the subject [NR = Norman Robinson, CM = Colin Munro, ABC presenter].[21]

NR: This broadcast of the flute-playing lyrebirds of Dorrigo was made by the ABC in Sydney.[22] The first part of the broadcast was made live in the studio and is not included in this recording. In it, the commentator referred to some of my previous lyrebird

[21] This untitled tape recording was supplied to Powys courtesy of Norman Robinson in July 1995. The ABC radio interview is no longer held in their library.

[22] Although the "flute lyrebirds" are sometimes referred to as from Dorrigo, the lyrebirds in that immediate area do not give the flute-like vocalizations. The "flute lyrebird" territory is south and west of Dorrigo.

broadcasts, and latterly to those species which the lyrebird mimicked. [NR introduces mimicry given by a Superb Lyrebird]

CM: Is there anything that the lyrebird is incapable of mimicking?

NR: Not really. It can mimic a tremendous range of sounds, but generally speaking he doesn't mimic artificial sounds in the breeding season; he does this out of the breeding season but very rarely in the breeding season. I've got a recording of a lyrebird mimicking a dog, but outside the breeding season. The calls made inside the breeding season must fit very closely into the pattern of the lyrebird's own sounds and be very closely related to them.

CM: One of the most extraordinary examples of mimicry—we'll pause and listen now.[23]

CM: The first sound was a flute, the second was the lyrebird. Now can you tell us the story of that?

NR: You're going right back to the early 1920s. Neville Fenton looked at this story, tried to trace the origin of this, and he got the name of Miss Martha Manns who in the 1920s took up with her brothers a dairy farm not far from Dorrigo, and Martha Manns told me that in the middle of the night when she first got there she heard a flute player playing a tune, and she rushed out, didn't wait for anything, she was a very forthright person, and the flute player was 60 feet up a tree, and of course it wasn't a human flute player at all, it was a lyrebird, and lyrebirds do in fact call in the middle of the night at times. And from then on she felt that she really must try to unravel this story, and she told me that the tunes that the bird mimicked were *The Keel Row* and the *Mosquito Parade* [later corrected by NR to the *Mosquito Dance*], two very popular tunes at that time, if anyone's old enough to remember them like I am [laughs]. This original bird that Martha found had been a pet of a neighbouring family of dairy farmers, and it had learned the two tunes from one of the family who played the flute. Subsequently, the bird was released, and other lyrebirds learnt the tunes from this bird, and because sections of the tune were so suitable and so well matched to the lyrebirds' needs, it replaced their own song completely, and has now become the lyrebirds' song.

CM: And this is how many generations of lyrebirds?

NR: Well, we don't know exactly how long lyrebirds live, but I would think for at least 15 years, so this is quite a few generations. And of course they've really got away from the original tune, and further away from Allan's Water, the flute-like songs gradually lose their very lengthy complex nature.

[23] See archival audio clip #2: a simple melody played on a flute, followed by a complex flute-melody sung by a lyrebird, and then a scale sung by a lyrebird leading into another flute phrase from the lyrebird. Available at http://environmentalhumanities.org/archives/a-little-flute-music.

CM: Now perhaps we'll just pause here and listen to a little more of the flute.[24]

CM: Now that's quite extraordinary because that sounds almost like the lad that you were talking about, practising his scale.

NR: Yes, that's true, and in fact this is not the first time this sort of thing has happened. There are some well-authenticated accounts by a German zoologist who one day heard a Blackbird imitating a human whistle, and he went through the Blackbird population, and he walked several miles, and eventually he found that the tune changed and gradually became much more recognizable as a human whistle, and there he found the man using this whistled tune to his cat, of all things [laughs].[25] And he did the same thing on some larks, which mimicked the tune played by a shepherd's pipe. And here again he'd actually traced it back to the original shepherd. But in this [Dorrigo] case, of course, it happened so long ago that all we've been able to do is authenticate the story by getting somebody who actually heard the thing and got the story from the original family. The lyrebirds' own song is virtually wholly learned; it's not innate. They learn from one another, so that you get very distinct groups of lyrebirds, which are out of communication with the next group, and will have a completely different type of song. I have recorded something like 20 different dialects of lyrebirds throughout Australia.

CM: This is what you call their territorial song?

NR: Yes. It's used in defence of their territory to warn other males from coming in. Humans build concert halls to get good acoustics for the orchestra. Lyrebirds, living as they do in different types of wet eucalypt forest, have to adapt to this acoustical environment. The birds range from the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria right up to the Queensland border, and just over the border.

NR: Following this broadcast I got an indignant letter from Martha Manns taking me task because I said that the tune was the *Mosquito Parade*. She told me that she had a recording of the *Mosquito Dance*, and I've tacked this recording on to the end of this, so that you can see in fact that this *Mosquito Dance* is indeed the tune, which is now clearly identifiable in the songs of these birds.[26]

[24] A repeat of audio clip #2 at http://environmentalhumanities.org/archives/a-little-flute-music.

