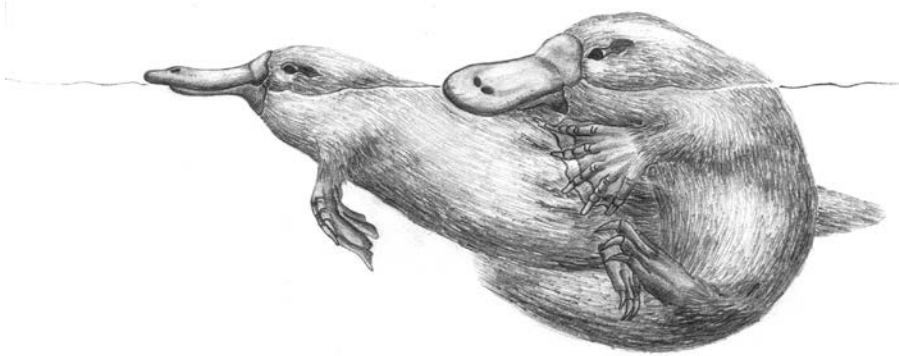


2

BREEDING BIOLOGY



'Monotremes oviparous, ovum meroblastic'

WILLIAM CALDWELL (1884)

Message to the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Montreal, announcing that the platypus and echidna did in fact lay eggs.

Following the first report of the platypus in 1798 by Governor John Hunter, the answer to the question 'Do platypuses and echidnas give birth to live young or lay eggs?' soon became the 'holy grail' of a number of biologists in Britain and Europe and especially many of those who visited the Australian colonies. To resolve this question – the answer to which had almost certainly been known by Aboriginal people for millennia and already tentatively reported by other Europeans – the Scottish biologist William Caldwell slaughtered many hundreds of platypuses and echidnas during his work in Australia. In 1884, with the evidence in hand, he sent a succinct message – *'Monotremes oviparous, ovum meroblastic'* – to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He had at last acquired convincing evidence that not only did platypuses and echidnas lay eggs but that the embryo develops by partial cleavage of the egg, as occurs in birds and reptiles, rather than by complete cleavage as