

GENDER AND GEOGRAPHY

GENDER, GENERA, GENRE, AND GEOGRAPHY: COLONIAL WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE USES OF BOTANY

Susan K. Martin

Recently attempts have been made to reconsider the position of middle-class female subjects in the colonies. To what extent are they empowered subjects fully constituted by the relations of dominance instituted by the white imperial powers of which they are part, and to what extent do they remain in a vexed, partial position of disempowerment produced by the gender relations which are a part of the colonial society as well as the metropolitan one (Bird, Giles, Mills)? This question is further complicated by the complex two-way negotiations of power within the categories of empire and gender.¹ In this article I want to try to map some of the minute distributions and redistributions of power and autonomy as they are played out in the involvement of nineteenth-century middle-class colonial women in botany.

The women who were involved in botany in nineteenth-century Australia and Canada were engaged in an imperial and ostensibly empirical, 'enlightenment' pursuit.² Botany and associated natural sciences involve the imposition of classification and naming on a 'new' place and its objects. This is seldom viewed or practiced as an acknowledgment or deferral to the site, but rather as an attempt to make that place conform to externally-defined patterns, to confirm its accessibility and availability by showing how its natural world, like its social and physical world, can be fitted into the systems of the old world, can be made to demonstrate their potential as property. Botany is also an attempt to make the environment intelligible in European terms and in terms of a logic it might initially seem to elude.³

Both the 'natural' and Linnean forms of classification opened up the study of botany to women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴ Women's move into botanical studies is also a matter of timing. Reforms in female education across the eighteenth century expanded the list of suitable studies for women and widened the definitions of 'accomplishments'. The educational commentator Erasmus Darwin, amongst others, situated botany as one of those accomplishments when he produced a long pedagogic poem, *The Botanic Garden* (1791) explicitly aimed at women.⁵

Botanical study provided a way for women to gain entrance to Science (Bewell 137, Allen 241), and the power and pleasures of scientific study and knowledge. It also legitimated particular forms of travel and movement for women by enclosing such rambling in the safe zone of the pursuit of accomplishment or appropriate knowledge, further legitimised by the long cultural and sentimental association of flowers with women. Alan Bewell argues that

Linnaeus' sexual system also made available to women a language for discussing sexuality, 'sex, gender relationships and the social order', because of the centrality of the human-plant analogy to the explications and discussions of botanical systems at the time, including Linnaeus' and Erasmus Darwin's (Bewell 134).

For exactly this reason it was not an uncontroversial field of study, nor was it entirely the freeing or enabling field I have suggested so far. Various commentators were horrified at the possibility of young female minds being corrupted by exposure to the sexual explicitness of Linnaeus' system, which Goethe thought would 'outrage...[the] moral feelings' of 'innocent young souls' (Goethe qtd in Bewell 134). One commentator on Wollstonecraft saw her as promoting a field of study which would not so much outrage as corrupt 'our botanizing girls'—'they will soon exchange the blush of modesty for the bronze of impudence' (Kamm 133). While this suggests unprecedented realms of sexual knowledge and fields of unexpected experiment opened up to 'our botanizing girls', it conceals the fact that the dangerous discourse was disciplined and appropriated by more conservative forces. Goethe's alternative to the corruption of Linnaean botany was to produce his own more chaste theory (and another of those botanical texts addressed to women, 'Metamorphosis of Plants'). This, according to Lisbet Koerner, radically breaks down the divide between public science and private pursuits, but only to resituate the female as carrying her own private sphere with her—thus never able to break out of it. It also positions women as being inevitably the object of study. To the limited extent that she occupies the position of student, the poem positions her as stupid recipient of masculine pedagogy ('Goethe's Botany' 493).⁶

A number of the British botanical texts addressed to the hungry audience of women at the time likewise explicitly aligned women's botanical studies not with those of professionals, but with amateurs and children. Darwin's poem was addressed to 'ladies and other unemploy'd scholars' ('Goethe's Botany' 487); Stephen Clarke's *The British Botanist ... intended chiefly for the use of young persons* (1820) is addressed to the mother of the 'young persons' who is supposed to absorb and then transmit the masculine knowledge offered to their eager little minds.

