

Museum: The Macleays, Their Collections and the Search for Order

Stacey, R. and Hay, A. 2007
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STACEY and Hay have previously collaborated on the volume *Herbarium* (Stacey and Hay 2004) regarding collections held in the herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. Ashley Hay has published two books of narrative non-fiction. Her essays, short stories and journalism have appeared in various periodicals including *The Bulletin* where she was a literary editor. Robyn Stacey is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication and Arts at the University of Western Sydney. She is an acclaimed photographer, in Australia, with her photography shown in Australia and internationally.

This book is about the history, collectors and collections of The Macleay Museum at The University of Sydney. Its aim is to bring the reader closer to the collectors and collections by breathing life into the characters and selected specimens in the collection; according to the dust-jacket's hyperbole, to throw open the doors of the museum and its rich collections. The authors develop the book with their individual skills, one of writing and one of photography. The second is facilitated through its aesthetic appeal, its folio size and large photographic reproductions of strikingly coloured specimens. The whole is a coffee-table-style-book with a text that digs deeper developing the background to the personalities and collections, intertwining them with the history of early systematists/collectors, which provides the backbone of the text.

The book opens with contents and acknowledgements and concludes with endnotes on the plates and the text, bibliography and index. Notes on specimens are provided by museum staff. The majority of the book is divided into two main sections, an essay and a series of photographic plates. The plates follow an order of sorts by clumping like objects, but not by following systematic or historical lines. They are primarily aesthetic in value. Ashley Hay's essay follows a much more structured narrative, it is the most useful section of the book providing detail on the history of the Macleays as well as capturing the atmosphere of the times when the Macleays were amassing their collections. The author goes further by incorporating a feminist sense through the inclusion of the women in the Macleay story. Their addition puts meat on the bones of the Macleay story that has been lacking in previous attempts to write the Macleay narrative. Ashley Hay's essay is appropriately researched and referenced; although annoyingly she has missed my paper on the Macleay bird collection and its history (see Fulton 2001). The book engages the lay-reader through its aesthetic appeal while a professional

systematist / ecologist will be drawn into the narrative of the "Macleays . . . and the search for order".

Have the authors managed to throw open the museum's doors and engage the browser? The photographic plates cannot show the extent of the collections, they are too vast, they provide small windows into the history, biology and the oversold concept of 'fantastic science'. The plates provide significant browsing material for the coffee-table. A smaller third section (in the notes) provides miniatures of the larger plates and finally gives some depth to the photographs, although this is not to say they give them any order. The narrative is a different story, standing alone from the photographic plates. It provides order through its well researched and beautifully written prose. I had not realized the connections between the Macleays, Joseph Banks, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Carl von Linné until the narrative drew them out. Ashley Hay paints insightful pictures of the characters who crafted the events and collections, putting them in the context of their own lives and bringing the history to life. She introduces Fanny Macleay, Alexander Macleay's eldest daughter, who meets Robert Brown (the eminent botanist) during Christmas 1814 and continues a life-long friendship sketching and corresponding. The essayist has brought me into the museum by outlining the years of persistent collecting in the search for order that have culminated in this museum. With small effort I can see behind the woodwork of the museum doors and the glass panes of the cabinets.

The book has many useful references to follow-up on. A broad audience may benefit from this book. It is refreshing to read as a professional and undoubtedly fulfils its role to a general audience in its broad approach and coffee-table style. The compartmentalising of sections of the book enables critical readers to go easily to the section they are interested in, in my case the essay. Another reader may want to pick it up from the coffee table and browse the striking photographic plates, yet another might follow-up on the notes to those plates. The book has many compartments to clump parts of the collection, which work well in keeping the readers to their own interests. They also allow the reader to venture in deeply or simply tread in the shallows.

