

Efflorescence: The Letters of Georgiana Molloy

'I never met with any one who so perfectly called forth and could sympathise with me in my prevailing passion for Flowers'¹ wrote Georgiana Molloy, one of the earliest settlers at Augusta in Western Australia, in the midst of her obsession for botanising. Her words were addressed to Captain James Mangles, an amateur botanist in London for whom she was collecting seeds and specimens of native flora. The letters she wrote to Mangles were strikingly different in tone and context to those she had penned to previous correspondents. In these she had described the life of exhausting hardship which greeted herself and her husband when they arrived in 1830. This article endeavours to account for such an alteration, exploring how Molloy became obsessed with botanising for Mangles and also with writing to him, to the point where she was seduced by writing. Yet it was not ordinary writing that ensnared her, but an erotic language that stemmed from the long-standing association between botany and sexuality. So deliberately crafted does her writing seem, in places, that Molloy's letters could be construed not only as a seduction by writing, but also a seduction of Mangles. It would have been in her interests to maintain Mangles' attention, for without him she would have little reason to further the botanising and writing that contributed so much pleasure to her life. At most, however, this ensnaring of Mangles' attentions could only have been a secondary consideration, for it was her sheer delight in botanising and writing that enabled Molloy to bloom.

Loneliness and hardship

Molloy wrote in despair to her friend Maggie Dunlop in Scotland: 'My head aches. I have all the clothes to put away from the wash; baby to put to bed; make tea and drink it without milk as they shot our cow for a trespass; read prayers and go to bed beside sending off this tableful of letters.'² This account was one of many that showed how overwhelming Molloy found the primitive conditions at Augusta, the severe shortage of servants and her continuous pregnancies. Not only was Molloy overworked, she also suffered from a pervasive homesickness. She wrote to a friend, Helen Story in an unmistakable tone of desperation in 1833: 'Oh! my dear and lovely Roseneath! My heart bleeds when I think of all the happy, celestial days I spent there ... Oh! do come out! Oh! do come out!'³ Her rare use of

exclamation marks conveys a sense that her horror at the new country could not be contained in mere description—it needed the emphasis of punctuation. She was also tormented by loneliness, as she protested to Maggie Dunlop: 'How would you like to be three years in a place without a female of your own rank to speak to or to be with you whatever happened?'⁴ Nor did she have anyone to engage her intellectually, and she later mentioned to Mangles that when she first arrived in the colony: 'Nothing was heard of but Beef and Pork.'⁵

Her sense of alienation and loneliness was no doubt heightened by the strangeness of the landscape. It made an unwelcoming impression upon her when soon after she arrived at Augusta her first child was born, only to die a few days later. It was three years before she could mention the incident to Helen Story:

language refuses to utter what I experienced when mine died in my arms in this dreary land ... I thought I might have had one little bright object left me to solace all the hardships and privations I endured and have still to go through ... Its grave, though sodded with British clover, looks so singular and solitary in this wilderness, of which I can scarcely give you an idea.⁶

Here, as Delys Bird has noted, the 'fracturing effects of emigration and grief'⁷ had a silencing effect upon Molloy. Emigrant women, when they lacked 'a secure, experiential frame of reference ... typically turned to the familiar English countryside for comparison',⁸ and hence the only allusion Molloy could make to her desolation was through a British plant—language could not be mustered to describe the rest of the foreign 'wilderness' to her friend. This sense of isolation and hardship in an inexpressible environment was to alter dramatically once Molloy began writing to Mangles.

Blossoming

The death of Molloy's second child in 1837, when he fell into a well and drowned, might have been yet another blow that caused Molloy to revile her surroundings. Interestingly, it did the opposite. Just prior to the accident, Molloy received a letter from Captain James Mangles. This amateur botanist was acquainted with Molloy through his cousin Ellen Stirling, the wife of the governor of Perth. On learning that she had an enthusiasm for flowers and gardening, he sent Molloy a box of seeds, requesting that she take the seeds for herself, fill the box with Australian specimens and return it to him in England. Molloy wrote back to

say that 'as all my former pursuits have necessarily been thrown aside (by the peremptory demand of my personal attention to my children and domestic drudgery) I feel that it will be long ere I can make any adequate return in Australian productions.'⁹ However, with the death of her son, she found time to get away from the house, as she explained in the opening of her second letter to Mangles: 'Having at length complied with your desire to obtain flowers and seeds from Augusta, I send you the result of my labours, which at one time I had not the least hope of being able to do in a satisfactory manner.'¹⁰ She then plunged immediately into a description of the boy's death, ending with an apology for 'thus using towards a Stranger the freedom and minute detail that Friendship warrants and desires.'¹¹ Whereas her previous child's death, linked to her hostile surroundings and traumatic arrival, was unmentionable even to a close friend, the death of this second child was described at length to a stranger.