[25] Erwin Tretzel, "Imitation und Transposition menschlicher Pfiffe durch Amseln *(Turdus m. merula L.),*" *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* 24, no. 2 (1967): 160.

[26] For a recording of *Mosquito Dance*, see, for example, "Mosquito Dance Boston Pops Youtube," accessed 19 February 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWXyPNJH6HA. The authors find the resemblance of "flute lyrebird" song to *Mosquito Dance* less than convincing.

Excerpt of Norman's letter to Syd, 3 July 1973

The recording of *Mosquito Dance* made quite an impression on Norman Robinson. He and Syd Curtis were colleagues in lyrebird research, and it was Syd who had first alerted Norman to the "flute lyrebirds" in November 1971. Below is an excerpt from a letter Norman penned to Syd after hearing the *Mosquito Dance*.[27]

> I have just heard a recording from Martha Manns of the *Mosquito Dance*, one of the tunes the Dorrigo lyrebirds were said to mimic. There is no doubt that this tune was the origin of this adopted song, so we now have the last piece of the puzzle and can publish the results. The really fascinating thing is that it has completely displaced the lyrebird "song" in this area, and I think this is because it is more suitable to an acoustical environment which has been drastically changed by logging activities.

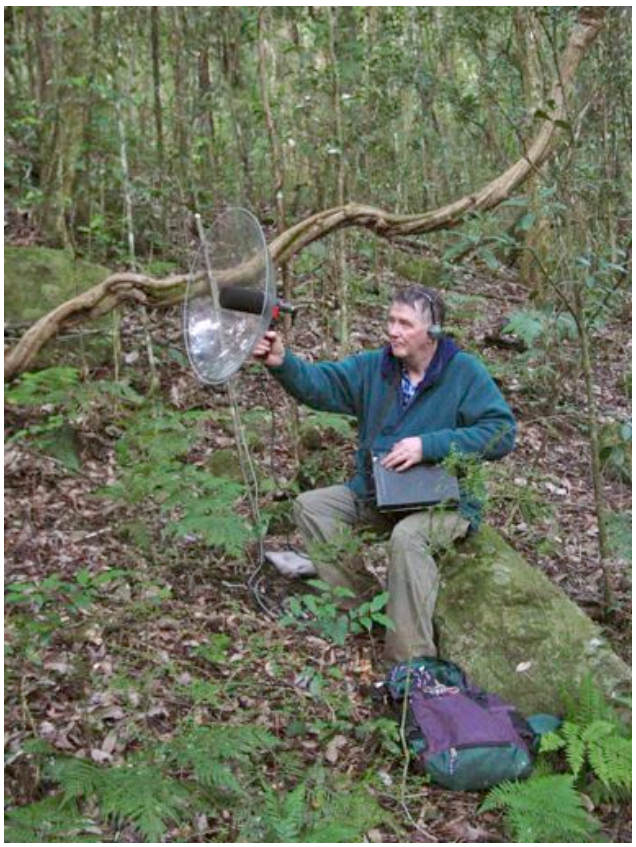

Figure 7. *Syd Curtis, 8 July 2003, recording an Albert's Lyrebird at Lamington National Park, Queensland. Photo by Kimbal Curtis.*

[27] Director of Management and Operations of Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service when it was established in 1975, Syd Curtis is considered a world expert on the Albert's Lyrebird. Although a member of the authors' "flute lyrebird" research group, he did not actively participate in the writing of this paper. He supplied us with this letter from Norman on 26 April 2009.

~ INTERMISSION ~

Mimicry of the calls, songs, beak snaps, and wing beats of other avian species typically forms 70% of lyrebird vocal displays, with the remainder being territorial song and other signals.[28] Young birds are thought not to learn directly from the mimicked models; rather, lyrebird mimicry and song are culturally transmitted from adult males.[29] Territorial songs and suites of mimicry are regionally distinct and generally change very little over time, partly due to the sedentary nature of the species.[30] In her longitudinal study, Powys found that locationally distinct territorial songs were shared by all individuals within each group, and songs remained constant over a period of seven years.[31] After 20 years, those songs are still largely unchanged.

Many people believe that lyrebirds in the wild mimic mechanical sounds. This notion was encouraged by an episode in David Attenborough's nature documentary *The Life of Birds*.[32] However, Attenborough failed to mention that two of his three lyrebirds were captives: the "motor-drive camera shutter" bird from Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary and the "carpenter" (drills, hammers, and saws) bird, AKA "Chook", from Adelaide Zoo. While there are anecdotes, there is no known recording of a lyrebird in the wild mimicking mechanical sounds.[33] Nevertheless, belief in such a phenomenon is now well established on the Internet and even crops up on official sites.