In addition, botany's incorporation as an 'accomplishment' threatened its status as a serious study when practiced by women, potentially reduced its range and more subversive aspects, and resituated it in a developing separate, private sphere, a sphere it also helped produce.

But what happens to botanising women when they go to the colonies—possessed of an accomplishment which complements and affirms their femininity and gentility, yet gives them prospective access not only to the masculine realms of scientific knowledge, but also to the forbidden realms of sexual and social knowledge, and one of the sources of empiric power?

Firstly, I think, they challenge the amateur bracketing of women's 'botanising' by their placement at the geographical 'frontiers' of botanical knowledge. Women like Georgiana Molloy at Augusta, Louisa Meredith in Van Diemen's Land, Catherine Parr Traill in Ontario, and Fanny Macleay in Port Jackson, were planted in places where botanical studies had been minimal. Unlike their British sisters, they encountered whole unidentified genera, myriads of species unfamiliar not only to themselves but often to any Western classification. They were, like their contemporary male botanists, in a position to collect, press and describe the new. They even had an advantage over such botanists in that they were in prolonged and intimate contact with their local ecosystems. Georgiana Molloy demonstrates this in her first long letter to Captain Mangles, the English botanical collector who was the impetus to her systematic collecting:

We have very few flowers until Spring. September and October are our most delightful months. The purple creeper begins to bloom in July, the red in August, but in those two months the Wilderness indeed 'begins to blossom as a Rose'. (1837-1838 [WAA 479 I] Qtd in Hasluck 162).

Thus the static nature of their domestic conditions gave them advantages over the heroic commando raids of travelling itinerant (male) collectors and botanists;⁷ their proximity to the

bush allowed an attendant knowledge of flowering and fruiting seasons, times and places, growing conditions and the effects of fires or floods. Settlers were more likely also to benefit from the knowledge of the local indigenous people, and to collect indigenous names and learning. Molloy learnt Nyungar names for a number of the plants she collected. In Canada Catherine Parr Trill commented that, along with her own observations, 'My next teachers were old settlers' wives and choppers and Indians' (Bennett 89).⁸ Molloy pointed out an additional advantage she had—the assistance of her children.

Molloy's botanical practices, as this suggests, to some extent challenged the parameters of the domestic—Captain Molloy is quoted by Georgiana Molloy as looking 'at a buttonless shirt, and exclaim[ing] with a Woebegone Visage, "When will Captn. Mangles's seeds be sown?"'. But her botanical pursuits also broke down or reconfigured the domestic/public divide, at least as it was mapped onto private/public and feminine/masculine space, for she goes on:

Recently he has laid aside all his own operations and accompanied the children and me by Land and Water, for a day's search in quest for seeds and Flowers... Indeed, my dear Sir, I have been more from my house this year in making up your collection than for the whole of the nearly eight years we have lived at Augusta... (1837-1838 [WAA 479 I] Qtd in Hasluck 170)

Mangles' request for seeds enabled Molloy to elevate a genteel hobby into a legitimated quasi-professional practice, to rearrange domestic rhythms to accommodate the demands of collecting and to redefine family structures and priorities to suit her primary interests. The letters to Mangles illustrate another shift in position experienced by many female botanists in Australia at the time: their entry into relations of some sort of professional equality with men of science.⁹

Later women botanists in Australia, including Louisa Atkinson and Louisa Meredith, corresponded and associated with Ferdinand Von Mueller, Victorian Government Botanist and director of the National Herbarium. Mueller's *First and Second Census of Australian Plants*, and some of his correspondence, illustrate the vexed position most of these women botanists occupied, or were positioned in, despite their apparently empowering grasp on colonial discourses of knowing and owning, and the special and intimate understanding of their environments this sometimes enabled.

