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Submitting to Limina

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Barry, Bernice, *A Lady's Pen: The botanical letters of Georgiana Molloy, Witchcliffe, Western Australia, UWA Publishing, 2023; paperback; pp. 251, 30 colour images, 6 b/w images, RRP: \$39.99incl GST, ISBN: 9780994206411*

Georgiana Molloy is credited as the first woman in Western Australia to become an internationally successful botanical collector. Born in Cumberland in 1905, Georgiana settled in Augusta in 1829 and began an epistolary relationship with James Mangles' – a self-established collector of artifacts and curiosities based in London. After several years of exchanging letters, he displayed and circulated her stunning specimens of West Australian flora, botanical collections which undoubtedly helped her to rise to international acclaim after her death. However, only Mangles' record of Georgiana's letters remain in archives, and none of his replies have survived. Berenice Barry's 2023 publication *A Lady's Pen: The Botanical Letters of Georgiana Molloy* tells the 'tenuous' story of these handwritten exchanges between Georgiana and James Mangles, in a one-sided tale unexplored for one hundred and eighty years (1).

This is Barry's second book on Georgiana Molloy. Her first was the 2015 publication *Georgiana Molloy: The Mind that Shines* – an official biography that addresses Georgiana's early life and puts an increased focus on her husband John Molloy and his influences. Consequently, as Barry has covered it all before, this book has little to say on Georgiana's beginnings, with only four pages covering her childhood and twenties in England and Scotland. James Mangles may make a brief appearance in *The Mind that Shines*, but his presence in *A Lady's Pen* confirms that he is fundamental to this specific period of Georgiana's life.

The introduction outlines the context of our 'main characters', and the next two chapters are biographies of Georgiana Molloy and James Mangles respectively. Section three is a 20-page note on the letters, exploring their historical context and her grammatical and stylistic choices when transcribing the documents. The remainder of the book is composed of Georgiana's 10 letters to Mangles, and three appendices – a list of the botanical species she collected, a comparative document (one of Georgiana's letters to her mother), and a brief autoethnographic note from the author, about an antique pen nib she found in the process of researching.

Barry has clearly spent an extensive amount of time with Georgiana. Therefore, this work has a far more lyrical focus than a typical biography, even venturing into a tone of historical fiction at times. Her writing is expressive, subjective, and narrativized, with Barry trying to delve into Georgiana's inner thoughts by asking rhetorical phrases such as 'what prompted her to agree?' (20). Barry justifies this narrativising as creating a history mystery, a story of what would James Mangles have written back to her since there are no surviving records of his own works (2). One can even read a metatextual quality into Barry's writing, as she mimics Georgiana's specific tone of a mix of 'scientific and emotive' writing that defined her letters and her approach to botany (4-5).

In the introduction, Barry establishes that this book is an entry into the long line of translations of Georgiana's letters. She frames her attempt as a combined effect of several different lenses (3) – citing Mangles' own selection leading to the letters

that remain today, and secondly referencing the 1955 original transcriptions by biographer Alexandra Hasluck. She also briefly mentions the 1994 text by William J. Lines, *An All-Consuming Passion: Origins, Modernity and the Australian Life of Georgiana Molloy*, which, while also a biography, takes time to focus on the first settlers and the Indigenous Noongar people who were dispossessed in the early colonies. While covering the mundane details of Molloy's everyday settler life, Lines' book can be considered an extensive look at the larger political, religious, cultural and philosophical debates of the time. Barry's book has none of this. Her wider debates in reference to gender, racism and settler colonialism are only briefly mentioned in relation to Georgiana's experiences and letters.

Nonetheless, *A Lady's Pen* still provides key historical context and explanations of Georgiana's botanical practices. She repeatedly stresses the difficulty of preserving and shipping these precious flowers, providing descriptions of Georgiana's many failed attempts (36, 45, 46). The second appendix (dated 1831) is a fascinating view of the nineteenth-century written literacy, relating Georgiana's crossing to the Swan River Colony and her experiences of being a heavily pregnant settler. This letter serves its purpose as an essential comparative, for, as Barry states, it contrasts with Mangles' letters which show Georgiana as her 'most eloquent, witty and definitively charming' (111). When talking to her mother, the reader receives the most unedited view.

Barry's love of Georgiana's work is ever-present in her poignant descriptions of her letters. She puts an onus on the reader to acknowledge that these documents require an 'awareness ... a recognition of the layers history has laid over them like a fine veil' (108). Therefore, considering my limited knowledge of botany and horticulture, the most captivating sections of the book for me were Barry's discussions of historical letter-writing. Barry takes a brief look into the culture of late Georgian communication and the 'shared social understandings of language,' noting the stylistic influences that may have affected Georgiana's writings (108). She points out how Georgiana's work was tailored to 'demonstrate the importance of being a lady' – through functions such as a wide vocabulary, a skill in structuring complex sentences and a knowledge of French and Italian phrases (5). Section three provides essential context to the transcriptions; as Barry writes that Australian settlers typically painted a 'picture of success, achievement and happiness', the 'true picture of their lives was often deliberately blurred' (110). In her second letter to Mangles, Georgiana relates the heartbreaking experience of the death of her only son. With Barry's analysis in mind, the reader is left to imagine what unthinkable hardships Georgiana is omitting.

The author writes how she intends this transcription to be a 'closer and more accurate reading of the nearest thing there is to Georgiana's original writings' (120). She attempts to replicate the punctuation in Georgiana's original letters, and puts emphasis on the miniscule changes and re-positioning of sentences between Hasluck's published versions and Mangles' original copies. Therefore, I believe *A Lady's Pen* would benefit from some more structure regarding the letters. A key of typographical conventions, (underlining, missing words, abbreviations) would be useful, as well as including a summary of each letter within the table of contents. Barry's methodology and her explanations are occasionally within the paragraphs on the page, and considering this book accommodates the seasoned scholars of

Georgiana's work hoping to compare versions, a few structural additions would help the process.

Barry's work is a worthy addition to the scholarship surrounding Georgiana Molloy, not only providing a comprehensive new transcription, but also presenting the letters as a missing half of a conversation. Georgiana's letters are framed as 'the lines that James Mangles chose to keep for posterity' – a combined outcome of *her* writing and *his* intervention (9). Barry maintains that Mangles' influence does not limit Georgiana's own achievements, but the author's engaging and incredibly subjective tone captures the bittersweet notion of lost history; her story cannot be fully told without him. The author's methodology of approaching the transcriptions is well-explained, and I enjoyed the humble tone of considering her work as not the first, and certainly not the last attempt to understand this incredible woman 'who travelled to the other side of the world and fell in love with the wildflowers she found there' (9).

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