It was also, in opposition to the first death, tied to a growing intimacy, rather than repulsion, with the land, and Molloy wrote: 'Since my dear Boy's death, my leisure has been much extended and I have, up to the present time, daily employed it in your service.'¹² Every day she went out gathering specimens for Mangles and became increasingly acquainted with the area's flora. Although, a few years after her arrival, she commented to her sister that 'I only know three kinds and those are two white and one blue of the herbaceous plants possessing an odour',¹³ after a few months of botanising for Mangles she was able to write: 'I have no hesitation in declaring that, were I to accompany the box of seeds to England, knowing as I do their situation, time of flowering, soil and degree of moisture required ... I should have a very extensive conservatory, or conservatories, of no plants but from Augusta.'¹⁴ As her letters and reports of botanising progressed, her enthusiasm for the project became even more apparent in lines such as 'I have been more frequently from my house this year in making up your collection than for the whole of the nearly eight years we have lived at Augusta.'¹⁵ She wrote that she wished to 'inspire [Mangles] with that ardour and interest with which the collection leaves me.'¹⁶ While Molloy may have been botanising, as Hasluck suggests, 'for solace, to take her mind of her lost son, and to take her eyes away from the fatal well ever before [her] in the midst of her garden',¹⁷ she was also taking to her task with such relish that it seems the activity was far more than a palliative.

Certainly, her zeal for her botanical mission forced virtually all mention of domestic duties and childbearing from her pages to Mangles, even though they had occupied a great deal of her letters to previous correspondents and were undoubtedly still a concern, as there was no one but Molloy to undertake them.¹⁸ Molloy's lack of discussion on this theme may have been due to the fact that she was writing to a stranger, for 'letter writing demands that one think in terms of another person'¹⁹ and Mangles was not intimate enough to be delivered details of Molloy's burdens. However, it was apparent that, in her daily life, she was also giving priority to activities associated with Mangles over her household chores. One of these activities was the sowing of the English seeds Mangles had sent her—a task deemed 'too valuable not to demand care and attention, and such I rendered it to the cessation of other concerns. Often has Molloy looked at a buttonless shirt, and exclaimed with a Woebegone Visage, "When will Capt'n. Mangles's seeds be sown?"'²⁰ As Susan K. Martin has observed, Molloy's quest for seeds enabled her 'to rearrange domestic rhythms to accommodate the demands of collecting and to redefine family structures and priorities to suit her primary interests',²¹ thereby allowing her to partake of a pleasurable activity. The effects of this rearrangement were shown in Molloy's comment that 'being in the Bush is to me one of the most delightful states of existence, free from every household care, my husband and children, all I possess on Earth, about me.'²² Within this space in the bush, she was able to attain a sense of personal accomplishment, as well as the feeling that she had found her vocation. She expressed this clearly to Mangles, writing: 'When I sally forth on foot or Horseback I feel quite elastic in mind and step. I feel I am quite at my own work, the real cause that has enticed me out to Swan River.'²³ These words are a far cry from Molloy's initial expression of horror at the landscape and the complaints of pressing domestic duties.

Such descriptions of how she felt in the bush add to the sense that, for Molloy, the imperative to get out and botanise was overwhelming. This comes through in her depictions of the sheer energy of her passion, which not only rearranged her daily activities, but also mobilised the entire district—black and white inhabitants alike—into helping with the collecting when the family moved further north to the Vasse area (now Busselton):

The soldiers who used to pass between this and Augusta unmolested and unencumbered with anything but their knapsacks, are now seen to bring from thence specimens of

all sorts of Plants under their arms. The Native Herdsmen are also employed in bringing in some desired Plant or Fruit, which until now they have never perhaps looked upon, for they dislike Flowers.²⁴

