

THE AMBITIONS OF JANE FRANKLIN. VICTORIAN LADY ADVENTURER. Alison Alexander. 2013. Sydney: Allen and Unwin. x + 294 p, illustrated, softcover. ISBN 978-1-7423-7569-4. AU\$35.

The author of this new life of Jane Franklin maintains in her introduction that through the Internet and the computer she has had access to records in Australia, New Zealand, England and Canada, which were not ‘culled’ in the way that the Franklin or rather Lefroy collection at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge has been treated. She tells us that the ‘culling’ was done either by Jane Franklin herself or by her niece and constant companion, Sophia Cracroft. The diaries and letters to which she refers were presented to the Scott Polar Research Institute by the Misses Lefroy in 1947, through the efforts of its founding director, Frank Debenham. He persuaded the young Frances Woodward to write the first published biography of Lady Franklin, *Portrait of Jane*.

Perhaps for the benefit of readers who know nothing of Lady Franklin, I should briefly sketch her life. She was born Jane Griffin in 1791, one of three daughters and a son who died young. Their amiable and interesting papa, sadly bereaved on his wife’s death, seems to have been particularly fond of his middle daughter Jane, perhaps because she was full of curiosity about many things. The Griffins had come to England as silk weavers from Normandy. They became established in London, and the Griffin girls were educated at first at home and between the age of ten and sixteen at a small Huguenot boarding school, where Jane’s uncle John Guillemard took an interest in her education. Among a number of interesting illustrations is one of ‘a typical silk weaver’s house in Spitalfields’, east London. Jane loved to read and travel, living with the family for example in France for two years after the long wars which ended in 1815. The family returned to England in 1816, when she gathered a number of suitors (one the Huguenot Peter Roget, compiler of the Thesaurus.) The author suggests several reasons why they were all refused, pointing out that the only way a woman could then find fame was through a husband, although Jane did aim to marry eventually, giving up her busy and interesting life as a single woman, but a life without an over-reaching aim.

Her biographer reckons that her eventual marriage to the celebrated Arctic explorer and naval officer Sir John Franklin, not long after the death of his first wife Eleanor Porden, the gifted and sensitive poet, and mother of his daughter Eleanor, gave Jane the purpose in life, which she needed, to promote her husband, hence the book’s title *The ambitions of Lady Jane Franklin – Victorian lady adventurer*. The long letter from Jane Griffin to Captain Franklin, already quoted by H.D Traill in his life of Franklin (London 1896) is quoted again but only in part on page 25–26 of the present work. It seems worth quoting once more

... whenever I think I am imposed upon my spirit rises, and I struggle harder to resist than perhaps is quite consistent with that meek and resigned spirit which men endeavour to teach us is not only becoming but obligatory, and which we poor women endowed with acute sensibilities, though with less energy and much less power than men, often find to be our surest safest way to happiness.

Do not be alarmed at these moralising reflections... You are of a much more easy disposition than myself, in spite of that energy and firmness of mind which, when the occasion calls for it, you can display as well or better than most men, and without which you never could have won my regard. [My task is to] combat those things which excite my sensitive temper; while it must and shall be yours, as my beloved and most honoured husband, to control even this disposition whenever you think it improperly excited... You will put this letter by and turn it to account at some future time when I am in a rebellious mood; and upon this consideration I trust you ought to feel infinitely obliged to me for furnishing you with so valuable document. How soon shall I repent of it myself?

On the following pages the author asks why Jane accepted Franklin after refusing so many men, providing a resumé of his character and standing (page 26).

However Jane had already made a number of interesting and unusual journeys herself, either with family or friends, before three years in the Mediterranean, while her husband was stationed there (of which travels he loyally approved). She was to make even more unusual and interesting journeys later in life. Her life was naturally tied to that of Sir John’s but the author’s accounts of these travels are enlivened with good quotations from her diaries.

Alison Alexander is a native of Tasmania, so that it is to be expected that her account of the Franklins’ years in what was then the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land should be particularly well done, although the book excels as a whole and was awarded the National Biography Award in Australia during 2014. The account of the Franklins’ and young Eleanor’s voyage in *Fairlie* to Van Diemen’s Land, only established as a penal colony in 1803, is lively and full of interest. It was in contrast to those endured by convict men and women, who ‘left their country for their country’s good’ in the familiar phrase.

By 1837, when the Franklins’ large party arrived in Hobart Town, the colony had reached ‘a veneer of normality and respectability’, its 43,000 population being layered into several social strata with the convicts at the bottom. The author remarks that whereas Franklin, as Lieutenant Governor, had a defined position in society, his wife had to establish hers, being compared inevitably with Elizabeth, wife of Governor George Arthur, 1824–1836. Ms. Alexander tells us that the arrival of the gallant and distinguished naval officer and Arctic explorer was largely greeted with expectations of a ‘golden age’ in contrast to the ‘corruption and tyranny of Arthur’s time’, however stable he had rendered the colony. Jane evidently proved to be ‘a first rate organiser’, being in charge of domestic arrangements which included a reception for the ladies of the colony not long after her arrival. She and Sir John made a tour of the island, likewise, being greeted with cheering crowds. Their social life at Government House is brought to life by the author from Jane’s diaries and letters and other original sources. Her relations with local charitable bodies, for example the Queen’s Orphan Schools are also described. She did her duty!

