into prey “like a straw into a milkshake”. The book also includes a collection of essays by prominent deep-sea biologists from around the world, on topics from trenches and seamounts to the varied uses of bioluminescence. These lend valuable context to the photos.

It is remarkable that almost all the photos are drawn straight from researchers, not professional photographers — the deep’s creatures are beautiful, bizarre and at times even grotesque enough to capture attention without any fashion photography. This wealth of

photos just needed to be made available; in doing so, Nouvian has done both the field and the public a service.

Collectively, these books offer a spectacular visual and cerebral introduction to the wonders of the abyss that could awaken many to the idea that, as Koslow puts it, exploration and protection of the deep sea “is one of the great scientific voyages of discovery, one that humankind has only just embarked upon.” ■

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Wonders from down under

Continent of Curiosities: A Journey Through Australian Natural History by Danielle Clode

Cambridge University Press: 2006.
224 pp. £35

Colin Martin

Male bowerbirds attract females by building bowers and decorating them with disparate, often highly coloured objects. Danielle Clode’s book on Australian natural history, written after a stint as scientific interpreter at Museum Victoria in Melbourne, takes a similar approach to attracting readers. She has teased out stories from the museum, founded in 1856 and one of Australia’s oldest, by exploring its collections and talking to curators. As the historian Tom Griffiths observes in his foreword, Clode’s book reinforces “the essential link between research and collections in a period when museums increasingly have come to privilege the manager and designer over the research curator”.

Years ago, I was enchanted to learn that in the late 1860s the poet Dante Gabrielle Rossetti had kept a wombat in a menagerie at his London house, which amazed his cronies in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Clode, on the other hand, looks at how Australia’s unique wildlife influenced the development of its indigenous natural history, rather than how weird and wonderful antipodean fauna were received in the Northern Hemisphere.

Although Clode’s bowerbird approach, triggered by the objects that caught her eye at Museum Victoria, is informative, her book is essentially an anthology of essays, and lacks a synthetic view. It was surprising that she included an essay on hominid fossils, none of which originated in Australia; and her riff on theories about the extraterrestrial origin of life hangs tenuously on the hook of a meteorite that hit near the Victorian town of Murchison in 1969. Her accounts of the theories of continental drift and biogeography are much more apposite.

The history of Melbourne’s water and sewerage systems seems a quirky choice, but it is an interesting story and pertinent, given the current drought in Australia. From the early

1950s, Melbourne’s water was sourced from extensive forest catchments, which purified it naturally. Later, museum researchers were important in monitoring the effects of dams on rivers. It had been thought that some types of dam might be better than others for improving invertebrate biodiversity downstream. It was shown, however, that the proximity of tributaries below a dam is a more important factor in invertebrate recolonization and keeping rivers healthy.

Humans selected by Clode include the museum’s first director, Frederick McCoy, who

in 1865 displayed the first gorilla specimens seen in Australia. McCoy wanted to disprove Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory by showing how different gorillas were to humans, and thought that installing an ape case would convince visitors that they could not be descended from apes. Crowds came to see it, making it one of the museum’s most popular exhibits, even though Darwinism triumphed.

Another essay considers species that were known only from specimens in museum collections and were thought to have become extinct, such as Leadbeater’s possum. Museum curators spent many years searching for it before it was finally rediscovered in 1961. The possums are now known to be relatively abundant in small areas of mountain ash forest, where they live high in the trees.

Australia’s unique fauna continues to influence how people use the continent. Earlier this year, an iron-ore mining project in western Australia worth £5 billion (US\$10 billion) was blocked by government officials after several new species of spider-like troglobites were discovered at the site. These blind cave-dwelling species have evolved to live in the dark and are killed by even brief exposure to sunlight. They are the tiniest animals ever to have halted major construction work. ■

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The Gorillas at the Museum—see page 100.

The first gorillas to be seen in Australia were displayed in 1865, exciting debate about human origins.