Even when struck with fever, the thoughts of collecting for Mangles did not leave her mind and she described to Mangles how her sister, who was visiting, had declared 'that three times out of four when she came to my Bedside I called out, "Oh poor Captn. Mangles! I cannot go on with his collection, and the seeds of the Nuytsia Floribunda will all be shed!"'²⁵ These accounts reveal the extent of the absorption Molloy had in her botanical project. The degree to which it occupied her thoughts—both amidst the swarm of daily duties and during illness—suggest that, for her, it had become an obsession. Certainly, something of that nature was detected by the neighbouring Charlotte Bussell, who commented that Molloy 'could not be without flowers.'²⁶

Molloy's letters, as they describe her botanical expeditions, reveal a joy that scarcely glimmered in her earlier letters. For, in tandem with her expansion of interests and movements into the bush, there appeared in her writing a vibrancy and enthusiasm. Indeed, the language that Molloy used suggests that she enjoyed writing to Mangles just as much as she enjoyed botanising.

The seduction of writing

For Molloy had found a boon in her literary relationship with Mangles—being able to converse with someone about flowers and botany. She mentioned to him how 'Grubbing hoes, Beef, Pork etc., Anchors and Anchorage, Whaling, Harpooning, Potatoes and Onions are the chief topics of conversation',²⁷ so that she was convinced that 'any observations respecting a flower garden would be ill-timed, and not agreeable to the generality of my guests.'²⁸ This remark indicates how her passion for botany had always been there, but held in check. With her new correspondent, however, she allowed it to flourish. In place of the cries of homesickness and loneliness were imaginative and descriptive passages, such as the following:

It is a lovely, luxurious morning, cloudy and gently-falling showers, the beauteous and gigantic Peppermint trees in front of where I write drooping their graceful form. My windows, or rather calico blinds, the former stitched tight on square frames, down, my doors open, the children playing in the verandah, the songsters of the wood chanting it so merrily. I could not refrain from putting some seed in, and

just before I sat down, put in some Mignonette, just sent for winter flowering, and some Lilac and Nasturtium seed.²⁹

Here is a sumptuous description of a peaceful morning, where the sound and scents of the outside world float to Molloy at her desk, writing herself into the scene and onto the page for Mangles to read and bring to life. It is not an ordinary morning, but a 'luxurious' one; the birds are not merely birds, but 'songsters', while the peppermint tree, instead of bearing branches, has a 'graceful form.' Within this scene, she situates herself as the gardener so besotted with plants she 'could not refrain' from poking some seeds into the soil. This passage is in stark contrast to the harried tone of her earlier letters. The sense of contentment that emanates from it reveals not only Molloy's pleasure in viewing the scene, but also in setting it for Mangles and framing it with the references to plants—the peppermint trees and the seeds she had planted. Neither was her pen confined to sensual descriptions of plants or vistas—she also created vivid dramas in which she starred. In one instance, she described how she stole a hortus siccus that had been sent from Mangles to the neighbouring Mrs Bull:

I have, I am afraid, been guilty of seizing on both the large Hortus Siccus, as also the small one. I know one was addressed to 'Mrs Bull', but I thought it was a mistake, and as coolly as possible appropriated it, until Mr Preiss pointed out to me my error. At all events, they will be returned to you with the tributes of the Spring, and I shall be exonerated from any selfish desire: in the mean time I shall apologise to poor Mrs Bull.³⁰

That she took the hortus siccus 'as coolly as possible' shows Molloy was far from thinking it a mistake. This, combined with the dramatic language—she was 'guilty' of taking the book, she 'seized' it with 'selfish desire' from which she intended to absolve herself by filling it with 'tributes'—serve to portray her as a villainess in her own, imagined melodrama. Yet it was one that could not have been composed for anyone but Mangles, as the object around which the scene centred was his hortus siccus. The botanical interest which Molloy shared with him was one that she could plunder for material to create a picturesque scene or an absorbing narrative.

These two extracts—one a lyrical rendition of a morning and the other an account of calculated thievery, reveal how Molloy had 'succumbed to the seductive allure of language ... [was] addicted to the thrill of words and controlled by the power of written

language³¹—in other words, she had been seduced by writing. This addiction to words and the pleasure of playing with them is most apparent in Molloy's letters to Mangles rather than to her family and friends, and suggests that Mangles was her main inspiration for writing in this way. Such a relationship becomes interesting when one takes note of the particularly sensual nature of Molloy's letters. Some of her descriptions are so lush and evocative that, it could be argued, in her letters to Mangles, Molloy was drawing upon a long-standing association between plants and sexuality, thereby penning a potentially erotic narrative.

