

REVIEW

ROBYN STACEY & ASHLEY HAY: **Herbarium**. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Melbourne, New York, Cape Town, 2004. vii + 156 pp., illus. ISBN 0-52184-277-8. Price: GBP 40.00 (hb).

If you occasionally have to spend time to explain what a Herbarium is to funding agencies or bewildered relatives, and what it stands for, you are well advised to purchase copies of this beautiful coffee-table book by Robyn Stacey (art photographer) and Ashley Hay (writer) and use them as gifts for the uninitiated.

'Herbarium' pictures selected specimens from the National Herbarium of New South Wales and tells the story of Australian botanical exploration, ultimately also leading to the establishment of an institutional herbarium in the grounds of the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney. It also explains why these dried specimens are crucial for research, conservation and the use of new plant resources.

The colour photographs are of a stunning beauty and cover an interesting range: typical Australian endemics (grouped under 'The new world'), assorted phanerogams and cryptogams ('Scientific fascination'), weirdly mounted ferns, flowers, and algae ('Hobby and decoration'), and cultivated plants ('Exotics'). The aesthetic quality of the ancient specimens (e.g. a *Viola* from Botany Bay collected by Banks and Solander in 1770) compares well with recently collected specimens. In addition to the full plate size pictures, there are thumbnails in the back of the book with interesting botanical notes on each individual specimen by taxonomists of NSW.

The introductory text takes the reader on a journey from early roots of botany (Theophrastus and Pliny), renaissance botany (Luca Ghini) to early Australian exploration by Cook and Banks, Brown and Solander. The story continues with less familiar aspects of 19th century Australian botany: the breathtaking saga of Ludwig Leichhardt's collecting trips and mysterious death; the role of Australian women, charmed into botanical exploration by Ferdinand Mueller; the contributions by commercial collectors; the ups and downs of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney from a pedestrian vegetable patch to a centre of learning and plant diversity, finally admitting a herbarium in its ground just over a century ago. The main scientific and societal functions of herbarium collections are well underpinned throughout. Text and plates all make for fascinating reading and visual delight.

A few years ago a famous Board member of the National Herbarium of the Netherlands complained in a meeting about the stuffy name 'Herbarium' for our institute, because it would be so demotivating for our young staff to have to tell their loved ones that they work in such a place. After acquainting oneself with this book by Stacey & Hay, I am sure everyone will want to work in a place called 'Herbarium' and be proud of it.

PIETER BAAS