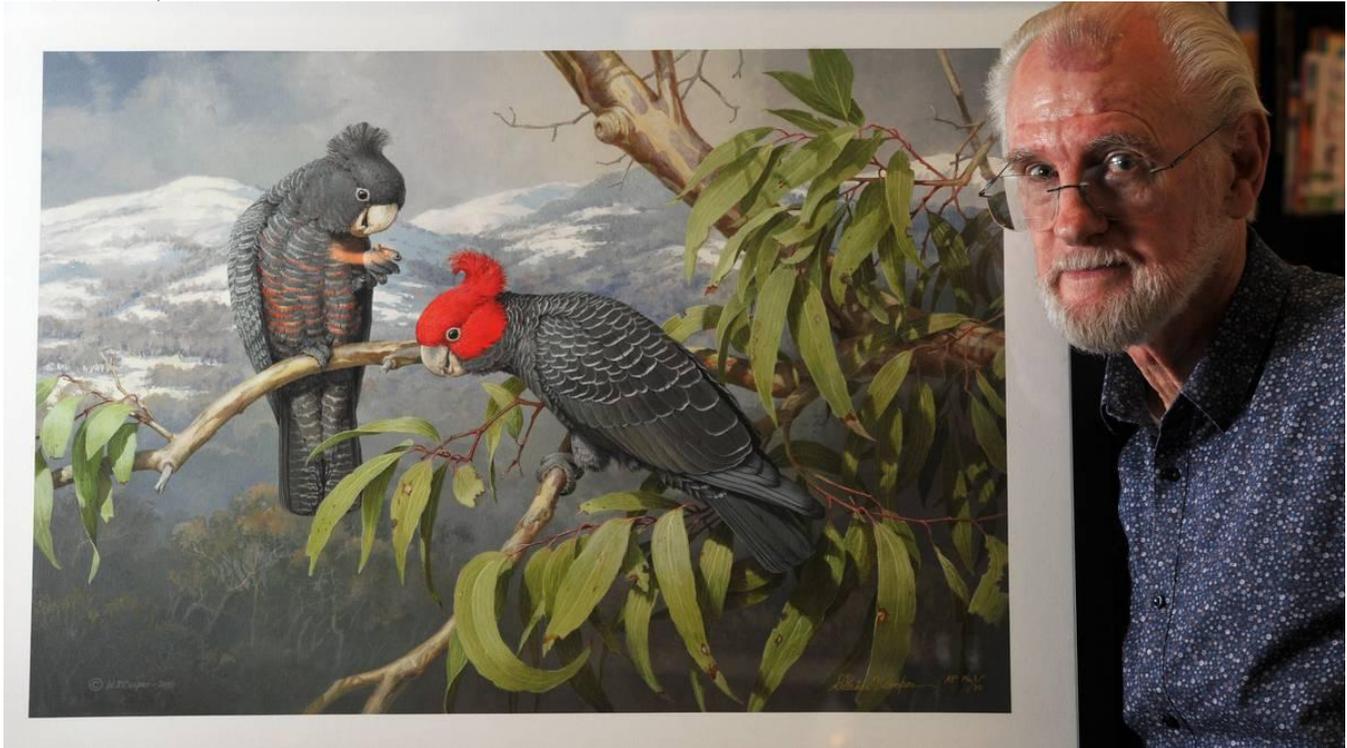
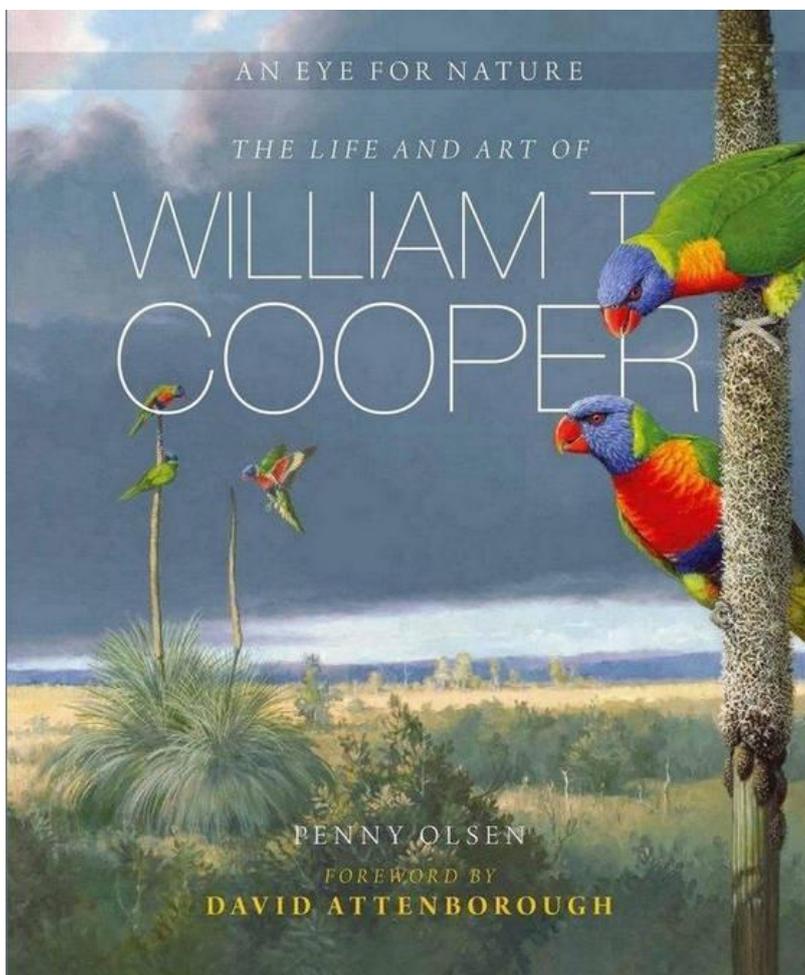


