

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

## ***Georgiana Molloy: The Mind That Shines*, Bernice Barry (Redgate Consultants)**

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### **Summary**

This is Bernice Barry's first book, and the third biography of Georgiana Molloy, who has become a well-known figure of West Australian colonial history. Following Alexandra Hasluck's *Portrait with Background: A Life of Georgiana Molloy* (1955), and William J. Lines' *An All Consuming Passion* (1994), Barry's beautifully written and illustrated, meticulously researched work takes a different approach to these earlier books, bringing new information to the story of Molloy and her husband. Barry claims that 'things that moved Georgiana and ideas that touched her belonged in the life of someone quite different from her public image' (3), and that her interest in these less well-known aspects of Molloy's life prompted her ten years of research and writing.

Born Georgiana Kennedy in 1805 in Cumberland, she was an educated woman who became deeply religious, influenced by a period she spent in Scotland where a revivalist Christianity was being preached. Nearly twenty years older than Kennedy, Captain John Molloy had a less privileged background than hers, while his life had been much more chequered and varied. The two had met at different times over a period of years, but his proposal, her acceptance, their marriage and departure for Western Australia took place over a very short time. However, their different backgrounds and ages did not affect their deep devotion to each other.

Like many of the early settlers to Western Australia, the Molloys had been seduced by what turned out to be false promises of the abundant natural world of the Swan River Colony and the prosperous future that awaited them there. What they found was very different, and John Molloy soon decided that he and his wife should move south to a new and potentially more productive settlement in Augusta.

They and a couple of other families were the first to arrive in what remained a tiny and isolated settlement, and the years they spent there were full of hardships, unaccustomed labour and tragedy. Georgiana experienced difficult childbirths and a miscarriage with no adequate medical attention. She gave birth to her first daughter soon after their arrival in Augusta, alone in a tent on a stormy night, and the baby only lived for a couple of weeks; later their only son drowned in a well on their property. Five daughters survived her, but she never recovered from the birth of the last, Georgiana, who was only three months old when her mother died.

Despite all this tribulation, these years were also productive and rewarding, as Georgiana planted a garden and became fascinated by the native flora. After ten years in Augusta, the family moved to the Vasse, to a more comfortable dwelling, where Georgiana had access to a larger community. Here, she continued the work she loved, collecting and categorising West Australian plants. Her interest had become known to Captain James Mangles (himself fascinated by the flora of Western Australia on a visit to the lieutenant governor of Western Australia, James Stirling and his wife) and he asked her to supply him with sample specimens that he sold to those in Britain who wanted to propagate these exotic plants.

An entirely self-taught botanist, Georgiana's contribution to the work being done by botanists in the UK on new plant species discovered in Western Australia, captured in the collections she sent Mangles, was significant and long-lasting. Worn out finally by her years in Western Australia, she died at only thirty-seven. Nevertheless, she achieved more in those thirteen years than most do in a lifetime and her reputation as an amateur botanist lives on.

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### About the Author

English-born and educated at Leicester University, Bernice Barry was an Education Inspector and English Adviser to the Northamptonshire Inspection and Advisory Service, then became a Regional Director for the English Department of Education's Eastern region. After moving to Western Australia, Barry established a partnership, Redgate Consultants, a partnership dedicated to educational research. Fascinated by Georgiana Molloy's life, Barry's intensive research resulted in her book, *Georgiana Molloy: The Mind That Shines*, published by Redgate Consultants.

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### Questions for discussion

- Biography and other related genres, particularly autobiography and memoir (all of which purport to tell 'real' stories of 'real' people), have enjoyed a possibly unprecedented popularity over the past two or three decades. Why do you think this is so?
- It would be interesting to compare your reading of this book with other biographies you have read. What are the similarities and differences? Do you enjoy biography (or memoir/autobiography) more than fiction?

- There are interesting connections - and differences - between an orthodox history and an historical biography like *The Mind That Shines*. Which for you more successfully suggests its time and people? And why?
- In her Preface, Barry describes her decision to include in this biography not only the 'story' of its characters, chiefly of course Georgiana Molloy, and her history, but also the 'story' of Barry's own quest, as she calls it, to explore the past. She also talks about how reading about the past brings her into touch with her own past. Is this part of your reading experience? Do you think Barry's personal narrative adds to or subtracts from the biographical narrative?
- Bernice Barry's devotion to her subject is evident in this biography. What do you think is the effect of this on the biography as a whole?
- Discuss evidence of the class structure of the tiny Swan River Colony and its outposts. How did this affect Georgiana Molloy's life in Augusta? And later in the Vasse?
- Trace the multiple influences in her earlier life that gave Georgiana Molloy her intense interest in the natural environment and especially in its flora.
- Before she married, Georgiana Molloy's life choices, as 'a single woman with no independent income' were to 'return home, marry, or become a lady's companion' (120). How surprising is it that Molloy's life was very different from that of most of those of her class at the time? Does the biography give us clues as to why she might have made the choices she did?
- One reviewer of the book said: 'Anyone who researches family and social history will relate to her [Barry's] excitement at chance discoveries, the fragmented pieces of information that suddenly fit together' (Gillian Lilleyman). How important was this aspect of the book to you?
- One of the most difficult decisions any writer has to make is what to leave out of their final work. There are many instances here where it is clear that there is much more to an incident or detail than what is there. How does this affect your reading of *The Mind That Shines*?

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### **If you enjoyed this book you may also like:**

*Georgiana Molloy*, Alexandra Hasluck (Fremantle Press)

*Cape Arid*, Philippa Nikulinsky (Fremantle Press)

*Soul of the Desert*, Philippa Nikulinsky (Fremantle Press)

*The Mind's Own Place*, Ian Reid (UWA Publishing)

*Tom & Jack*, Geraldine Byrne (Fremantle Press)