The sexual metaphor of plants

'Sexuality lies at the core of the flower's existence and played a prominent part when it was taken up in human life' writes Jack Goody.³² It was playing this role as far back as the Bible, where in *Song of Songs* an amore compared his lover to a flower: 'Like a lily among thorns/ is my darling among women.'³³ Some centuries later, Shakespeare made use of it in Ophelia's madness scene in *Hamlet*. Ophelia's reference to the orchid, named in the text as the 'long purples/ That liberal shepherds give a grosser name'³⁴ added a sexual context to her words for, according to Charlotte Otten, these plants were: 'Obtrusively phallic' and 'had whole clusters of scientific and common or popular names which revealed the human (as well as animal or mythical) organs of generation.'³⁵ Their mention by Ophelia suggests that she was exchanging something more than love notes with Hamlet, indicating how the sexuality of plants could be harnessed to provide a subtext to the story.

At the end of the eighteenth century the sexual nature of flowers was brandished when Linnaeus devised his system for classifying plants according to the number of male and female parts on each flower. He divided plants into classes by counting how many 'male' parts they had (that is, stamens) and into orders by their number of 'female' parts (or pistils).³⁶ He referred to the female 'genital fluid', and 'male pollen' and also employed the terms andria and gynia, 'the Greek terms for husband and wife'³⁷ in place of the more conventional 'pistil' and 'stamen.' This meant that, when explaining how plants reproduced, the description was inevitably couched in terms of human reproduction or, more specifically, in terms of marriage. For if a male and a female cohabited on the same plant they were required, by the social

laws of the day, to be married. However, while this analogy was intended to simplify botany, it also had the unwitting effect of firing the public imagination. As most plants had more than one stamen and one pistil, it followed that many were not lawfully wedded:

Only one class of plants—Linnaeus's monandria—practices monogamy. Plants in other classes engage in marriage consisting of two, three, twenty or more 'husbands' who share their marriage-bed (that is, the petals of the same flower) with one wife. Plant husbands of his 'class xxiii'—polygamia—live with their wives and harlots, later called concubines, in distinct marriage beds. Each of these 'marriages' signifies a particular arrangement of stamens and pistils on the flower.³⁸

This riotous arrangement of couples was seized upon with great glee by Erasmus Darwin, who wrote a book of sensational poems entitled *The Loves of the Plants*. His plants 'freely expressed every imaginable form of human sexuality.'³⁹ He had enormous fun with arrangements such as *Lychnis*, which consisted of ten males and five females:

Each wanton beauty, trick'd in all her grace,
Shakes the bright dew-drops from her blushing face;
In gay undress displays her rival charms,
And calls her wondering lovers to her arms.⁴⁰

His poetry, as is evident here, literally embodied the sexual lives of plants, thereby creating a medium through which sexuality could be discussed without actually referring to human beings. As such, it proved a useful medium for discussing sexuality indirectly, or for adding hints of eroticism to literature.⁴¹

The association between plants and sexuality continued in a more muted, but far more prevalent form in the nineteenth century, when it was known as the Language of Flowers. Charlotte de Latour of France published the book generally accepted as having begun this language in 1819. Entitled *Langage des fleurs*, it was, according to the author, primarily used as a language between lovers. 'It is above all for those who know of love ... that we have brought together a few syllables of the language of flowers.'⁴² Each flower had a symbolic meaning attached to it and the recipient, when they received a bunch, deduced what their sender was saying. The practice, which soon caught on in England and the rest of the Continent, could be seen as a physical representation of what had already been present in literature for centuries—the erotic overtones of flowers. Interestingly, Molloy herself received from Mangles a copy of this

text at the end of 1839, indicating that both of them must have been aware of the metaphorical meanings that plants held.

