

Captain John Laskey, Dr Peter McDougall and the roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii* Montagu, 1813

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ABSTRACT

The roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii* was described by Montagu in his 1813 *Supplement* to his *Ornithological Dictionary* in which he provided considerable detail on how the specimens came to him from Glasgow. Recent research by Mearns & Mearns has revealed biographical details of the finder, Dr Peter McDougall. This article provides further information on the role of Captain John Laskey leading to the publication of Montagu's description, and on preserved examples of the roseate tern from McDougall's collection that are additional to the type specimen.

INTRODUCTION

The roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii*, a rare summer visitor and breeding seabird in Scotland (Forrester *et al.*, 2007), was first described by George Montagu (1753-1815) in 1813 from a shot specimen and notes provided by Dr Peter McDougall (1777-1814), a Glasgow medical man and naturalist (Montagu, 1813). Montagu described the location of the specimen as "two small flat rocky islands, in the Firth of Clyde, called Cumbrey islands, in Milford Bay", by which he undoubtedly meant the small islands known as the "Eileans" in Millport Bay, Isle of Great Cumbrae, North Ayrshire (Forrester *et al.*, 2007).

The recognition and description of the roseate tern is a familiar story (Mearns & Mearns, 1988, 2022, 2023). Two elements are elaborated in this article. One explores the role of Captain John Laskey (*ca.* 1755-1826) in alerting Montagu in time for inclusion of the description of this new species in his 1813 *Supplement*. The other traces further preserved examples of the roseate tern connected with McDougall in addition to the type specimen, which were part of his extensive collection of birds.

McDougall's private museum was dispersed by auction on 15th July 1814 and contained 148 birds in twenty-six glass cases and 82 uncased mounts of British species. Thirteen cases with 100 birds, five un-cased birds, four mammals, four reptiles and two fish were non-British species (Anonymous, 1814). The majority of the latter were Neotropical and North American, and the large number of New World species suggests he relied principally on contacts in Glasgow's trans-Atlantic shipping trade for specimens. There is no evidence he travelled abroad to collect in person.

JOHN LASKEY

John Laskey was born in Devon, trained and practised as a lawyer, and while living there wrote numerous notes published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. These demonstrated his wide interests and covered diverse subjects from observations on the migration of swallows, coins and local archaeological finds, to a stuffed kangaroo he had acquired (e.g. Laskey, 1796). As the Napoleonic war with France developed, in common with many citizens he volunteered with his local militia, the North Devon, in 1798. They trained alongside the Wiltshire Militia whose colonel was George Montagu, author of the *Ornithological Dictionary* (Montagu, 1802; Cleevely, 1978). It is likely, being near neighbours living in the Kingsbridge area of Devon, they were already acquainted through mutual natural history interests. In May 1795, Laskey married Maria Susanna Charlotte Dickinson, daughter of Richard Dickinson of the Office of Ordnance, Tower of London. Hers was a military family whose men mostly served in the regular army. Laskey bought a commission as a lieutenant in 1800 and in 1804 a captaincy with the 21st Kirkcudbright and Wigtown Militia, which resulted in him spending most of his time in Scotland. His interest in antiquarianism and natural history developed into a broad knowledge in a variety of subjects "by dint of reading and observation of museums and cabinets ... minuting in a book kept on purpose" (Laskey, 1796). Mollusca were a particular interest of his (Laskey, 1811). In his later publications he added the name Coombe to his author line, which seems to have been an affectation (Laskey, 1818, 1819). It is possible he adopted this second name in admiration of Charles Coombe (1743-1817), a famous numismatist who wrote a catalogue of William Hunter's coin cabinet.