Wild lyrebirds make a very loud *billick billick* call, along with twanging, clicking, thudding, and scissors-grinding sounds.[34] These types of noisy or even metallic sounds can be heard over the entire range of the species, and while sometimes mistaken for human-made sounds, they are not mimicry. Typically, territorial songs are pure lyrebird inventions but may sometimes incorporate snippets of birdsong mimicry. Higgins *et al* list the only suggested example of imitation of a man-made sound in a lyrebird's *territorial* song[35]—that of the "flute lyrebirds"—summarizing the handful of references to it in the literature.[36]

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[28] F. Norman Robinson and H. Sydney Curtis, "The Vocal Displays of the Lyrebirds *(Menuridae)*," *Emu* 96 (1996): 258.

[29] Robinson and Curtis, "The Vocal Displays," 258.

[30] "Banding. Of 187 banded in Aust., 1953-97, 38 recoveries (20.3%). Of 33 recoveries, July 1984 to Mar. 199, all <10 km from banding site. Of 143 banded 1953-June 1984, six public recoveries: five (83.3%) <10 km from banding site; one (16.7%) 10-49 km. Longest known movement: one banded as nestling at Don R., Vic., 10 Sept 1961, found dead 10 km ESE 62 months later ..." (P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook,* 146.

[31] Vicki Powys, "Regional Variation in the Territorial Songs of Superb Lyrebirds in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales," *Emu* 95 (1995): 288.

[32] David Attenborough, *The Life of Birds* Episode 6 (London: BBC Natural History Unit, 1998).

[33] P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook*, 159.

[34] Powys, "Regional Variation," 280-89.

[35] P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook*, 160.

[36] F. N. Robinson, "Vocal Mimicry and the Evolution of Bird Song," *Emu* 75, no. 1 (1975): 23-27; Pauline Reilly, *The Lyrebird: A Natural History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1988), 47; L. H. Smith, *The Life of the Lyrebird* (Richmond: William Heinemann Australia, 1988), 100; and H. Sydney Curtis. "Fact or Folktale? The Flute Lyrebird," *AudioWings* 2, no. 1 (1999): 8.

Figure 8 *An adult male Superb Lyrebird in the scrub.*
Photo: Wikimedia Commons, used with permission from user "Fir0002/Flagstaffotos."

ACT TWO

Syd's letter to Neville, 2011

Syd Curtis first made contact with Neville Fenton concerning "flute lyrebirds" in 1971, but they did not meet until 1978, when Neville took Syd to record near Allan's Water. In the winter of 1981, Syd returned to record.[37] Forty years after his initial contact with Neville, Syd wrote a letter to reconnect with him. By serendipity, Martha and Thorald Manns had moved to Mt. Tamborine, Queensland, where Syd's mother lived.[38] Syd recounts the story of how he first met Martha in 1971.

> 2 April 2011
> Dear Mr. Fenton,
>
> Martha was painting the outside walls of my mother's house. She knew of Mum's interest in birds and played your tape to her. I was then doing a research project on Albert's [Lyrebirds] vocal behaviour. Mum asked Martha to play your tape to me. She did so, but first emphasised that it was your tape, that it was copyright, and I must not

[37] See archival audio clip #3 at http://environmentalhumanities.org/archives/a-little-flute-music. Also see additional contemporary audio clips #4 and #5, one from the homestead area and one from Enfield State Forest, approximately 130 kilometres to the south.

[38] Hilda Gladys Geissmann was a self-taught naturalist and nature photographer.

copy it. She explained that a chick had been taken from the nest and raised in the domestic fowl-run on a local farm in the 1920s.

I was fascinated by the flute sounds, but it also seemed to me that in a few places the bird was making two different sounds at the same time. Some birds can do this. The voice-producing organ of birds is the syrinx. A few birds were known to sometimes produce different sounds at the same time from the two sides. I wanted to be sure that the sounds on Martha's tape were truly simultaneous. I asked Martha to let me play the tape on my Uher recorder. I could then have played it at one-quarter speed to check. "No!," says Martha, "Certainly not. The tape is copyright." Martha had a two-speed recorder, and I asked her to play it at the slower (half) speed. Again, total refusal. She immediately rewound the tape, took it off her recorder and put it away. End of performance.

I knew Norman had a major interest in mimicry, especially by lyrebirds, and that your tape would be of great interest to him—hence my request to you to let him hear a copy. As you know, he was so fascinated by it, that he made a special trip over from WA [Western Australia, in 1972] to get you to take him to the lyrebirds. (I was not on that trip.) Norman recorded the birds and sent me a cassette of his ABC talk. That spurred me to want to visit and record them, and it was June '78 that you kindly took me to the area.

You first took me to the site of the farmhouse where Martha reckoned the bird had been held. By then the house had been removed but the house stumps were still there in the ground, marking the site precisely. Then you took me to the area where the bird allegedly was released—possibly, but not necessarily, the area from which it had originally been taken. I camped and recorded. And went back for another recording trip a few years later. I don't know whether you could still pinpoint the location of that original farmhouse. It would be great if you could.