While it cannot be ascertained whether Molloy and Mangles were receptive to either Linneaus' or Darwin's work, what is clear, from this smattering of examples, is that the association between plants and sex was by no means uncommon. As Bewell observes: 'Whether or not a person decided to draw explicitly on the analogy between plant and human sexuality, it was always there to be made—and most people knew it.'⁴³ Given the sensual quality of Molloy's botanical descriptions and her knowledge of the Language of Flowers, it is not likely that she was unaware of it. Certainly, traces of such metaphorical language may be detected in her letters, as in this account of a botanical expedition:

the ground was adorned with the crimson flower of *Kennedyia*, but not so profusely as it will be a week or two hence ... I discovered a plant I have been almost panting for, a very small neat white blossom, on a furze looking bush ... As the shades of night were commencing, we reluctantly turned homewards when other agremens met my eye—what but a grove of *Nuytsia Floribunda*! I though myself really blest that these desiderata should place themselves before me.⁴⁴

Molloy's description of the richness of the vegetation creates a vision of a lush and fertile landscape. Her reference to the unmistakable redness of the *Kennedyia*, and the promise of it flowering further, has connotations of a potent sexuality. Not only this, but the hint of passion in the term 'panting', combined with Molloy's romantic description of the coming of nightfall, leaves the reader with a strong sense of an intention to arouse. The passage also harbours a certain breathlessness which, along with the eroticism of the piece, her reader would be hard-pressed to miss. In another extract, Molloy capitalised on the sexual qualities of plants while writing of a native specimen in her garden:

The Purple creeper alone has consented to be domesticated, and has associated its beautiful Purple flowers with a very elegant Pink climbing Plant from Mauritius. I never saw it in England therefore have sent you some seeds to entwine round the pillars of a conservatory. It is ever flowering with us.⁴⁵

That the creeper had 'consented' to live in Molloy's garden suggests a curtailing of wildness, as though the plant were an exotic woman who, although she had been 'domesticated', still

exuded the mysteriousness and thrill of contained passion. The term 'associated' is also sensual, suggesting a shy, delicate affair with the pink plant. Yet the image of the vine entwined around a conservatory pillar is the most potent, being resonant of the garden of Eden, with the snake curling around the phallic post, while the final line—'It is ever flowering with us'—hints at an orgasmic joy in the presence of the flower. In representing the vine as something seductive, Molloy drew upon the ancient association between plants and human sexuality and created a particularly suggestive passage. Her delight in dabbling in this kind of language becomes apparent throughout the pages that she wrote to Mangles, but it scarcely appears in any prior letters. One possible reason for this change in tone, apart from Molloy's seduction by words and writing, lies in her recognition of the value of keeping Mangles interested in herself and in the botanical project. In other words, she realised that she needed to seduce him in order to keep him writing to her and asking for specimens.

The seduction of Mangles

'Seduction is a reaction,' writes Frances Wilson, and 'no writer will seduce who has not already found himself seduced by writing.'⁴⁶ This equation was exemplified by Molloy, who had been seduced by writing and therefore felt the need to persuade Mangles to continue to correspond with her, as he was responsible for the enjoyment that she derived from looking for plants and writing of them. Her only means of communication with Mangles was through a pen and therefore her only power lay in that pen. Thus she had no other recourse to maintaining Mangles' interest except through writing a literary seduction. From an examination of her letters, it would appear that the new lusciousness of her prose, the flattery which she doled out to her correspondent and the sheer romanticism of some passages, pointed not only to Molloy being herself seduced, but also being engaged in this process of the literary seduction of Mangles.

In a literary seduction, as Frances Wilson observes:

the reader first falls in love with writing in the form of a book, a poem, a single line or an isolated word and then falls for the writer himself. Rather than being captivated by a smile, a voice, or a gesture it is in the pattern of certain letters, the positions of particular vowels, the flow of the sounds or the story that the lover drowns ... In literary seductions words become flesh.⁴⁷

That Molloy had some sense of this process of substitution was apparent in the charming scenes she painted of herself. In the following vignette, for example, it is the sensuous use of words that is attractive:

at dear Augusta, I used to take [the harpsichord] on the Grass plot and play till late by Moonlight, the beautiful broad water of the Blackwood gliding by, the roar of the Bar, and ever and anon the wild scream of a flight of Swans going over to the Fresh Water Lakes. The air perfectly redolent with the powerful scent of Vergillia, Stocks, and Oenothera biennis.⁴⁸

Any reader could not help but be captivated by this alluring scene—the scent of the flowers in the still air, the silver light on water, the clash of music with the swan's screams and the mysteriousness of a woman playing a piano by moonlight. They combine to create a stirring image which would have piqued Mangles' interest and compelled him to continue his correspondence, perhaps in order to read more writing of this nature, or to gather more knowledge about the elusive woman portrayed by Molloy.

