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J.S.P. Ramsay: amateur ornithological photography and the photo processing industry

Dr. Julia Peck
University of Roehampton

Conference paper for: Workers and Consumers: The Photographic Industry 1860-1950
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J.S.P. Ramsay (b. 1884, d. 1981) was a Sydney-based businessman running Ramsay Photo Works, a successful photo processing business that operated for several decades from 1925. Ramsay was the son of E.P. Ramsay, the curator of the Australian Museum and natural historian. Unable to follow in his father's footsteps, but interested nonetheless in ornithology, Ramsay undertook his own fieldwork expeditions, wrote articles for *The Emu*, campaigned for environmental matters and made photographs of birds and other creatures in the Australian environment. Ramsay also reviewed photographic equipment for *The Emu's* readers, providing apt commentary on technical advances and their usefulness to ornithological photographers. Ramsay published some of his own photographs but also licensed them for use to other ornithologists. Little is known of his photographic business but he did advertise his processing and printing services by placing adverts in *The Emu* and in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Indeed, today Ramsay is remembered for his ornithological photographs, his technical innovations and his contributions to environmental matters. Few photographs remain from his processing works so his business success goes largely unremarked. In this instance the passionate amateur ornithologist eclipses the businessman – the subjects of Ramsay's photographs and his motivating passions were more highly prized than his commercial skills and success. Photography's commercial arm, as a service industry to other photographers and amateurs, remains invisible. This paper will argue that Ramsay, and his son who helped to piece together his archive, desired to be remembered for his amateur activities over and above his commercial success.

J.S.P. Ramsay (b. 1884, d. 1981), the subject of my paper today, was the owner of a photo processing company, but also an amateur ornithological photographer. Although a minor figure within Australian photography and ornithology, Ramsay is remembered for his technical achievements, his interest in nature education, for his innovative bird photographs and for campaigning for the preservation of habitats (Slater, 1980: 55-58; Snowden, Ramsay and Lea, 1984: 2-4). The aim of this paper is to present information regarding Ramsay's photography business, although there are scant records to draw upon. However, I also want to analyse the existing accounts of Ramsay's ornithological photographic practice to date, because they emphasise the amateur photographer and ornithologist over and above Ramsay's interest in the photo processing industry. Ramsay himself has said that it was an interest in nature that brought him to photography (Ramsay, 1955), rather than an interest in photography that brought him to nature, but Ramsay and his son John Ramsay also seem to have understood that there was potentially greater social prestige in celebrating Ramsay's ornithological activities than in celebrating his business success. In this instance the passionate amateur ornithological photographer eclipses the businessman and the

subjects of Ramsay's photographs and his motivating passions were more highly prized than his commercial skills and success. Whilst the focus of this paper will be on Ramsay and the celebration of his amateur work, I think there is something instructive about the celebration of the amateur over the professional businessman: it could be said perhaps that in historical accounts of photography, and in ornithological practices more generally, the amateur retained something of their Victorian social status; that is, as someone "who loved an activity or, rather, who pursued many different activities with enthusiasm, ease, and confidence, who appreciated the arts and was curious about the natural world" (Seiberling, 1986: 3). Complicating this account, though, are the historical processes and discourses that have led to Ramsay's material being retained by an institution – in this instance, the Macleay Museum – and Ramsay's own longevity, which seems to have enabled his inclusion in historical accounts of ornithological photography. These historical events include the bicentennial celebrations in Australia in the 1980s that influenced the Macleay Museum's collection practices, and the discourses of masculinity and productive leisure that were prominent in Australian culture in the 1920s. The broader aim of my paper then, is to shed some light on the preoccupations of the history of photography and how this intersects with the narratives of nation building and identity, that in turn help to account for Ramsay's successes in being included in accounts of Australian photography as a bird photographer rather than a businessman in the photography industry.

