

BROWNING AND THE COCKATOOS Mike Disney

30/10/14

When we lived in Canberra I had a regular chess partner called Browning who was a seriously resourceful man. When his family outgrew his income as a humble government scientist he resigned to become an entrepreneur, and very quickly a multi-millionaire. Almost every month it seemed he dreamed up yet another ingenious scheme to make more millions – which worked. When I knew him only the Governor General of Australia had a larger mansion than he had – and Browning had plans about that.

All would have continued well had not Browning taken on a flock of cockatoos, large white birds with sulphur coloured crests and harsh calls like super-sized football rattles. Browning's latest money-making scheme involved buying a modest sized mountain outside Canberra and planting it with tree seedlings which he planned to sell to gardeners when they matured. The problem was that the mountain already belonged to the cockatoos – who found the seedlings very tasty.

Not used to being defeated Browning employed his considerable ingenuity and massive fortune to exterminate the pests. Every week he would retail his latest move in the blood-thirsty campaign: poison, bird-lime, traps, guns actuated by trip-wires and firing along fixed lines; large mines that could be detonated remotely from his office at home; boomerangs, bird-scarers, a powerful loudspeaker system for broadcasting Cockatoo distress calls; hunters; hawks; mortars; parachute flares, aerial grenades, sky-rocketsthere was no end to the slaughter: possums, wallabies, snakes, echidna, goannas, seagulls, pigeons, dingoes, rodents, pets, kangaroos, sheep-dogs, koala-bears, and any number of feral and not-so-feral cats: oh yes and the occasional, the very occasional Sulphur Crested Cockatoo. Each campaign – and they grew more extravagant by the month – resulted in one Cockatoo casualty – and one only. The smart birds worked out Browning's latest stratagem and thereafter avoided it.

Browning wasn't used to defeat. He grew to hate the cockatoos; he could talk of nothing else, he lost weight, he couldn't sleep, his eyes became maniacal, his teeth ground, he even began to lose to me at chess. Finally when the third batch of his expensive seedlings had all been devoured and the costs of paying off enraged pet-owners grew astronomical, his wife called in a psychiatrist.

It was decided that Browning and all his brood would take an immediate boating holiday as far away from Australia as possible – along the canals and

waterways of Western Europe. They departed, leaving the cockatoos in possession of the battlefield.

How you make a fortune out of enjoying a long and leisurely boating holiday defeats me. It involved buying and selling luxury yachts across international borders while evading taxes, but Browning somehow managed it. When he returned from London, fat and sleek, he was twice as rich as when he departed. Yes he was a smart man was Browning, but not as smart as those cockatoos – who are still in sole possession of his, or rather their mountain.