

LETTERS TO LONDON: LOUISA ANNE MEREDITH'S CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE THROUGH HER PAINTINGS OF TASMANIAN FISH

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(with three plates)

Koolhof, ME (2025). Letters to London: Louisa Anne Meredith's contribution to scientific knowledge through her paintings of Tasmanian fish. *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania*. 159: 39–46 ISSN: 0080-4703. Royal Society of Tasmania, PO Box 11, Franklin, Tasmania 7113, Australia. Email: office@rst.org.au

Louisa Anne Meredith's successful career as a writer, artist and naturalist has in many respects been well documented. She won numerous national and international awards for her botanical drawings and paintings, and her work as a natural history illustrator has received wide acclaim. Less known, however, is that Meredith's meticulous illustrations of Tasmanian indigenous fish played a key role in bringing Tasmanian fish to the notice of the scientific world, not only in Tasmania and Australia, but internationally. Letters throwing light on this achievement have been catalogued by the Natural History Museum, London, but appear not to have come to the previous attention of any historian or helped elevate her work as contributing to scientific knowledge.

Key Words: Louisa Anne Meredith, fish paintings, Royal Society of Tasmania, Dr A Günther, Professor F McCoy, Morton Allport, natural history illustration, British Museum, Natural History Museum.

Louisa Anne Meredith's successful career as a writer, artist and naturalist has in many respects been well documented. Her work as a natural history illustrator has been described as 'of wide popular appeal' and 'excellent source material' (Moyal 1993, pp. 176–177), and it is well known that she won numerous national and international awards for her wildflower paintings (O'Neill 1974, McCarthy 2018). Louisa Anne, also known as Mrs Charles Meredith (pl. 1A), was awarded Honorary Membership of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1881 'in recognition of her long efforts to encourage the study of the Natural History of Tasmania, by illustrations both literary and pictorial, in her various and highly-popular publications' (Royal Society of Tasmania 1881, p. xii). Almost unknown today is Meredith's highly-skilled work in painting Tasmanian fish. Yet, when viewing her fish illustrations created more than 150 years ago, the paintings reveal remarkable vibrancy, scientific detail and accuracy appreciated by scientists and non-scientists alike (pl. 1B).

Correspondence throwing light on this skill comes from the naturalist Morton Allport in Hobart, together with four letters in Meredith's hand now held in the Natural History Museum, London, following transfer from the British Museum, and a letter by eminent Melbourne naturalist Frederick McCoy catalogued by the Natural History Museum. These letters reveal that Meredith's acclaimed illustrations of Tasmanian indigenous fish played a key role in bringing Tasmanian fish to the notice of the scientific world, not only in Tasmania and Australia, but internationally. It appears that none of these letters has previously attracted much attention, apart from a brief mention by Mollison (2020, p. 51) of Morton Allport sending a set of Meredith's fish illustrations to London.



PLATE 1A — Portrait of Louisa Anne Meredith by Georgiana McCrae, thought to have been painted in 1860 (in Clemente 2014, fig. 13).

In 1855, Meredith presented to the Royal Society of Tasmania (RST) a life-sized watercolour painting of a fish taken in a seine (fishing net) near South Cape. Her work was reported as a 'carefully executed coloured drawing

