

Book review

COLONIAL MANDARIN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ALEXANDER MACLEAY

By James Donaldson

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 367 pp.

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The author of the book, James Donaldson, was educated at Wick High School in northern Scotland, the same locality where Alexander Macleay grew up and collected his first insects. Donaldson was a journalist on the *Scottish Daily Express*, before migrating to Sydney in 1968. In Sydney, he worked on the *Daily Telegraph* before becoming a political writer on other publications. Donaldson's experience as a political journalist in Sydney where Alexander Macleay was the Colonial Secretary and his formative years spent at Wick where Macleay grew up gives us clear indication on why he is qualified to write this biography and why he may be inclined to do so.

The shortest summary of what this book is about lies appropriately in its title, 'The Life and Times of Alexander Macleay'. The book follows the life of Macleay from his earliest days to his death with a focus on his time in the hurly burly of 19th century Australian politics. Macleay was the Colonial Secretary answerable only to the Governor. However, Donaldson adds another protagonist into the narrative – Macleay's grand home and gardens in Sydney. Macleay's Elizabeth Bay mansion is never far from the action. The aim of this book is to paint in the details of Macleay's life with the above focus in mind. The author suggests Macleay was 'one of Scotland's and Australia's unsung or simply neglected great men.' Thus, the aim from this perspective is to right the wrong that he has been neglected by history.

This is a biography presented more or less in chronological order from birth to death. Along its journey through Macleay's life it will delve into his hobby of collecting insects, a hobby that led to him to become a foundation member of The Linnean Society of London and then on to assembling the most extensive private natural history museum in the world. Yet, disappointingly to me, the narrative focused more on his role in bureaucracy than on his specimens. Most of the book is devoted to the to and fro of his political life in the penal settlement of Sydney. Its eight substantial chapters allow readers time to absorb the moderately dense information presented, each chapter depicting a stage or aspect of Macleay's life. The references to all this information are footnoted on every page. The book opens with acknowledgements thanking the very important sources drawn on for this book, which is followed by a short introduction that is actually a very concise summary of Macleay's life. It then runs its eight chapters to the last page. There is no index nor contents.

The audience being addressed is a general one. The fact that the book is referenced is more a measure of the writer than the audience so the language remains accessible throughout. Yet, no doubt academics will be drawn to the book, because of the subject matter of an early Australian history and despite the author's admitted association with a tabloid newspaper.

The book's title beginning with 'Colonial Mandarin' is not, to my mind, validated in the text. The text does not overstate and sensationalise. Macleay was no mandarin and the book sticks to the less sensational facts, the title being more of a tabloid trick to attract readers. I thank the author for keeping the narrative real.

Without doubt the strength of this book is in the research, which has been extensive. Alas, it presents only rather skeletal information on Macleay's natural history collections and would have benefitted from reading my chapter on just that 'Alexander, William Sharp, and William John Macleay: Their Ornithology and Museum' (Fulton 2012). Yet, this book presents the most informative dialogue I have read on Alexander Macleay's interactions in the political world of early Sydney and goes into some interesting detail on various headline drawing events, in which Macleay became entangled. It is good to see the events explained in a positive light. The only other source I know that has achieved this is Derelie Cherry's, 'Alexander Macleay: from Scotland to Sydney' (Cherry 2012). Cherry's book was acknowledged by the author of this book, who has no doubt drawn heavily upon it.

This is an important text in relation to the early colonial settlement and bureaucracy in Australia. Not enough has been published on this part of Australian history involving Macleay and this book fills gaps, just not the natural history gaps I was looking for. However, I will look at the section on the Linnean Society of London again. Donaldson's book does add to the limited secondary resources on colonial settlement and, as it promises, it sheds much light on the life of Macleay, the Colonial Secretary, during a formative time for Australia. Being fully referenced it will be used by historians interested in this period, if only to direct them to the primary sources. Secondary and tertiary students may also be drawn to the book along with their lecturers, potentially with all having something to gain.

The organisation of the text is annoying, with its footnote style references on every page often taking up a quarter of the page. To some this will be a blessing whereas I would have preferred references in a reference section at the end of the book alongside an index. Despite the annoying references the book is a good read. It is a page turner and reads quickly, although mainly because a quarter of the page is missing due to the referencing system. The book would have benefitted from some professional editing by the publishers. There were typing errors, although rare, and the reference numbers were out by one to two through the first third of the book. Nonetheless, I managed to determine what would be the correct reference, because the references were on the same page. Beyond this I would assert that the research is entirely pertinent and comprehensive, and the style of writing clear and engaging.

Unlike Derelie Cherry's book on the same subject (Alexander Macleay) the supplementary material is almost absent. The cover uses the now well-known painting by the famous portraitist Sir Thomas Lawrence, it is subsequently reused for the frontispiece. No other supplementary material is presented. This book somewhat parallels Derelie Cherry's book on Macleay (Fulton 2015), but does not equal her effort. Nonetheless it is complementary in places and I have enjoyed reading them both. I would recommend this book to historians

interested in the politics and bureaucracy of early colonial settlement in Australia and to others including natural historians or natural scientists who are simply interested in knowing more about the man, Alexander Macleay, and his life and times.

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