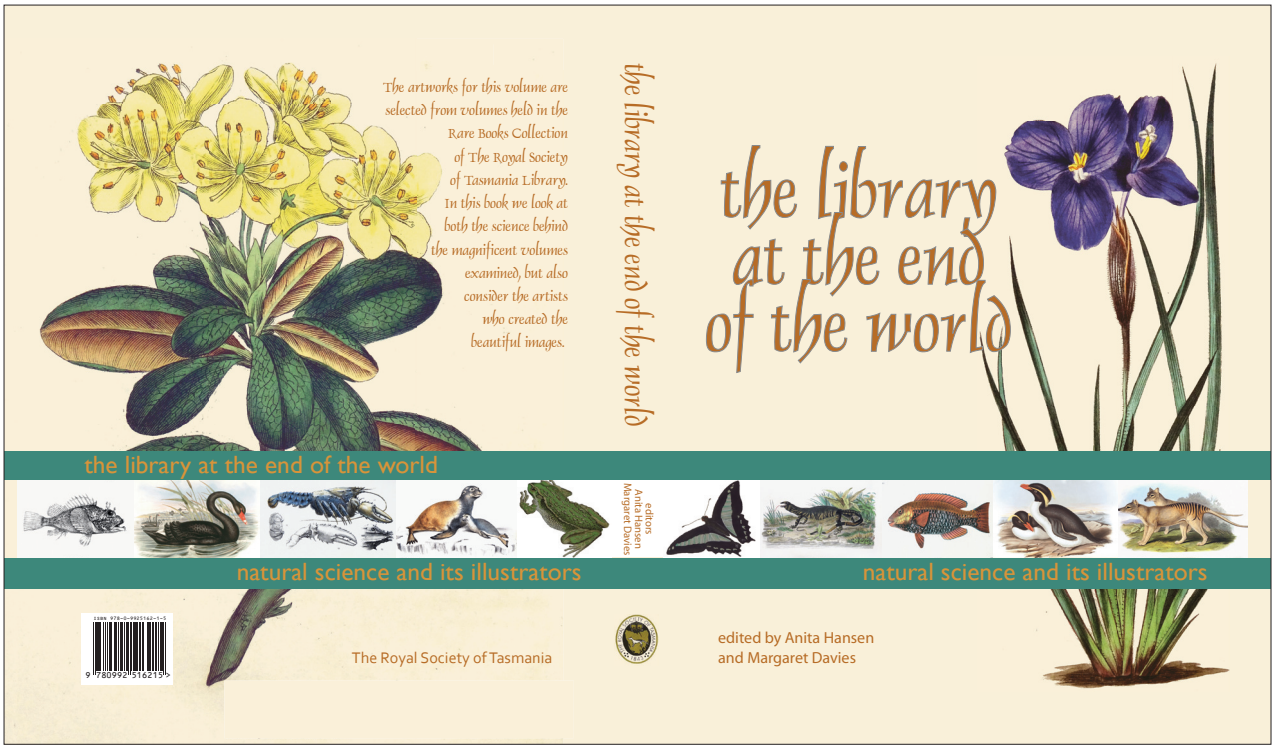
doi: https://doi.org/10.26749/rstpp.149.29

BOOK REVIEW

by Peter J. Jarman



The Library at the End of the World: Natural Science and its Illustrators
Edited by Anita Hansen and Margaret Davies
Published by The Royal Society of Tasmania
ISBN: 9780992516215 (hardback), 9780992516208 (paperback)
RRP: Hardback $75; Paperback $50
Available from The Royal Society of Tasmania, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Customs House, 19 Davey Street, Hobart, or at www.rst.org.au, or from leading booksellers.

Many Australians learn in primary school about European discovery and exploration of Australia; fewer learn how scientific discovery continued after settlement. Among the early settlers of Tasmania were men and women intrigued by the biology of this new land. Their desire to place Tasmania's biota in a world context induced a flow of specimens from the colony to authoritative taxonomists in Britain and continental Europe. Very soon the naturalists wanted to identify and classify for themselves, requiring a reverse flow of books and journals. In the 1830s Ronald Campbell Gunn was sending plant specimens to Sir William Hooker at Kew, and requesting botanical books in return, writing that such books "are not to be procured here at any price". This may soon have been less necessary; the Royal Society's copy of Robert Sweet's (1827-8) *Flora Australasica* carries a bookplate of "W. Westcott Bookseller and Circulating Library, 60 Collins St. Hobart Town", a business that had existed since at least 1845.

