

OF BIRDS AND BOMBS

Adrian Koopman writes:

IN the arid, stony Richtersveld, which straddles the border of South Africa and Namibia, two species of lark can be found: Stark's Lark (*Alauda starki*) and Sclater's Lark (*Spizocorys sclateri*), while in the dark recesses of the ornithology shelves in the Life Sciences Library on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal lie the four dusty volumes of Stark and Sclater's *The Birds of South Africa*.

Who were Messrs Stark and Sclater, whose namesakes fly over the western deserts and whose names grace the title pages of these long-unread volumes?

Arthur Cowell Stark (1846–1899) was a medical doctor and naturalist. He emigrated from Torquay, England, where he was born, to Cape Town after the death of his first wife. Besides practising as a medical doctor, he visited the inland regions of what were then the Cape, Orange Free State, Natal and the Transvaal, collecting animal and bird specimens for the South African Museum in Cape Town. He also investigated the major specimen collections in the Albany Museum in Grahamstown and the Durban Museum. He was a keen butterfly collector as well.

In 1899 he returned to England to oversee the printing of the first volume of *The Birds of South Africa*. He returned to Durban to do further research for the next three volumes, and on the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war volunteered his services as a doctor to the British cause and travelled to Ladysmith shortly before the start of the siege. On the 18 November of that year, while standing at the entrance of the Royal Hotel, he was struck by a shell from the Boers' Long Tom gun, and died an hour later from his wounds.



Arthur Stark c.1885

Stark's field notes were afterwards recovered from Ladysmith and his residence in Durban and his executors entrusted these to William Sclater, the director of the South African Museum.

All four volumes were published by R.H. Porter of London, and the title page of the 1900 first volume simply says "by Arthur C. Stark". The title page of the second volume shows Stark as the author, but adds "Completed by W.L. Sclater", while the third and fourth volumes (1903 and 1906) give Sclater as the author, but add "Commenced by Arthur Stark". This change-over of authors is explained by Sclater in a prefatory note to Vol. II, which includes the words:

On the outbreak of the war, Dr. Stark placed his services as a volunteer medical officer at the disposal of the military authorities. He proceeded to Ladysmith, arriving there by the last train before the investment ... [On] November 10th, 1899, Dr. Stark was struck by a shell when standing at the door of the Royal Hotel and was killed almost instantaneously.¹

Charles Clinning's brief note on Dr Stark confirms certain details:

He served actively in the Boer War and was at Ladysmith as a doctor to the British troops during the siege when he was killed by a Boer shell. He was engaged at the time of his death in the preparation of a four-volume work on the birds of South Africa which was completed after his death by W.L. Sclater.²

These two entries both suggest active participation in the war effort as a doctor: "placed his services as a volunteer medical officer at the disposal of the military authorities" and "served actively in the Boer War and was at Ladysmith as a doctor to the British troops". However, two other accounts^{3,4} of his activities in Ladysmith suggest otherwise. Wikipedia says of his time there:

During the siege of Ladysmith, he was resident in the Royal Hotel, but spent the days in shell-proof dugouts along the Klip River, or fishing, while the town was being shelled by Boer forces.

Donald MacDonald's account is a lot more detailed, and a lot more scathing. MacDonald was an Australian war correspondent for the *Melbourne Argus*, and his 1900 *How We Kept the Flag Flying* is a lively and sometimes acidic account of the siege of Ladysmith. He describes Stark as being present in Ladysmith "merely with a visitor's curiosity to witness great events", as being "a man

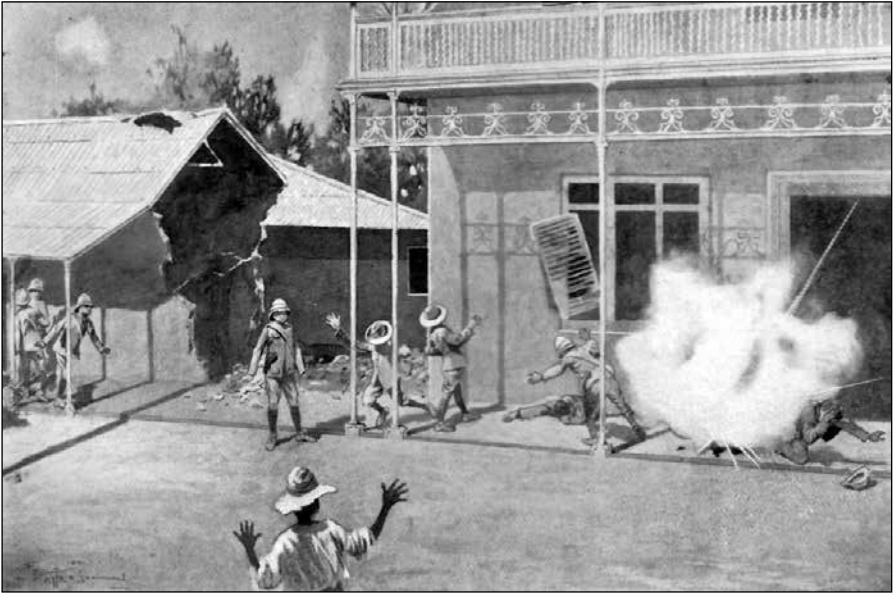
of queer little fads and fancies, who could not move in a community without exciting notice" and as "a quiet, quaint man, who went about sometimes with a butterfly net, [and] sometimes with a fishing rod".⁵ As to Wikipedia's account of Stark's days in a shellproof dugout on the Klip River, MacDonald gives lively detail of this:

