

Bibliographic notes on EHA's 'The common birds of Bombay'

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The works of Edward Hamilton Aitken (1851–1909), popularly known as EHA, have a cult following that defies time. Among ornithologists, his *'The common birds of Bombay'* is like gold dust. His works were published at the turn of the twentieth century, and ever since the enthusiasm of his fans has remained unabated. Sálím Ali, no ordinary writer himself, speaks with deep veneration of EHA's prose, in the volume of *Common birds* that he edited in 1947.

Despite the popularity of this work, we do not know the dates of publication of its first two editions². It is widely believed that since EHA's newspaper articles appeared in the *Times of India* prior to 1900, the first edition must have appeared in that year, or soon afterwards. However, no one is certain (Mengel 1972).

In trying to establish a date of publication of EHA's *The common birds of Bombay* I do not seek to execute a bibliographic coup, for indeed the work does not contain anything that would overturn scientific ornithology: no dating or priority issues, no new names proposed or ornithological theories propounded, no *'Mih'* moments. I simply take this opportunity to try and add to the pleasures of EHA fans by unravelling the journey of his endearingly celebratory record of Indian birdlife and birdlore.

A book is 'dated,' in one of several ways. The easiest is when the publisher prints the year of publication either on the title page, or in the imprint page, behind it. Sometimes, one finds a later, or even an earlier date than the one mentioned on the above two pages, inside the book, either at the end of a preface, or a foreword. This date, if later, is then taken as the year of publication; if earlier, it might be useful for other points of research.³ When none of these forms of dating is present to be followed, then one begins to scout around for clues from the book world: library catalogues,

reviews in journals, bibliographic records, *etc.*, intending to arrive at an approximate date of publication. Probing deeper, one searches for hints dropped by the author or his friends and acquaintances: journal entries, private correspondence, presentation copies, inscribed copies, *etc.*

The 1st edition

Recently I acquired a volume of EHA's *Common birds* that is, hold your breath, a presentation copy from the author to an unknown person. It is inscribed by him on the half-title page, "A happy voyage home," signed, "E. H. Aitken," and dated "19th March. 1901," (Fig. 1a). This might be the earliest dated copy of EHA's book yet recorded. It might also be a first edition, first printing. I will describe the book first and then show why I claim this.

The volume is bound in cloth on boards, a rich navy blue in colour, with the title reverse-embossed in gilt in the upper left hand corner. The author's popular pen name, EHA, is similarly reverse-embossed on the lower right hand corner of the upper board. The rounded spine carries the title in its upper side, also in gilt. The front cover is plain, i.e., un-illustrated (Fig. 1b). The endpapers of this volume have a delicate floral pattern (aka:

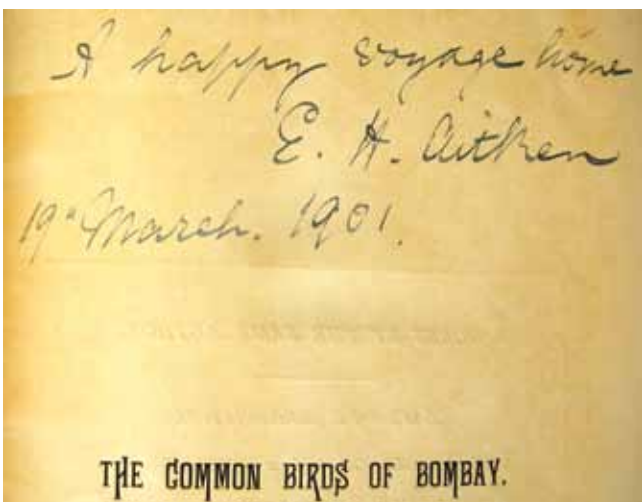


Fig. 1a. EHA's inscription in the 1st ed., presentation copy of *Common birds*.

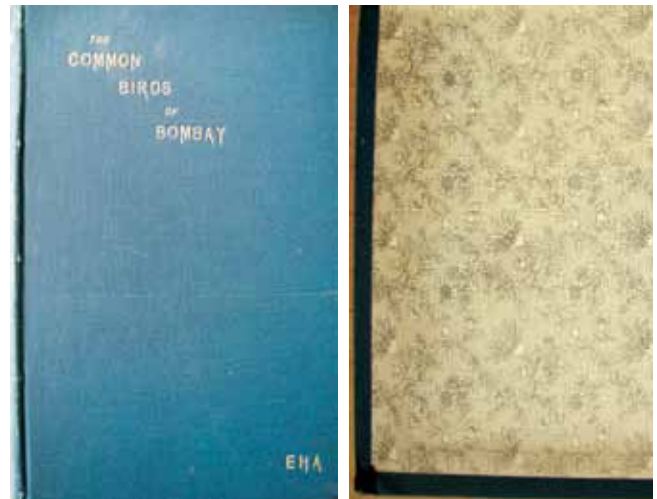


Fig. 1b (L). Cover of 1st ed., of *Common birds*.

