Georgiana Molloy

A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Despite deprivation and hardship, and the demands of raising a young family, colonist Georgiana Molloy made a major contribution to the early knowledge of botany in the south-west.

BY SUSAN PATRICK

Looking across the peaceful waters of the Hardy Inlet from Georgiana Park, a visitor to Augusta may find it hard to imagine the rigorous life led here by the remarkable plant collector and amateur botanist, Georgiana Molloy. It began on this spot in 1830, at the corner of Albany Terrace and Turner Street, where she and her husband, Captain John Molloy, built their first house in Western Australia.

A NEW LIFE

Born in Cumberland, near the Scottish border, Georgiana, then aged 24, married Captain Molloy on 6 August 1829. The couple emigrated to the Swan River Colony soon afterwards, arriving on 12 March 1830. By then, all of the good land around the Swan River had been allocated, so the Molloys, Bussells and a handful of other settlers sailed on the *Emily Taylor* to the south-west tip of WA to pioneer at Augusta, at the mouth of the Blackwood River.

They arrived at Flinders Bay on 2 May and began to erect rudimentary accommodation, farm the infertile soils and clear part of the heavy karri forest that grew right to the water's edge.

Georgiana's first child was born in a tent on 24 May, but died after only a few days. She felt her loss bitterly and, when their house was erected near the water's edge, turned her energies to home-making to take her mind off her loss.

Despite the poverty and struggle to survive, Georgiana managed to establish a modest flower garden with seeds she had brought from England. Letters to her homeland show her feelings about life in this new country. She felt the beauty of the place, but found 'the thickly clothed dark green forest' wearying. The following spring, however, her love of the flora was excited by the small, delicate flowers that appeared everywhere in the bush.

In November 1831, her second child, Sabina, was born and, on the child's first birthday, Georgiana described the native plants in a letter to her sister. She commented on the scent of some plants and also said that she had noticed there were many kinds of leguminous plants with similar flowers but different leaves. She described three: a blue vine, probably the native wisteria (*Hardenbergia comptoniana*); another with leaves like holly, prickly hovea (*Hovea chorizemifolia*); and a third with leaves like privet, common hovea (*Hovea trisperma*). Sitting on her verandah surrounded by her little garden of English, Cape and Australian flowers, she also described the beautiful small birds with brilliant plumage sporting around her—the scarlet robin, splendid fairy-wren and honeyeaters.

Early in 1832, the remoteness of Augusta and the difficulty of clearing the area's heavy timber led the settlers to look further afield. As a result, Captain Molloy claimed fertile and open land in the Vasse region, around what is now Busselton. However, the Molloys did not relocate there until 1839.

BLOSSOMING

In 1836, while still living at Augusta, Georgiana received a request that changed her life. It was from Captain James Mangles RN, asking her to collect native seeds and specimens

Previous page
Main: Dramatic change from coastal heath to forest at Boranup.
Photo – Chris Garnett
Inset: Georgiana Molloy.
Photo – Courtesy of the Bunbury family and in memory of their own daughter, Georgiana.
Background: Christmas tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*).

Below: Georgiana Park, Augusta, the site of the Molloy's first house, overlooking the Hardy Inlet.
Photos – Susan Patrick

Right: Splendid fairy-wren. This was one of the beautiful small birds that Georgiana commented on, that visited her garden at Augusta.
Photo – Babs & Bert Wells

Below right: Native wisteria (*Hardenbergia comptoniana*). Georgiana noticed many kinds of leguminous plants with similar flowers but different leaves.
Photo – G Saueracker/Lochman Transparencies

Below far right: Prickly hovea (*Hovea chorizemifolia*), another plant with flowers similar to native wisteria, but with different leaves.
Photo – WA Herbarium

on his behalf in exchange for others that she might want. He was a horticulturalist interested in the plants of south-western Australia, which he had visited in 1831, and he had heard of her love of flowers from his cousin Ellen, the wife of Governor Stirling. Despite having a young family to care for and educate, she began work on this challenging task. She told Captain Mangles that, as she was not a botanist and did not know the names of the native plants, she would send a leaf and a description of the flower of each one. After finding flowering plants during bushland rambles, aided by her two small daughters, she would note and number the locations and revisit the plants several times until the seeds were ready to collect. Previously, she had explored little in the bush and such expeditions gave Georgiana great joy. In a letter to Mangles, she wrote that 'being in the Bush was one of the most delightful states of existence, free from every household care'.