The selection of these images and the manner in which they were described point to the deliberateness of Molloy's writing. She admitted herself, closing a letter to Mangles, that 'when this arrives I hope it will give you such a pleasing impression of Captn. and Mrs. Molloy, but especially the latter, as an active and obliging person.'⁴⁹ For it was the 'impression' aroused by the words that mattered—as long as it interested Mangles, he would be tempted into writing back for more.

As well as creating appealing images of herself, Molloy doled out generous quantities of flattery to her correspondent, understanding, no doubt, how much pleasure this gesture would convey. In one instance of her veneration, she wrote to Mangles of a work he had produced, entitled *Floral Calendar*. She suggested

that a Lithographic Portrait of the Compiler should form the Frontispiece. Then I should see face to face the person whom Fate has so capriciously veiled from sight, but made so instrumental in bestowing kindness and gratification at so remote a part of the Globe.⁵⁰

Here, the use of 'capricious' to describe Fate illustrates the annoyance Molloy felt at being separated from Mangles, which, in turn, leaves the reader—who was once Mangles—with a sense of her yearning to have met him. The mention of Mangles' kindness announces Molloy's gratefulness to him, as well as her impression of him as a benevolent man. Meanwhile, the term 'veiled'

introduces both a sensuousness and flirtatiousness—the excitement that comes from something partially uncovered, yet still concealed. It is a term that could be used to describe the correspondence itself, the titillating nature of which was drawn from the distance between the two writers, that allowed Molloy to flirt safely with her pen. The flattery—Molloy complimenting Mangles' generosity—combined with the teasing image of the veil and Molloy's evident aggravation at not being able to meet Mangles, produces an extract in which each of the variant emotions are directed towards or inspired by Mangles. Her crafting of phrases appears to be calculated to gratify and encourage the recipient of her letter.

Molloy also constantly mentioned how often she thought of Mangles and the fulfilment of his wishes. In early 1840 she wrote: 'Since Saturday last I have been engaged in your service. The children have had a week's holiday and so have I, although I have necessarily been very assiduous, always working from after Breakfast till 12, and half after 12 at night.'⁵¹ Her efforts would have been sufficient to impress any employer! She even compelled herself to physical exertion in order to pack specimens while ill, mentioning in a letter of November 1838: 'The day on which I sent off the box, I was so unwell as scarcely to be able to pack it, but as the vessel unexpectedly called and had but a few hours to remain, I put in its contents.'⁵² Molloy was making plain the lengths to which she was prepared to go in her 'service' to Mangles.

Her repetition of this word throughout her letters indicates a shrewdness on Molloy's part. She was well aware of the significance of her work—namely, the colonial project to which it contributed—and often suggested to Mangles that, without her, he would not have his recognition:

I do not know how the Specimens will arrive, but at least they will afford amusement to your Botanical Friends, and will, I believe, be the first in Britain from this part of the world. My anxiety you should first possess them rouses all my energy to prepare them for embarkation.⁵³

Molloy, in this extract, makes her relationship to Mangles clear—without her, neither he nor Britain would acquire the new and unidentified (to European eyes) specimens of the area. Molloy's strategy of indicating her worth was successful, as indicated in a letter from George Hailes, one of the recipients of Molloy's specimens and letters: 'It must indeed be a pleasure to hold communication with such as Mrs Molloy ... I sincerely hope [she]

may long enable you to add the splendid Plants of Australia to the Gardens of England.'⁵⁴

Yet Molloy's pleasure in writing far overshadowed her position as an agent in the colonisation process. Although Mangles published works that incorporated her research without acknowledgement, Molloy was not concerned⁵⁵. In fact, his actions had the opposite effect, as she wrote: 'The notices of the Swan River 'Floral Botanical Register' have quite inflamed my ardour.'⁵⁶ Her situation was summed up by William Lines, who wrote that Molloy

discovered and created her own world even though the disclosure of that world came through the agency of a man. James Mangles's request, the summons of male authority, brought Molloy into intimacy with the bush and provided the setting for her own liberation.⁵⁷

Through Mangles, Molloy was able to indulge in and express her two passions—botany and writing. The result was an efflorescence: the bursting forth of a pleasure in her surroundings and in their articulation. This growing acquaintance with the Australian landscape brought her a vocation and ongoing happiness with her new life in Western Australia.

