Game in Transit

A history of the rhino in South Australia

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Press

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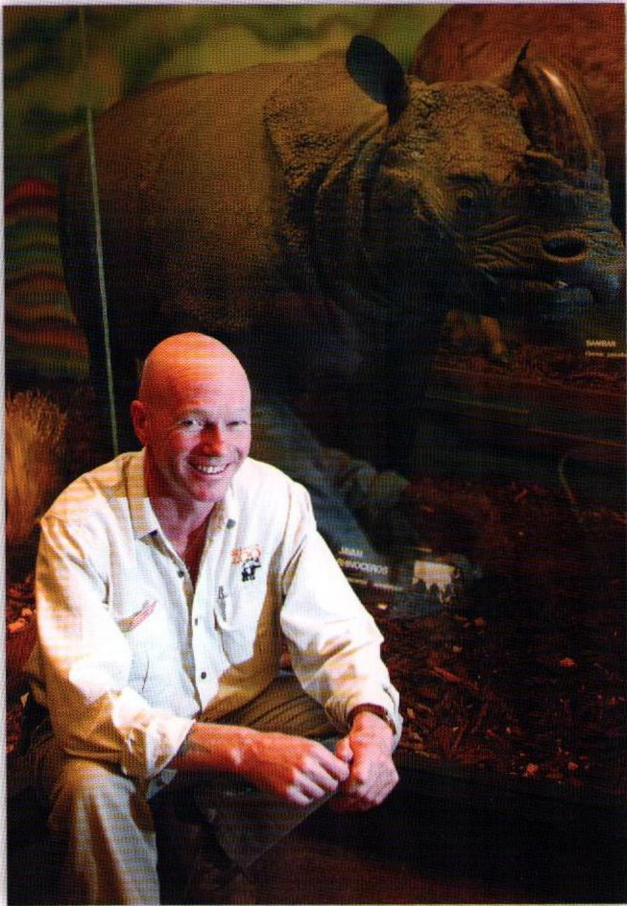
The rhino is but a small piece of a very large puzzle, but it is a puzzle that we will now never be able to complete, because every day we lose more pieces.

Geoff Brooks, 2016



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Chapter 1

The only rhinoceros in the colonies

During a conversation with former Adelaide Zoo Director Kevin Evans I learnt the Asian rhino in the South Australian Museum was 'ours', a former resident of the zoo with quite a story behind him. For whatever reason I had not made the connection between the Museum and the Zoo, and had never heard his story. It intrigued me to think that such an animal, one whose place is cemented in history, stands virtually unknown on North Terrace.

Mr Rhini arrived at the Adelaide Zoo, then known as The Gardens, early in 1886. Exhibited wrongly throughout his life as an Indian one-horned rhino, he was at the time said to be the only rhinoceros in the colonies, was to become the world's last Javan rhinoceros in captivity,

> 'Where did you get the rhinoceros?'
>
> 'Oh, I got that grand little fellow from a dealer who had just come from Borneo. He had three more, but this one was the best. He is as tame as a pig, and only 18 months old, but strong as a horse. I gave £66 for him, and was offered £200 for him in Sydney.'

These are Director R.E. Minchin's words from an interview he gave in 1886 to the *South Australian Register.* The newspaper article detailed his travels to Batavia, Bangkok, Siam (Thailand) and Singapore, a trip where he not only collected an enormous number of specimens for the zoo including the rhinoceros, and met the King of Siam, but also witnessed *bastinado* punishments (foot whipping) and executions on the streets of Bangkok.

Collecting animals from Asia to build the collection of a fledgling Australian zoo in the late 1880s would have been an adventure worthy of any explorer. This part of the world would have still been feeling the physical and economic effects of one of the greatest natural disasters of their time, the 1883 explosion of the volcano Krakatoa and the resulting tsunamis that killed more than 36,000 people. Negotiating with the locals would have been difficult, requiring translators and guides for a language and customs far removed from the Victorian era ideals held back home. Tact and patience would have been needed, as few cultures are as tied to schedules as we are in the West. Time and tide wait for no man, but the English have them on the clock.

Transporting the captured wild animals from villages and markets posed problems, with each species having its own particular requirements. Imagine having to construct transport crates capable of surviving a long sea voyage out of locally sourced materials. Many animals acquired from dealers and local menageries were in poor condition, injured during capture, and malnourished during captivity. Many required treatment and care, something not always available for the local human population, let alone an animal. Yet some were so rare that it was felt worth the risk of transport in an attempt to exhibit and breed the species.