Fig. 1c (R). Fleuron-patterned endpaper of 1st ed., of *Common birds*.

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Hamilton_Aitken [downloaded 3 Nov 2011].
2. Edition: "Strictly speaking, an edition comprises all copies of a book printed at any time or times from one setting-up of type without substantial change (including copies printed from stereotype, electrotype or similar plates made from that setting of type); while an impression or printing comprises the whole number of copies of that edition printed at one time, i.e. without the type or plates being removed from the press" (Carter & Barker 2004).
3. A good example is the 1947 ed., of *Common birds*, which Sálím Ali edited. His preface dated from January 1945, in which he speaks of the 1st ed., being published, "In the 40 odd years since the articles were first published in the *Times of India* ..." (p. v).

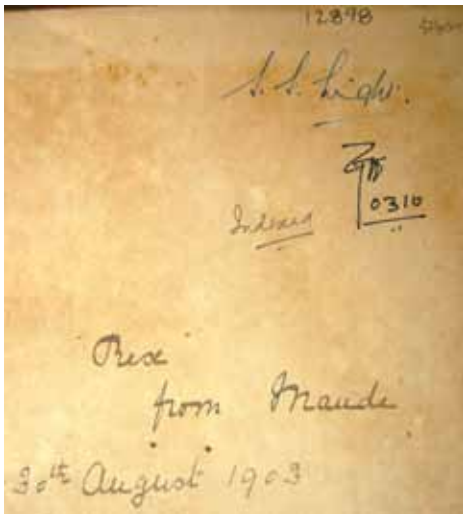


Fig. 2a. Gift inscription on free front endpaper of 2nd impression of 1st ed., of *Common birds*.

fleurons) in a faded lilac hue (Fig. 1c). There is no date given anywhere in the book. This volume matches exactly, well, almost, with another that has been digitised and uploaded on the www.archive.org⁴ website. So why do I claim this to be a 1st ed., 1st printing?

In my library is another specimen of this book which is also inscribed, this time on the free front endpaper with the words, "Rex from Maude," and dated, "30th August 1903," (Fig. 2a).

Someone who has not seen the earlier version could consider this example to be from a first edition. Almost everything in its geography and bibliographic detailing is similar to the above-described volume, except for the following:

1. It has a different cover. This one also is bound in cloth on boards, but the cloth is greyish in colour. The title is in black ink in the top third of the cover, and the author's initials, EHA, are in the bottom left corner. In the centre is reproduced EHA's inimitable sketch of a Black Drongo, with an insect in its beak, perched upon a bare branch (Fig. 2b).
2. The endpapers are of plain paper.
3. The fore edge of the cloth binding, at least in my copy, extends beyond the edge of the boards, forming a loose (not stiff) edge (Fig. 2c).
4. The title on the spine is all along it and running vertically upwards.

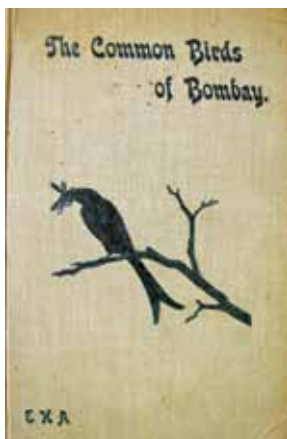


Fig. 2c. Loose fore-edges of upper and lower boards.

Fig. 2b. Cover of 2nd impression of 1st ed., of *Common birds*.

4. <http://www.archive.org/details/commonbirds-of-bom00aitkrich>
5. Impression: "The number of copies of an edition printed at one time. ..." (Carter & Barker 2004).

This volume seems to be a second impression⁵ of the first edition, published with a different cover after the first lot sold out by 1903, or perhaps a little earlier. It employs the same type as the earlier volume, and so could be a reprint that used the original standing type, or it could be that the first impression was rebound with a different cover. It is the existence of this volume that prompted me to claim the earlier one as a 1st ed., 1st impression.

After reading this note, my friend Humayun Taher, pursued the mystery of the undated first edition, till he dug up evidence of its publication in 1900 (pers. comm., vide email dated 22 November 2011). This was in the introduction to EHA's posthumously published *Concerning animals and other matters* (1914), wherein Surgeon General W. B. Bannermann wrote, "In 1900 was published *The Common Birds of Bombay*," (?p. 7). This I believe confirms my copy to be from that 1900 printing.

The 2nd edition

But there *was* a second edition. This was also published with no dated title page. Its title page carried the epithet, "2nd Edition" (Fig. 3a). There are several changes visible in this volume.

1. The cover remains cloth on boards. However the illustration and type used for the title differ from the earlier volume (Fig. 3b).

