

A Flutter of Butterflies

by Michael Braby and Penny Olsen

Publisher: *National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2011. 106 pages. ISBN 9780642277251.*

RRP \$34.95

Butterflies are highly regarded. We see them as beautiful, fragile and ephemeral creatures. Their lives seem carefree, filled with sunshine and light breezes as they flit from flower to flower. They are portrayed favourably in children's literature, poems and artwork. In the classroom we marvel at metamorphosis, where the caterpillar is transformed into an elegant adult. With few exceptions, we ignore the caterpillars of troublesome species or treat them as aberrations.

By contrast, many moths and other insects seem to have been skulking behind the door when beauty and charisma were handed out. Quite unfairly, we blend fact, supposition and legend and tend to show favouritism, glorifying some insects and demonising others. Consequently, a book that charms us with beautiful paintings of both butterflies and moths is welcome and may encourage us to value all lepidopterans. Furthermore, the book draws together a wide range of illustrations and connects them with a well-written narrative that places them in a historical context and illuminates the many and varied pathways taken by artists over the past two hundred or more years.

During the Age of Exploration, butterflies and some moths featured prominently in collections destined for museums and private collections in Europe. Some artists depicted these specimens, while others living in Australia or visiting it painted them in their homeland. The best of these paintings have artistic merit while being scientifically accurate. Our appreciation of these works is enlivened by an understanding of the times in which the paintings were executed and the personal story of the artists. This book touches on many artists and describes their exploits and motivations. These are understandably diverse, given that an interest in butterflies

and moths has never been solely the province of scientists. The artists that came to paint them are quite varied: naturalists and explorers, naval draughtsmen, 'gentlewomen', wealthy private collectors, scientists and many others. As well as providing an overview of the development of lepidopteran art in Australia, the book examines in greater depth the lives and exploits of eleven of the most well-known and influential artists. We discover how they became interested in painting these subjects. The personal journey of each is deftly described, revealing their inspirations, triumphs and tribulations.

The authors of *A Flutter of Butterflies* are both prolific and respected authors of numerous books and journal articles. In the past decade or so Michael Braby has opened up the world of Australian butterflies to amateur naturalists and scientists alike, producing an identification guide and comprehensively referenced works on the taxonomy and biology of Australian butterflies, as well as a carefully crafted list of common names for butterflies. He is currently the Curator of Entomology at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Penny Olsen, based at the Australian National University in Canberra, is a natural history writer and research scientist with particular interests in birds of prey and natural history illustrations. In 2001 she wrote the award-winning *Feather and Brush* (CSIRO Publishing), which described and extensively illustrated the history of Australian bird art.

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Ambrose, Graeme. 2012. "A flutter of butterflies [Book Review]." *The Victorian Naturalist* 129(5), 187.

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