Later Ed Slater [another ornithologist and lyrebird expert] got involved. He considered the story likely to be false. One of his arguments was that the distance between locations where he found flute calls was too great. I'm not convinced that the distance is a problem, given that there were forty plus years in which the calls could have spread. What would be a problem is if there is any major break in habitat.

The State Forest carried pretty much continuous habitat south to the Macleay River. The river certainly is a major break in the habitat, but there are two qualifications: firstly, the land on the north side rises quite steeply from the river in the area I looked at, whereas it was relatively flat on the southern side. I have seen an Albert's Lyrebird flying slightly downwards quite rapidly and directly for a reasonable distance. I reckon a Superb could also do so and that it would be possible for one to fly south across the river, though probably not in the reverse direction.

> Remember, also, that a lyrebird's voice can be very loud. Norman reckoned Superbs can be heard up to a kilometre away, and Albert's can be heard further than that. Two possibilities arise: A young adult male "flute" lyrebird, unable to find a vacant area for his territory, might hear lyrebirds south of the river and fly down to join them; birds on the south of the river might hear "flute" songs and copy them.
>
> All the best,
> Syd

Thorald's memories, 2009 and 2013

Thorald Manns (born 1926), the youngest brother of Martha, has a good memory of his time at Allan's Water. He was ten when his family went to live there. He still has Martha's tape recorder and knows the "flute lyrebird" story well. He believes it was the Jones family who had the pet lyrebird that mimicked the flute, and that the bird was kept in a big room in the house.[39] He had heard people say that the lyrebird used to sit up on a table while a boy played the flute. Thorald believes that boy was Ronnie Jones. However, Thorald never saw the lyrebird, nor did he see the flute, nor anyone playing it. There is no record of Martha mentioning the name of the Jones family, but the homestead site that she showed to Neville is the site of the Jones homestead.[40] When asked if he or his family played any musical instruments, Thorald said that his mother had a good singing voice, that he played the harmonica a bit, and that Martha as a girl had played some piano. None of them played the flute. Thorald and Martha were close, and he looked after her before she died. We spoke with him via telephone [VP = Vicki Powys, TM = Thorald Manns].

> VP: Tell us about the first place you lived at Allan's Water, the Jones' homestead.
>
> TM: We lived there for about 18 months and had hoped to buy it but missed out. The house was getting a bit dilapidated by then but was quite comfortable. One corner of a room was netted off, with a perch inside it. There was also a chook yard outside, and we kept chooks there for a while. It's possible that the lyrebird was kept sometimes inside and sometimes outside in the chook yard. When we first got there and lit a fire in the fireplace, there was some rubbish in there that unbeknownst to us, included a few bullets, which exploded but luckily missed us.
>
> VP: Where on your block did you build your house Allanbank in relation to where the Jones' house was?

[39] The conversations with Thorald Manns and Powys on 9 April 2009 and 2 April 2013 are assembled from notes. We found him by using a variety of family history methods.

[40] Neville Fenton, personal communication, 4 March 2013.

TM: Quite close, a good stone's throw away. It was near the road just as you come into the block, near the boundary. There was a gully between our place and the Jones' place. This was on the banks of Allan's Water; our place was called Allanbank.

VP: Did the Jones' farm have a name?

TM: Not that I can recall. They were real bushies. They lived off the land pretty much, never travelled very far, rarely went as far as Dorrigo.

VP: When Martha took Neville Fenton, the ranger, to see the house, was it to your house or the Jones' house?

TM: I'm not sure, but I think the Jones' house may have been demolished by then.

VP: Did your house Allanbank have a wooden floor, or dirt, and what was it like?

TM: We lived in a big shed for a while that had a dirt floor, but the house we built later [Allanbank] had a wooden floor; we'd saved up enough by then to get some floorboards and some roofing iron. The walls were built of flattened fuel drums over a timber frame, and the chimney was made of corrugated iron with a stone base. Water was carried in buckets from the creek for washing, and we boiled up clothes in an outdoor copper that was set up on rocks and bricks. Later, we had a tap in the house that ran directly from a spring. There were springs all over the place. All we drank was spring water; it was lovely, not salty or anything. There were two bedrooms. I shared one with my brother, and Martha and Mum shared the other. Another room was combined kitchen, living, and dining room. We baked bread in a camp oven and made our own yeast. Lighting was by kero lamps. The mailman brought in our groceries—bags of flour and tinned stuff; we'd place an order and receive it a month later. We bought meat from Dorrigo—it was salt meat; we used it for soups and meals. We stored potatoes in the shed. Baked potatoes were lovely. We grew fruit trees from the seeds of plums, apples, and pears and had a paling fence around an acre of land with the fruit trees. We dried the plums, laying them out on a piece of cardboard on the roof to dry, and they kept well.

VP: What were the best things about living at Allanbank?