Standards for transporting these sometimes precious and delicate creatures were nothing like the stringent procedures that we have in place today. Most of the larger species were forced by space restrictions on early vessels to travel up on deck. Taken from their sheltering jungle and exposed to the elements on an ocean-going vessel saw many valuable specimens lost during the long voyage home.

Adding to the difficulties, the Director also found that there was competition for some of the rarer species. A number of times he found the particular birds or animals he wanted had already been bought. Agents for Charles Jamrach, a famous British wildlife trader who sold to noblemen, zoos and menageries, were buying everything they could for the more affluent European and US markets. Jamrach's emporium near Tobacco Dock in East London was the largest animal trading outlet in

the world. To complement his acquisitions, seafarers who moored at the busy Port of London would sell him any exotic animals they brought back from their voyages.

In 1857 a Bengal tiger escaped from the emporium and carried off an eight-year-old boy. Jamrach heroically rescued the boy, forcing the tiger to drop him by ramming his hand down the tiger's throat. The tiger's escape and the boy's subsequent rescue are commemorated by a bronze statue that stands close to the site of the incident. Such was Jamrach's fame and reputation as a trader he is named in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* as the provider of the Norwegian wolf that escapes from the London Zoo.

After months of bartering and struggling with multi-language negotiations the shopping list of specimens bought back by the Director was reported by the paper as follows:

> Mr. Minchin left Adelaide on December 18 last year on a visit to Siam and various other places for the purpose of selecting suitable specimens of various birds and beasts to increase the attractions of our Zoological Gardens, and he has performed his mission with excellent judgment, having brought back a fine collection, consisting of one rhinoceros (a fine healthy fellow), two curious white buffaloes, a black panther, two leopards, one soil-bear, ten tiger cats, four Siamese cats, two orang-utans, one red-faced monkey, two black monkeys, three monkeys of various species, one porcupine, two baboons, two squirrels, one pelican, ten crown pigeons, one crane, five pheasants, four white guinea fowls, two white hawks, fifteen gorgeously plumaged parrots, five Nicobar pigeons, seven blue rails, two peacocks, four blackbirds, one white monkey with pink eyes (a lively intelligent-looking fellow, and a great favourite with the sailors), two alligators (one a rather formidable looking young fellow, five feet long, the other a piccanninie), ten tortoises, six vultures (caught at a feast on human flesh), two slow loris, and a few other curious creatures.

Upon arrival in Adelaide, the steamship *Guthrie* commanded by Captain S.G. Green was met by the customs launch of the day. Mr C.J. Valentine, inspector of stock, gave the entire collection a clean bill of health. Also coming on board was the taxidermist from the museum, and the assistant health officer.

The voyage had been trying and Director Minchin had been with his collection night and day when the weather was bad. One of the major problems he had to deal with was not the weather or rough seas, but the crew. Some of the crew had the notion that all animals will chew tobacco and drink alcohol if they have the chance, so he had to be on guard to ensure that nothing was given to his charges that would do them harm.

During the onboard interview, Mr Rhini made his presence known:

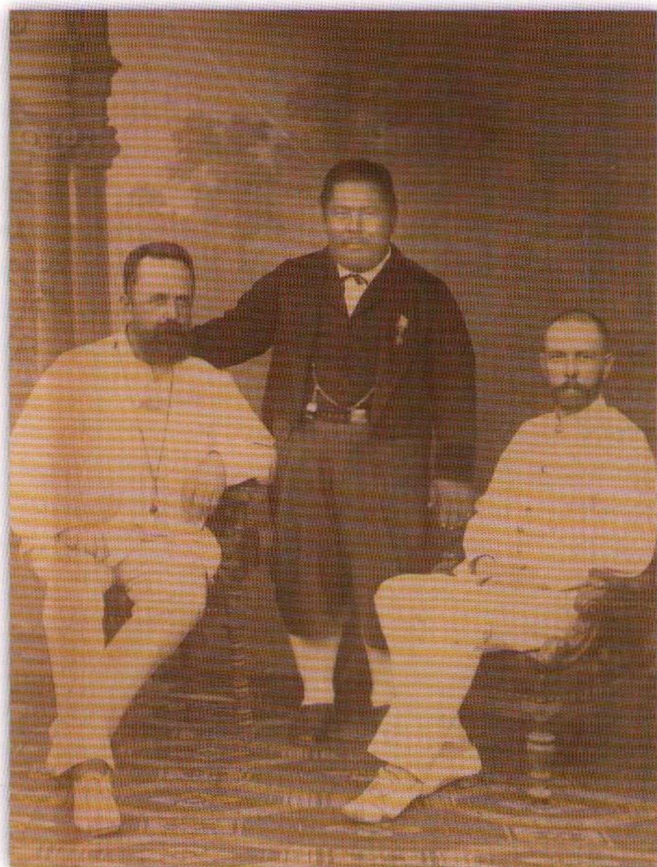
> While we were speaking he pushed his long, ungainly head against the stout wooden bars of his cage, uttering a peculiar half grunting, half squeaking noise, and looking as amiable as a pig out of his small, bright, black eyes. His horn is a mere knob, and the rough folds of his hide are flexible, as yet the skin being only 'platey' at the sides. He is a male, and gives every promise of growing into a fine large bulky beast. He has a plump well-fed look and stood the voyage well.