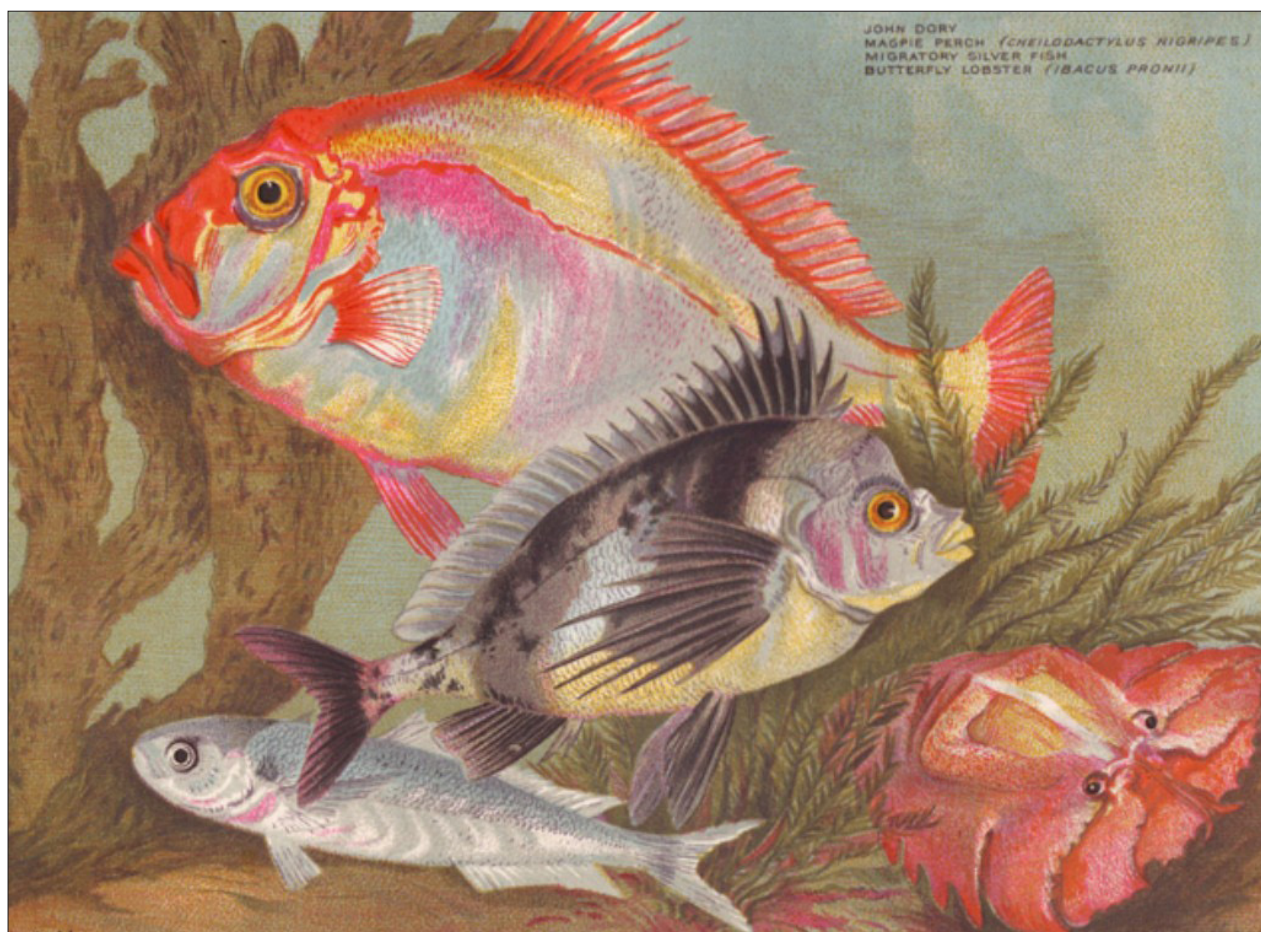


Plate 1B – Plate 5 from Meredith (1880) depicting a range of fish (and lobster) species with skill and accuracy.

... of a Fish (probably undescribed)' (*The Courier*, 27 December 1855, p. 2). So unusual was this fish and so peculiar its features that a newspaper article itemised every strange detail of the fish's appearance. Meredith's watercolour painting was described as '[a] very accurate and beautifully coloured drawing' (*The Courier*, 27 December 1855, p. 2). That fish is now known as the goblinfish *Glyptauchen panduratus*.