Firstly, while Mueller was fastidious in his replies to correspondents (Robertson 109), some of his replies to women were double-edged in their repositioning of his collectors as amateurs whose true profession lay elsewhere. To South Australian collector Louisa Hussey he wrote in 1896: 'My pride is to demonstrate for all classes of Australian plants the geographical distribution; but if you incurred special toil for that it would disturb your happiness and might withdraw you from filial and domestic duties' (Kraehenbuehl 393-4; letter from Mueller, 25 June 1896, published [with Hussey's permission 392] in *Garden and Field* November 1896 Melbourne). This solicitude does not fully agree with Mueller's other correspondence: 'Kindly send some seeds of any of the Droseras later in the season', he writes, and about the *Veronica Distans*. 'Has this any scent? What is its greatest height? Are the flowers always white?' (Kraehenbuehl 392). Mueller relocates Hussey's professional interest and practice as an aside to primary domesticity, and by publishing his letter in *Garden and Field* spreads the message to other young lady botanists. At the same time his avuncular tone also positions collecting as *part* of their filial duty, again domesticating it.¹⁰

Less personally Mueller's *Censuses* demonstrate the way in which the contributions of 'amateurs' were obscured by the very structures of their discipline. Though to all intents and purposes some of these women engaged in the practices and demonstrated the skills of professional botanists, they did not have access to one of the quintessential features of the colonial botanist, the linguistic outcome of botany—the power of naming. While Mueller's 'Types'—the dried herbaria samples which serve as guarantee for the identification of a species—note the name of the collector and the site of collection as well as the genus and species attribution, his *Second Census*, which for the nineteenth century was the last word on

the naming of Australian plants, lists not this information, but the *publisher* of the official name and description, and the place of publication.

That the women botanists had some awareness of this lack, this final inaccess to the language of their science, is evident in their writing. Molloy begs of Mangles:

My first request to you is, that you will oblige me by sending me the names of the different flowers according to their numbers. I have kept the number of each, and the duplicates of most of the specimens, that I might have the satisfaction of bearing some name attached to them and as through your medium I believe I shall be enlightened from the highest source, I shall esteem your compliance a great favor. (1837-1838 [WAA 479 I] Qtd in Hasluck 167)

Molloy of course had names for a great many of the specimens she had collected, but her investment was in the forms of order produced by her own Imperial society, as is evident from another letter to Mangles:

'I beheld a tree of great beauty....the flowers are of the purest white and fall in long tresses from the stem. Some of its pendulous blossoms are from three to five fingers in length and these wave in the breeze like snow wreaths....The native name is 'Danja' and I rather think it will turn out to be a Hakea. (14 March 1840: BL 479A/1-2. Qtd in Lines 283)

Similar concerns about naming surface in Louisa Atkinson's first newspaper column, 'A Voice from the Country', appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the 1860s:

It is a pity that so few of our native flowers have popular names: unless we study botany and recognise them by a Latin cognomen, they remain strangers. How can we make a friend and a pet of a thing which even to our inmost minds we have laboriously to describe as *that* plant with the quinate leaf, or lance leaf, or so on?...The botanical name is invaluable and indispensable to the scientific, but can never be generally adopted. Yet surely on that account we need not turn away from the lovely flowers of our land with indifference. In occasionally writing on the flora of the Kurrajong, I purpose, therefore, giving the vulgar or familiar title—where one has been bestowed—and occasionally may suggest one where it has not to my knowledge....to establish a universal appellation is very desirable... (Atkinson 5)

In this passage Atkinson lays claim to the vernacular—partly downgrading it as 'vulgar or familiar', but also asserting the verity and authenticity of common names in opposition to Latin terms and classification. Implicit in her statement is an authority derived from positioning the relationship to flowers in an intimate, personal, spiritual and therefore feminine sphere in which familiarity and love for our environment might be facilitated by the social skills and common introductions of female gentility.

Women's vexed and partial access to the language and power of naming is a much theorised topic. However, I am more interested here in the name of the hakea than the name of the father, that is, the ways in which social and systematic restriction of access to languages and discourses of authority reflect, represent and reproduce relations of power amongst socially gendered and classed individuals in particular places and times.

Botanical names are given to new species when the species is described, typed and named and the name published in a reputable journal or monograph (Lumley & Spencer 4-6).¹¹ Women could not or did not achieve this sort of publication. They were not permitted as members in most of the relevant societies.¹² Limited access to such associations meant limited access to peer networks, to libraries, herbaria collections, exchange facilities and museums. The Latin used to name and describe found plants would have presented a problem for many women. Catherine Parr Traill had to learn some Latin in order to make use of her copy of Pursh's *A Systematic Arrangement and Description of the Plants of North America*, which, she commented wryly, 'unfortunately for me, was chiefly written in Latin' (Bennett 89). Social stigma against the *type* of publication a botanical journal represented might also have been an issue in the context of a colonial mobilisation of the study of botany as a marker of middle-class gentility and leisure—even in the absence of the leisure. Professional

publication may have threatened the blurred boundaries of the pursuit, which enabled a few women to partially occupy both sites.