Molloy died in 1843, a few months after the birth of her fifth living child, and worn out from a life of drudgery, hardship and childbearing. However, the letters that she left behind reveal how she discovered a line of work she truly loved, and one which offered a space away from the tiresome domestic sphere. She also found, in her new correspondent, the chance to write in an alluring and exciting way, by drawing upon the long-standing link between plants and sexuality. While she clearly derived enormous pleasure from this kind of erotic writing—to the point where she was seduced by it—Molloy was also likely to have been aware that it was Mangles who was responsible for her botanising and writing. With this in mind, she used writing to seduce him into a continuation of his correspondence and interest in her botanical activities and specimens. Yet these motivations pale into the background when one considers what emerges from Molloy's letters to James Mangles—an efflorescence—a burgeoning love for her surroundings and a joy in describing them. Her writing and botanising enabled her to flourish in what would have otherwise remained the harsh and oppressive conditions of the nineteenth century Australian bush.

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Notes

¹ Alexandra Hasluck. *Portrait with Background: A Life of Georgiana Molloy*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1955: 194.

² Hasluck, 103-104.

³ Western Australia Historical Society. 'The Letters of Georgiana Molloy.' *Early Days: Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. Vol 1 (1927-1931)*. Rpt. Perth: General Printing, 1978: 37.

⁴ Hasluck, 104.

⁵ Hasluck, 228.

⁶ Hasluck, 73.

⁷ Delys Bird. 'Gender and Landscape: Australian Colonial Women Writers.' *New Literatures Review*, 18 (1989): 20-36: 32.

⁸ Bird, 25.

⁹ Hasluck, 147.

¹⁰ Hasluck, 154.

¹¹ Hasluck, 155.

¹² Hasluck, 155.

¹³ Hasluck, 98.

¹⁴ Hasluck, 157.

¹⁵ Hasluck, 162.

¹⁶ Hasluck, 157.

¹⁷ Hasluck, 155.

¹⁸ No further letters from Molloy to her family and friends, the Dunlops or Helen Story, are extant once she began writing to Mangles, although it is highly unlikely that she stopped writing to them. Sadly, Mangles' responses to Molloy's letters do not appear to exist either. However, their captivating nature is suggested by a comment penned by Doctor Lindley to Mangles: 'What a capital correspondent your friend Mrs Molloy must think you are! If she sends you treasures of Nature I am sure you make more than a return in treasures of Art' (Western Australian Historical Society 72).

¹⁹ Carolyn Steedman. 'A Woman Writing a Letter.' *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*. ed. Rebecca Earle. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999: 118.

²⁰ Hasluck, 162.

²¹ Susan K. Martin. 'Gender, Genera, Genre, and Geography: Colonial Women's Writing and the Uses of Botany.' *Crossing Lines: Formations of Australian Culture*. Proceedings of Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference, Adelaide, 1995 edn. by Caroline Guerin, Philip Butterss, Amanda Nettelbeck. Adelaide, SA: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1995: 32.

²² Hasluck, 194.

²³ Hasluck, 199.

²⁴ Hasluck, 192.

²⁵ Hasluck, 198.

²⁶ Hasluck, 185.

²⁷ Hasluck, 156.

²⁸ Hasluck, 156.

²⁹ Hasluck, 225.

³⁰ Hasluck, 191.

³¹ Frances Wilson. *Literary Seductions: Compulsive Writers and Diverted Readers*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999: xix.

³² Jack Goody. *The Culture of Flowers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 3.