The RST minutes and meeting records, usually very restrained, are highly respectful of the skill evident in Meredith's fish watercolours and speak warmly of her work. In his paper 'Zoological statistics' read to the RST in 1862, TJ Ewing paid tribute to the work of Meredith:

... few of our fish have been drawn, as they come fresh from the sea with all their glowing but fleeting brilliancy. If we wish to see what some of these are, we have but to look at the beautiful drawings of Mrs Allport and Mrs Charles Meredith, presented to this society. (Ewing 1863, p. 5)

A further example comes from 1864, when Meredith's son Owen found a strange-looking fish on a southern Tasmanian beach. Owen presented this fish to the RST, and at the next monthly meeting Louisa Anne Meredith presented to the same society 'an excellent and very accurate water colour drawing ... of the fish presented by Mr Owen Meredith at the last meeting' (Royal Society of Tasmania 1864b, p. 103). Tasmanian naturalist Morton Allport remarked: 'Owing

to the absence of any standard modern work on fish, it was impossible to give the scientific name of the curious specimen presented by Mr Meredith, but it is probably allied to the anglers, or frog-fish (*Lophius*, sp. ?)' (Royal Society of Tasmania 1864a, p. 90). The fish depicted is today known as *Brachionichthys hirsutus*, the critically endangered spotted handfish. Meredith's painting of this fish merited mention by RM Johnston in his 'Classified Catalogue of all the known Tasmanian Fish Species' in the Fisheries Royal Commission Report of 1883: 'Mrs Meredith has very faithfully painted this species in her Tasmanian Friends and Foes, under the name tortoiseshell fish *Cheironectes politus*' (The Commissioners 1883, p. liii) (pl. 2A). Such was his regard, Johnston also mentioned Meredith's book in his bibliography of the catalogue, referencing its figures and notes (Johnston 1883, p. xlv). This was high praise from the meticulous Johnston, scientist, statistician, Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia and later Vice-President of the Royal Society of Tasmania, indicating the esteem in which he held Meredith's work. As it transpired, the difference in the name given by Meredith, *Cheironectes politus*, and that of *Brachionichthys hirsutus* as reported by Johnston, was due to handfish nomenclature being under review at the time (Last & Gledhill 2009, p. 5).

The quality of Meredith's work is apparent in a comparison of one of her painstakingly-detailed handfish

paintings with those of well-known artists William Buelow Gould and Thomas Bock made during similar periods (pl. 2B, 2C; also see Last & Gledhill 2009, p. 6).

Letters from Hobart naturalist Morton Allport (Allport 1872, 1873, 1874) describe his sending a set of Meredith's paintings of Tasmanian fish to the distinguished Dr ACLG Günther, Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum, London, and arranging for their return. For years Allport had been sending preserved fish to Dr Günther for scientific purposes. Some of the specimens proved to be new to science; others were known species that had not previously been recorded in Tasmanian waters (The Commissioners 1883, p. xxix).

Allport noted that the colours of the specimens he sent were 'quite destroyed' by the preservation method used. He sent Meredith's paintings in order that a pre-eminent scientist could appreciate the precise markings and beautiful colours of the Tasmanian fish, writing: 'Many of the more brilliantly coloured species [such] as *Phyllopteryx* are quite destroyed in Spirit and the preparations give no notion of their beauty' (Allport 1872) (pl. 3).

In his letter to Dr Günther of 10 August 1872, Allport wrote:

By Post in a separate parcel I send six sketches by a lady whom I have known for many years (Mrs Meredith) and who would be willing to continue sending other illustrations of our indigenous fish if they could be made serviceable and the originals be returned to her – Mrs Meredith's own remarks on these specimens accompany the sketches. ... The Cestracion, Histiopertus and Cheilodactylus you will have no difficulty in recognising – the latter is C. Nigripes. What Mrs M. calls the Silver Trevally I believe to be Caranx georgianus the one spoken of as "English Trevally" I do not know.

Can these sketches be made available either through the Zoological Society or otherwise for the purpose of showing the colours of recent specimens. (Allport 1872)

Allport clearly considered that Meredith's paintings of the fishes she called 'Silver Trevally' and 'English Trevally' would be useful to Günther in making a scientific identification. Morton Allport was Vice-President of the RST and an authority on Tasmanian zoology, corresponding prolifically with scientific experts in Europe (Stilwell 1969). The tone of Allport's letter to Günther is very telling; he has great respect for Meredith and feels keenly the responsibility to return her paintings safely. He wrote to Günther: 'You will see by Mrs Meredith's notes that she looks to me for the careful transmission of the pictures and I shall be obliged by your returning them in the same way as they are sent' (Allport 1872).