He was quite a familiar figure in town, and each morning was to be seen, a tall man in a long overcoat, walking placidly down to the river with an angler's basket slung upon his shoulders. In this he carried his luncheon, and his anxiety to get out of danger led to a good deal of banter. He had just returned from the river-bank. "Well, doctor," said a friend, "got back from your daily picnic?" and before the poor fellow could answer he was cut down.

MacDonald also gives what appears to be an eye-witness account of Stark's death (but may have been constructed with journalistic licence after the event). Stark had been talking to Mr M'Hugh of the *Daily Telegraph* when a first shell from Long Tom struck the pavement opposite the hotel. A second shell came through the roof and

went out the front door, taking poor Dr. Starke⁶ just above the knees as he stood sideways. One leg was cut clean off, the other frightfully shattered down to the foot. "Catch me," he moaned as he fell forward on his face, his blood absolutely splashing over M'Hugh's hands and arms. The correspondent escaped without a scratch, though two others who stood by – one of them a soldier – were hit.⁷

MacDonald concludes his narrative of the tragic end of Dr Stark by saying that he died on the operating table an hour after being hit and was buried a few days later in Ladysmith.



Death of Dr Stark (from MacDonald, facing p. 77)

William Lutley Sclater (1863–1944) was the ideal person to take on Stark’s uncompleted manuscripts. He was the son of Philip Lutley Sclater (1829–1913), the first editor of the British ornithological journal *Ibis* and Secretary of the British Zoological Society for over forty years. William Sclater collected in British Guiana in 1886 and published articles about birds in *Ibis*. He moved to Cape Town with his wife in 1896 to become curator (in other sources “director”) at the South African Museum, which is undoubtedly where he met Dr Stark. He continued his scientific writings, including the work *Flora and Fauna of South Africa*, and as we have seen completed Stark’s four volumes of *Birds of South Africa*.

Sclater seems to have had a penchant for completing other people’s work. He completed the five-volume *Birds of Africa* begun by Captain George Shelley⁸ as well as *The Birds of Kenya Colony and the Uganda Protectorate*, begun by Sir Frederick Jackson.

Sclater returned to England in 1909 and became curator of the Bird Room at the Natural History Museum in London, where he continued to work until his death in 1944 at the age of 81.

Given the demise of Dr Stark from a shell from an enemy gun, it is a curious twist of fate that Sclater died as a result of a direct hit on his London home from a German V1 rocket.

Stark, as we have seen, was buried in Ladysmith, and Sclater presumably in London. But a more fitting memorial to these two naturalists who died so tragically is surely seen in the two species of larks that still fly over the Richtersveld bearing their names.

NOTES

- 1 Stark, Arthur and William Sclater, *The Birds of South Africa* Vol. II (London, R.H. Porter, 1901) preface note. Note that Sclater gives the date as 10 November, which is incorrect. The correct date is 18 November.
- 2 Clinning, Charles, *Southern African Bird Names Explained* (Johannesburg, The Southern African Ornithological Society, 1989) p. 132.

- 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Stark (accessed 30 April 2016).
- 4 MacDonald, Donald, *How We Kept the Flag Flying* (London, Ward, Lock & Co., 1900), pp. 77–8.
- 5 MacDonald, *Flag*, p. 78. In hindsight we would recognise here, not the medical doctor, but the “naturalist”, still seen in those days as a queer creature who goes pottering about in search of “specimens”.
- 6 Note the incorrect spelling here.
- 7 MacDonald, *Flag*, p. 77.
- 8 Commemorated in Shelley’s Francolin (*Francolinus shelleyi*) and Shelley’s Sunbird (*Nectarinia shelleyi*).