The Royal Society of Tasmania (RST), the oldest scientific society in Australia and New Zealand, was founded in 1843 and quickly established its own library. In 1845 the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land wrote to the Royal, the Antiquarian and the Linnean societies in London, of which he was a member, seeking books for the RST's library. By 1849 the collection held 250 volumes. As the Society grew, the library acquired books more purposefully, emphasising Tasmanian natural history but keeping abreast of national and international publications. In its first century the library was the major public source of natural history knowledge in and about this remote intellectual outpost. *The Library at the End of the World* reviews and illustrates some of the library's treasures. For anyone with a feel for the history of Australian science, this book is a wonderful reminder of the age of discovery in a new land with almost everything yet to be discovered. The library grew during the greatest age of developments in biological illustration; and this book's editors and authors have clearly enjoyed selecting informative and beautiful pictures from the library's holdings.

John Gould and Henry Constantine Richter, Tasmanian echidna (*Echidna setosa*) [*Tachyglossus aculeatus setosus*, Short-beaked Echidna]. Hand-coloured lithograph, 34.5 x 52.0, Gould, J. 1863: The Mammals of Australia. Vol. I, Pl. 2.

Tasmania was important to European appreciation of Australian biota because of visiting, as well as resident, collectors. To quote Peter McQuillan in his chapter on Insects: "Remote Van Diemen's Land was to become a fabled destination for early European naturalists. The discovery of its peculiar creatures … reinforced the emerging appreciation of Tasmania's biological novelty." For example, John Gould's first stop in Australia in 1838 was Van Diemen's Land, where local enthusiasts such as the Franklins, Reverend Thomas Ewing and Ronald Gunn welcomed him. In five months Gould collected 500 Tasmanian birds, naming half of the state's endemic species. He visited Bass Strait islands "where he was greeted by Aboriginal women performing a traditional Emu dance" (quoted from Sally Bryant's chapter on Birds). Tasmanian Aboriginal people and cultural practices continue; the island-state's emu, an endemic subspecies, even then sadly depleted, was extinct in the wild a few decades later.

In sometimes subtle, sometimes total ways, Tasmania's biota differed from those of the mainland. This is illustrated in Stewart Nicol's chapter on Mammals with pictures from Gould's *The Mammals of Australia* (1863): the Thylacine has been unique to Tasmania for many thousand years, while the deeply-furred Tasmanian subspecies of the echidna can be contrasted with its mainland conspecific with exposed spines. This chapter includes two early-nineteenth-century pictures of Eastern Quolls in NSW, where the species went extinct in the 1960s. In Tasmania it survives, a reminder

Sarah Stone, *Rana caerulea*, Blue Frog [*Litoria caerulea*, Green Tree Frog]. Hand-coloured copper engraving, 22.8 x 17.8, White, J. 1790: Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales: ...

Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Dasyure à longue queue (*Dasyurus Macrourus*) [*Dasyurus maculatus*, Spotted-tailed Quoll]. Hand-coloured lithograph, Péron, F. 1817: Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes ... Atlas par MM. C.a. Lesueur et N. Petit.

of Tasmania's luck in having escaped or delayed the wave of extinctions of medium-sized mammals that, on the mainland, began in the first half of the nineteenth century and continues to the present day.

The taxonomists and illustrators in Europe who worked from pressed, dehydrated, pickled and stuffed specimens produced some bizarre misinterpretations of Australian reality. Margaret Davies illustrates this in her chapter on Amphibians. The Green Tree Frogs shown in White's 1790 *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* are pathetically distorted, as poorly curated pickled specimens would be on arrival in Europe. Moreover, the frogs are shown bright blue, and were named Blue Frog in English and *Rana* (now *Litoria*) *caerulea* Latin, because, as Davies points out, no scientist then knew that these handsome green creatures turned blue in preservative.

Most of *The Library at the End of the World* consists of taxon-specific chapters by authorities on vascular plants, orchids, lichens, crustaceans, insects, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. None of the chapters pretends to be exhaustive of the taxa, the library's books or their illustrations; each reflects its author's choices, producing varied but always lively accounts. Anita Hansen has written short vignettes of 37 featured artists. The text is tightly edited and the whole book is superbly designed and produced. The book's opening history of the library describes its dynamic support of the state's scientific life up to and beyond the library's 1968 move to the Morris Miller Library of the University of Tasmania. Digital access to catalogues and publications here and around the world is the latest step for those wanting to share the world's natural-history knowledge guided by this library at the end of the world. Anyone who enjoys the history of science (or of libraries) and the development of biological illustration will be stimulated by this book. And every sale of this modestly priced book carries the work of The Royal Society of Tasmania further into its third century.

Peter J. Jarman is Emeritus Professor of Ecosystem Management from the University of New England. He now lives in Tasmania where he is an Associate of the University of Tasmania. His research is in the areas of mammalian ecology and behaviour coupled with a strong interest in scientific illustration from medieval times.