The depth and appropriateness of research is summarized in the length and relevancy of the bibliography. It is not a specialist's reference list to the collections, it is appropriate for a discussion of the museum and its history. The research depth combined with accessible writing style helps to engage the reader with the subject it does not burden the reader with detail. While other texts have dealt with the history of the Macleay Museum: its collectors and collections (e.g., Stanbury and Holland 1988), this book delves a little deeper into the lives of the museum's early protagonists and less into their

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collections. It is not a resource for what is held in the Macleay Museum it is a general and entertaining read. Its scholarly usefulness is in engaging today's researchers with a little of the history and philosophy of science. I recommend this book to all students who once ventured into the Macleay Museum or similar to look around and more generally to those interested in the origins of museum collections.

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Extinction & Biogeography of Tropical Pacific Birds

David W. Steadman, 2006
The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
ix-xiv, 594 pp., paperback
ISBN 0 226 77142 3
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ALTHOUGH Steadman's book was published in 2006, it has lost none of its value. Without question, *Extinction & Biogeography of Tropical Pacific Birds* is one of the most interesting and informative books published on the birds of the Pacific Region in the last 100 years. It ranks in importance with Ernst Mayr's *Birds of the Southwest Pacific* (1945) and should be read by everyone with an interest in the ecology and history of the Pacific islands.

The impact of humans on the fauna of the Pacific is well known, but I doubt many of us appreciated either the scale of that impact or the speed at which it occurred, much less who was responsible. The Pacific islands were among the last lands colonized by the world's ever expanding human population (and some may be the first to be de-populated as sea levels rise with global warming). Some islands, such as New Zealand, may only have been colonized within the last 600–800 years. For others, such as New Britain, people arrived ~30–35,000 BP. In all instances, bar the large continental islands, and regardless of island size and isolation, the impact of humans on birds was the same — rapid extinction of almost all species. Because many, if not most, islands had evolved endemic species of flightless rails, the total number of extinctions estimated by Steadman is between 1000 and 2000 species (p.319), of which the number of extinct rails lies between 500 and 1600 (p.316). The birds that survived are a vestige of a much richer and diverse avifauna. This is what makes Steadman's account so important.

Steadman teaches us not to assume that what we see on islands today is representative of the avifauna prior to the arrival of people. Not only does this open an interesting discussion on some of the underlying assumptions regarding the evolution and

ecology of island faunas, including MacArthur and Wilson's theory of island equilibrium, but it should instruct us on the value of taking a historical perspective when studying the ecology of communities of plants and animals.

Steadman's account of the Pacific avifauna relies on the palaeontological record. From a number of well-researched sites on a variety of islands, Steadman repeatedly documents the pre-human avifauna, colonization by people, and the following rapid decline and loss of species until few survive.

The evidence of human impact is not the only part of Steadman's account that merits reading and thought. Steadman devotes the final section of the book to a series of chapters on the processes of extinction, dispersal and faunal attenuation, equilibrium and species-area relationships, community ecology and conservation biology. If you read nothing other than the final six chapters and conclusions, you will still be well rewarded. His accounts of these topics are comprehensive, thoughtful and thought provoking.

Largely, *Extinction & Biogeography of Tropical Pacific Birds* is a synthesis of Steadman's extensive palaeontological studies in the Pacific begun in 1984 (p.97), with previous studies in the West Indies and Galapagos Islands. Not all of the Pacific islands are considered in depth. Hawaii, New Zealand, the Galapagos and Easter Island, as well as New Guinea, the Philippines and Indonesian archipelago are excluded. After a general introduction reviewing the Region's geography and geology, flora and fauna, human history, and birds, Steadman then considers in Part II each major island group (e.g., Melanesia, West Polynesia) separately. Part III reviews birds groups (e.g., Megapodes, rails, Passerines, seabirds). The result is a thorough survey of current knowledge of each island group and its avifauna, both as it exists today and how it changed with arrival of humans.

Extinction & Biogeography of Tropical Pacific Birds is thoughtful, easy to read, and thoroughly documented account of the biogeography and extinction of birds

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