Equally telling is his statement in the same letter: 'Mrs Meredith's own remarks on these specimens accompany the sketches' (Allport 1872), implying that Meredith had supplied observations worthy of the attention of the much-published Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum. Dr Günther was a most eminent ichthyologist, a Fellow of the Zoological Society and the Linnean Society of London; a Fellow, Gold Medallist and later, President of the Royal

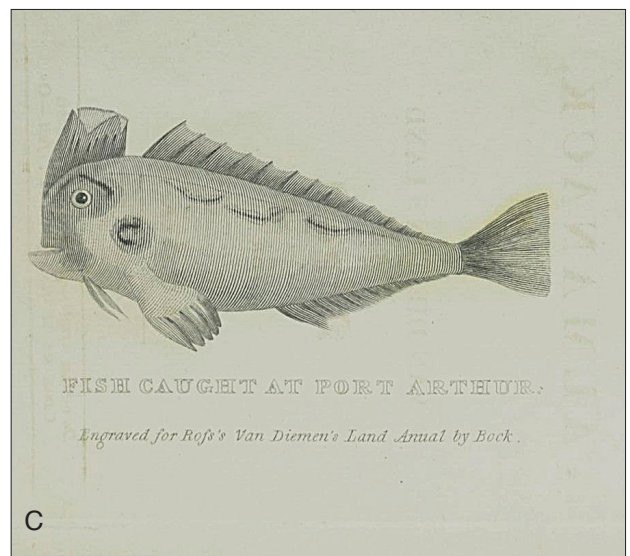
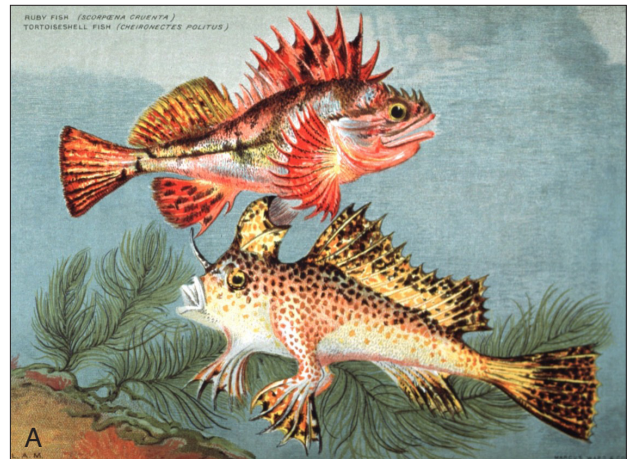


PLATE 2 — Comparison of detail between three early illustrations of handfish. **A** Spotted handfish by Meredith, figured as a 'Tortoiseshell Fish' (Meredith 1880, Plate 8, bottom specimen), **B** Spotted handfish illustrated by WB Gould (ca. 1832), figured as a 'Walking Fish' (Gould 1832), **C** Copper engraving of red handfish by T Bock, figured as 'Fish caught at Port Arthur' (Ross 1835, inside cover). (Species identified in Last & Gledhill 2009, p. 6.)



PLATE 3 — Plate 7 from Meredith (1880) showing the vivid colours of the superb dragon and Shaw's cowfish, often lost when stored in spirits.

Society of London, who had published a highly-regarded eight-volume *Catalogue of the Fishes in the British Museum* (Smith 2005). It was the British Museum which set the standard for natural history discourse in the nineteenth century (McOuat 2001, p. 1).

It is evident that Meredith, a woman of no academic standing who had been home-educated by her mother and a governess (Ellis 1979, p. 29), commanded the respect and esteem of these leading scientists of the day. It may also seem astonishing that an artist with limited formal training living in colonial rural Tasmania could have her work proposed as being of use to the Zoological Society of London, in addition to the British Museum. Meredith (née Twamley) had been a precocious child and began her career as a writer and artist in her teens when living in Birmingham, England, where she moved in artistic circles and received advice on painting from Sir Thomas Lawrence, President of the Royal Academy (Ellis 1979, pp. 20–33). In exploring Meredith's sense of identity in adult life, Miller (2014, p. 71) observed:

Meredith's education and the income she received from her writing meant that she was not a woman dependent entirely on her husband. Furthermore, Meredith asserted intellectual independence and her

own intellectual identity, and had done this before her marriage.

