

William J. Lines, *An All Consuming Passion: Origins, Modernity and the Australian Life of Georgiana Molloy*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards 1994. Pp.332 + 19 illustrations and maps. \$39.95

From its red-foliaged dust jacket, through the pages of clear text and matt

finished illustrations on quality paper, to its crossed-letter endpapers, this is a visually handsome book similar in design to Lines' earlier *Taming the Great South Land*. And, like *Taming*, the boundary between writing history and historical novel is blurred and unclear. The glowing book-stand cover evokes Jackie Collins, while the 20 chapter titles bring Manning Clark to mind. *An All Consuming Passion* purports to be an 'exploration of the history of the environment and landscape of Australia' derived from the letters and papers of Georgiana Molloy and her contemporaries. It spans early nineteenth century post-Napoleonic Britain and the founding days of colonial Western Australia. Georgiana's birth in 1805 and death in 1843 form the beginning and end of the story, while the chapters link the story with the stages of her life and provide it with a modern, progressive direction.

Although *An All Consuming Passion* is described as a 'story', there are actually two stories carried through the book, and the connections between them often seem tenuous. One story is that of Georgiana, the well-bred English gentry-woman imbued with the evangelical spirit of her times, who journeys from the old world to the new, metaphorically transporting modernity from Europe to the Nyungar domains of south west Australia. Along the way, spirituality gives way to sensuality, and formal religion is subverted by the personal freedom of the bush. The other story is of invasion and war culminating in the Vasse massacres between 1837 and 1842, in which Progress, often in the form of the Bussell brothers, is violently installed as the superior deity in the region.

The settlers resent their initial dependence on Nyungar knowledge of the land and Nyungar artefacts such as pathways. Imbued with their own superiority, they are unable to see that the desirable landscapes they call parklands have been created and maintained by Nyungar agency. Georgiana, however, after being asked to collect botanical specimens for a dashing cousin of Governor Stirling's wife, develops an enduring and ever-deepening love for the wildflowers and their bush habitats around Augusta. She discovers a freedom that is based, not upon the intellectual, avaricious modernity of her colonial neighbours, but upon the spiritual stimulation of botanical collecting and reciprocity of the collecting community.

The local Nyungar are the only people to comprehend Georgiana's passion for the bush and, even later throughout the Vasse wars, they remain her constant companions in her rambles, guiding her to new flowers, assisting her collecting seeds, and discussing the characteristics of her floral prey. In one sense, the function of the Nyungar in the story is to mirror Georgiana's grace, to be the objects of settler violence and, by analogy, to represent an English past of communal, spiritual values rapidly disintegrating under the weight of Progress and industrialisation. Their 'otherness' is not simply derived from being indigent, although the structure of the story leaves this for the reader to work out.

As Progress gains its victory over the Vasse landscape, Georgiana, like the Nyungar, becomes physically weakened by disease and exhaustion. The character of Georgiana is finally used to link the two stories. In March 1843, a comet in the western sky is regarded as a bad omen by the Nyungar and is followed by influenza epidemics of a genocidal quality. Georgiana, sick and

distressed with illness after the birth of her eighth child, cannot be saved by modern medicine. Her death on 7 April, like that of so many Nyungar around her, metaphorically marks the demise of communal and reciprocal society and the success of modernity and progress in south west Australia.

But Georgiana Molloy was as much a historical person as she is an artefact of Westralian historiography. In the late 1890s, when the imperial provisions in the Western Australian Constitution protecting Aborigines were removed, W.B. Kimberley's history of the colony was published without any account of Captain Molloy's role in an 1841 massacre of Nyungar people. This was repeated in J.S. Battye's history of the state in 1924. Archival papers relating to the massacre were missing, and there was spirited debate in the *West Australian* letters pages for and against Molloy, all of which topically coincided with the Forrest River massacres of 1926. In 1929, the Western Australian Historical Society Journal published letters of 'Georgina' Molloy within a narrative written by W.G. Pickering. These letters emphasised the role of Georgiana as a gentlewoman and botanical collector, thereby carefully siting her within the discourse of gentryism, wildflowers and 'Westralianism' (yet to be effectively written about by historians) and rescuing the early settlers from the odium of murder. These matters again rose to public attention in the mid-1950s when F.K. Crowley was formulating his 'New Gentryism' approach to writing Westralian history in which the magisterial historian played a central role.

Alexandra Hasluck researched and published her gentryist *Portrait with Background* in 1955, a biography of Georgiana that also 'tried to show the ordinary life of the colonists'. An appendix to *Portrait with Background* cleared Captain Molloy of the accusations of murder, and reinforced the mystical role of the feminine, floristic and essentially Westralian Georgiana. A hagiophile historiography has been constructed for the purpose of denying the bloody black history of white Westralia and, although Lines challenges elements of this construct to some degree, he maintains Georgiana's purity and never questions her husband's official or spousal actions.

Lines' use of Paul Carter's work to illuminate Nyungar and settler cultural intentions, place naming and territorial possession certainly adds depth to understanding the interactions between black and white in early colonial times. Some historians of place in the west may object to Lines' portrayal of the settlers as greedy, selfish and murderous, but they can no longer ignore the vicious nature of contact in most frontier districts of the colony/state. If landscapes can be accepted as reflecting the natural and cultural conditions of a region at a given time, then Lines' reading of the historical landscapes of south west Australia is, I think, a success. However, using the life of Georgiana as a metaphor for the cultural history of early European occupation and settlement in the South West, and now for the demise of communalism, has meant that the historical Georgiana Molloy remains yet to be liberated from the historiographical requirements that Westralian gentryism, and now Lines' environmentalism, have created for her.

It's a good read, this story, so long as you don't mind your environmental history reinforcing rather than challenging provincial Westralianism.