

THE MAKING OF

Women of Flowers

BOTANICAL ART IN AUSTRALIA FROM THE 1830s TO THE 1960s

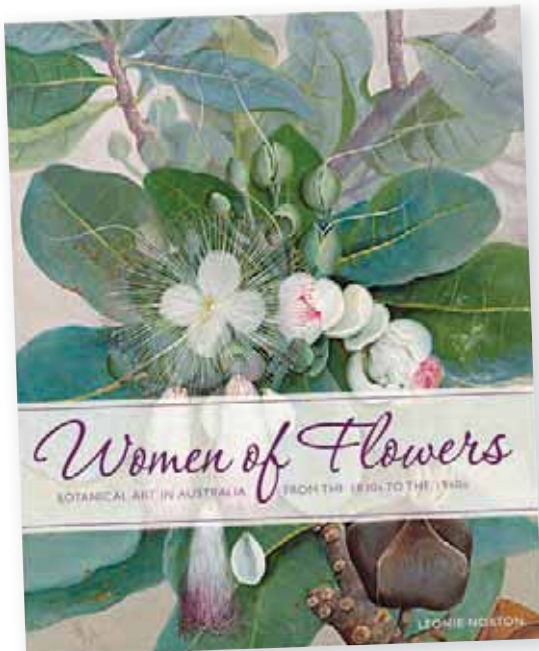
Helena Scott (1832–1910)
Ornithoptera 1840s (detail)
watercolour; 36.5 x 28.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2875468

LEONIE NORTON TELLS THE STORY BEHIND
ONE OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF
AUSTRALIA'S MOST POPULAR PUBLICATIONS

AS A SYDNEY-BASED BOTANICAL ARTIST and international tutor, I had naturally been exposed to botanical art from the very earliest representations through to the more contemporary works being produced today. My passion was the watercolour paintings of the early Australian colonial women flower painters and botanical artists, not only for their delicate and beautifully executed pieces, but also for the history that lay unrevealed beneath these works. I wanted to explore their lives, their origins and living conditions after coming to Australia, as well as their backgrounds, schooling, art education and family situations. I wanted to be able to share their very individual paintings which expressed their love of the Australian flora.

My initial concept in writing *Women of Flowers* was to record the biographical information of approximately 10 of these women, discovering unknown or unrecognised amateur artists who had produced beautiful work and whose lives had a story worth telling, whether it be everyday life caring for a family, painting botanically scientific work professionally, or travelling to places far and wide searching for and recording new plant species.

From the women I chose, each story was fascinating and quite different. The more research I did, the more important it became for me to bring their stories to life and to celebrate their accomplishments. I felt it was an important part of history that had been unrecorded up to now.



LEFT
The cover of *Women of Flowers* by Leonie Norton (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009)

BELOW
Ida McComish (1885–1978)
Poinsettia, Euphorbia pulcherimma ... Gathered at Cremorne, Australia between 1929 and 1956
watercolour; 17.8 x 23.0 cm
with botanical specimen
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24930943

first port of call on my journey of discovery into the lives of the ‘women of flowers’.

In the serenity of the Allport Library, in Hobart, in 2006, the silence was broken only by the pages softly turning as I eagerly read the diary of Mary Morton Allport. Born in 1806, Allport was one of the earliest flower painters to come to Australia and the first female professional artist in Australia. Her diary documented details of her daily life, caring for her husband and children in everyday circumstances after her migration to Tasmania in 1831. It recorded her trials and tribulations and the enjoyment she experienced during precious time away from family and chores to paint the native plants she embraced in her new surroundings.

There was evidence of nostalgia for her country of birth, and of having left family and friends in order to begin a new life in Van Diemen’s Land. On 12 November 1832, Allport wrote in her diary: ‘Painted a snowdrop in my album from memory—I have never seen one in this colony, and my heart yearns for them.’ There is no doubt that it was a very hard life for her in Tasmania with a one-year-old son and after having lived a comfortable existence in Birmingham. Her husband had taken up a land grant and their first home in Australia was a simple bark humpy, barely enough to protect them from the heavy snow of their first Australian winter.

I discovered other wonderful women artists who had lived and painted in Tasmania and I

Some women had been born in Australia and had embraced the uniqueness of the antipodean native plants. Some had emigrated from Britain and recorded the unfamiliar flowers and plants of their new home. Some had tuition from their parents or other artists, and yet others were self taught. There were artists whose work was purely amateur and those who took a professional career path.

Of the plants they painted, a small quantity has strong botanical importance, as they are now rare or endangered, or are no longer found in the region where they were originally located. Several of the women discovered new species, which were named after them.

I wanted to project an accurate social history with images, not only of their beautiful flower paintings, but also photographs of the women, their families and their homes. Some women travelled extensively throughout Australia and others travelled to foreign countries in their quest for plant specimens. Others had plants collected for them and some artists painted the endemic Australian plants from their gardens. Some of these women lived very long and fulfilling lives and continued painting into old age, while some died young in very tragic circumstances. Each artist had an exceptional tale to tell.