Part of the duties with his new regiment took him to East Lothian, where he resided for a while in Port Seton. Their duties included guarding Napoleonic prisoners of war many of whom were housed further south in Peebles. From 1811 he transferred with at least part of the regiment to Dumbarton Castle at Dumbarton Rock, until 1813. Here prisoners of officer rank were held under stricter regimes. Laskey then was able to visit the recently opened Hunterian Museum built by the University of Glasgow in 1807 to house the bequest of William Hunter (1718-1783). In a notebook Laskey itemised those exhibits in which he had personal interest. The product of this activity came to the

attention of the bookseller John Smith, son of the founder John Smith, of the eponymous company. Smith persuaded Laskey to provide his notes as a text for *A General Account of the Hunterian Museum* (Laskey, 1813) referred to below as the *Account*. Several such manuscript commonplace books (personal compilations of information) by Laskey are preserved in museums and libraries ranging across various subjects. His notes on the Hunterian Museum (now preserved with associated correspondence between Laskey and Smith in Cambridge University Library; Ref. Code: GBR/0012/MS Add.6306) lacked information on the medical collections and the library but were necessary for what Smith envisaged as a commercially viable visitors' guide. Following advice from Laskey, Smith contacted Dr Peter McDougall to supply the former and Smith's son (John Smith, the third) fulfilled the latter. Laskey's *Account* of the Hunterian dating from the first decade of its existence provides a valuable curatorial tool to this day, over 200 years later.

PETER MCDUGALL'S ROSEATE TERN SPECIMENS

Laskey had become acquainted with Peter McDougall as part of the local naturalist community and so came to be in a pivotal position to alert Montagu to the discovery of an unusual tern in the Clyde area. The timing proved fortuitous - a description of the bird as a new species could be written in time to be included in his *Supplement* (Montagu, 1813). Montagu said "we must also include Captain Laskey in [acknowledgement] by whom we were first made acquainted that such a bird had been taken by, and was in the collection of Doctor M'Dougall, to whom he kindly communicated our wishes to examine it." The details provided initially by McDougall to Montagu are of an adult male, its sex established by dissection, and was one of two birds shot on 24th July 1812 by his "companion sportsmen". This became the holotype for the name *dougallii* and is preserved in the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) (Fig. 1).

In addition to the holotype, there was a young bird in the NHM originating from Montagu and labelled "Frith of Clyde, Dr M'Dougall" according to Leach (1816). This specimen can no longer be traced in the national collection (Mearns & Mearns, 2023). William Elford Leach (1791-1836) was instrumental in obtaining the collection of George Montagu for the British Museum. Details of the negotiations are given by Harrison & Smith (2008).

As Montagu had only one bird to hand in 1813, it would seem likely that the roseate tern discovery triggered more sampling by McDougall to supply demand from those wishing to possess examples. Several other specimens have come to light. There are two extant McDougall specimens that came to Liverpool Museum as part of Lord Derby's collection. The 13th Earl of Derby, Lord Edward Geoffrey Smith Stanley (1775-1851), built a massive collection of birds and mammals that became a major foundation for Liverpool Museum,

which opened in 1851 (Woolfall, 1990). Mearns & Mearns (1988) first thought that, apart from the type, it



Fig. 1. The holotype of roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii*. (A) The specimen. (B) Labels from holotype. (Photos reproduced by permission of Natural History Museum, Tring)

was unlikely that other McDougall specimens still existed, but later they were informed of some specimens in Liverpool (Mearns & Mearns, 2023). These are from the collection of birds described by Fisher & Jackson (2002) as 28 foreign and 14 British cases of birds acquired from a "Dr McDougall". Some lots were bought for Lord Derby at the auction of McDougall's belongings, which was held in Glasgow in 1814. One was Case No. XI, described in the sale catalogue (Anonymous, 1814) as "*Sterna Dougallii* - Roseate Tern, two males and a female, A NEW SPECIES DISCOVERED BY DR. M'DUGALL." and "*Hirundo rustica* - WHITE HOUSE SWALLOW". John Smith, the Glasgow bookseller, was engaged to bid on Lord Derby's behalf. He sent the results by letter, details of which are interesting for the relatively large sum fetched by the tern case and some other details provided by Smith (Letter from John Smith in Archive Department, National Museum of Liverpool). Smith wrote:

"The great object of competition was the case containing the Roseate Terns: To secure your Lordship the pair I was necessitated to promise the odd one [one of the males] & Swallow to a determined Collector, who would have gone above my price for the whole, conditionally that on resigning the competition, he should have them for the balance of the Sum, they might sell for, more than the charge stated above; - I have no doubt your Lordship will approve of this arrangement for, otherwise, I am confident they would have been lost. Dr M'D is said only to have killed 7 birds in condition for preserving, and your Lordship is secured of the two finest, reserved for himself..."