The state governor of the day, Sir William Robinson, had given Director Minchin a letter of introduction to the British Minister to Siam, a letter of request that he hoped would help with an introduction to the King and the acquisition of a number of animals for The Gardens in Adelaide.

Minchin arrived in Bangkok to find the Minister away in Burma, so handed the letter to the officer in charge. He then had to wait. Fortunately Mr Otto Weber, the Swedish Consul, took an interest in him and his affairs and helped with introductions to the King's brother. The King's brother would not recognise the letter of introduction to the British minister, but was persuaded to assist with an introduction upon hearing the Director had a presentation to deliver from the colony of South Australia. Nine days after arriving, Director Minchin was finally admitted to the King's presence, where he delivered a gift of emu eggs, handsomely mounted in silver by Mr Wendt of Rundle Street.

Whilst waiting for an audience with the King, Minchin had time to investigate his surroundings. The streets of 19th century Bangkok covered about 12 square kilometres and held a population of nearly half a million people. The ancient walled city still had a very Chinese feel about

it, having only a few years before broken from an exclusive economic involvement with China that had dominated much of the previous century. It was on these streets that he witnessed several executions. An execution for murder was carried out with little fanfare. The murderer was brought forward in a timber box, his head and hands protruding. Both the victim and the executioner appeared drunk. The executioner



Director Richard E. Minchin (left) with the King (centre), 1886. (Although claiming to be a photograph of the King, it may in fact show a Palace official. Other photos of the King from youth to old age show a taller and more slender man.) The identity of the other person is unclear, but he may be Mr Otto Webber, the Swedish Consul who assisted the Director with introductions. (Photo: RZSSA)

walked behind the man and, with one stroke of his sword, decapitated him in front of the crowd. The *bastinado* punishments Minchin witnessed were for refusing to inform.

The Director was given permission to visit the royal menageries, but he was disappointed by what he found. The animals he saw were in poor condition. 'They are like children with toys, the Director said, the animals are a source of interest for a few days and are then neglected. I did not see them fed or watered while I was there.' As a rule animals obtained from Oriental menageries were not well fed or housed, and did not compare in health or vitality with the occupants of Adelaide's zoo.

Minchin described the King as a little man, flat as a board, with an intelligent face, who would be rather nice-looking were it not for the quantity of betel-nut he chewed. Through an interpreter he told the King that he was in search of animals for the South Australian Zoological Gardens and showed him a list. Even though the King spoke English he would not speak in that language, but gave instructions that the Director was to have all he required.

The enclosures in which the animals were kept were very large. This created problems once permission was given to take the animals for transport to Australia. The methods used to capture these animals were fairly simple. A gang of prisoners in chains was supplied to capture the animals and drive them into the cages. The shouts and cries made by this group only served to scare many of the animals into the farthest corner of their cages. This meant many animals had to be lassoed with a slipknot on a long bamboo pole. Some animals were lost by strangulation using this method, including a black panther. I can only imagine that some of the prisoners also suffered serious injury as a result of the capture methods, as a number of the animals chosen for transport, including the aforementioned panther, were dangerous carnivores.

From the moment an animal was acquired it was the buyer's problem. Once accepted they were left just where they were in their crude cages, and the new owner had to get them to the seaport in the best way possible. As there was no formalised method of transporting cargo most

of the animals were carried to the ship in their cages on crude carts or by bearers on their shoulders.

Some animals were obtained just as chance offered. Some like the rhinoceros were brought over in boats from Borneo and surrounding islands to the nearest market.