Given that personal motivation and social standing is part of the subject it seems useful to recount Ramsay's biography. Ramsay's interest in nature and birds started at a young age and he was a collector of eggs and skins when he was a young boy. From around 1901 (when Ramsay was 17 years of age) Ramsay was keeping a diary of his field trips and in 1905 his use of photography of nature begins. Ramsay's use of the camera coincides with the period in history when the camera replaced the gun in the study and collection of natural history, although Ramsay seems to have continued collecting specimens (Snowden, Ramsay and Lea, 1984: 4; Allen, 1976: 119 and 223; Griffiths, 1996:130-132). In 1911 Ramsay purchased a Birdland Camera (Macleay Museum, 1984: 1) and this seems to have consolidated his interest in photography, and certainly his photographic output increases from this time. Ramsay married Ethel Thomas in 1913 and their honeymoon was a field trip to the Grose Valley in the Blue Mountains (Ethel continued to be a part of Ramsay's field trips at least until 1920). Their camping activities were quite thoroughly documented and they seem to have engaged in domestic routines, as well as enjoying the informality of the bush.

Ramsay was networking and socialising with other amateur ornithologists, including Alfred Keene and Sidney William Jackson. These networking activities, entirely normal for an amateur

ornithologist, brought Ramsay into contact with H.L. White of Belltrees in Scone, a notable Australian ornithological collector. Ramsay sent White some of his photographs made from this trip, which White forwarded to *The Emu*, the journal of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. *The Emu* published these photographs in 1915 in their inaugural section on advice for photographers called Camera Craft Notes, together with excerpts of Ramsay's letter detailing the process of making the photographs (Ramsay, 1915). Ramsay followed this contribution to *The Emu* with notes from two expeditions in 1918 and 1920 (Ramsay, 1918; Ramsay 1920). He also reviewed a 35mm camera for *The Emu* in 1933 (Ramsay, 1933).

Ramsay's love of nature was probably inherited from his father, E.P. Ramsay. E.P. Ramsay was an ornithologist and zoologist and was the curator of the Australian Museum from 1874 to 1894 (Chisholm, 1976). E.P. Ramsay had been something of a field explorer himself before working with and expanding the museum's collections and he also published his own writing. E.P. Ramsay was also a member of the Linnaean Society of London and the Royal Geographical Society of London, amongst many other institutions (Chisholm, 1976). However E.P. Ramsay retired from ill health before J.S.P. had completed his education, and J.S.P. Ramsay also suffered a serious illness in his teens: both circumstances seemed to have affected J.S.P. Ramsay's opportunities for formal education, although Ramsay himself seems never to have dwelt on these circumstances (Southcombe and Gardoll, 2012).

When not engaging with his photographic and ornithological activities, Ramsay was overseeing photographic processing and printing. Originally co-owner of Mercer and Ramsay, when Mercer left the business in 1925, Ramsay established a limited company called Ramsay Photo Works. Mercer and Ramsay was in operation certainly by 1915, although the exact founding date of the company is unknown.¹ The remaining fragments of advertising for Mercer and Ramsay reveal both prices for processing and printing and the fact that the duo described themselves as photographers (Southcombe and Gardoll, 1912; Mercer and Ramsay). Ramsay Photo Works traded for several decades and was only wound up as a business in 1982, a year after Ramsay's death (ASIC Extract, ACN 000019643). Ramsay's second business, which was co-owned by at least one other notable figure from Australian photography, George G. Morris, (Newton, 1980) also seems to have specialised in processing and printing. Although some postcards with their business name on them survive in the National Museum of Australia (NMA, 2013), there is scant documentation outlining the photographic business and Ramsay's interest in it. There are some adverts in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and some adverts in the ornithological journal *The Emu*, which provide some insight into the available services at the processing company (Sydney Morning Herald, 1930; Ramsay, 1921).

Ramsay's papers stored at the Mitchell Library in Sydney also indicate that the 1920s were a busy time for the business, with up to 30 employees prior to the economic crash of 1929; but the business suffered during the 1930s and for a time there was only one employee in the company (Ramsay, 1900-1979, folder 1930-1939). The robustness of the business and its interests are unknown after this time, although there is a suggestion that Ramsay's Photo Works was as much a building where self employed photographic retouchers could rent space in which to work as it was a processing company (APRS, 2005). I understand from Ramsay's heirs that Ramsay's business was generally sound and he also invested in property (Southcombe and Gardoll, 2012), yet Ramsay does not seem to have ever promoted himself socially as a businessman. Ramsay certainly did not become a notable commercial businessman who was reported on in the photographic press, although this particular points needs further research.

