Notes R.B.G. Edinb. 38(3):416 (1980)

BOOK REVIEW

The Euphorbiaceae of New Guinea.* This account follows the pattern of the Euphorbiaceae of Siam (*Kew Bull.* 26:191–363, 1971) and Borneo (*Kew Bull. Add. Ser.* IV:1–245, 1975) and is to be warmly welcomed as a significant contribution to our knowledge of a large, important, and difficult family in a region where the vegetation is so poorly known, yet so economically and scientifically important. It covers the whole of what is now known as West Irian (West New Guinea) and Papua New Guinea excluding Bougainville.

The volume is very much a herbarium manual which will be used to good effect in the larger herbaria with reference duplicates of New Guinea material (much of which has been so generously distributed from Lae by the Division of Botany). It is arguable that with such a difficult family a herbarium manual only was possible, yet with greater use of illustrations a wider public could have been served. The need for illustrations has obviously made itself felt as this is the first volume in the series to be illustrated, but the coverage is poor with only 23 out of the 48 genera represented by line drawings which are huddled together at the back of the book. The drawings themselves are excellent, but it would have been more useful to have had simple illustrations of contrasting key characters throughout the text.

There are keys to genera and species which are generally clear, with concise contrasting characters. A good feature is that the keys generally start with the more obvious characters and become progressively more difficult, an inevitable feature of these small flowered, often dioecious plants. Fruit and floral characters often alternate which will make the determination of incomplete specimens very difficult. Occasionally one can fault the choice of a dichotomy such as number 25 of the general key (p. 8): Leaf-base distinctly asymmetrical vs. Leaf-base asymmetrical—no doubt clear enough to one who knows the plants but not a good objective distinction.

The description of both genera and species are often very brief and this is intentional and certainly avoids a lot of redundant information. The short notes on how to distinguish closely related taxa will prove immensely valuable as will the ecological notes.

Distributions of most of the taxa are little known and I dislike the use of the letters denoting political divisions when a species is often known only from one or two collections, and when further distributional information is to be found elsewhere in the text—such data would be better kept together.

I am not qualified to give a critical appreciation of the taxonomy but I am fully confident that it is a sound and careful, yet bold, piece of work which reflects truly the author's great knowledge and experience. *Macaranga* is very professionally dealt with by Dr T. C. Whitmore whose intimate knowledge of this important genus comes over very clearly.

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* *The Euphorbiaceae of New Guinea* by H. K. Airy Shaw. *Kew Bulletin Additional Series* VIII. HMSO, London. 1980. 243 pages. £15.