



Chest reveals secrets

THIS exquisitely produced book traces the secret history of a "museum in miniature": a wooden chest containing one of the earliest colonial collections of Australian flora and fauna. The chest has been linked to governor Lachlan Macquarie, who ruled the fledgling colony of New South Wales from 1810 until 1822.

Austere and boxy on the outside, the chest opens out to reveal a treasure trove of hand-painted panels, drawers and trays hosting beautifully preserved collections of moths, butterflies, beetles, seashells and birds. It left Australia when Macquarie did, in 1822, but then languished in a Scottish castle for more than 150 years.

Author and former Mitchell librarian, Elizabeth Ellis, approaches the largely untold story of the chest as mystery: How did it end up in a turreted castle in the Scottish Highlands?

Why were its contents, including 80 species of native birds, so well preserved when they bore the hallmarks of an amateur collector?

Was the chest created as a gift for Macquarie? (Another colonial chest, thought to be the twin of the Macquarie chest, lost most of its contents before the State Library of NSW bought it in 1937.)

The Macquarie chest was eventually acquired by the State Library of NSW in 2004. This year marks 200 years since Macquarie took office in New South Wales. To commemorate the anniversary, the NSW State Library, in conjunction with the Miegunyah Press, has released this lavish hardback. It boasts more than 150 photographs and paintings, and slides into its elaborate boxed cover as readily as a secret drawer into an antique desk.

Rosemary Neill

Rare & Curious: The Secret History of Governor Macquarie's Collectors' Chest. By Elizabeth Ellis
The Miegunyah Press
\$59.99, 275pp



Macquarie chest, left, opened to show stuffed birds, shells and painted panels; glazed cases of insect, moth and butterfly specimens from the chest, below