The photographer of the postcards for Ramsay Photo Works is unknown, although Ramsay would have been competent at such shots had he wished to make them. His photographs of birds were also reproduced in other publications, including Amy Mack's *Bush Days* (1911) and Cayley's *Birds of Australia*² and he sold photographs to other publishing ornithologists to illustrate their books and articles. Such activities were fairly normal amongst ornithologists and other natural historians, and credit to the photographer would usually be made in the book (see Dudley Le Souef, for example). Ornithologists would also exchange photographs for scholarly purposes, and H.L. White, the famous collector at Scone, would also request photographs of bird behaviour for his collection. Ramsay, however, was at once typical of his generation and yet marginal. Ramsay did not become a major publisher on bird behaviour, yet he did find ways of maintaining his interest in birds and their environments, especially through campaigning against egg collecting and campaigning against the destruction of habitat (Snowden, Ramsay and Lea, 1984: 2-3). Ramsay's photographs, though, are mainly typical of amateur ornithological photography in south-eastern Australia. Peter Slater, for example, introduces his book on historical ornithological photography with Ramsay's early photography and pays less attention to Albert Keene, Launcelot Harrison, Charles Barrett, Norman Chaffer, W.H. Dudley Le Souef, Robert Hall and Archibald James Campbell – many of whom had more prestigious careers in natural history and some of whom had professional standing within their respective fields of natural history (Robin, 2001; Campbell, 1901, Dudley Le Souef, 1907; White, 1991). [Mention restrictive reproduction right and reproduction costs.]

Given that Ramsay was a fairly typical amateur ornithological photographer in the early and mid twentieth century, how might we understand the prominence given to his bird photography and the occlusion of his photographic business? It is through understanding the social prestige of the

amateur, and also through understanding the acquisition practices of the Macleay Museum, together with the desires of J.S.P. Ramsay's son – John Pearson Ramsay – that perhaps this tangled picture can become a little clearer. Luc Boltanski and Jean-Claude Chamboredon, may also offer some insight into the aspirational desires typical of photographic businessmen too.

It is at this point, I think, that this research experiences methodological challenges. As many of you will know, reconstructing a sociological picture in history is impractical, even when some biographical and broader contextual information is available as it is likely to be very incomplete. Nonetheless, what I would like to propose is that Ramsay, son of a significant ornithologist and zoologist, found a way of both making his way in the world of business and in following, at least in part, in his father's footsteps through being a photographic ornithologist, in writing up his field notes and submitting them for publication. In this way, J.S.P. Ramsay would have been able to utilise the 'cultural capital' associated with his family's name, even though his economic position was probably much less secure: Ramsay would have been able to draw upon his father's contacts and social circle (if not also his name) in establishing himself as an amateur ornithologist. Ramsay clearly had an interest in the Australian bush and its wildlife from an early age, and I strongly suspect that his father would have encouraged these activities. And we know that sometime between 1911 and 1915 Ramsay made photographic trading his way of earning a living.

Where Boltanski and Chamboredon potentially help with understanding what this meant from a sociological perspective is in looking at the social aspirations and class backgrounds of professional photographers. Their work draws upon social research undertaken in France in the 1960s – some decades and continents apart from my subject – but there are aspects of their work that seem to ring true for the larger profession of photography. They note, for example, that the social backgrounds of photographers and those working in the various parts of the photography industry tend to be socially diverse (1990: 155). They note some correlation between class and the type of qualification in photography achieved (156). For example, 'young people from the upper classes and middle classes' usually attended a professional school (156), which they note was a 'symbolic means of conforming to the course taken by most of the members of one's class of origin' (157). More importantly, though, success in photography is linked to one's social background and ability to socialise with a wide group of socially prestigious others (160-161). Its practitioners also perceive photography as a socially mobile occupation: "The choice of photographic profession often indicates movement from low-status professions to a profession with a slightly higher status or a status which is less well defined and therefore less easily identifiable" (161). They go on to say that the status of different workers varies, with the darkroom worker being close to that of a manual worker (161). A

man employing darkroom workers is of course closer in status to that a businessman. Photography also provides for some the “hope and promise of upclassing” (161). This might go some way to explain why Mercer and Ramsay described themselves as photographers on their price list – they could fudge their social status as darkroom operatives or small business owners in claiming a socially less well defined occupation that in turn suggests a desire for a greater degree of social mobility.