Georgiana was meticulous in her work, examining each seed minutely, to ensure that it was sound and fresh, and free from insects. As promised, she sent a collection of the dried plants and descriptions of the flowers with the seeds.

In November 1837, when her 19-month-old son tragically drowned in their well, she distracted herself by collecting seeds with her daughters Sabina and Mary. As a result, the first box was ready to send in January 1838. However, it was delayed until November because of illness, and the birth of another child in June.

In her garden, the native wisteria was the only native species that would consent to domestication, covering one side of the verandah. However, nasturtiums, pinks, sweet peas, mignonette and geraniums from Europe did well, with a pink gladiolus and oleander from the Cape of Good Hope.

NEW DISCOVERIES

When her first seeds and specimens finally arrived in England, Mangles was delighted with her collections and sent the precious seeds to private and public horticultural collections, whose growers acknowledged their freshness and viability. Plants such as the red and green kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos manglesii*) were soon growing in English gardens. John Lindley, Professor of Botany at University College in London, pronounced of her specimens that 'many of the best are quite new'. Among them was the first collection of the marri tree (*Corymbia calophylla*), which he described in Edwards Botanical Register in 1841. The horticulturalist, Joseph Paxton, praised her good seed collections and books of dried plant specimens, saying that few had done what she did for the gardens of her native country.

In May 1839, Georgiana and her family regretfully left Augusta, where 'we suffered much in every way, and also enjoyed much undisturbed happiness'. She took with her those of the precious plants in her garden that could be transplanted in the Vasse.

Left: John Lindley named the marri tree (*Corymbia calophylla*) from specimens sent by Georgiana.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Below left: Flowers of marri.
Photo – WA Herbarium

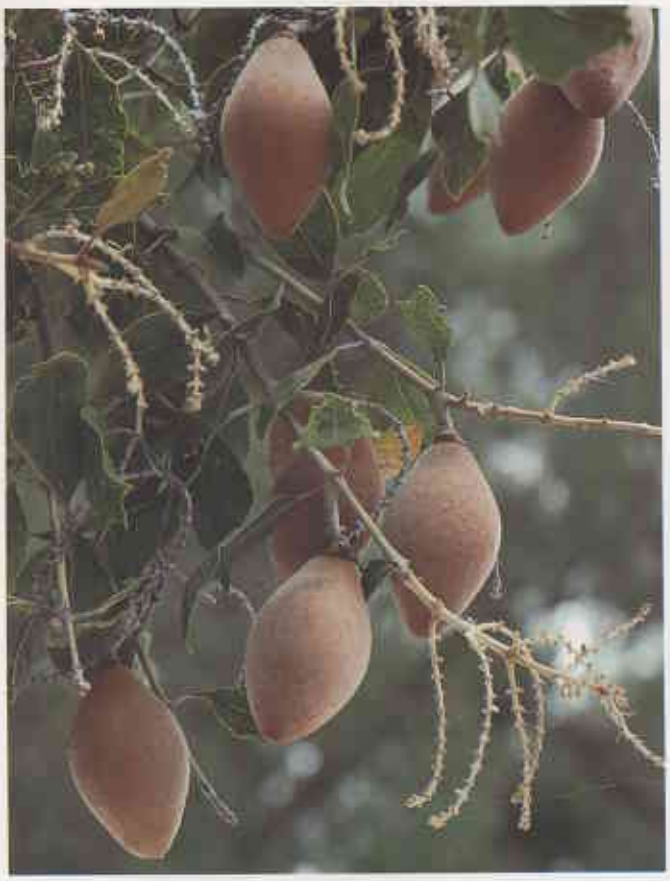
TRANSPLANTING

At their new home, Fairlawn, Georgiana continued to collect plants for Mangles. At first, she found her new surroundings less beautiful than Augusta, as their house was situated on flat land and surrounded by trees. But by late August 'the flowers in the wilderness began to bloom and I was astonished at their loveliness: much finer than at Augusta'.