TM: In the scrub there were some trees with moss, like a garden; they were beautiful. Sometimes my brother and I would go exploring over the cliffs. We would take a hatchet and cut a pole, and we'd slide down that from ledge to ledge. There was really interesting vegetation, different trees, treeferns, staghorns, orchids, hanging mosses, and real rainforest.

Figure 9 *Thorald Manns, c.1949, in his early 20s.*
"We had a wonderful crop of potatoes that year with twenty tons to the acre."[41]
Photo courtesy of Thorald Manns.

VP: Did you see lyrebirds over the cliff?

TM: Well yes, but there were lyrebirds on our place too. You could get quite close, especially when it was foggy; they were not shy, and there were a lot of them about.

VP: How did you learn how to cut timber?

TM: We pretty much taught ourselves. Dad was a wanderer; he never owned much. We parted company, so there was just my mother, sister, and brother. We had to work hard or go hungry. My brother was left-handed, and I was right-handed, so that made sawing easier for us. Mum and Martha did some sawing, too. We used crosscut saws and wedges; we had all the wood getting gear, moles, hammers, crosscut saws, that sort of thing. A neighbour had a bullock team. We cut some timber on Jones' place and other people's places and made more money from that than from growing vegetables. We walked for miles to whatever jobs we had for other people. Later I rode a bike, and

[41] Thorald Manns, personal communication, 2 April 2013.

we also got horses for riding. Martha liked horses and was a good rider. Eventually, we got a second-hand Maxwell ute—my brother bought it.

VP: What was Martha like?

TM: My sister Martha was 18 years older than me, and she was like a mum to us boys after our mother died in 1943. She was nearly six foot tall and strongly built, and she always preferred outdoor work to being indoors. Martha was pretty brainy. She loved photography but could not afford to buy film in the early days. I lived with my sister for many years, and I looked after her in her old age, but she could be a bit domineering. If there was an argument, I would just walk away.

Martha interviews Gordon and Thelma, c.1970-1975

The plot thickens with an interview Martha Manns initiated. Thorald Manns identified these two interviewees, who are referred to on tape only as Gordon and Thelma.[42] Gordon H. Pitkin died on 29 May 29, 1975 and is buried in Dorrigo, New South Wales next to Thelma Mary Pitkin, who died 21 April 1993 [MM = Martha Manns, GP = Gordon Pitkin, TP = Thelma Pitkin].[43]

MM: Gordon, do you remember a property known as Allanbank where I used to live in the Allan's Water district?

GP: Yes, I know it quite well, Miss Manns, and I had occasion to go to the property on different occasions and was well informed about the place.

MM: Did you know the neighbours who lived there years before I went to live in the district?

GP: Well, I didn't actually know their names, but I had business with them and had occasion to go and buy pigs off them [and go to] the property.

MM: Do you know if they had a lyrebird in captivity there?

GP: Yes, they had a lyrebird in a big cage, a wire netted cage.

MM: How big would it be?

GP: As big as an ordinary bedroom of a house, I'd say.

MM: Did the man of the house play any musical instrument?

[42] Thorald Manns, personal communication, May 2009.

[43] This untitled and undated reel-to-reel tape was supplied to Powys by Neville Fenton in April 2009.

GP: Yes, the gentleman of the house used to play the flute.

MM: And did the bird pick up any of the music?

GP: Well, the lady of the house invited us in to have a drink of tea, and while we were in having the tea, the flute started to play, as I thought. I looked around, and the gentleman that used to play the flute was still sitting there with us, and I made an enquiry, and they told me that was the bird imitating the gentleman with the flute. The gentleman's wife, she used to play a piano.

MM: After they left there and the bird was released into the scrub, did you ever hear the calls then?

GP: No, I left the district and come further to Dorrigo and never had occasion to go back, so I haven't heard the young birds imitate the old one to a certain degree.

MM: You've heard the recording I just played to you. Was the sounds on that anything like the original bird?

GP: It was like it but not nearly as perfect.

MM: Thelma, what do you know about the Allanbank lyrebird?

TP: Well, I never saw the bird, but I know for a fact it existed. My husband has seen it, and the people concerned were rather strange people, lived on their own, and this is something that one, knowing them, could understand they would do. They were musically minded, all the family, and I know for a fact they had a flute, and, as we all know, lyrebirds will mimic anything, and personally, knowing the birds, it would be quite easy for me to realise that this bird that you recorded is the offspring from the original bird. Many years ago on the same creek about four or five miles lower down, my brother [Bartlett] got a lyrebird chick, and my mother reared it, and it would only respond to her. She had a large vegetable garden and called this particular bird Daisy, and when she called it, it would come to her for feed, but if any of us younger people went out into the garden, it would take off in abject fright and plant under the cabbage leaves or wherever it could conceal itself. It goes to prove that lyrebirds can be tamed, you know, if taken the right way.

The Jones family's memories of Portion 52, 2009

Daniel Robert Jones married Jean Myles; they had four children and lived at Allan's Water from 1911 before moving to Coffs Harbour c.1934-35.[44] At the time of our interviews in 2009,

[44] We found the family through a variety of family history methods, including researching early and current electoral rolls, death certificates, army records, and phone books.