# William T. Cooper: Artist of avian splendour

By MIKE SCANLON - Newcastle Herald  
Feb. 6, 2015, 8:30 p.m.



**Ornithological artist, William T Cooper, who lives in Qld, the launching his book of illustrations, *An Eye for Nature: The Life and Art of William T Cooper*, at the National Library. He is pictured here with a print of a 2010 painting he did of two Gang Gangs. March 27th. 2014 Canberra Times photograph by Graham Tidy.**



*BIRDMAN* is the new buzzword in Hollywood as the Oscar awards loom closer this month.

The new black comedy movie is about a former film superhero (Michael Keaton) as he struggles to mount a Broadway play and revive his career.

But what about the other, more successful birdman lurking in the wings, who is real, has been around for decades and who originally hailed from Newcastle?

"I ALWAYS WANTED TO PAINT LIKE [JOHN] GOULD, BUT THERE WAS NO MARKET... FOR BIRD PAINTERS IN THOSE [EARLY] DAYS."- WILLIAM T. COOPER

He's not an actor, but a famous wildlife artist living with his wife and collaborator, Wendy, painting from a studio in tropical north Queensland.

Meet internationally acclaimed wildlife illustrator William T. Cooper, or plain Bill Cooper, the man whom legendary BBC TV naturalist Sir Richard

Attenborough views as one of the greatest of all bird artists.

Sir David was so impressed with Cooper's skill with the brush that he made a TV documentary about him called *Portrait Painter to the Birds* in 1993.

Later, Attenborough said he believed Cooper was "Australia's greatest living scientific painter of birds" adding, " he is possibly the best in the world".

The British wildlife filmmaker now owns a stack of Cooper's stunning bird illustrations, including a famous colour plate of a flamboyant bird of paradise sitting on a gnarled, moss-covered branch in a misty rainforest.



As well, Cooper, now aged 80 years, was the subject of both a big, glossy book then a documentary, aptly called *Birdman*, only last year. But he may have painted his familiar art works of colourful birds for the last time, choosing instead now to concentrate on landscapes.