She enlisted help from her family, other settlers and even local soldiers. However, she relied heavily on local Aboriginal people to help her find and collect seeds, and she found them to be better than Europeans in this work. Finds included the yellow drumstick, to which John Lindley gave the name *Isopogon sphaerocephalus*. As she and Captain Molloy were not able to leave home at the same time, she often lacked a companion on her rides in search of specimens. American whaling ships sailed along this part of the coast and an American captain was urged to accompany her on one of her field trips, and was made to dismount at every plant and shrub in seed that she saw from horseback.

In November 1839, the German botanist Ludwig Preiss visited Geographe Bay. Georgiana invited him to Fairlawn, hoping that he would help her with information about the plants of the area. He stayed for a month, during which time she assisted him in collecting the local flora. However, she was unhappy at his subsequent lack of correspondence. The collections made during his visit were later published in *Plantae Preissiana* by Lehmann 1844-48. In the winter of 1842, the botanist James Drummond also visited Fairlawn while collecting plants in the Vasse district.

In the meantime, Georgiana's knowledge of botany grew, as Mangles sent her botanical books, magazines



and illustrated catalogues. He also sent seeds for her garden as well as collecting materials and other equipment. Even personal gifts were sent as their correspondence continued.

In 1840, she was able to ride out with her husband for seeds of *Isopogon* and soon afterwards wrote in a letter to Captain Mangles:

> 'I beheld a tree of great beauty . . . Its flowers are of the purest white and fall in long trusses from the stem. Some of its pendulous blooms are from three to five fingers in length. These wave in the breeze like snow wreaths; and are of such a downy white appearance, and emit a most delicious perfume resembling the bitter almond . . . The native name is 'Danja', and I rather think it will turn out to be a Hakea.'

Later in July, on another ride, she found this tree 'to be the identical tree which bears the wooden pears or nuts' (the woody pear tree, *Xylomelum occidentale*). She had followed a small tributary stream to the Vasse, its banks studded with banksias, acacias and sheoaks and the ground adorned with the crimson flowers of scarlet runner (*Kennedia prostrata*). After an 'interminable grove of Jacksonia' she came to an open plain and found the woody pear a little farther on. She returned through a grove of WA Christmas trees (*Nuytsia floribunda*) and another of drumsticks (*Kingia australis*).

SEEKING SEEDS

Despite ill health, Georgiana visited Cape Naturaliste early in 1841, which she described as 'a most bleak and barren headland' and Castle Bay and Rock, which pleased her very much, due to the rich soil and resemblance to Augusta. She gathered seeds on the shore there, as flowers were few.

Georgiana always took immense trouble to obtain seeds, those of *Nuytsia* being particularly difficult to collect. In her last letter to Mangles, written in April 1842, she described the difficulties of collecting the small amount of *Nuytsia* seeds that she had sent him. She went four times to collect them and twice sent others, but said that the seed was difficult to obtain if she was not there the day it ripened. This was the last seed collection that she would make, as she never recovered from the birth of her fifth daughter eight months later.

Above left: Woody pear (*Xylomelum occidentale*) which Georgiana described as a tree of great beauty when in flower.
Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Above right: The Christmas tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*). The ripe seeds of this tree were difficult to collect.
Photo – Babs & Bert Wells

Right: Drumstick isopogon (*Isopogon sphaerocephalus*) was collected by Georgiana in the Vasse region.
Photo – WA Herbarium

Right: This deformed but graceful flowering spike of grass tree, (*Xanthorrhoea* sp.) belies Georgiana's description of 'the stiff and inelegant grass plant'.
Photo – Bruce Maslin

Below: Tall boronia (*Boronia molloyae*) is the only plant which commemorates Georgiana's name.
Photos – WA Herbarium

LASTING LEGACY

Georgiana Molloy's correspondence with Mangles continued over five years, and throughout those years the boxes that arrived from him brought Georgiana and her family much happiness. 'I only wish you could witness the unbounded pleasure that is evinced on the opening of a box all the way from England. I assure you young and old are equally anxious and pleased,' she wrote to him.

Despite the wealth of knowledge that she sent back in return, Georgiana was not very well recognised for her work. In 1857, *Molloya cynanchicarpa* was published in her honour by Meissner, even though not based on one of her collections (being a species from north of Perth). In 1870, Bentham considered that the plant was a *Grevillea*, and thus eliminated the name *Molloya*. This plant is now known as *Strangea cynanchocarpa*.

