Matthew Stephens reveals the story of the Gould pattern plates and the many processes involved in the realisation of the artist’s vision.

In early November 1949, Tom Iredale, former Conchologist at the Australian Museum and expert in Australian ornithology, received a request for advice from the National Librarian, Harold White. The Museum of Technology and Applied Science in Sydney had offered to sell to the National Library a number of John Gould’s 'key plates of birds and mammals', and White wondered whether Iredale could offer an opinion as to their importance and value. A keen collector of antiquarian books, Iredale had a nose for rare and valuable material and, from the speed of his response, it appears he had a whiff of something significant. Immediately after viewing the plates, Iredale shot a letter off to Canberra confirming that the Library was being offered 'pattern' plates—the master illustrations that had been copied by colouring workshops to produce John Gould’s luxury publications. This set of over 200 plates was of particular significance because they represented many of the patterns created for Gould’s Birds and Mammals of Australia. Iredale was unable to contain his excitement, as revealed in the Library files:

The whole lot constitute an astonishing 'find' as some of the Mammals date back over the century and all are over eighty years old and of course unique. They have apparently been in the 'vaults' of the Museum for sixty or more years.

The thrill Iredale felt as he recounted his discovery is an emotion familiar to anyone working closely on the publications of John Gould. As a member of the team that developed John Gould Inc—the Australian Museum’s exhibition celebrating the 2004 bicentenary of Gould’s birth—I can attest to...
the excitement of digging deep into the life and work of the 'Bird Man'.

As I began researching what many consider are images symbolic of Victorian gentility, I had not expected to find the countless examples of sheer sweat, hardship and personal sacrifice made by those who contributed to the works published under the Gould name. It soon became evident that this extraordinary enterprise, although inspired by the drive, ambition and talent of one man, relied heavily on the scientific and artistic skills of the many people who worked for him.

This web of individuals was of particular interest to Tom Iredale, in the role they played in the creation of an estimated 500,000 hand-coloured plates sold by Gould. By 1949, Iredale recognised that the fine art of natural history lithography was little understood in an age when images were reproduced mechanically, and he saw the rediscovered pattern plates as a significant link to a technology that had reached its zenith almost a hundred years earlier. Iredale also had a personal connection with the history of natural history lithography, having assisted Gregory Mathews between 1911 and 1923 on his multi-volumed work, *Birds of Australia*, in which the lithographic plates were hand-coloured. The rediscovery of the Gould pattern plates only eight months after the death of Mathews—whose 1936 supplement to *The Birds of Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands* was the last bird book to ever contain hand-coloured lithographs—no doubt drove Iredale's urgency as he tried to encourage White to purchase the patterns:

They are historically invaluable and should certainly be acquired for your library ... any reasonable amount should be agreed to, as this is not a case of bargaining. Mathews would have secured them at almost any price whatever.

The Library accepted Iredale's advice, and purchased the 239 plates at a cost of £2 each in June 1950. A month later, Iredale's article, 'An Amazing Discovery', appeared in the *Australian Zoologist*, where he offered no clue as to how Gould's patterns, last seen in London in the 1880s, had ended up languishing in the vaults of a museum in Sydney.

It was this tantalising article by Iredale that first drew my own attention to the Gould pattern plates in the National Library. A key objective of the *John Gould Inc.* exhibition was to demonstrate the many processes that lay between the collection of a specimen in the field and the finished image bound into a volume. We hoped to display original Gould specimens, manuscripts, watercolours, pattern and published plates to give visitors a sense of the complexity that lay behind the creation of these works. So it was with considerable excitement that members of the Australian Museum Research Library travelled from Sydney to Canberra in October 2003 to explore the National Library's collection of Gouldiana.

Undoubtedly the greatest surprise for anyone who starts exploring the life and works of John Gould is the realisation that Gould was not solely responsible for the illustrations in his books. When faced with an original Gould sketch, some viewers are shocked by the rudimentary nature of the workmanship. Gould quite readily admitted that he only made sketches, to be properly finished by his artists and then copied onto a lithographic stone for printing. His sketches capture the very essence of the birds he portrayed, and he followed each stage of the development process closely, often scribbling comments and corrections on later watercolour versions of the image and the lithographic test plate.

Within the Mathews Collection in the National Library lies a folio of 17 original 'John Gould' drawings (Pictures R3647-R32664, and S202-S204), offering examples of unfinished and finished images. Only the first drawing of the set, *Euphema splendida*,
is attributed to the hand of John Gould, with the remaining drawings probably by his artists William Matthew Hart, Henry Constantine Richter and Josef Wolf.

Drawn in 1846, Gould's pencil and crayon sketch of these three Splendid Grass Parakeets on a spray of *Beaufortia decussata* is a rather gentle reworking of a single parrot image originally lithographed by Gould's young wife Elizabeth, only months before her death in 1841. It was relatively unusual for Gould to issue an updated plate of a species he had previously described, but in this case he had been dissatisfied with having only a single male specimen to illustrate and insufficient field information. In 1845 Gould received more examples of the parrot from Johnson Drummond, a collector who had caught the birds near Moore's River in Western Australia. Gould continued to be frustrated by a lack of information, however, when he was informed that Drummond had been speared to death while searching for more specimens in the Western Australian bush.