Before I get too maudlin about these women's lack of access to the official languages of botany, it should be noted that their lack of articulation is relative. Georgiana Molloy, in her collecting, used not only her husband and children as assistants, but servants, passing soldiers, and the local Nyungar people. Louisa Meredith in Tasmania seems to have used her children and convict servants similarly, and Traill in Canada certainly benefited from the knowledge and collections of local farmers' wives and indigenous Canadians. Molloy comments to Mangles in an 1840 letter that her young servant Charlotte Heppingstone 'knows the names [of the plants] that we ourselves used to distinguish them by'. Heppingstone's correspondence makes it clear that her efforts on Molloy's, and therefore Mangles', behalf were strenuous.¹³

The private family naming system sacrificed to Latin and British systems of classification is insignificant in comparison to the loss of the names and systems of understanding the Nyungar had for their plants. According to William Lines, Georgiana Molloy persuaded Nyungar people to collect for her despite the fact that they associated flowers with death (Lines 277). However, alternative systems of classification, such as those of some Nyungar groups, who sorted and named plants according to use, seasonal annotations, and so on,¹⁴ do not appear to have registered with Molloy as legitimate.

Such people were recruited by Molloy and others to a hierarchy which ultimately served, and had its apex in, the causes of the imperial naming project outlined by Paul Carter. Nyungar people were pressed into the service of yet another white activity erasing or appropriating their own understanding of and relationship with their land.

Middle-class white women in Australia were just amongst the more obvious of those whose namings of and meanings for their environment were not published or disseminated. Most genteel male collectors or amateurs in Australia had the option of publication. For the less genteel, male or female, opportunities were curtailed.¹⁵ Amalie Dietrich, who collected botanical and other natural history specimens in northern Australia from 1863-1873 is an interesting variation on this. She was acknowledged as a professional and colleague in a number of ways not extended to the other women listed here, by such men as Mueller. It seems likely that to some extent her professional status arose from the ambiguity of her class and national status.¹⁶ But like the other women here, and because of employment status, class and education, as well as gender, she also did not publish or name her collected specimens.¹⁷

A number of women botanists, including Dietrich, though deprived of the power of naming, had species, and in Louisa Atkinson's case, a genus, named after them. Again, this is not a simple honour. On the one hand, such naming practices grouped these women with botanists, in that it was common practice for botanists to name plants after their professional colleagues. On the other hand, the context of such naming might be seen to change when the power of naming is not a mutual one. Potentially there is some level of objectification, memorialising, and dis-placement involved. Louisa Meredith expresses gratitude at having a species named after her: 'My esteemed friend of many years, the eminent Australian botanist, Baron F. Von Mueller, has done me the honour of giving to the small 'immortelle' found on Mount Olympus, in Tasmania, my name as its specific tide' (*Some of My Bush Friends* 5). But this reads differently in the light of her comments on her status in 1878: 'I believe that no other woman resident in the colonies has done so much in art, science and literature for her adopted country, and I think forty years of active work deserve their reward' (Rae-Ellis 217). She seems to have relished the £100 pension she eventually extorted from the Tasmanian government more than the 'small' remembrance offered by Von Mueller (Rae-Ellis 218). Probably rightly so as, like a great number of plants named after women in the nineteenth century, the so called 'immortelle' has disappeared from the current *Census of Australian Vascular Plants*.

But for some of the botanists listed here there were ways of disseminating and displaying their knowledge about botany which were in accordance with the understandings of white middle-class female gentility. They could publish their findings, not in Botanical journals but

in fiction, travel writing, children's literature, poetry—any one of the acceptable genres for female literary production. For Traill in Canada, and Atkinson and Meredith in Australia, these forms of writing provided a sphere in which their authority was ostensibly more assured, their power of naming, or at least describing, public; and their work and knowledge could be displayed and asserted in a field in which women and female authority were more entrenched.

