



BRIAN GILL finds bird specimens in museums tell stories of pioneer discoveries.

# Tales

The old Bird Hall that occupied a gallery towards the front of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, from 1929-1969. Every bird in the cabinets carried its own story about its collection. The albatrosses were later incorporated into a diorama.

Auckland Museum began collecting birds in the 1850s. Now, a century and a half later, its bird collection of 12,000 specimens tells a fascinating story through the lives of the collectors and the lengths they went to obtain birds. It is a story of remote places, and the tenacity of the people who collected birds, prepared them and packed them for carriage home. The museum's 2500 foreign birds tell an exotic story of danger and hardship in the tropics and in the American 'Wild West'.

For the last 50 years, birds have come to the museum by salvage from those that have died naturally. For the first 100 years, however, birds were mostly killed deliberately for the museum.

Viewed with horror by today's nature-lovers, this collecting must be weighed against the on-going value of the specimens for scholarly research and public display. In Auckland Museum's current 'Origins' gallery, a mounted South Island saddleback still performs its educational role about 120 years after Andreas Reischek shot and prepared it.

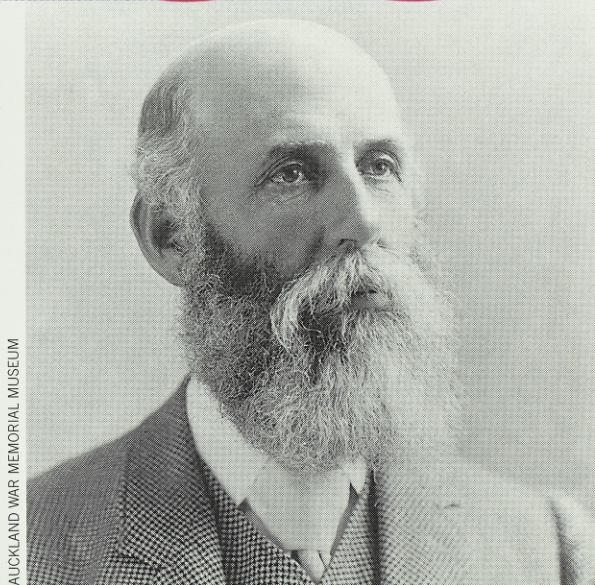
The number of bird specimens needs

context. A few thousand collected in a hundred years is negligible beside the estimated two million birds *per day* killed around the world by domestic cats and motor vehicles. While others battle to save our species in the wild, museums struggle to preserve representative samples of our birds as a resource for future educational displays and research.

## New Zealand birds

Auckland Museum's oldest surviving New Zealand stuffed birds were bought around 1856 from the collector and taxidermist Mr I. St John of Nelson. St John must have been one of the few taxidermists in the young colony, and his birds were desperately needed by the new museum, which at that stage occupied two rooms in a farm cottage on a site that is now part of the Auckland University city campus. From initial consignments of more than 40 birds, five or six have survived to the present.

In New Zealand of the 1850s, even putting a name to birds was a problem. One of St John's birds was listed as a 'Mud



Pioneer botanist, Thomas Cheeseman, arranged many bird 'exchanges' while Curator, 1875 — 1905.

Sucker,' presumably some sort of wader. In 1856 the honorary curator complained to St John '... will you be kind enough next time to put the names on the stands. A Black & White Bird with Red Bill I received this time I had one from you before so do not send up another ...' The red-billed bird was presumably an oystercatcher.

While St John was in Nelson in the winter of 1856 he was among the first in New Zealand to see Australian silveryeyes. The specimen he sent to Auckland Museum, sadly now lost, was later cited in