Amelia Scurry noted relatively recently that the character and style of Meredith's paintings of fish, marine worms and shells suggest that she was 'working within the tradition of natural history illustration and deliberately producing species studies'. Further, Scurry comments that in Meredith's six major Tasmanian publications destined for English and American audiences, she revealed 'a developing interest and focus on a scientific method of observation and the documentation of ecological diversity' (Scurry in Horne 2009, p. 179).

Many sources write that Meredith travelled to London in 1891; however, the shipping records reveal that she embarked on the sea voyage to London in 1890, accompanied by Miss Meredith, her granddaughter, departing Australia on the *Salazie* bound for Marseilles via Melbourne (*Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 1890, p. 495). From Meredith's letter of 6 May 1890, we know she was living in London on that date, at 38 Cambridge Terrace, Hyde Park. Meredith had equipped herself for her London stay with a letter of introduction to Dr Günther from the much-decorated Sir Fredrick McCoy FRS, professor and museum director, possibly

collecting the letter from McCoy when the *Salazie* docked in Melbourne on 27 February *en route* to Marseilles (*The Argus*, 28 February 1890, p. 4).

McCoy had been awarded a DSc (Cantab.), 1886; CMG, 1886; KCMG, 1891; and royal honours from Italy and Austria. He had served as a commissioner for the Victorian (1861), Intercolonial (1866) and International (1880) Exhibitions and was an honorary member of learned societies in Cambridge, Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Moscow, New Zealand and Sydney (Fendley 1974). McCoy's identifications and classifications of fish had been cited in Johnston's *General and Critical Observations of the Fishes of Tasmania* and the *Classified Catalogue of the Fishes of Tasmania* (Johnston 1883). It is evident that not only was McCoy a leading ichthyologist of the day, he also had a close knowledge of Tasmanian fish.

McCoy's letter reveals his deepest admiration for the skilful work of Meredith in depicting Tasmanian fish, writing:

My dear Dr Günther

Pray allow me to give you the greatest pleasure you have ever had in your life by making you personally known to Mrs Meredith, whose admirable works and beautiful figures of Tasmanian Fishes you have often quoted. (McCoy 1890)

Nothing could indicate more clearly a scion of the Melbourne establishment than this letter headed 'University Melbourne', on writing paper bearing the seal of the Melbourne Club. McCoy's statement that by effecting an introduction to Meredith, he would be conferring on Günther 'the greatest pleasure he has ever had in his life', is extravagant praise indeed. His acquaintance with Meredith was of long standing; in 1856 McCoy had shown her around the grounds of the University of Melbourne (Clemente 2014).

From McCoy's letter of introduction, we also learn that Günther often quoted Meredith's 'admirable works and beautiful figures of Tasmanian fishes' (McCoy 1890), presumably in conversation and correspondence with other learned people. This reveals a singular respect for Meredith's fish illustrations by an eminent scientist of the day. Far from Morton Allport's correspondence from Hobart with Günther in London regarding Meredith's fish illustrations being an isolated example, Allport's high regard for the quality and accurate depictions in Meredith's fish paintings reinforces the point.

An unsolved mystery is contained in McCoy's letter. He wrote: 'This is about publishing another work on Tasmanian Natural History and will show you the most beautiful drawings from the life, you ever saw of Tasmanian Fish' (McCoy 1890). The new 'written work on Tasmanian Natural History' referred to by McCoy is an enigma. At the time, Meredith was taking to London material for the publication of her book *Bush Friends in Tasmania: Last Series*, which did not include fish. Was Meredith planning another volume, one featuring her watercolour illustrations of Tasmanian fish, correctly identified with their scientific names by Dr Günther? This could certainly be inferred from McCoy's letter and Meredith's subsequent letters to Günther.