By this argument Louisa Atkinson's 'Voice from the Country' newspaper column did indeed provide her with a voice, through which she could disseminate her own or regional common names for plants, and assert her botanical and regional knowledge in a forum in which her power to name and sort her world was acknowledged.

Louisa Meredith, in works such as *Some of My Bush Friends in Tasmania*, displayed her talent as a botanical artist and her knowledge as a regional botanist and naturalist. The early section on Australian Clematis opens with reference to a crimson variety of clematis:

A lowly one, of generous growth, that climbs
Alike the rugged hill, or gems the turf
Of sunny plains with wandering coral buds
And trifid leaves...

Wound in with the standard poetic language is the Latin, taxonomical term 'trifid'. The poem is surrounded by decorative borders, but followed by a botanical-style coloured plate of the two plants in the poems. This in turn is followed by a similarly mixed section describing the contents of 'Plate 1' according to natural order, genus and species:

Native Clematis	Renunculaceæ	Clematis coriacea
Coral Pea	Leguminosæ	Kennedia prostrata

However, the accompanying description is not botanical but personal and aesthetic. 'Such abundant splendour [it appeared in] last spring' she says. that. 'My boys sometimes came home to me bearing rich tangles, that covered them all over, and I wreathed it around favourite pictures, with charming effect....No description can overrate its loveliness'.

This is an interesting if rather strange mix of professional botanical discourse¹⁸ and personal, domestic, intimate and familiar details which enfold the professional language within intimate webs of association and assert local and individual importance alongside global classification—or perhaps against it—as she avers the importance of seeing plants in situ (it 'must be seen as we see it, cheering and enlivening wide wastes of barren bush-land, ere its pleasant aspect can be fully appreciated' [3-4]), but also asserts her own common naming—native clematis—over a botanic classification which would tend to separate a clematis from a kennedia, the two species she unites here.

Meredith's assertion and insertion of botanical knowledge is quite clear, as for instance when she criticises one piece of naming as lacking any clear reference to the plant: 'The yellow composite flower I have named "Golden Cushion", used to be known as the *Richea glauca*It now retains the name *Richea* as its specific one. The meaning of *Craspedia*, as applied to it, is not very clear' (98).

Nevertheless this position of narrative power was somewhat uncomfortably occupied—Meredith's nineteenth-century tea table books can be seen as carving a niche, or as occupying some uncomfortable site between botany and bogusness. Do the fairy tales of where Tasmanian berries come from enhance the anatomically accurate botanical lithographs and classifications, or do they trivialise them? Does Meredith forge a narrative between botanical and poetic discourses, between ladies' decorative flower painting and botanical illustration—or do her botanical illustrations become flower paintings when she sticks a ribbon around her collection of wild flowers?

The intimate blending of domestic familiarity and botanic explication in Meredith's, Atkinson's and Traill's publications, and in the letters of Fanny Macleay and Georgiana

Molloy, is a separate and more engaging genre than botanic description, and produces a different understanding of the flora and its environment, and a different sense of space and place.

Yet these forms of writing might also be seen in the terms Sara Mills uses to describe the work of travel writer Fanny Parkes, when she suggests that by offering detailed information about the alien place she 'manages both to produce knowledges...that are quite clearly imperialist while at the same time producing a textual space for herself that is not compromised by the seeming masculinity of such knowledges' (46). In other words, rather than being seen as finding a way of writing the new world in terms that transgress the imperial understandings of the place and undermine the disciplining principles of botanic taxonomy, they may also have been engineering genres which allowed them temporary access to both the authority of the imperial subject and the authority of the authentic Lady.