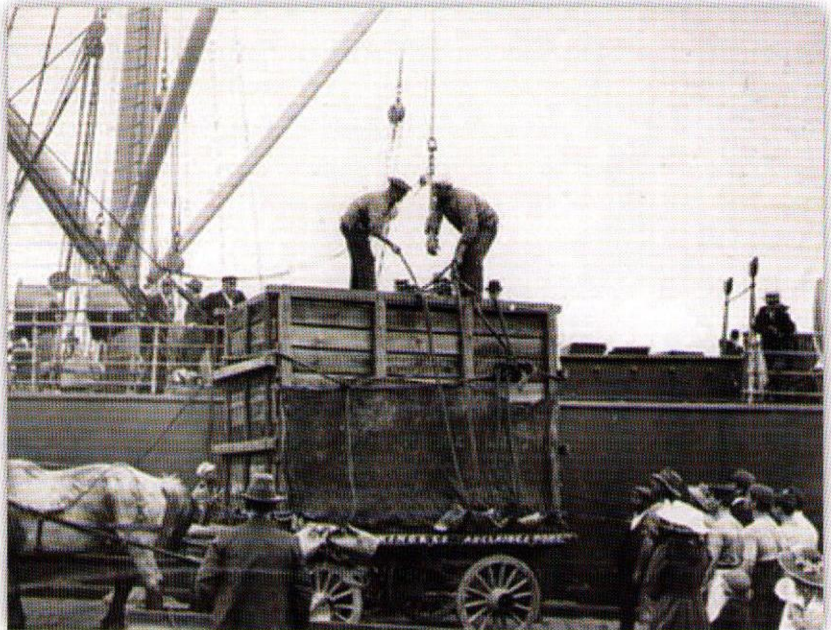
Transporting the animals was not the only concern, food was needed: hay for the buffaloes; bran, fruit and biscuits for the rhino, apes and monkeys; seed and grain for the birds; and sheep for the carnivores. All of this had to be obtained prior to setting a course for Adelaide. Once on board staff were required to feed, clean and care for this huge and varied collection.

Travelling the globe in the 1880s was a time-consuming occupation. The Director and his collection left Singapore on 10 March aboard the steamship *Guthrie*, stopping at 11 ports along the way. The journey home

The steamship SS Guthrie. *On its outward voyage it transported 353 passengers to their jobs in Queensland and returned with numerous animals and birds for the zoo, and a full cargo of Asian products including rice and crackers, tea and rattans, oil and tapioca to deliver to Australian ports along the way.*
(Photo courtesy of John Hoskin)

took 34 days and even though the *Guthrie* was billed as 'the favourite steamship, with splendid accommodation for passengers', it would not have been a pleasure cruise.

The *Guthrie* was built by B.W. Doxford & Sons Ltd, Sunderland, in 1884 for the Eastern & Australian (E&A) Steamship Co. Ltd. The iron steamship, weighing 2338 gross tons, (1494 net tons) and measuring 314 feet long x 38 feet wide x 23 feet deep, was employed on the Australia to Far East run via Singapore, taking in the ports of Darwin and Thursday Island for more than 20 years. Sold in 1913 to Hong Kong interests and rumoured to have been renamed *Helvette*, it was lost in the China Sea on 1 November 1914.



After unloading the crates of assorted birds and animals, the trip from the Port to the zoo was at a leisurely pace on the car-free streets of Adelaide.
(Photo: RZSSA)

At Port Adelaide, the zoo's head keeper Mr Edwards waited to transport them the final 15 kilometres to The Gardens. According to the meteorological report for 12 April, it was fine, but partly cloudy with moderate to fresh south-east winds. This collection of strange birds and animals in their crudely built cages must have been quite a sight as it slowly made its way down Port Road to the city. Most would have been carried on a procession of horse-drawn carts, but I wonder if the two white buffalo were made to walk. Australia's modern-day quarantine service would have a fit!

As the first of his kind to ever set foot in Adelaide, Mr Rhini created a great deal of interest. He had arrived three weeks before Easter in 1886, and the large crowds visiting the zoo were accredited to him. Record sums were taken, £90 on the Good Friday and £101 on the Easter Monday, an enormous amount of money for the time.

Over the course of his life at the zoo Mr Rhini grew in size and strength, and his exercise yard, which had originally been enclosed by a simple fence, was soon not considered safe for such a powerful animal. A wall was built, with a smaller wall in front topped with a railing. The space in front of the rhinoceros house and exercise yard was covered with asphalt to cope with the volume of visitors.