Ronnie had died, but two other brothers, Raymond and Evan, were still living, had good memories, and were happy to talk about their life at Allan's Water.[45] Cousins Lyn (Raymond's daughter) and Roger (Evan's son and a librarian) facilitated the interviews. Roger remembers his grandfather Daniel very well. He described how Daniel had gone to Allan's Water in 1911 when he was aged about 30, had played the flute and recorder, and had lived a long and interesting life.[46]

Raymond Jones (born c.1924) confirmed that none of the three Jones boys played the flute (Ronnie had played the mouth organ). When questioned about keeping a pet lyrebird, he seemed genuinely surprised: "*Keep* a lyrebird! No, we never *kept* one, although there were plenty of them about."[47] Raymond indicated that they often heard the lyrebirds around Allan's Water. When asked if he thought they had a complex flute-like song, he observed that, rather than flute-like, he thought they gave a twanging tune like a guitar and could mimic a crosscut saw, and recalled that his sister had thought they produced a sound like striking a match. He confirmed that their father Daniel Robert Jones did sometimes play a wooden transverse flute with metal joins. Self-taught, he played pop tunes and hymns. The family made their living mostly from growing potatoes until potato blight arrived. That, combined with their distance to the markets, prompted them to move to Coffs Harbour when Raymond was about ten.

Evan's son Roger Jones told us:

> After talking to my father and uncle separately, there is no memory of a captive lyrebird, or a cage within the cottage. My father remarked that such an unusual "event" would be remembered and talked about by the family, and in this case, such a suggestion is not supported. Both men are those who are interested in and discuss their past at length, so if neither recall the matter it becomes difficult to substantiate. A piano was not kept by the Jones family, nor did the wife (Jean Jones, my grandmother) play any instrument. Ronald played a mouth organ, not a flute. That Daniel Jones played a flute is not disputed, but there is no recollection of particular tunes played.[48]

A chorus of memories about Martha, 2013

To try to fill out our picture of Martha Manns, we interviewed several of her acquaintances. Here is an excerpt from our interview with husband and wife Kevin and Maureen Thomas. Kevin grew up on a nearby potato farm in Deervale, near Dorrigo [HT = Hollis Taylor, KT = Kevin Thomas, MT = Maureen Thomas]:[49]

HT: What was Martha like?

[45] The boys had a sister, Jean May (1916 - 1974), who married Frederick George Kerr in 1942 (Coffs Harbour District Family History Society: *Coffs Harbour and District Deaths, Burials, Cremation—1866 to 2003*, accessed 30 May 2013, http://www.ancestry.com/).

[46] Roger Jones, personal communication, 12 July 2009.

[47] Raymond Jones, phone interview with Powys, 26 April 2009.

[48] Roger Jones, personal communication, 12 July 2009. He is in part responding to the transcribed interview with Gordon and Thema Pitkin that the authors sent to him.

[49] Interview conducted by Taylor in Ballina, New South Wales, 14 April 2013.

KT: Oh, she was a good person. She was one of my mother's best friends. A spade was a spade with her.

MT: Oh, yeah, she's gorgeous. You know she loved her cigarette smokin'. They put her into a home and she said, "Well, I'm gonna sit out the bloody door if ya won't let me smoke it in there!" Yeah, she did! She wasn't givin' 'em up for anything, was she, Kevin? Up at Tamborine Mountain, they had a nursery there, her 'n her son, yeah they were lovely, we used to go up there, oh, she worned the carpet out for us when we went up there, 'cause we were living in Sydney then, and we used to go up and spend a day with her, yeah, she'd roll the mud out for you when you'd come 'n everything. I thought of her as a lovely woman, anyway.

HT: So, Maureen, did she ever tell you the lyrebird story?

MT: No, she didn't actually. Oh, she may have. She ever you, Kevin?

KT: Oh, I wouldn't know.

A past president of the Dorrigo Historical Society and yodeling champion, Betty Sawtell lives near Dorrigo on 300-plus acres with lyrebirds in the back garden. She accompanied Neville when he made one of his recordings and says the song of the "flute lyrebird" is so famous that even the Archbishop of Brisbane has a recording of it.[50] A second interview with Betty gave us more insights into Martha[51] [VP = Vicki Powys, BS = Betty Sawtell]:

VP: Can you tell me a bit about the Manns family, especially Martha Manns, who had the story about the "flute lyrebird"?

BS: Well, my children were frightened of her; she was a big woman and always wore a wide belt and dressed like a man. She lived out in woop woop.[52] I suppose it was how she was brought up. The children reckoned she was half-man; that's why they were scared.

VP: So when she dressed like a man, do you mean suit and tie or just work clothes?

BS: She never wore a dress—just work clothes—certainly not a suit or anything. She wasn't the sort of person I could get close to, but I greatly respected her knowledge of the scrub. It was phenomenal what she knew.

