

The Nature of Hidden Worlds

by Mary E White

Reed Books, 256pp, RRP \$39.95

Reviewed by D.G. Hird.

As an undergraduate and voracious consumer of often extra-curricular biology some two decades ago, accounts of the fossil history of Australia were, I recall, sketchy. Marsupials were generally supposed to have rafted into Australia from the north having somehow been filtered in space and time from placental mammals. Texts were principally anatomical and somewhat heavy going, although exceptions such as Simpson's evocative account of the evolution of the horse were enough to inspire interest in keenly anticipated future developments.

This book amply illustrates that the story of antipodean prehistory was, and is, well worth waiting for. Subtitled *Animals and Plants in Prehistoric Australia*, it complements the author's earlier volume *The Greening of Gondwana* which largely concerned itself with fossil plants and floras. While both are in large format and abound in the clear photography of Jim Frazier, any impression of the superficiality of many coffee-table books is soon dispelled. The varied and often technical evidence which provides the cohesion for the modern theory is presented by the use of clear diagrams, often as sequences through history. These are supplemented by artistic impressions of fossil environments together with photographs of fossils and 'living fossils' providing evidence for them.

This book tackles a large subject encompassing hundreds of millions of years and a wide geographic spread. The development of many ideas is presented along with the theory itself, e.g. the natural distribution of some plant groups, notably the genus *Nothofagus* in southern continents, inspired serious consideration of the notion that modern land masses may have spread from a common ancestral one, i.e. by continental drift. While necessarily restricting itself to a series of snapshots through history, a coherent account of current knowledge is presented.

Followers of the most recent discoveries of new Australian fossils, e.g. the extraordinarily rich Riversleigh marsupials, Kimberley dinosaurs and South American monotremes will, however, have to wait for a full account. A dilemma for a book such as this must be to judge when to go to press, knowing that more finds are imminently available for publication. On the Tasmanian front, local specimens mentioned include the marsupial *Wynyardia* and the Lune River plant deposits now unfortunately pillaged by over-zealous collectors.

This book can be thoroughly recommended to a range of potential readers.

Young children fascinated with the notion of fossilisation of long-dead animals and plants will appreciate the illustrations while more advanced readers will find the text and abundant diagrammatic content illuminating. Fossils stimulate curiosity in most people, yet important fossil sites are often found largely by chance and by non-experts. Books like this reinforce the importance of reporting specimens as well as giving the reader a perspective through time on the vast spectrum of life on Earth.