Not bad for a former Newcastle lad who lived in Newcastle suburban shantytowns in his early years, before learning to be a teen taxidermist at the now defunct Carey Bay zoo. In childhood, Cooper was fascinated by the works of the great 19th century bird illustrator John Gould, but never in his wildest dreams did he think he'd later make a living from doing

what he secretly loved - painting birds.

Instead, he began painting more commercial landscapes and seascapes from 1964 onwards while working as a window dresser and as a Newcastle clothing store salesman. Cooper's breakthrough to finally painting spectacular birds began at the end of 1968 when he illustrated the book, *A Portfolio of Australian Birds*. Then in April 1970, Cooper made his first visit out of Australia to see and paint Papua New Guinea's more unusual parrots.

My own interest in Cooper's artwork began in the mid 1960s while drinking at the back of the old Westminster Hotel, now Westminster Apartments, in Hunter Street, diagonally opposite Newcastle's old sandstone post office.

Journos, printers, 2KO radio announcers and the CIB forensic detectives from the then Newcastle police station opposite regularly drank there.

Out the back was a small mezzanine lounge with a life-size art mural (now long painted over) that caught my eye. I was told it was painted "by that Bill Cooper artist fellow".

The painting was obviously too good for its surroundings. In retrospect, the large mural was probably a Spanish bullfight scene, like the big one I later discovered he'd done at the nearby Great Northern Hotel, alongside one of Nobbys headland.

Painting private murals for hotels and private homes in the late 1950s, though, were all part of Cooper's rite of passage into the art world. Sadly, most of these art works have now disappeared.

One of his largest, now forgotten, Newcastle commissions was a painting of Australian gums that once hung in the officers' mess of a trans-Pacific cargo boat.

The self-taught artist lived in a variety of places during his years in the Hunter, from Redhead, to Belmont and Bungwahl and his paintings often reflect time spent there.

My interest in the meticulous artist was also rekindled late last year on spying a large painting (from 2006) hanging in Hobart's Tasmanian Museum of a thylacine emerging from bush shadows, cautiously sniffing the air.

A valuable insight into Cooper's early life and struggles finally came early last year with the publication of Penny Olsen's biography of the genial artist. Entitled *An Eye For Nature: The Life and Art of William T. Cooper*, it's lavishly illustrated with nearly 200 paintings and drawings, many never previously published.

In it, author Olsen reveals Newcastle of the 1930s and 1940s being "Poverty town", caught in the vice of the Great Depression. Here, for many men, unemployment, hard drinking and brawls were normal. Big camps of makeshift shacks with hessian-bag walls with dirt floors mushroomed.

Cooper's family squatted for a while in an Adamstown shack. The kids ran wild in the bush.

In 1940 they moved to the New Lambton Estate on coal-company bushland, riddled with old collapsing tunnels and large pits filled with water.



Two years later, in June 1942, after a Japanese submarine shelled Newcastle, young Cooper was sent to live at Manilla, west of Tamworth.

Author Olsen said the artist Sir William Dobell later befriended Cooper, strongly advising him not to go to art school, but to develop his own style. Apart from their working-class Newcastle connection, their early lives had many parallels. Dobell had left school at 14, Cooper at 15. Cooper began painting backdrops in store windows, while Dobell wanted to be a commercial artist and for a while drew shoes for drapers' shops.

Today, birdman William T. Cooper, AO, should be a household name, but isn't.

The Australian National Library and the Papua New Guinea government have bought entire collections of his work and he even designed postage stamps for the PMG government. Back in 1992, the Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia, USA, awarded Cooper a gold medal for distinction in natural art history. He was the first and only Australian recipient in its 190-year history.

"I always wanted to paint like Gould but there was no market, no niche, for bird painters in those [early] days," he once said.

He also made sure he saw every one of his bird subjects in its natural habitat, rather than from photographs, to ensure scientific accuracy. That dedication really came through in the Kimberley, Western Australia, in 2006. Out suddenly in the field without a sketchbook, Cooper made sure of capturing all the fine details of an elusive white-quilled rock pigeon by drawing them on the brim of his felt hat!

This birdman, like his cinematic namesake, flies very high indeed.