Photography is only part of the picture here, though, as the status of naturalists and ornithologists also needs to be considered. Taking *The Emu* and the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union as an example, the social spectrum of those involved in ornithology was broad. Certainly those on the council of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union were from the social elite and upper middle class, with some of its notable members being professionally engaged in natural history (Dudley Le Souef) including a retired Colonel from the army (W.V. Legge) and men from the civil service (A.J. Campbell and Henry Kendall).³ Whilst the hierarchy of such organisations was dominated by the socially elite, the organisation encouraged a wide participation of men from different social backgrounds and aimed to be popular in outlook.⁴ The participation of socially diverse men was considered to be important, as the valuing of nature and its environment became a civic responsibility, part of an activity that stressed nationalism and belonging, and part of the broader movement of self improvement and the productive use of leisure time (Griffiths, 1989: 355-356). The RAOU, in contrast to some of its equivalents in other countries, retained a popular base and outlook for many years (Robin, 2001: 1; 117). In addition to that, in the absence of many professionals working in natural history, the knowledge of flora and fauna was dependent upon people willing to spend time in the field and amateurs remained important in the study of natural history. Ornithology, then, was open to those who were willing to spend time becoming knowledgeable about their subject and who would share it with others. Not everyone who participated, though, published their findings or aimed to gain from their observational activities. Ramsay’s publishing, then, can be seen as significant in this regard as it indicates a desire, at least in the 1920s, to establish himself as a field practitioner who published his findings.

Ramsay’s first published photographs were in Amy Mack’s book in 1911. This book was probably aimed at a popular audience who enjoyed exploring the Sydney environs, but did not actually engage with full-scale field expeditions in more remote parts of the continent (Mack had written these short essays for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Mack, 1911: viii). The photographs taken in Scone in 1915, considerably further from Sydney, were considered noteworthy enough to be celebrated for two reasons: firstly, patience in the production of the image (which took a couple of days) and the use of flash photography. From there, Ramsay (perhaps encouraged by White or his

association with Sidney Jackson) travelled further afield. Although the later photographs might be considered less noteworthy from a technical point of view, his desire for undertaking discoveries in the field of ornithology is articulated through in the texts. It is in the articles published in 1918 and 1920 that Ramsay effectively makes a claim for the scholarly contribution to ornithology, and although he uses photography for illustration purposes, much less is made of the photographic activity and the illustrations are almost taken for granted. Ramsay, in these two articles, seems to have made up for the loss of his education and professional status. He did not, however, continue to publish articles. Later in his life he looked back on this time and recounted that his business had become so successful that it took his attention away from ornithology (Slater, 1980: 58) and indeed, his field expeditions discontinue. Ramsay stayed in contact with ornithologists, however, and pursued his campaigning activities for the preservation of habitat (Ramsay, 1900-1979, folders 1930-9; 1950-9). In the 1930s, when the business declined, Ramsay did work with Albert Keene on making a film on the platypus but Ramsay seems to have worked closer to Sydney from this time on.

The interruption of Ramsay's fieldwork with business success raises questions about the lack of acknowledgement of Ramsay's business in his remaining archival fragments. Why is there so little about the business when Ramsay's letters to other ornithologists and others dealing with the environment are carefully documented? (Ramsay kept carbon copies of his outgoing letters.) Some of this probably relates to the lower social status accorded to businessmen and to Ramsay's own desire to follow in his father's footsteps. Ramsay does acknowledge his business in later interviews (Slater, 1980: 58), so it is not hidden from view, but what Ramsay brought to the business practice of photography is not likely ever to be known. Questions remain, however, about Ramsay's prominence in ornithological photography, but the answer to this, I think, lies partly in the Macleay Museum and its confluence of purpose with the bicentenary celebrations of 1988, and the desires of his son, John Ramsay, to see his father remembered.

