

## Some Recent Natural History Publications #3 October 2005

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### *Digging up Deep Time; fossils, dinosaurs and megabeasts from Australia's distant past.*

Paul Willis and Abbie Thomas. ABC Books, Sydney, 2005. 294 pages, RRP \$34.95.

This is a most exciting and accessible book on a favourite topic of mine – how this land got to be the ‘Australia’ that we now know and love. I don’t mean the human aspects, but the enduring landscape and biological features which make the place so special and so unique. The authors are a science-writing partnership working for the ABC in Sydney. More though, Willis is a palaeontologist who has worked for the Australian Museum and has even participated in several of the digs featuring in the book. Quite rightly he is clearly proud of his role in reassembling the famous Eric the opalised pliosaur from the thousands of fragments into which it had been shattered. (However, given the joint authorship, it seems anomalous that the book is written in first person singular, the ‘I’ clearly being Willis.)

This is, in my opinion, very good science writing indeed. It is clear without being simplistic and there is a well-planned and consistent structure, to the book and to each chapter. We visit 16 fossil sites around Australia, in the chronological order of the ages of their fossil beds, in order to trace the development of the Australia biota. Each chapter begins with a simple but effective ‘time spiral’, divided into the Eras, with the relevant fossil site located on it. The history and significance of the site are clearly set out, and placed firmly within the context of the evolving world and local fauna of the time. The practicalities of the arduous and skilled tasks required are described as perhaps only a practitioner could do and the personalities of the researchers emerge with the animals. In fact each chapter ends with brief biographies of the key players, both historical and current, as well as very helpful information as to where one can view fossils from the site.

Next month I shall be spending a night at Lightning Ridge with a natural history group; this book will add to that experience. Highly recommended.

### *Tree-Kangaroos of Australia and New Guinea.*

Roger Martin. CSIRO Publishing, 2005. 168 pages, RRP \$39.95.

It is no secret that I have long been a big fan of the Australian Natural History Series, which I regard as one of the most important publishing initiatives in the field of Australian biology. The series was begun by the NSW University Press and has now been continued by CSIRO Publishing. Each title deals with a species or, as in this case, a group of species, and is written by an active authority in the field. Martin is a very experienced field forest biologist and has studied Bennett’s Tree-Kangaroo for well over a decade. As we have come to expect from this series, the book is exhaustive in its (very accessible) coverage of the history of human and tree roos, taxonomy, adaptations, evolution, habitat, ecology, behaviour and conservation.

I’ve always been fascinated by the idea of a tree-dwelling kangaroo, whose distant ancestors were small ground dwellers which then took to the trees. Subsequently some remained up there to share the land with us as possums while others came down to become kangaroos, some of which then re-ascended. Having read this book, I shall be even more disappointed if I fail in my next attempt to see these wonderful animals next May!

### *The French Explorers and the Aboriginal Australians 1772 - 1839.*

Colin Dyer. University of Queensland Press, 2005. 240 pages, RRP \$39.95.

This is not really in the natural history sphere, but it has come my way and I’m happy to let you know about it. Dyer, a francophone and historian, is based at the Queensland university. He has examined the records of 10 French expeditions to Australia in the relevant period and extracted from them all references to interactions with Aboriginal people. There are many of these because the French often seemed more inclined than their English counterparts to interact with the indigenous Australians. This is a detailed but easily read book. The author makes a point of drawing no conclusions himself; “I have endeavoured to absent myself from the text as much as possible, and to allow the participants to speak for themselves”. If this is your field, this approach may well suit you.

*Encountering Terra Australis; the Australian voyages of Nicholas Baudin and Matthew Flinders.*

Jean Fornasiero, Peter Monteath and John West-Sooby. Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2004.

411 pages, RRP \$49.95.

I am very fortunate – this is yet another book on a topic dear to my heart! Alongside my passion for trying to better understand the nature of the land I live in and love, I have long been intrigued by the history of European discovery of Australian biology. The simultaneous scientifically-motivated voyages of Baudin and Flinders at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are part of the fabric of our lore, culminating in their meeting at Encounter Bay in South Australia. At that time science was regarded, even by governments, as being above politics, to the point that such voyages carried passports giving them free passage in times of war. Sadly, this era was coming to an end though. Flinders is pretty unequivocally regarded as a superb, though ill-starred, navigator and a supporter of the needs of his scientists in a way that the French commanders were not reputed to be. Conventional wisdom, based on the accounts of his companions, has it that Baudin, through an abrasive and unsympathetic personality and less than total commitment to the voyage's scientific aims, created near-fatal problems for his voyage. Certainly he did not survive the trip to tell his side of it.

This book explicitly seeks to redress that, telling Baudin's story (in parallel with Flinders') with great sympathy and based on the authors' own translations of his account of the first year of the four-year odyssey plus his sea log. I make no claims to being an historian but the flaw in the claim that this allows an objective account seems evident – there was no more reason for Baudin's version of events to be unbiased than were those of his 'enemies'! It is a fact that most of the scientific complement and many of the crew left the ship at the first available opportunity, in Ile de France, or Mauritius, citing Baudin's personality and management failings. The authors assert that the problems stemmed from those who "wished to see his expedition come to a grinding halt", without offering any explanation as to what their motivation may have been. I have no axe to grind here, but I am unconvinced by such assertions disguised as facts.

This all feels a bit academic though and where I am convinced is in the value of the book as a detailed and readable living account of the two voyages, and particularly of their scientific contributions, biological and anthropological. The latter was largely due to the more empathetic and respectful French, though misunderstandings intervened here too. If you are interested in the details of scientific discovery of our coastline, I recommend this highly. If you also want to make judgements on the people involved, that's entirely up to you!

*Sex in the Bush.*

ABC Television, 4x25 minute episodes starting 8pm Tuesday 25 October.

After the very long period of excellent quality ABC natural history documentaries which ended with the beautifully shot but appallingly badly written and narrated *Wild Australasia*, this is another opportunity sadly lost. It aims to look at courtship and reproductive strategies in a wide range of Australian fauna, and has tapped some pretty impressive biological talent – including leading bird ecologist Professor Andrew Cockburn of ANU, well known to Canberrans, and reptile doyen Professor Rick Shine. The disappointing outcome cannot be put down to them. My guess is that a very good series was imminent when a biologically illiterate producer decided it needed 'dumbing down' and 'cutting up'. The result is lots of good photography backed by narration which has been pared down to remove much of the content. I have just rewatched a segment of the remarkable dance display of the male Victoria's Riflebird, scrutinised at closest range by the female, and can confirm that while the relevant question is asked, ie "what is she looking for in the dance?" the narration used completely fails to answer it. Basically it's complicated and it's 'beautiful' (!) but no suggestion as to its genetic relevance. But worst of all – nauseatingly, cringe-makingly worst of all! – is the totally gratuitous heavy inter-cutting of segments of human 'courtship' from black and white movies. If this was a show about the significance of human romantic behaviour there just may have been a point to this. As it is we are left with the strong impression that we are not trusted to be able to concentrate for 25 minutes without distraction at about the level of 'Funny Home Videos'. Maybe I've contracted a jaundice in Africa, and I admit that I've so far only managed to sit through the first episode, so give it a go and you may enjoy it more and get more out of it than I did. I hope so.