



# Kimberley Society

## Book Note

***Among Wild Animals and People in Australia (Bland Vilda Djur och Folk i Australien)* by Eric Mjöberg, translated by Margareta Luotsinen and Kim Akerman. [Hesperian Press](#), Carlisle (WA), 2012. Casebound, dust jacket, 362 pages, illustrated, ISBN 978-0-85905-507-9, RRP \$95.00.**

This long-awaited translation of Mjöberg's 1915 work is the ninth volume of the Western Australian Explorers' Diaries Project series produced by Hesperian Press. It fits into that series because Mjöberg's diary, as well as being a chronicle of his expedition, holds a lot of new information gleaned during his time in the Kimberley.

Most of the volume (pages 48 to 312) relates to the Kimberley. The rest covers preparation for the expedition, voyages, a visit to Queensland rainforest, and the expedition results. The last two pages contain maps – 'Overland Routes travelled by the 1st Swedish Scientific Expedition' and 'Eric Mjöberg's trip through the St George Ranges. February 1911'. Footnotes added during the translation and editing supplement the few written by the author. Most give current identification for species, with the botanical ones owing much to generous input from Tim Willing of Broome. Other footnotes add details taken from Mjöberg's notebooks, journal or field notes. The volume is far more detailed than is suggested by the main index, which is for the original pagination (shown in the text in bold type inside square brackets). A separate index, prepared by Alex George and Tim Willing, lists plant names. Some of the shortcomings in the main index can be offset by checking the list of captions to plates and figures (pages 332 to 339).

The synopsis (pages xvi to xvii) describes four routes traversed by the Mjöberg expedition between October 1910 and August 1911. The first is a round trip from Derby, north-easterly, as far as the Isdell River. That trip is mentioned only on page 267 [421]. The second is from Derby, along the Fitzroy River to Noonkanbah Station, with excursions to Mt Anderson, the Grant Range, the Edgar Range, and Fitzroy Crossing. The third route takes in the St George Range, Noonkanbah and the adjacent Cherrabun Station, and the return to Derby. The last one is a boat trip to Broome, followed by excursions in and around that town.

Mjöberg was in his late twenties when he came to Australia. He had worked in the entomology department of the Swedish Museum of Natural History each summer after 1903 and had recently received his PhD in entomology. He is described as a biologist in the synopsis, which lists his main companions on the expedition as an ethnographer, an ornithologist, and a taxidermist. As the diarist, Mjöberg wrote descriptive passages about the people, plants, animals, insects and other things he saw. He was fascinated by the natural history but was not impressed by the 'tiresome climate' or the 'unbalanced, reprehensible diet'. He looked down on the men he labelled 'bushmen' and concluded 'that usually less stable individuals are recruited to people the north'. Those individuals were all from the European population. He was even less taken with 'the Australian Negroes' and the Asians.

Frank Hann, by comparison, received nothing but praise. His exploration and mapping warrant praise but some of Mjöberg's other remarks should be treated with caution. If Hann did immortalise some of Derby's barmaids by naming features after them, Mjöberg was wrong in thinking that Mt Elizabeth came by its name that way. Hann named it after his mother. Where Mjöberg obtained his information about Hann is unknown but he seems to have viewed Hann as a kindred spirit when it came to the collection of Aboriginal remains. Unlike Mjöberg, Hann neither collected nor removed skeletal material. But his apparent willingness to do so, in the interest of science, made him unpopular in some quarters.

By the time Mjöberg set out from Derby – page 72 [112] of the book – I felt ambivalent about his writing. He told how 'a bullock wagon pulled by a long span, packed high with all sorts of boxes and chests, meandered away from the outer post of civilization, to be buried for more than half a year in the inaccessible interior'. Inaccessible interior? As Mjöberg noted several pages later, their bullock driver ("Bullocky" Johnson) had recently blazed a road from Yeeda Station, through the King Leopold Ranges, to Isdell Station. Johnson took the expedition along a much easier road than that one. But, meandering from station to station along the Fitzroy River road, 'his impertinence went too far' and Mjöberg dismissed him near Mt Wynne. That ruckus resulted in 'nine days of involuntary camping' and contributed to the first

five weeks of Mjöberg's time in the 'inaccessible interior' being spent on or close to the road between Derby and Noonkanbah Station. Meanwhile, the ornithologist and the ethnographer had branched off and gone south of the Fitzroy at the invitation of a station owner.

Mjöberg's writing resonates with the mixture of arrogance, naivety and wonder with which he viewed the Kimberley. There are no dry descriptions of flora, fauna or landscape. Lively anecdotes tell of encounters and incidents. Photographs and sketches are plentiful. Comments from or about local residents embellish the personal observations. Some text and photographs are, however, unsettling.

For several months from 1 December, Noonkanbah was the expedition's base. It was there that Mjöberg obtained his 'first anthropological material' – by taking an Aboriginal skeleton from a platform in a tree. Then, at a burial cave on Skeleton Hill, he 'dug out layer after layer' of bones and skulls where 'generations of aborigines lay buried'. He claimed to be the first white man to have 'disturbed the peace of these natural crypts'. On the way back to camp, he laughed inwardly as he walked behind Aboriginal men he had tricked into 'carrying the remains of their dead comrades'. He was aware that 'a law had already been passed by the government, that under no circumstances were whole skeletons of the black aboriginals, or parts thereof, permitted to be taken out of the country'. Undeterred by that, he used bluster, threats and subterfuge to get away with six skeletons. In 2005, those remains were repatriated.

The value of Mjöberg's book lies primarily in its 230 images and its recording of flora, fauna and ethnography. He wrote up his encounters with Aboriginal people and he provided informative descriptions of some of their customs. His narrative reads as an adventure story or, as he terms it, a 'travelogue' in which he braves the hazards of the 'inaccessible interior' to chase or shoot the prey from which his party collected about 300 bird skins and 50 animal skins. Those collections were made around Derby (October 1910 and April/May 1911), along the Fitzroy River and in the adjacent ranges (November 1910 to March 1911), around Broome, and, with the assistance of Hugh D Norman's schooner *Ena*, between Broome and the Eighty Mile Beach (April to August 1911). Mjöberg wrote next to nothing about his colleagues' trips to Mowla Downs Station and the Edgar Range, the Isdell River, Sunday Island, Meda Station, and Beagle Bay.

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