[50] Phone interview conducted by Powys, 5 May 2009.

[51] Phone interview conducted by Powys, 3 April 2013.

[52] Australian slang referring to a small imaginary town, or meaning in the middle of nowhere.

VP: We are writing up the story of the "flute lyrebird," and that's why we wanted to know a bit more about Martha. Martha said that a lad played the flute and the lyrebird mimicked it.

BS: And that's fair dinkum, right! I've heard it myself. The sound is colossal! They thought at first it was copying chainsaws or other things.

VP: Did people have radios in the 1930s—wireless, I mean?

BS: No, nothing like that. It was up to buggery all that country around Ebor, very isolated.

VP: Did you know the Pitkins, Gordon and Thelma?

BS: Oh yes—they were marvelous people. I've lived here for 69 years [since c.1944], so I knew a lot of people.

We interviewed Neville Fenton most recently in March 2013. Here is an excerpt [HT = Hollis Taylor, NF = Neville Fenton]:

HT: What was Martha Manns like?

NF: I saw her as a very honest person. She was a bush-type lady—grew up in the back blocks, those types of people were very down to earth. I don't think she ever married. She had strong features—she could work as hard as most men, a strong personality and a strong body. I think she really believed the story, and I believe her—she may have withheld the name of the man who played the flute—she would want to protect that person in later years in case they got in trouble for having a pet lyrebird. She didn't give us the name of the person who played the flute, and I thought that in her own backwoods way she would have thought that she should not mention anything that would give them trouble.[53] And she would try to protect the tapes—my tapes.

HT: Do you think that Martha heard the original bird?

NF: If it had already been released, I guess she could not have known. I thought she told me she both saw and heard the bird, and it had been held in a cage, which I presumed to be a fowl-house type enclosure. I thought she used the Pitkins to partly back up this position. I'm sure she told me a boy played the flute. However, her Norm Robinson interview does not support many of these impressions.

[53] Lyrebirds were protected by law in New South Wales beginning in 1881 (Birds Protection Acts 1881-1922), which technically meant you could not legally capture or keep a lyrebird, but the law was poorly enforced, especially in isolated areas. NSW Government: Legislation, "Birds Protection Act," accessed 29 May 2013, http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/sessionalview/sessional/act/1881-41a.pdf.

Finale

Dear Reader,

Norman felt the flute tune fitted perfectly with the lyrebirds' needs, but one could equally argue that the story fits human needs. Martha's sense of awe and wonder sought narrative authority. Our desire for an explanation of these remarkable vocalizations echoes theirs.[54] Thus it was that Powys, after combing through archival letters and diaries in search of pre-1900 descriptions of New England lyrebird song that might mention a flute-like dialect, emailed this to Taylor and Probets:

> We had travelled by horseback all day and finally Papa decided we should make camp in a forest clearing. The stockmen hobbled the horses and set up our tents while Cook prepared the evening meal—salt meat, fresh parrot-meat, and a big damper that he cooked in the camp oven. Mama and my sister and I all shared a tent, while the men slept out in the open. At first light we were awakened by birdsong, and we glimpsed a Lyre Bird that was giving a complex flute-like song with so many notes all tangled up together. We had never heard anything like it before, and it was quite wonderful to hear. But we could not listen for long as soon the camp was roused with the clashing of pots and pans, and we had to saddle up our horses and get ready for the next stage to Armidale.
> ~ Mary Groggins, from *Journey over the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, 1871.*

Our hearts leapt! We read on: "I made it up." Haraway suggests that our objectivity must make room for "surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world."[55] It is not just the Jones and Manns families that link to this day, but all of us, linked through serendipity, coincidences, chance meetings, and detective work, and in the hope of proving (or disproving) the origin of—or in any case celebrating—the extraordinary "flute lyrebird" vocalizations.

When we began to unravel this old story to test its authenticity, our goal was to encourage luck by peeking in every nook and cranny. This quest for accuracy was both reliant upon but also in opposition to narrative and memory. In the above interviews and letters, you will notice some missing puzzle pieces, some pieces that do not fit, and even two pieces occasionally vying for the same spot. For example, Martha told Norman in 1972 that the flutist was a lad, but in a recording she made herself at about the same time, she identifies the flutist as a man.

[54] Martha Manns died on 24 August, 1994 in Beaudesert, Queensland. Norman Robinson died on 1 December, 1997 in Perth, Western Australia.

[55] Donna Haraway, "Situated knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99.

Neville wondered if Martha were for some reason protecting the identity of the family with the captive lyrebird, and yet she identifies the site several times as Portion 52, the Jones' homestead. We must rule out the nearby Portion 51, since the Manns moved there after the lyrebird had supposedly been released, and none of them played a flute. Martha went to great lengths to document the story, pinpointing the Jones' homestead and identifying them to the Pitkins as "the neighbours who lived there years before I went to live in the district." Why then did she fail to name them, thus simultaneously acknowledging and hiding their identity? Martha knew where various Jones family members were later living.[56] We wonder why she never followed up on it or put Neville onto them. Did Martha hesitate to ask straight up questions, thinking perhaps it might be rude to ask, but then make up a version of her own?