As time allowed, research was done through resources on the Internet, followed by visits to appropriate libraries for further information and to view the original paintings. This initial research led me to the historic city of Hobart, in Tasmania, which was my





had some foxing or other flaws, due to the non-archival paper used.

Many of these accurate and meticulous works were by women who had remained anonymous or even, as in the case of Dorothy English Paty, had last been viewed 175 years ago. Opening a portfolio of some of these paintings was an almost surreal experience and it transported me to another era. It was here that I began to unravel the fascinating travels made by some of the women.

Ida McComish made eight identical albums in total, covering them with veneered Norfolk Island pine which she had collected and varnished with shellac and methylated spirits so that they resembled burnished crocodile skin. Each album contains rare specimens from a particular location, along with a botanical painting, the botanical name and significant information of the plant. In their quest for rare specimens, she and her husband sailed to exotic places such as Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Tahiti, Raratonga and New Zealand. Closer to Australia, they explored Lord Howe Island and the subjects of her first album in 1928 were the indigenous plants of Norfolk Island, which was one of their favourite destinations.

Another avid traveller who sought fame through her depictions of exotic and unusual specimens was Ellis Rowan. Her path of travel and exploration was traced through letters of introduction from her husband to important dignitaries in foreign lands. She travelled almost continuously for nearly 50 years, from 1869 to about 1919, her expeditions taking her to Calcutta, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the Himalayas and the Americas. Although her works and life have been well documented, this does not make her achievements or paintings any less spectacular, and the Library holds approximately 900 of her colourful gouache paintings in its Pictures Collection.

Artists who did not seek to explore distant destinations but travelled extensively within Australia included Marriane Collinson Campbell. Living in what is now Duntroon, in Canberra, she reconstructed a typically English garden, including a replica of Hampden Court maze, with seeds sent from Britain.

Campbell's later paintings of Western Australian orchids, a variety of Blue Mountains specimens, and plants from Moreton Bay, in Queensland, demonstrate her

was fortunate to view their paintings and learn some of their history.

Allport's story was not unusual in that many women left family and friends to come to Australia, an unknown country where living conditions and the environment were totally alien to them.

The exciting discoveries in Hobart led to my next port of call, this time closer to home, in the National Library of Australia, where the artists' descendants had donated albums and paintings for the public to view and enjoy. The Library proved to be an absolute treasure trove. Selecting various works I wanted to see was like discovering the jewels in Aladdin's cave. Hundreds of flower paintings dating from the early nineteenth century were safely stored away. Most were in pristine condition, with the colour still vibrantly glowing, but others understandably

Ellis Rowan (1848–1922)
Erythrina c.1887
 watercolour; 54.7 x 38.0 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an6649849

search for unusual native plants, through travel to various Australian locations.

The next stage of the journey took me even closer to home, to the Mitchell Library in Sydney. I devoured the exquisite paintings and drawings by Louisa Atkinson, and looked at some beautifully detailed botanical paintings by Harriet and Helena Scott, whose work I greatly admire and still find inspirational.

By now I had assembled many pages of information and lists of paintings on about 15 artists, all worthy of being represented. The difficult decision was who to include from among the many women of flowers. I wanted to encompass a wide range of artists with interesting and varied lives and experiences, and wonderful paintings that I knew would be appreciated and enjoyed by all who read my book. I had even sent away for several death certificates to verify or expand on information I already had, and this unearthed some previously unknown facts, which added further interest to life stories.

During a meeting with the publishing staff of the Library, it was decided to include 10 chapters in the book, each representing one artist's biography and approximately 10 images of their stunning paintings, predominantly from the Library's collection.

The next step was to fine tune the biographies and to condense the information I had. As there were so many incredibly fascinating life stories which reflected part of our nation's history, it was not an easy task to omit some significant, personal and very interesting information.

The chapters were finally completed and sent to the Library for editing. To verify the authenticity of the biographical information, a curator was called in to read through the chapters before the final proofs were printed. Meanwhile, the Library's designer and I viewed the images and mutually decided on those best suited. This was an extremely enjoyable aspect of putting the book together.

The proofs next had to be viewed to attain an overall feel for the appearance and content of the book, and to check for any necessary amendments. This done, the book was ready to be printed.

My journey was complete and I had reached my final destination. It was a labour of love to research and record the personal history and unique paintings of the early Australian women of flowers and I feel privileged to be able to share their histories and incredible achievements.

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LEONIE NORTON is a botanical artist, tutor and author



ABOVE
Louisa Atkinson (1834–1872)
Kennedia sp. between 1855
and 1872
watercolour; 27.7 x 19.2 cm
Courtesy Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South
Wales, PXA 4499, f.7

BELOW
Dorothy English Paty
(1805–1836)
Gigantic Lilly (*Doryanthes
excelsa*), Newcastle, Nov
(November) 6th 1835
watercolour; 28.1 x 34.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an3455898-5

