

BOOK REVIEW- Dave Holley

Platypus

The Extraordinary Story of How a Curious Creature Baffled the World

A, Moyal 2002.
Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Aus.
226pp. ISBN 1 86508 804 8

Platypus is a detailed account of the discovery and classification of this unique Australian mammal and its role in the major scientific theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From historical literature, popular stories, museum and library records of the day, Ann Moyal has written an interesting chronicle of how the platypus, *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, and Australian fauna in general, fitted into the creationist view of the world of the time. The platypus threw up enormous challenges to the scientists of this period on how species were 'created' and why 'diversions' such as the platypus existed. From its initial discovery in the new penal colony of New South Wales, specimens were sent back to England only to be regarded as a 'hoax' and then something that nature or God himself could only have created in a whimsical fancy.

From the species initial discovery, the book takes us into the scientific powerhouses of Europe, particularly England and France, and the larger than life reputations that were created and demolished on the latest zoological discoveries and theories of the day. Once it was clearly established that the platypus was something that was not 'stitched together' the scientific gaze concentrated on classification and where the animal fitted amongst the more recognisable mammals of Europe. Much of the book is centred on attempts to discern the extraordinary reproductive behaviour of this secretive animal. Moyal takes us through the debate surrounding the existence of mammary glands in the animal and that unique mode of birth it shares with its cousin the echidna.

There are many big names within Platypus, from Joseph Banks, Francois Peron, Charles Owen, through to Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, and Moyal discusses the role this little aquatic mammal played in the papers and theories put forward by these men during this ground breaking era of science. The book also brings us into the 20th century and the importance placed on the animal in modern Australian science.

Platypus is an easy and insightful book. Moyal places the reader clearly in favour of such an enigmatic animal and spurs the reader to seek out and observe the creature in its natural habitat. A small criticism of the book however concerns the last chapter. In it, Moyal talks of the role of the platypus within the Aboriginal Dreamtime, as well as recent evidence from the fossil record of the animals predecessors. The contents of this chapter, although having come about due to recent anthropological and paelentological studies, would have made for greater story telling at the beginning of the book and provided context for the discussion to follow. As it is, this chapter reads like an afterthought and detracts from the story. That criticism aside, Platypus is a fantastic book and a must read for any student or teacher of Australian Natural History.