University of Melbourne

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Notes

- 1 The categories are not necessarily so easily separated of course. For a discussion of the transculturation and bi-directional power relations of the imperial scene, see Sara Mills. For negotiations of power in nineteenth-century middle-class gender relations see Elizabeth Langland.
- 2 It was apparently also an evangelical pursuit—Fanny Macleay, Georgiana Molloy, Louisa Meredith, Louisa Atkinson, Catherine Parr Truill, and Susanna Moodie were all involved in evangelical religion.
- 3 A process Mary Louise Pratt defines as 'the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history' (Pratt 15).
- 4 The 'natural' because it relied on close observation of nature and a 'teleological and historicist' understanding of the natural world—theoretically possible for anyone with education and leisure ('Goethe's Botany' 472), the Linnaean because it was primarily a system of classification and collection, based on carefully laid out rules of sorting and naming which could be learnt and acquired.
- 5 Rousseau likewise wrote pieces on botany directed at middling and upper class women, as did a number of male and some female writers across the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Bewell 137-8; 'Goethe's Botany' 478).
- 6 It also provided him, Koerner suggests, with 'an elegant way to flirt' ('Goethe's Botany' 493).
- 7 Such as Ludwig Priess, whom Molloy later entertained as a guest for a month (Lines, Hasluck).
- 8 'Sabina [her six year old daughter, she said,] I shortly found to be infinitely more *au fait* at discovering and remembering the abode of differently described plants than I was myself. I have known her unexhausted patience go three and five times a week to watch no. 83 & 74, lest the seeds should be opened and shed'. (First Letter to Mangles, Qtd in Hasluck 164).
- 9 While some of Molloy's correspondence declares her ignorance and begs for books and knowledge, other sections discuss scientific packing methods and outline her methodical and professional systems for numbering and transporting.
- 10 Hussey may have had the last word in this exchange, as it is often the case that the proliferation of such disciplinary discourses marks not the increase in oppression but

- alarm at growing freedoms, but Hussey's letters to Mueller, along with correspondence from a number of other women botanists, including Amalie Dietrich, were blithely recycled for the war effort by the Director of the National Herbarium of Victoria in the 1940s (Krachenbuehl 392; Moyal 355 n. 22).
- 11 Though the system of Botanical nomenclature was only regularised at the end of the nineteenth century it operated in a similar way throughout most of that century (Lumley & Spencer 4-6).
- 12 The Linnean society did not admit women until 1919, and the Royal Society not until 1946. The Royal London Botanical society, described by Allen, is a notable exception, as are some of the Australian societies toward the end of the nineteenth century, such as the Royal Society of South Australia, of which Hussey was a member, and to whom she read a paper (Krachenbuehl 390). Louisa Meredith was a member of the Royal Society of Tasmania (Rae-Ellis 209).
- 13 For example: 'I have obtained all the seeds but the one which is prickly...I have been searching all day for them and with great trouble obtained them. The season has been so hot, and the Natives are burning every day which made it tiresome to get them' (Heppingstone to Molloy 28 January 1840; Qtd in Hasluck 202).
- 14 See A.R. Peile, 'Preliminary notes on the ethno-botany of the Gugadja aborigines at Balgo, Western Australia', *WA Herbarium Res Notes* 3 (1980) 59-64. Quoted in Carrs' 'The Botany of the First Australians' 8. Note that Peile searches for ways in which Aboriginal names and even categories might be incorporated into a Western taxonomy without at any point seeing Western taxonomy brought into question by, and at complete odds with this as a competing system.
- 15 The reputed ill-temper of George Caley, botanist and collector in Australia for Banks, who allegedly once commented that Robert Brown was 'a labourer in the field that ought to be wrought by [my]self!' (Qtd in Stephenson 18), may in part have been due to the difficulty a lower-class man found in gaining full recognition in a field dominated and defined through gentility. Caley, on the other hand, has a genus and a number of species named after him, which is more than can be said for a number of women botanists.
- 16 As a woman of working-class background, and a foreigner whose English was poor, she travelled freely around Australia, collecting for her European employer. Sara Mills locates a difference between women settlers and women travellers relevant to Dietrich's situation. Women settlers [in India], she argues were 'subject to even stricter class and hierarchy rules than those that operated on them within Britain', but--travellers were not necessarily a part of these communities and could behave eccentrically, even 'being treated as honorary men' (38).
- 17 Dietrich is in a different class from the middle-class lady botanists here for any number of reasons--most centrally perhaps that she was able to obtain a paid position as a collector--a fact described as 'bizarre' by Moyal, and that such a position did not imperil a social status not founded on leisure or on Anglo-Celtic understandings of female gentility and position.
- 18 The botanical names were, supposedly, checked for accuracy by Sir J. Hooker as a favour (Rae-Ellis).