

Review of *Collecting ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and women botanical artists*

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Collecting ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and women botanical artists

Penny Olsen

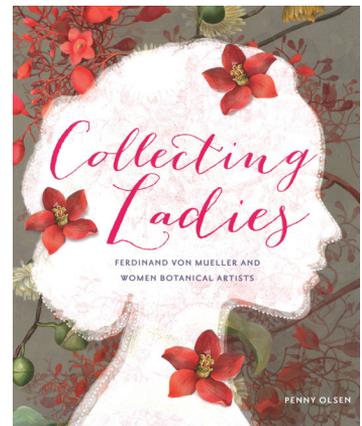
National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2013.

ISBN: 9780642277534, 237 pp., RRP: \$39.99

Ferdinand von Mueller, the first Government Botanist of Victoria and the greatest Australian botanist of the 19th century, advertised for plant collectors, including ladies, in newspapers throughout Australia. A large number of women responded to the advertisements and collected for Mueller from around Australia. In *Collecting ladies*, author Penny Olsen profiles fourteen collectors who were also botanical artists. Some of the more well-known 'ladies', such as Louisa Anne Meredith, Fanny Anne Charsley, the Scott sisters Harriet and Helena, Fanny de Mole, Louisa Atkinson and Ellis Rowan, produced beautifully illustrated books and much has been written about them. The other women profiled are: Rosa Fiveash, Euphemia Henderson, Anna Frances Walker, Gertrude Lovegrove, Margaret Forrest, Flora Martin and Mueller's niece Marie Wehl.

Some women had a direct relationship with Mueller, through meeting him in person or via correspondence. Others, such as Fiveash and Lovegrove, while they overlapped in time, were connected with other botanists (John Ednie Brown and William Baeuerlen, respectively), but they are included because in the author's words they 'benefited from the milieu' created by Mueller.

The cover of this book is a delight to behold and hold. It shows a silhouette of the side profile of the face of a lady in white superimposed onto a portion of an Ellis Rowan painting of *Bombax malabaricum*, and promises the reader a rare look into women artists painting and collecting specimens of plants in the 1800s. Indeed, the whole book is beautifully laid out with numerous colour reproductions of original artwork held by the National Library of Australia and other institutions, many not previously reproduced.



The book opens with an account of Ferdinand von Mueller's botanical achievements followed by portrayals of the lives and achievements of the fourteen 'collecting ladies'. There are separate chapters for most of the women and a final chapter on two who particularly painted fungi (Wehl and Martin). Each chapter is profusely illustrated with their botanical art and other illustrations and photographs from the time, which draw the reader in to understand the personal side of each woman and their association with Mueller.

The 'collecting lady' who was perhaps closest to Mueller was Euphemia Henderson, a flower painter who painted in Melbourne's Botanic Gardens and brought flowers to Mueller to be identified. She was apparently his first love and they became engaged, but the engagement was short-lived and dissolved by Mueller sending a letter care of a Doctor friend, David John Thomas. Apparently Mueller's colleagues had insinuated that Henderson was 'past childbearing age'. Mueller however, continued to correspond with Henderson and she in turn always remembered him on his birthday. The Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne is fortunate that Euphemia Henderson's sketch book containing 36 loose flower paintings was donated to the Library by her family. Nine of the paintings have been beautifully reproduced for the first time in *Collecting ladies*.

Collecting ladies includes a detailed list of illustrations, with information on the medium, size and location of the original. A handy inclusion to this list are thumbnails of the images, where they are reproduced in part in the main text. There is also a comprehensive bibliography; but, frustratingly, the items are not linked to the main text, and therefore it is difficult to match up quotes with particular letters. The index is useful for the text, but unfortunately does not include names of plants that are depicted in the paintings reproduced in the book.

Collecting ladies is primarily a work of social history, and there is not much assessment of the scientific value of the artwork, nor of the technical aspects of flower painting or the various methods of reproduction. However, Penny Olsen has crafted a wonderful account of a notable part of Australia's botanical history. Through the detail of their lives, the women are shown to be strong collaborators, not shadowy handmaidens to Mueller.