In 1980 a team of archaeologists at the University of Sydney launched an appeal for the donation of historic photographs. Their concerns were that many photographs of historical importance were simply being discarded, especially upon the death of the older generation. The team, then, encouraged people to donate photographs or to make them available for copying (Groom, n.d.; Sydney Morning Herald, 1980). During the 1980s, the Macleay Museum, part of the University, agreed to house the donations and copies, and seems to have taken over the project in 1981, when a new appeal for material was released (Sun Herald, 1981). It is not known when John Ramsay first made an approach to the Macleay Museum, but he was instrumental in donating his father's collections and helped to organise and catalogue the material. The catalogues at the Macleay

Museum and the Mitchell Library are detailed and painstakingly recorded and were clearly a labour of love undertaken in honour of his father. John Ramsay's activities of ensuring his father's remembrance seem to have echoed J.S.P. Ramsay's activity of sorting and donating his father's materials to various collections in the 1950s (Ramsay, 1900-1979: 1950-1959). J.S.P. Ramsay also passed away in 1981, close to the time of the revival of the Macleay Museum's call for photographic donations. By 1984, when the donation was finally deposited at the Macleay, Catherine Snowden, with John Ramsay and Alison Lea, noted that the value of the collection was recognised by the National Gallery in Canberra and that it was "likely that the visiting curator... will be choosing examples of his work for the comprehensive photographic exhibition the Gallery plans to produce for the Bicentennial celebrations" (Snowden, Ramsay and Lea, 1984: 5). Although it is impossible to go into any detail here on this point, the Bicentennial celebrations were a troubled moment of celebrating the European settlement of the continent of Australia, and notions of pioneering, masculine 'mateship' and the engagement with the bush, including its flora and fauna, were important tropes of nationalism within that celebration.⁵ Owners of businesses, especially small businesses, were not so much a part of the historical narrative, although of course many settlers had found greater economic prosperity in their adopted country.

I have little doubt that J.S.P. Ramsay wanted greater social prestige and desired to follow in his father's footsteps, but perhaps more so when he was a younger man. E.P. Ramsay has an entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and therefore has greater prominence than his son J.S.P. Ramsay (although E.P. Ramsay's entry was written by Alec Chisholm, a noted naturalist and friend of J.S.P. Ramsay). The efforts of John Ramsay, and the Macleay Museum, and also Peter Slater who published a book on the history of Australian ornithological photography (1980) have ensured that J.S.P. Ramsay has been remembered within ornithology and photographic history. What is clear is that Ramsay's interest in ornithology enabled him to socialise with those who had greater social standing, and that his productive use of leisure time, in combination with his photographs that he made, meant that he engaged with twentieth century activities that were important to notions of Australian masculinity. Although fairly marginal within these activities he is now remembered for them, and his business engagement with photography is overlooked. There is really no doubt in this author's mind, though, that Ramsay engaged with some important and powerful discourses that Australians want to be remembered for and actively invest in. Business practices do not seem to have the same powerful imaginative force and connection to notions of nation and belonging. So while the darkroom worker and business manager have been overlooked in the broader histories of photography, partly I guess because of their lesser social prestige, John Ramsay was able to present his father as ornithological photographer and an 'average' Australian worth remembering because

his leisure activities fed into popular notions of nationalism and belonging. The activities of John Ramsay and the Macleay Museum, together with the Bicentennial celebrations, seem to have formed a confluence that have helped to remember this man and his contribution to ornithology for precisely these reasons.

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¹ In a letter to J.H. Bettington regarding a field trip to Norfolk Island Ramsay used Mercer and Ramsay notepaper (Ramsay, 1900-1979, folder 1910-1919).

² Amongst J.S.P. Ramsay's papers at the Mitchell Library is a letter from 'Cayley's Birds of Australia' notifying Ramsay of the acceptance of some photographers. However, cross referencing this letter to Cayley's book (which exist in several editions) has yet to be undertaken. See: letter dated 14th Feb 1921 in Ramsay, J.S.P. 1900-1979. *J.S.P. Ramsay Papers*, Sydney: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 5849.

³ Kendall may not have worked with Campbell as a civil servant – this needs further checking.

⁴ See the inside endpaper of *The Emu*, 1901, part 1 where the objects of the society include the "advancement and popularisation of the Science of Ornithology" and further, A.J. Campbell's *Presidential Address* in *The Emu*, Volume 10, part 3, pp. 179-181.

⁵ This requires careful research, yet to be undertaken.