The letter is annotated by Lord Derby with his catalogue numbers for the nine specimens he received from the auction; seven were other, mostly foreign, species. The roseate terns cost him eight guineas (£8-8s-0d; worth ca.

£800 today), the other specimens collectively added up to only £5-17s-6d (ca. £600 today).

Henry Ogg Forbes (1851-1932), one-time Director of Liverpool Museum, said that one roseate tern specimen in the BM and two in Liverpool were the types of the species (Forbes, 1896-8). Forbes then quotes from a manuscript note by Lord Derby which stated that two were preserved by McDougall, a male and a female, and a third was given him directly from Montagu. This third specimen seems not to have survived. The two original mounts as received from John Smith's endeavours were made down into round skins (Fig. 2). Forbes' assertion that specimens in Liverpool were part of the type series was incorrect.

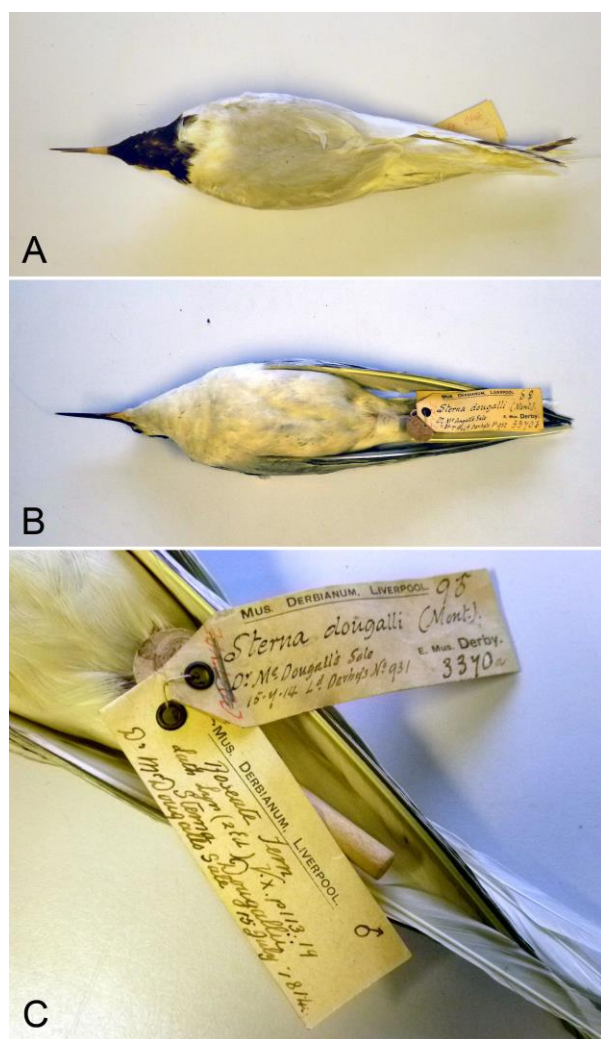


Fig. 2. Other specimens of roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii*, from Lord Derby's collection. (A) Specimen No. 931: a male. (B) Specimen No. 932: a female. (C) Labels from specimen No. 931. (Photos reproduced by permission of National Museums Liverpool (World Museum: NML-VZ D3370, NML-VZ D3370b and NML-VZ D3370a respectively))

If there were seven birds obtained by McDougall said by Smith to be suitable for preservation, to what extent can these can be accounted for? One was sent to Montagu and is the type specimen for Montagu's name, *Sterna dougallii*. It was one of three mentioned by McDougall in communicating to Montagu in a second letter (his first

letter referred to just two birds) that were "shot with many others, on the 24th of July, 1812, all of which are exactly alike". Leach (1816) catalogued a juvenile bird that Montagu must have acquired subsequently. One of the males in the glass case sold in Glasgow was acquired by an anonymous bidding competitor. The other two might have been those mentioned by McDougall in his second letter to Montagu. The third Liverpool specimen said by Forbes to have been received directly from Montagu might also have been got in 1813. Clearly, McDougall did return to the nesting site in that year to obtain more specimens, particularly the juvenile. He died, perhaps unexpectedly, aged only 37, in April, 1814, too soon to collect and preserve any more roseate terns in what would have been a third consecutive nesting season for the bird on the Cumbraes.

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