

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### CAROLINE LOUISA WARING ATKINSON

(1834 – 1872)

**Naturalist, Journalist, Novelist**

- 1834 Born 25 February at Oldbury, Sutton Forest, NSW
- 1853 First articles, *Nature notes for the month*, published in the Illustrated Sydney News
- 1857 First novel *Gertrude, the emigrant: a tale of colonial life* published
- 1859 *Cowanda: the veteran's grant* published
- 1860 – 1870 *A voice from the country* series of articles published in Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Mail
- 1861 – 1872 Novels *Debatable ground: or the Carlillawarra claimants; Myra; Tom Hellicar's children* and *Tressa's resolve* published as serials in the Sydney Mail
- 1864 – 1870 Regular contributor to the *Horticultural Magazine*
- 1869 Married James Calvert
- 1872 Daughter Louise Snowden Annie born  
Louisa died 28 April

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**Caroline Louisa Waring Atkinson** was the youngest of four children of Charlotte (Waring) and James Atkinson. Both her parents were well educated and well connected; her father was an innovative and successful grazier and her mother a talented and artistic teacher and keen naturalist. Both her parents were writers; her father published a classic text on farming methods suitable for New South Wales (rather than England!) and her mother wrote the first book for children in Australia titled: *A mother's offering to her children* (written under the name of Charlotte Barton and published in England).

Louisa was only eight weeks old when her father died, and after a short disastrous marriage to a psychotic friend of her late husband, and serious difficulties with the trustees of the family estate, Charlotte was forced to leave Oldbury, the family home, with her young family.

Louisa, a delicate child with a heart defect, was educated by her mother who fostered her intense interest in writing and drawing, as well as all facets of natural science. She was allowed to explore the surrounding bush as the family moved from Sutton Forest to the Shoalhaven, to Sydney and finally to Kurrajong in the Blue Mountains (for Louisa's health). At Kurrajong, Louisa became a familiar figure as she walked or rode around the countryside studying, sketching and collecting plants, animals, birds and insects. She taught herself the skills of a natural scientist, becoming a botanist of some distinction and a zoologist who practised dissection and taxidermy. With her talents in sketching and watercolour she illustrated her fieldwork, and with her fine descriptive powers she brought the delights of the bush to the many readers of her popular newspaper articles. Despite being deeply religious, Louisa was vivacious and generous and, not always one for conformity, caused *some twitterings in the ranks of the colonial Mrs Grundy* when she gave away the long skirt that was the fashion of the day to wear trousers whilst horse-riding!

She was only nineteen when her first illustrated articles *Nature notes of the month with illustrations* were published in the Illustrated Sydney News in 1853; the first woman in Australia to have a long-running series of articles published in a major newspaper. The *Nature notes* described the natural changes that occurred throughout the year, included anecdotes of bush life and the aborigines, and were illustrated with engravings of her drawings of bush scenes, plants, animals, birds and insects.

These were followed, in a similar vein, by *A voice from the country* which ran successfully for over ten years in the Sydney Morning Herald.

Louisa also contributed regular articles to the *Horticultural Magazine* and even sent a pot of jam made from native cranberries to the committee as she believed that Australians should learn to eat the native fruits!

Her articles attracted the attention of prominent botanist Dr William Woolls, and through her friendship with him many of her specimens were sent to the famous naturalist Baron von Mueller who named several plants after her.

Although Louisa's most notable writings are those on natural history, she wrote her first novel, *Gertrude, the emigrant: a tale of colonial life* when she was twenty three. She used the pen name, *An Australian woman*, and the book aroused great interest as its author was the first Australian-born woman to write a book and have it published in Australia. Louisa was also the first author to illustrate her own work. Her novels were very popular as they were truly Australian, written about Australian life for Australians with none of the pretensions of *English life transferred to the colonies*. Her stories, with their rich and perceptive descriptions of country and city life, were simply written, and studded with vivid descriptions of native plants, birds and animals.

In 1865, after spending nearly 20 years fighting to regain the estate, Louise and her mother returned to Oldbury where her mother died several years later.

On 11 March 1869, when she was 35, Louisa married James Snowden Calvert, manager of a property near Yass, NSW, who shared her interest in botany, and was one of her most avid readers. They moved to live at Sutton Forrest to be near her bother James and his family at Oldbury. Here they continued to collect, sketch, write and press specimens. In early April 1872 Louisa gave birth to a daughter, Louise Snowden Annie; tragically, she died 18 days later. It is believed that, seeing her husband's riderless horse arrive home and believing he had met with a fatal accident, Louisa had a heart attack and died. Although often ill in her last years she had been preparing to compile and illustrate her own definitive work on Australian flora and fauna, but *she had been cut down like a flower in the midst of her days*. She was buried in the Atkinson family vault at All Saints' Church, Sutton Forest.

Much of Louisa's work was lost when Oldbury was sold. However, the Mitchell Library (State Library of NSW) holds a large collection of her watercolours and sketches which have recently been compiled, with all plates in full colour, in the *The natural art of Louisa Atkinson*. There are commemorative plaques to her in Sutton Forest and Richmond churches, and a memorial in Powell Park, Kurrajong Heights.

Louisa paved the way for the many female writers and journalists who followed in her footsteps, with her novels consistently advocating the rights of women and children. More importantly, her writings fostered awareness and an appreciation of Australian flora and fauna in her many readers, and her articles often contained sympathetic reference to the Aborigines and a conservation theme way ahead of her time.

### **Published Works**

- \**Gertrude, the emigrant: a tale of colonial Life* (1857)
- Cowanda, the veteran's grant* (1859)
- Debatable ground: or the Carlillawarra claimants* (1861)
- Myra* (1864)
- Tom Hellicar's children* (1871)
- Tressa's resolve* (1872)

### **Sources**

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- Valuable assistance from the Garden Information Officer, Mt Tomah Botanic Garden  
[www.womenaustralia.info/biogs](http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs)

\* Held in JSNWL

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