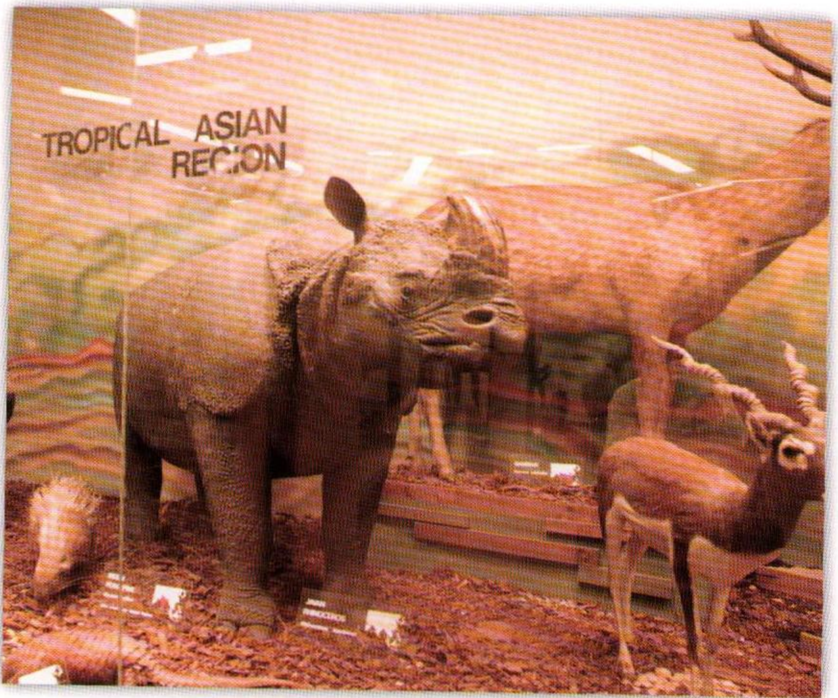
Mr Rhini occasionally made the local papers. There are short pieces about the comical noises he would make at passers-by, and there are the almost inevitable articles where the thickness of his skin is compared with that of local politicians. He was a popular character within the zoo population and a source of pride within the zoo community.

For 20 years he was a part of The Gardens landscape, and was said to have led a blameless life. His only crime, according to the Director, was a pardonable one perpetrated during construction of the reptile house next to his enclosure. A workman had hung his coat on a wall within reach of Mr Rhini's enquiring nose. Returning for his coat, the workman found it had disappeared, with the chief suspect being the rhinoceros – who was said to have had a smile on his face.

On the news of Mr Rhini's death, the *Register* published an article in

which it stated Adelaide had lost one of its respected citizens, and the Adelaide Zoo a very valuable exhibit. A post mortem revealed his teeth were so worn they were virtually useless for chewing. He had been unable to eat the fodder he had lived on for many years and had spent his final years eating foods that could be easily digested. At the time he was valued by industry standards at about £1500, but this price was based on the assumption that he was a more common species.

More than a year after his death reporters from 'The *Register* wrote a piece lamenting his loss. After spending an enjoyable day at the zoo they found Mr Rhini noticeable by his absence. They shared their memories



In the South Australian Museum Mr Rhini is exhibited with Miss Siam, Adelaide Zoo's first elephant. They were once housed side by side at the zoo; they may have even acknowledged each other as Miss Siam walked past carrying visitors in the howdah on her back. More than a century later they are still together.

of him, how he blew bubbles as he wallowed in his bath during Adelaide's long hot summers. They remembered how he had grown and that his incessant horn rubbing had seen the need for a stronger fence to contain him. There was also his attention-seeking habit of grunting at people as they tried to pass him by. From the time he arrived in the late 1880s he made an impression, and in the decades before his passing in 1907 his exotic personality had left an indelible mark. Adelaide had never seen anything like him.

Mr Rhini was sent to the South Australian Museum. The Museum and the Zoo had a working relationship; both were building their collections and any exotic animal was valuable, alive or dead.

There was a substantial story published on his preparation and mounting, in which the then director of the Museum, Professor Stirling, was interviewed. He described in some detail the work involved in removing the skin, muscle and bone to strip the animal down, and the preparation of steel frames, plaster and padding required to give a near perfect representation of the living animal.

