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Nicholas Drayson is a naturalist and novelist – in that order, I fancy, although it’s the reverse in his bio. Love and the Platypus has many charms but little narrative drive. The opening sets the pace, with his hero, naive young Scottish scientist William Caldwell, engrossed in observing the nest-building behaviour of a wasp while waiting two hours for his lift. Caldwell seems more engaged by insects and birds than the vaguely puzzling antics of other humans, though Drayson does provide him with an arch and self-assured young woman as a love-interest.

The setting is the countryside near Bundaberg, the year 1884, and Caldwell (an historical figure) is in Australia to discover the truth about the reproductive cycle of the platypus, a subject of fierce scientific debate. Despite devastating the local monotreme population in the name of science, he is an unusually sensitive new age guy for his time, objecting to the use of the word ‘nigger’ and treating the indigenous people and their ways with deference.

Scribe has done Drayson proud, with a beautiful cover featuring Ferdinand Bauer’s platypus from the Flinders voyage. It’s a likeable book but most of the energy goes into the zoology rather than the anthropology.