However, Jane Franklin’s curiosity led her to travel beyond Government House and we learn of her activities from her

surviving writings, despite their paucity. She was ‘determined, capable and intelligent’ at this period, says Ms. Alexander, who points out that she had much freedom, as governor’s wife to do as she pleased, also being free of pregnancies unlike Mrs Arthur. She may have charmed many men, but she was devoted to her husband, ‘or at least to furthering his career’, although she did not mind being away from that thoughtful and unselfish individual for months at a time, as she had done in the Mediterranean. There is a good character sketch (page 80), followed in the same chapter by a perceptive discussion of the couple’s relationship with one another. As well as Jane’s relations with other men and women, her dealings with the staff of Government House are sketched. Although she had no offspring of her own, she cared for Sir John’s daughter Eleanor and more distantly for two adopted aboriginal children, Timemernidic and Mathinna, whose charming portrait is among the illustrations and whose sad end is recounted in chapter 9. We are told that at least 27 convict women worked for Jane Franklin and also of her opinions regarding the rest of the island’s population, particularly the female convicts about whom she had contacted the philanthropist, Elizabeth Fry before leaving England.

More interesting to readers of *Polar Record* is a chapter entitled ‘Improving the colony’. This describes the Franklins’ (especially Jane’s) encouragement of the Tasmanian Society, their hospitality to visiting naval offices and others interested in science and Jane’s own effort to establish a botanical garden by buying 410 acres (166 hectares) of land in a lovely mountain glen, which was called Ancanthe, near where her classical museum building still stands. The first issue of *The Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science, Agriculture: Statistics* etc. appeared in 1841. Copies were distributed in Australia and England (particularly to the Colonial Office) all owing to Jane’s enthusiasm. We see her meet Captain James Clark Ross, R.N., Captain Crozier, botanist young Joseph Dalton Hooker and Lieutenant Joseph Henry Kay, who was to remain as Director of Rossbank, the magnetic observatory, all being entertained at Government House during the naval expedition of 1839–1843 in HM Ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. The author does not repeat Jane Franklin’s supposed remark about Ross as being ‘the handsomest man in the Navy’; (an opinion fully borne out by his portrait in the National Maritime Museum). Jane made efforts to encourage art as well as science in the colony, commissioning work from the convict Thomas Bock, but no art gallery was built.

In Chapter 10, the author concludes that ‘Jane Franklin was no ordinary woman’, following the beginning of the chapter with accounts of her climbing Mount Wellington (1274 metres) at the age of 46, considered elderly at the time (1837). Other notable journeys are described one extremely ambitious one being from Melbourne to Sydney overland in 1839, during which not a few dangers and discomforts were suffered by her party. Another journey was to Adelaide. Here her step-daughter’s diary brings it all to life, as sometimes happens in the book elsewhere. In 1841, she took a ship to New Zealand,

the year that the country became a British colony. The sketch map facing page 152 illustrates Jane’s travels, 1849–1852, in the Antipodes. Her last major excursion was with seventeen convicts as porters to the wild west coast of Tasmania, a walk of 66 miles with Sir John and others, mostly in very wet weather, returning by sea. Alison Alexander points out that historians value her journals today because ‘they provide a rare picture of all types of people... she was unique in her interest in everybody’s experiences and opinions’ (page 160).

Towards the end of her account of the Franklins in Van Diemen’s Land, the author makes Jane step aside to provide character sketches of three women closely connected with her there. These are Mary Franklin, Sophia Cracroft and Eleanor Franklin. She goes on to relate the difficulties that faced Sir John Franklin as governor, supported by Jane, who became closely involved in local politics, which evidently dominated her diary. But she became frustrated at having no power to intervene in support of her husband against the intrigues of John Montagu, Sir John’s chief advisor as Colonial Secretary. The local newspapers were often hostile to the Franklins. The end came with Sir John’s recall to England by the Colonial Office. On 3 November 1843, the Franklins departed from Tasmania, Sir John being seen off by a very large crowd. The author provides judgment on his wife’s influence and conduct in the colony (page 201–202), asserting that she learnt ‘valuable lessons’ which were to help her in public life during later years.

The remainder of this book covers the British Arctic naval expedition of 1845–1848, carried out in *Erebus* and *Terror*, hopefully to crown the efforts of earlier quests to find the northwest passage. Their disappearance and the many efforts to discover their fate is skilfully told, centred of course on Jane’s active role in private and in public. We see her moving house to live near the Admiralty to urge their Lordships to greater efforts. We see her and her devoted helper and amanuensis Sophy Cracroft writing to the press. We see her gathering other devoted helpers- explorers, writers and politicians to support her efforts. These included financing and despatching no less than four vessels in the search. Of these, of course, *Fox*, Captain Leopold McClintock, went furthest to solve the mystery of her husband’s disappearance, following the earlier revelations by ‘dear Dr. Rae’ of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Many of her letters and those sent by Sophy and Eleanor returned in the ships which had carried them to the Arctic. Some of these are quoted. Jane Franklin lived to see Sir John honoured with statues in London’s Waterloo Place and at the last with a bust in Westminster Abbey. Ms Alexander contrasts the often critical opinions of today’s British and other academics with the warmth of the memories she still evokes in Tasmania. ‘Ironically’, she concludes in the last sentence in her book ‘the only place to honour Jane Franklin is the island she despised’ (page 257).

All in all, this is a perceptive, well researched and readable biography of an exceptional individual, greatly to be commended. (Ann Savours, Little Bridge Place, Bridge, Canterbury, Kent, CT4 5LG (meganshirley1988@gmail.com)).