Mr Rhini was beautifully prepared, to such a degree that some 40 years later, after having been exhibited throughout his life – and death – as an Indian one-horned rhinoceros he was studied and correctly identified as a Javan rhinoceros (*R. sondaicus*).

To put this in perspective as to how unique this made him, in the history of captive rhino there are only 22 Javan rhino recorded since the 17th century. L.C. Rookmaaker's comprehensive book *The Rhinoceros in Captivity* covers all species of captive rhino from Roman times till 1994, and records that only four Javan rhino survived their capture and transport out of Asia. They were exhibited in Calcutta, London and Adelaide. Only one of them, Mr Rhini, lived more than 20 years, outliving the only other Javan rhino in captivity by 15 years. This made him the last of his kind in captivity, and sadly he may be the only one of his kind that most of us will ever see.

Today the Javan rhino has an appallingly low population. The estimate is somewhere between 38 and 44 individuals remain. This population

is at risk on a number of fronts, with one of them being that the entire population is found in one national park, Ujung Kulon NP in Indonesia.

There was another population with possibly as few as five animals in Cat Tien National Park in Viet Nam, but after no sightings, or traces of them including camera traps, for three years (until a poached animal was found in 2010), this population was declared extinct in November 2011.

Ujong Kulon National Park struggles with an encroaching human population and incursions by stock and wild banteng cattle. There are also invasive plant species crowding out rhino food plants and the ever-present danger of poaching. A recent concern is that the population once considered stable, may now be in decline. Work is being carried out so that a small number of Javan rhino may be relocated to an intensely managed fenced area near Ujong Kulon at Gunung Honje to create a second population, but this species has not been trapped or transported successfully for more than a century. So there are risks.

This part of the world is vulnerable to volcanic activity. The great volcano Krakatoa still lives in the form of Anak Krakatoa, or Son of Krakatoa, just west of Java. This new volcano first appeared above the waves in the wreckage of the old one in 1927. Growing at an enormous rate, it now stands more than 300 metres high and is a living, breathing volcano, one whose life has been punctuated with a series of violent eruptions, the most recent in September 2012.

I must admit that prior to researching Mr Rhini my knowledge of the Javan rhino, and in fact of all three Asian rhino species, was limited. All are endangered, with the Sumatran and Javan on the critical list.

Estimates of the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) population place it at less than 200 individuals. Even though there are less Javan rhino, the Sumatran is considered the most endangered rhino in the world because of the extreme fragmentation of its population. Indonesia, Sabah and Malaysia hold the only significant populations. Sumatran rhinos are found only in protected areas and the best possible hope for their survival is the continued protection provided by highly

trained anti-poaching teams known as Rhino Protection Units (RPUs). This rhino, also known as the hairy rhinoceros, is the last representative of the woolly rhinoceros family.

The greater one-horn or Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) is seen as a conservation success story. Strictly protected by wildlife authorities the population has increased from approximately 200 animals at the turn of the 20th century to almost 3000 today. Poaching of the greater-one horned rhino has remained high in both India and Nepal and there is still a long way to go before this species, or the Javan and Sumatran rhino, are considered secure.

In yet another case of mistaken identity, Mr Rhini was incorrectly described as a Sumatran rhino in the 1978 book *Royal Zoological Society of South Australia 1878–1978* by C.E. Rix. In the copy I have there is a paper tag that was glued in after publication, but before distribution, correcting this mistake.

In 2010 I met with Dr David Stemmer, Collection Manager of Mammals of the SA Museum. The museum was at the time unaware of the status or place in history of this rhino. He is interpreted simply as Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). There is little written history of this rhino within the museum as more efficient record-keeping practices were only instituted after 1910, three years after his death and subsequent mounting.

An *Advertiser* article stemming from this research into Mr Rhini's story led to a radio interview. At one point we discussed the pronunciation of his name. I pronounced it one way, the radio presenter another. We finally came to the conclusion that it really didn't matter, as he would not have been called by name for more than a hundred years.

In his time Mr Rhini may have been as well known as Digger our southern white rhino calf is now. Some would have formed an emotional attachment to him, visited him and read of his exploits in the local papers, and they would have known him by name and known how to pronounce it.

It seems strange to see Mr Rhini now as I have a different perception of him. I had seen this rhino before, but then he was only an anonymous specimen, with no backstory and one to which I had no attachment. Today when I look at him, I see more than a lifeless representation of a critically endangered species. I see an animal that once had a name and was once much loved; and I see a personality, much as I do every day with our rhino at Monarto.