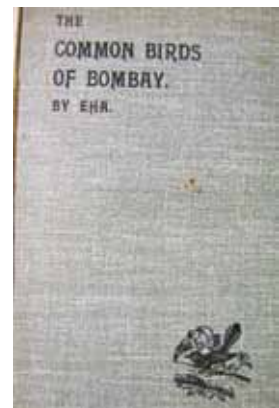
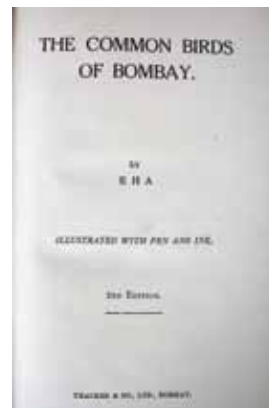


Fig. 3a (L). Title page of 2nd ed., of *Common birds*. Fig. 3b (R). Cover of 2nd ed., of *Common birds*.

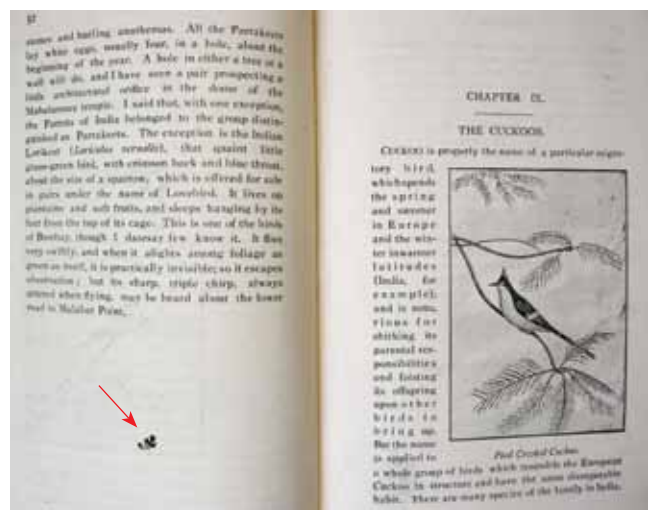


Fig. 4a. Vignette on p. 52 of 1st ed., of *Common birds*.

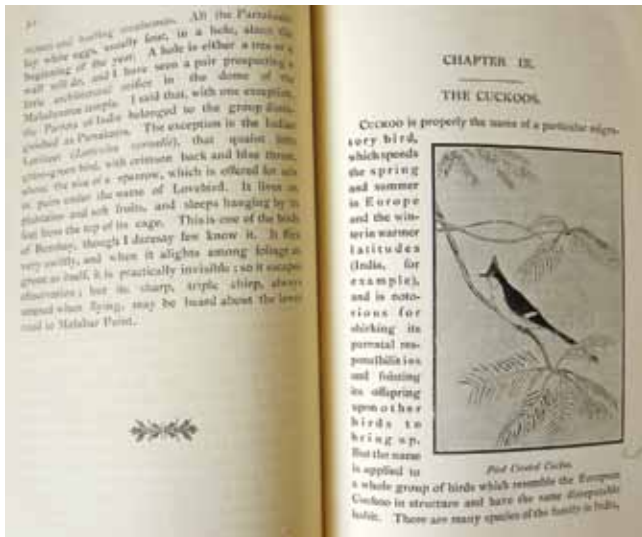


Fig. 4b. Vignette on p. 52 in 2nd ed., of *Common birds*.

2. The spine carries the title in the upper part (or head), and the publisher's name near the lower end (or tail).
3. Pagination remains the same, as does the type used for the text block.
4. All vignettes (aka: glyphs or ornaments) used as tail-pieces of chapters differ from those in the earlier two volumes, which were identical (Fig. 4a & 4b). This is the critical element that demonstrates that it is, as claimed, a second edition. It would take a great deal more study to be sure that no corrections have been made in the text used for the first edition.

The 3rd edition

As far as I know, the edition published after this is the one edited by Sálím Ali and dated 1947 (Fig. 5). It carries the epithet, "3rd Edition," on the title page and on the imprint page, and the latter includes, "Published 1947."

In the final analysis, we find evidence that the first edition was probably published in 1900 and that it was certainly in existence as a published work in March 1903; we trace an hitherto unknown second impression of that edition; and we confirm the existence of an undated second edition. For the time being we must be content with the result of our bibliographic research, but further material may surface in the future. For an annotated bibliography of EHA's "*Common birds*" see Pittie (2010).

Now to hold the volume that EHA himself held and inscribed, and sink into his incomparable prose, and think on remaining questions such as: to whom did EHA present this copy? Why were they going home? Where was "home"? Did he present it at a sending off party, or was it thrust into a hand in the nick of time, as its recipient boarded the ship?

EHA's correspondence, and diaries beckon!



A view of the spines of various editions of *Common birds*.



Fig. 5. Dust jacket of the 3rd ed. of *Common birds*. Artist unknown, but perhaps EHA himself, as the initials appear in small print on the artwork.

Acknowledgements

My deep thanks to Humayun Taher for whetting this note, and for ultimately locating evidence for the first edition's publication date and to Edward Dickinson for improving its readability.

References

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