Above all, we are unable to reconcile the interviews with the Jones family members and those of Gordon and Thelma Pitkin: the Joneses acknowledge a flutist in the household but no lyrebird, while the Pitkins recall both flutist *and* bird. Both are compelling. We have debated whether the lyrebird could have been released before the Jones boys were old enough to remember. The oldest known wild lyrebird was more than 29 years old, and other individuals have been known to live more than 20 years in the wild.[57] A young lyrebird begins to sing proficiently usually in his fourth year. No matter how we do the maths, it seems a tall ask for the boys—Ronald Alexander Jones (b.1911—the year the family moved to the property—now deceased), Daniel Evan Jones (born c.1922), and Raymond Jones (born c.1924)—to have never discussed this remarkable family event, if it did indeed occur. Raymond confirmed that they did notice and discuss the lyrebirds who dominated the sonic environment for hours each winter. However, their discussions of this seasonal marker apparently never led to talk of a captive bird or a flute tutor, which Ronald at minimum would have witnessed if there had been a pet lyrebird.

From the start, we decided not to align ourselves with absolutist positions for or against Martha's story—and it does appear to be hers. We found no other source for it, and in a small community, suppressing the provenance of such a story seems unlikely. When Martha first came to Allan's Water and heard the nocturnal lyrebird song, the first thing she thought was *flute player*. At that time she had no knowledge of any pet lyrebirds. We are left to wonder if someone indeed told her the story later, or if this might be an example of "[w]hen truth is at odds with meaning, it is meaning that wins"?[58] Some people eagerly accepted the story, convinced by the remarkable song itself and requiring no further proof. We took the position that no one is lying, allowing rather for discrepancies and errors of memory and interpretation, which are the typical human condition. We stitch ourselves—and our stories—together, however imperfectly; we are a cut-and-paste job,[59] and using narrative structure assists this process.

[56] Thorald Manns, personal communication, 19 April 2009.

[57] See P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook,* 146; and L. H. Smith, *The Life of the Lyrebird,*19.

[58] John Gray, *The Silence of Animals* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 82.

[59] Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence," *Harper's Magazine* (2007): 68.

A number of lyrebirds in our study area deliver a complex, flute-like song, although often with a technical competence *exceeding* what a human flutist could achieve. We count ourselves among those who are in admiration and awe of these singers and allow for the possibility of the story being true or partially true. We have debated amongst ourselves whether lyrebirds are capable of and prone to this magnitude of cultural transmission and change. For example, Curtis has observed that "[l]yrebirds are superb mimics. I think they can copy, almost perfectly at first try, any sound they want to."[60] This would suggest that a swift cultural transmission *might* be possible. However, some of us interpret the lyrebird literature as indicating that had a captive bird been released, that this lone individual would be more likely to take up the calls of the majority of singers, rather than that the other singers would drop their songs and take up the song of the new arrival.[61]

The voice mediates between the human and the non-human and is particularly pertinent to half of the world's approximately 10,000 bird species: songbirds, so distinguished because they learn their song.[62] Such learning, which surfaces in vocal *mimicry*, *imitation*, and *appropriation,* is a capacity humans share with songbirds but not with other primates.[63] Sounds travel between birds and people in both directions; sounds flow through places and jostle memories. Vital to life, memory manifests in a number of ways, including this capacity for vocal learning. Sound is in motion, but so too is memory, in its intricate and often confounding dance with imagination. Even a done-and-dusted story retains its dynamism in human memory.

Differences in memory and conflicts in narratives forced us to seek a better explanation for the "flute lyrebird" song than that found in Martha's story. Although we are compiling a musicological analysis of these vocalizations and producing a map of the geographical limits of these complex songs across the forested habitat in New South Wales' New England high country, neither offers a clear-cut explanation.[64] Ultimately, this "flute lyrebird" tale of wonder exceeds containment, dispersed as it is across several fields of inquiry and a number of individual memories that go in and out of sync. In our search for fact *or* fiction, we found fact *and* fiction in a tangled embrace, accompanied by *A Little Flute Music*.

[60] Syd Curtis, personal communication, 1 August 2010.

[61] P. J. Higgins, J. M. Peter, and S. J. Cowling, eds., *Handbook*, 157-163.

[62] D. E. Kroodsma, "Vocal Behavior," in *Handbook of Bird Biology*, eds. S. Podulka, Jr., R. W. Rohrbaugh, and R. Bonney (Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2004), 7.23.

[63] Björn Merker, "The Vocal Learning Constellation: Imitation, Ritual Culture, Encephalization," in *Music, Language, and Human Evolution*, ed. Nicholas Bannan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 215-260.

[64] Manuscripts in preparation.

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