

THE ELLIS BIRD DRAWINGS

Introduction

Charles Clerke in his final letter of 10 August 1779 to Sir Joseph Banks wrote that he 'must beg leave to recommend to your notice Mr. Will. Ellis one of the Surgeon's mates who will furnish you with some drawings and accounts of the various birds which will come to your possession'.¹ The Ellis bird paintings which thus went to Banks are now in the British Museum (Natural History) where they have been identified most recently by Lysaght (1959).² They consist of 90 water colour drawings of the whole bird with, in many cases, accurate life-size pen and ink sketches of the head of the bird depicted. One of them, Folio 57 of the White fronted Tern *Sterna striata* from New Zealand, is the type of the species illustrated (Lysaght, 1959; Medway, 1976³).

The Alexander Turnbull Library collection of Ellis bird drawings consists of eight folios depicting fourteen species, all those identified being from the North Pacific area. Stresemann (1949, 1953) has indentified the birds seen in that area during Cook's third voyage.⁴ Unlike the London collection, the Wellington one contains only two drawings of the whole bird (Folios 38 and 40), the rest being drawings or line sketches of the head only or the head, feet and bill.

This small collection is nevertheless an important one for at least two reasons. Not only does it consist of original drawings executed *ad vivum* by Ellis in the North Pacific area in 1778 and 1779 during Cook's third voyage; it also includes species not depicted among the more extensive collection of Ellis bird drawings in London and is thus a valuable supplement to that collection.

I have not been able to compare these Ellis bird drawings with his drawings of the same species in the London collection. I have however, with the materials available to me, endeavoured to identify the species illustrated as accurately as possible. The identity of the bird in Folio 40 has, however, eluded me.

The Drawings

FOLIO 32 Three ink and wash drawings of birds' heads with foot and bill detail.

Inscribed in ink:

'71. Guillemot Colymbus N.W.C. of America and elsewhere'.

'72. Brown Sheerwater N.W.C. of America'.

'73. Fullmer, N.W.C. of America'.

Numbered in pencil: 1.210. Watermark: Pro Patria. 31 × 19.8 cm.