

from the archives

# HARRIET AND HELENA THE SCOTT SISTERS

The 'picturesque pursuits' of two female colonial artists have taken on a contemporary role unimagined during the original execution of their exquisite works more than 150 years ago. Archivist Rose Docker reveals the extraordinary work of the Scott sisters.

right: The Scott sisters illustrated all specimens at life size, as shown in these plates. Detail of Helena Scott's illustration of the life stages of the Jasian Butterfly, *Charaxes australia* (now *Polyura sempronius*), complete with a characteristic host plants and background vignette of the young colony. Australian Museum Archives AMS193/18

left: A notebook from one of the Scott sisters with detailed entomological notes and sketches c. 1855. Australian Museum Archives AMS192/112. Photo Matthew Stephens.



02

When members of a Novocastrian community group began researching historical accounts of local native vegetation, they sought out an astonishing collection of drawings by two of Australia's most talented natural history artists, Harriet and Helena Scott.

In 1846, Harriet and Helena, then aged 16 and 14, moved from Sydney to the isolated Ash Island in the Hunter River estuary with their mother, Harriet Calcott, and father, entomologist and entrepreneur Alexander Walker Scott.

There, surrounded by unspoilt native vegetation and under the inspiring tutelage of their artistic father, their shared fascination with the natural world grew. For almost 20 years, the sisters lived and worked on the island, faithfully recording its flora and fauna, especially the butterflies and moths.

Some 150 years later, members of Newcastle's Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project began to rehabilitate areas of the Hunter estuary, including the 780-hectare Ash Island.

In preparing their historical snapshot of the island's vegetation, the Kooragang group returned to the Scotts' unusually detailed nineteenth-century recordings, held in the Australian Museum Archives. The collection includes a catalogue handwritten in 1862 entitled the *Indigenous Botany of Ash Island*, well-preserved botanical specimens, and spectacular depictions and scientific descriptions of the island's moths and butterflies – the great strength of the two artists and their father.

## Lepidoptera

By 1864, the sisters had completed spectacular drawings of moths and butterflies for the publication of the first volume of AW (Walker) Scott's *Australian Lepidoptera and Their Transformations*.

When the prominent natural historian William Swainson had reviewed this emerging work over a decade earlier, he enthused in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, '... these drawings are equal to any I have ever seen by modern artists ... every tuft of hair in the caterpillar, the silken webs of the cocoon, or the delicate and often intricate pencillings on the wings of a moth, stand out with a prominence of relief which it is perfectly impossible to reproduce by simple water colours ...'.

The brilliance of those colours and intricacy of detail – from the first, tiny, observational drawings produced by Scott and his daughters, to the final 100 watercolour plates designed for translation onto the lithographic stone – are just as startling today.

Purchased by the Museum for 200 pounds in 1884, this collection serves as an important historical resource and also illustrates the fascinating story of these two impressive naturalists and their artistic achievements.



03



left: Examples of Helena Scott's artwork. top: two species (left, *Eustixis sapotearum*, and right, *Porela vitulina*) with details of life cycles, anatomy and host plants. c. 1855. bottom: sketch of *Xylopsyche stacyi* (now *Zelotypia stacyi*). The artist would later redraw this species with characteristic host plants and background vignette of a colonial landscape. c. 1855. *AMS 192/2*

right: Photograph of Helena Forde (née Scott) c. 1866.



### Beyond art

The meticulous diaries and notebooks kept by the sisters, part of the Museum collection, provide a glimpse into their scientific activities. Working with their father, the sisters collected live specimens from the surrounding countryside, located the right plant materials for feeding and raising their hungry subjects, and then corresponded with scientists to aid in the identification and description of some of the more puzzling species.

Walker Scott publicly acknowledged their entomological achievements and emphasised that the painstaking execution of the final life-sized drawings of moths and butterflies in various stages of their life cycles was all the work of his 'clever daughters'.

In 1868, as further recognition of their work, Harriet and Helena were elected honorary members of the Entomological Society of NSW – a rare distinction for women at the time.

### Turning professional

The *Lepidoptera* certainly provided an impressive showcase for the sisters' artistic talents, and their father, a long-time trustee of the Australian Museum, had a wide circle of scientific friends in need of illustrative assistance. For a while, following the publication of the epic *Lepidoptera*, Harriet and Helena went on to execute most of the artwork for other scientific literature

in Sydney. This included Gerard Krefft's *Snakes of Australia* (1869) and *Mammals of Australia* (1871) – the plates of which were highly praised at the Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition in 1870.

But the 1860s had also brought hard times for the pair – their mother's death, followed by their father's bankruptcy and the death of Edward Forde (whom Helena had married in 1864). Under growing financial difficulties, the Scott family was forced to leave their inspirational island haven.

Increasingly, the sisters were then faced with the social ignominy of having to seek payment for their drawing commissions. When completing some plates of birds' eggs for her old friend (and later Curator of the Australian Museum) Edward Ramsay in 1866, Harriet pleaded '... above all ... let nobody know you are paying me for doing them for you.'

Harriet went on to marry Dr Cosby William Morgan in 1882, but the widowed Helena continued to struggle to make ends meet.

### Frustrations

In difficult circumstances after her father's death, Helena persuaded the Australian Museum to publish the remainder of the *Lepidoptera* material. The Museum had purchased the maze of family papers – including the sisters' drawings, diaries and notes

– in 1884. Under Helena's close guidance, and in collaboration with Museum entomologist AS Oliff, the Museum finally published the second volume of the *Lepidoptera* in five parts between 1890 and 1898 – the culmination of an astounding 50-year undertaking.

The sisters continued to draw and paint commercially for the rest of their lives. Harriet drew botanical illustrations for the 1879, 1884 and 1886 editions of the *Railway Guide to New South Wales*, and they both executed designs for Australia's first Christmas cards in 1879. Harriet died at Granville NSW in 1907 and Helena in 1910.

Forced through circumstance to become two of Australia's earliest 'professional' female artists, it was a hard economic road. Harriet, it seems, had always suspected the challenges that lay in store for a woman in the world of the 19th-century arts and sciences. In a letter to her childhood friend Edward Ramsay in 1865, she'd revealed her frustrations and great desire to distinguish herself: '... in some way or other and if I were only a man I might do it, but as I am a woman I can't try, for I hold it wrong for women to hunt after notoriety ... clearly I ought to have been Harry Scott instead of Hattie Scott.'

Retained for posterity in the archival collections of the Australian Museum, the Scott sisters' magnificent works of art and papers are much more than a handy reference to the vegetation of landscapes past: they stand as a memorial to these two colonial women as true artists and naturalists of note.

Rose Docker, *Archivist, Australian Museum*

➔ View selections from the Scott sisters collection online at [www.australianmuseum.net.au/archives](http://www.australianmuseum.net.au/archives)

### Further reading

Marion Ord, 1988. *Historical drawings of moths and butterflies. Harriet and Helena Scott*. From the collection of the Australian Museum. Craftsman House, Sydney.