

LOUISA MEREDITH

Louisa Meredith was born in Birmingham in 1812. She was educated mainly by her mother and, in the agitation leading up to the 1832 Reform Act learnt to 'think independently and express herself fearlessly on religious and social issues', and is likely to have written for the Chartist press. She published several books of poems and in 1839 published *Our Wild Flowers Familiarly Described and Illustrated*, written in story form.

Louisa married her cousin, Charles Meredith, in April 1839 in Birmingham. They sailed for Sydney in the *Letitia* soon afterwards. Louisa stayed in Bathurst while Charles inspected sheep stations on the Murrumbidgee. They returned to Sydney and lived at Homebush.

In 1840, Louisa and Charles went to Oyster Bay in Tasmania, where Charles' father owned 'Cambria'. Charles and Louisa built a house on a neighbouring property. Their second son was born there in 1841, but died soon afterwards. In Tasmania, the Meredith family was among those whose fortunes suffered; yet Louisa continued the writing she had commenced before leaving England for New South Wales in 1839.

Her perceptive observations in *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, published in 1844 was angrily reviewed in the Sydney press. Louisa's literary work continued through the years her children were born. The companion account, *My Home in Tasmania during a residence of nine years* published in 1952. *Over the straits: a Visit to Melbourne* appeared in 1861. Louisa became as well known for her sensitive writing on Australia's wildlife, and her artistic representations of plants and flowers as for her pungent social observations. *Tasmanian Friends and Foes: Feathered Furred and Finned: A Family Chronicle of Country Life* appeared in 1880 and included colour plates from her own drawings. She also illustrated several books of poems and *Bush Friends in Tasmania: Last Series* in 1981. Her wildflower drawings won medals in exhibitions in Australia and overseas. In 1884, the Tasmania government granted her pension for 'distinguished literary and artistic services' to the colony.

Louisa enjoyed the travel to research for her books. She became an honorary member of the Tasmanian Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She also enjoyed acting. A man in one of her admiring audiences described her as 'rivalling Fanny Kemble on the stage and as an interpreter of Shakespeare on the platform'.

Very few professional women earned reasonable incomes. Writers, botanists, painters and artists used skills in part-time, occasional manner. Few women motivated by money, or allowed to earn it this way. Louisa Meredith was the only one to be a commercial success. 20 books, some ran to several editions and many pamphlets, journal and newspaper articles.

Louisa's writing helped her family through many economic ups and downs. She died at Collingwood Victoria on 21 October 1895¹.

¹ See V R Ellis, *Louisa Anne Meredith: a tigress in exile*, 1979