The drawing of these three parrots, created in such tragic circumstances, was generously loaned by the National Library to the Australian Museum for the *John Gould Inc.* exhibition—to be displayed alongside the specimens which Gould had originally illustrated. For the first time in over 150 years, the specimens of these small brightly coloured birds returned to Australia after having been sold by Gould to the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, in 1847. The finished plate, as published in *The Birds of Australia*, was also displayed with the specimens and sketch, and showed how closely Gould's original interpretation had been carried through to the final, published image.

It probably comes as little surprise that Johnson Drummond was not the only casualty among Gould's collectors. In early October 1844, John Gilbert, a naturalist employed full-time by Gould to collect bird and mammal specimens in Australia, set off from the Darling Downs with Ludwig Leichhardt's expedition to Port Essington. In the National Library's Manuscripts Collection, a series of letters sent by Gould leading up to the expedition capture both the hardship faced by Gilbert in the field and the demanding expectations of his employer. Perhaps most poignant (MS 587, folder 2) is a letter sent by Gould wishing Gilbert a safe journey—a letter Gilbert was never to read. As the months passed by and not a word was heard from the expedition, John Gould held little hope for the survival of his most talented collector and the many specimens he had expected to receive on Gilbert's return.

After 18 months of silence, the expeditioners sailed into Sydney triumphant, but carrying the grim news that John Gilbert had been killed in an altercation with a local Aboriginal tribe some nine months earlier. Leichhardt forwarded Gilbert's bird specimens to Gould in London, and deposited the remaining mammal specimens at the Australian Museum. One of these specimens, *Lagorchestes leichardti*, was later sent by the Australian Museum to Gould to describe and illustrate in his *Mammals of Australia*. Naming the animal 'Leichhardt's [sic] Hare Kangaroo', Gould returned the wallaby to the Australian Museum in 1861. With the
specimen still housed in the Museum's collection, the *John Gould Inc.* exhibition team was keen to see the pattern plate (PIC/8549/104) at the National Library—the closest to the original drawing of the specimen now extant. We were surprised by how little the pattern plate image looked like the now desiccated model which Gilbert had collected only weeks before his death in 1845. However, like the Splendid Grass Parrots, the Hare Kangaroo specimen was placed side-by-side with the earliest form of its image and reminded visitors of the incredible sacrifices made by many of Gould's employees.

Conscious of our limited time in Canberra, the exhibition team requested to see the Library's 80 pattern plates for *Birds of Australia* (PIC/8549/1-82). On his visit to that musty vault in 1949, Tom Iredale realised that only patterns for the supplement to the *Birds of Australia*—a single-volume from a set of eight—were being offered for sale. Curiously, no one at the Museum of Technology bothered to inform Iredale that the remaining seven volumes had been transferred to the Mitchell Library two years earlier. He was mystified by the absence of these volumes and, as late as 1950, vowed to continue searching for the missing patterns. Thanks to two letters held by the National Library (MS 1755), an account of how the pattern plates found their way from London to Sydney can now be told. It appears that in the late 1880s, the Curator of the Australian Museum, Edward Pierson Ramsay, had suggested that the Department of Public Instruction should publish a new work about the birds of Australia for use in schools. He approached Gould's publisher, Henry Sotheran & Co., hoping to incorporate pre-existing material into the publication as a way to save money. Surprisingly, the publishers offered to sell the pattern plates for the *Birds and Mammals of Australia*, along with their copyright, to the New South Wales Government for £650. The plates were purchased, but E.P. Ramsay went into a physical decline not long after and, along with the financial depression of the early 1890s, the impetus for the project appears to have faded.

With only an hour to spare on our visit, fellow librarians Samantha Fenton, León Lemmer and I leafed through the loose patterns of Gould's Australian birds. Not unexpectedly, Gould's hurried scrawl, demanding corrections from his artists, appeared from time to time as we turned the pages. Yet it was the rough sketch of a European Moorhen slapped onto the back of one of the old boards used to support the plates that took us by surprise. Why was this European bird nesting with a flock of Australian ones? Confused by what lay before us, we scrutinised the image for clues to make sense of what we had found. The handwriting was clearly Gould's, the hummingbird doodles we had seen on his other sketches, and the numerical additions down the edge of the page were typical of a man ever eager to make a profit. Before us lay a previously unknown preliminary sketch for the Moorhen plate in *The Birds of Great Britain*—a particularly popular Gould image. This drawing was to become one of the highlights of the *John Gould Inc.* exhibition, and for the exhibition team the result of a fascinating research process. As we directed National Library staff to the pattern plates and their unexpected treasure, I could not help but feel that the ghost of Tom Iredale had joined the excited huddle and was sharing in the pleasure with us all.

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