- ³³ Bible. *Good News Bible*. Canberra: The Bible Society in Australia, 1988: 2.2.
- ³⁴ William Shakespeare. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996: IV vii 68-69.
- ³⁵ Charlotte Otten. *Environ'd with Eternity: God, Poems and Plants in 16th and 17th Century England*. Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1985: 78-79.
- ³⁶ It is interesting to note that Linnaeus' perspective on gender made its way into his classificatory system. For the number of male parts of a flower determined the class to which it belonged, while the number of female parts determined its order and, as Schiebinger points out: 'In the taxonomic tree, class stands above order. In other words, Linnaeus gave male parts priority in determining the status of the organism in the plant kingdom' (125). She argues that there is no 'scientific justification' (125) for this reasoning, but that Linnaeus was imposing his own view of gender onto the natural world.
- ³⁷ Londa Schiebinger. 'The Private Life of Plants: Sexual Politics in Carl Linnaeus and Erasmus Darwin.' *Science and Sensibility: Gender and Scientific Enquiry 1780-1945*. ed. Marina Benjamin. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991: 127.
- ³⁸ Schiebinger, 128.
- ³⁹ Schiebinger, 131.
- ⁴⁰ Desmond King-Hele. 'Chronicle of the Lustful Plants.' *New Scientist*. 22 April 1989: 37.
- ⁴¹ It also, as Bewell has pointed out, 'implicitly offered women a language for understanding and talking about their own sexuality' (174). This offered them scope for empowerment, especially in the face of the moral outrage of teaching women about botany (and therefore, by extension, sexuality) which led to some authors creating versions of Linnaeus' system which obliterated the references to sex. The politics of teaching botany to girls and women are described in detail in Ann B. Shteir's text *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- ⁴² cited in Goody, 238.
- ⁴³ Alan Bewell. "'On the Banks of the South Sea": Botany and Sexual Controversy in the Late Eighteenth Century.' *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and Representations of Nature*. ed. David Miller and Peter Reill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 175.
- ⁴⁴ Hasluck, 205.
- ⁴⁵ Hasluck, 161-162.
- ⁴⁶ Wilson, xix.
- ⁴⁷ Wilson, xiv.
- ⁴⁸ Hasluck, 201.
- ⁴⁹ Hasluck, 167.
- ⁵⁰ Hasluck, 194.
- ⁵¹ Hasluck, 192.
- ⁵² Hasluck, 170.
- ⁵³ Hasluck, 193.
- ⁵⁴ Hasluck, 207.
- ⁵⁵ It does not appear that Molloy intended her letter for a readership beyond Mangles, as she never acknowledged that Mangles passed her letters around, although many writers sending letters back home did intend them for a general, rather than private, audience.
- ⁵⁶ Hasluck, 202.
- ⁵⁷ William J. Lines, *An All Consuming Passion: Origins, Modernity, and the Australian Life of Georgiana Molloy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994: 298.

Dorothy Hewett (21 May 1923-25 August 2002)

She is buried in the small bush cemetery at Springwood in the Blue Mountains where she lived with Merv for the past decade. The tall gums whispered, the air was cool and clean, and people of all ages mingled and remembered, and then threw sprigs of yellow wattle on the coffin after Merv and Kate had spoken and the tape of that strong voice speaking 'Go down red roses' had been played. She would have loved the informality, but this was also theatre, of a distinctively Australian kind, with its own special rituals: the language of poetry rather than of formal piety, the velvet voice singing 'Stormy Weather,' the beloved grandson barely able to control his grief, the backdrop of the grey New South Wales bush, the dried leaves and brittle pieces of eucalypts underfoot, and into this the sudden moment when she seemed to be performing for all of us. And after the funeral, the move up to Varuna where the talking continued, a time to swap stories, with performances from many who had been important to her: family, friends, colleagues, lovers. And, towering over all this, arriving in the Wagga funeral car, his monstrous Galaxy, was Merv, after years of caring and nursing, coping but vulnerable, keeping it all together – just.

And I remember her being interviewed by Margaret Throsby, the laughter in her voice and the wonderfully predictable choice of records with the emphasis on the political message and the magic diversity of the human voice: Paul Robeson's 'Joe Hill' after whom her son Joe was named, Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit,' Bob Dylan's 'Hard Rain,' the end of 'Rhapsody in Blue' and all introduced by the song her father loved to listen to, the Yeats poem 'Down by the Sally Gardens' sung by Kathleen Ferrier. She loved the fact that her father who had taught her the names of trees had been an early environmentalist, and she lamented the loss of his trees on her return to Lambton Downs.

So how will Dorothy Hewett be remembered? It was noticeable that many of the obituaries which appeared immediately following her death, while acknowledging her importance to Australian literature and the extraordinary range of her work, yet again resorted to descriptions of the flamboyant life and body as if these factors would forever mark her legacy. Certainly she lived a life full of colour and incident, and there are some great pieces of archival footage and photographs showing her at first nights