In 1842, Hooker published a letter from James Drummond in which he described a boronia 'as tall as the shoulder of a man riding on a horse', which he named *Boronia molloyi*. However, Drummond's description was overlooked and his name commemorating Georgiana was not taken up. Instead, this species was described in 1844 by Bartling, who used the name *Boronia elatior* for it. It was not until about 130 years later that the earlier name was accepted as having priority, with the spelling changed to *molloyae*, since the name commemorated a woman, not a man. The name *Boronia molloyae* now recognises her great contribution to the early knowledge of botany in the south-west.

Georgiana Molloy died in April 1843 at the age of 37, following complications after giving birth to her seventh child. She left five surviving daughters and a legacy of knowledge about the botanical resources of the south-west, and particularly those of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste area. Remarkably, she had gained this knowledge while bringing up a large family under primitive conditions, and with little help, despite having been brought up as a gentlewoman with servants. Added to these difficulties, she suffered from ill health throughout much of the time that she was collecting for Mangles.

Of her many collections made with such trouble and care, 20 are listed in George Bentham's *Flora Australiensis*, under 'Vasse River, Mrs Molloy'. They include species of *Acacia*, *Astroloma*, *Persoonia*, *Tribonanthes* and *Bossiaea*. Lindley described many of the plants that Molloy collected in *A Sketch of the Vegetation of the Swan River Colony*, but attributed her specimens only to Captain James Mangles. The specimens themselves are in the Kew Herbarium and the University of Cambridge Herbarium. Photographs of 15 species, which were described from her collections, are at the Western Australian Herbarium.

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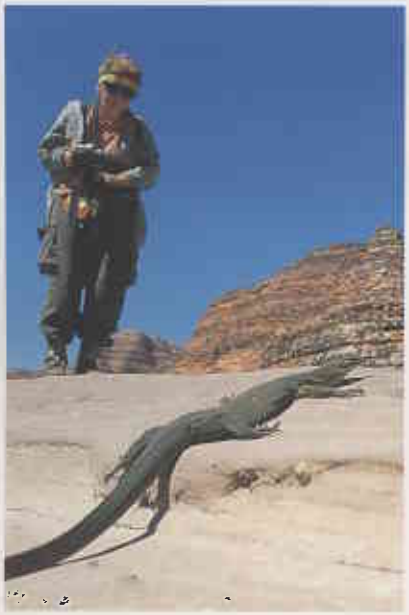

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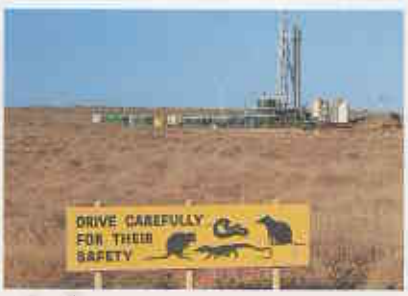
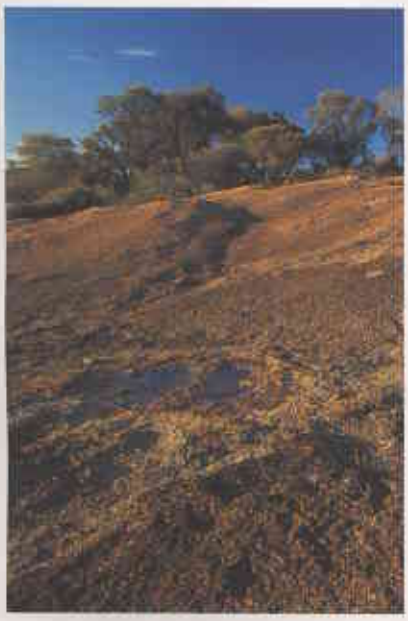


Since the 1960s Barrow Island's animals have shared their island paradise with the oil industry. Read how the mammals are being monitored and protected. See page 18.

Georgiana Molloy made a major contribution to the early botanical knowledge of the south-west. Read about this remarkable woman on page 43.



The Goldfields Woodlands National Park protects the region's best examples of eucalypt woodlands (see page 28).

Collecting seeds is one way in which we are helping to conserve biodiversity. Join the 'Hunters and Gatherers for Conservation' on page 49.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

There's something going on in our schools. Students are voluntarily taking an active interest in conserving their local environments. They are visiting forests, beaches and wetlands to study native wildlife. And they are having fun! What is happening and why? See 'EcoEducation—winning over school communities' on page 10.

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