On 6 May 1890, Meredith wrote the first of a series of four letters to Günther in London, enclosing '[a] hyperbolic note from my kind but too flattering friend...'; that 'note' is almost certainly the letter of introduction from McCoy:

My dear Sir,

I hesitate and really blush, to send you this hyperbolic note from my kind but too flattering friend, which I enclose and should fear to lay my sketches before you, but that I believe you approved some, sent to you some years ago, by the late Morton Allport – I am writing to ask Professor Flower if I may show him, and thought it might be convenient for you to see them at the same time – I will send this note to his care, to assist arrangements. (Meredith 1890)

The 'Professor Flower' referred to in this letter was Sir WH Flower, Director of the Natural History Department at the British Museum and President of the Zoological Society of London (The British Museum). In Meredith's next letter to Günther of 28 September 1891, she wrote:

Dear Sir,

Last year, when I had the pleasure of showing you my drawings of Tasmanian fish, you were so kind as to say you would write on them the correct scientific names, (altho [sic] they were not so minutely accurate as they should be, as to fins) and I shall be very much obliged to you if you will do so – and will send them to the Museum by "parcel delivery", if I hear from you that I may – I leave England to return to Tasmania early next month. (Meredith 1891a)

Her self-deprecating manner is again evident in the comment 'my drawings of Tasmanian fish ... were not so minutely accurate as they should be, as to fins'. The quality of the drawings, and Günther's regard for Meredith, were evidently sufficiently high to induce a busy and eminent professional man to find the time to inspect and personally provide the scientific names of the fish illustrated, in a short period of time.

Meredith's self-effacing remark echoes her previous 'Memoranda' of 8 July 1878 in which she donated seven minutely-detailed paintings of marine worms to the RST, accompanied by 12 pages of punctilious notes:

I fear so unscientific a description is of little value, except to convey a faint idea of the living aspects of the beautiful and interesting creatures whose portraits, faithful as my pencil might achieve, I have the pleasure of presenting to Dr Agnew, for the Royal Society. (Meredith 1878, pp. 11–12)

Her letter of 8 October expresses her thanks to Günther for promising to name her drawings and makes arrangements for sending them to the British Museum: 'I thank you very much for your kind promise to name my fish drawings, and will send them to you at the Museum, after the 16th' (Meredith 1891b).

In Meredith's fourth letter to Dr Günther of 20 October, she adopted a warm and respectful tone, gracefully acknowledging Günther's professional advice:

I have sent the fish in a portfolio, and desired the carrier to ask when he might call for it again – will you kindly write the names on the drawings, or if on

the mounts close to the drawings – I shall value these very much and if I ever attempt any more fish-portraits shall remember what you told me as to more exact and minute accuracy in the fins and scales ... With many thanks for your kindness in naming my sketches... (Meredith 1891c)

Previous correspondence reveals that, in reality, Meredith was not always a modest person. In a letter written in 1878 she had declared to her old friend Sir Henry Parkes: 'I believe that no other woman resident in the Colony has done so much in art, science and literature for her adopted country, and I think forty years of active work deserve their reward' (in Clemente 2014), yet in her letters to Günther she appears to consciously adopt a self-deprecating tone that stops short of being ingratiating. Meredith's underlying confidence in her artistic work can be detected in her letters, along with a thin thread of steel in her written voice when she asked Dr Günther: 'Will Saturday be too soon for the portfolio to be called for? We leave London early in [sic] next week' (Meredith 1891c).

The deferential remarks abounding in Meredith's writing have previously been noted by Dunscombe (1998, p. 17): 'Meredith's literary writing is loaded with an awareness and foregrounding of her less authoritative status as a woman author, and she quite consciously cultivates the authorial persona of accomplished amateur throughout her literary career'. Meredith's letters to Günther reveal that she adopted the same approach when writing about her fish illustrations, and Dunscombe's observations on Meredith's literary work apply equally to her watercolour paintings of Tasmanian fish: 'As a woman, she clearly took her exclusion from the domain of the expert as a "given"' (Dunscombe 1998, p. 18).

Kerr (1984) refers to 'the context of the "Lady Painter", that notoriously underrated race'. Women painters in colonial Australia are separated by Kerr into two main categories: the 'pioneers', who sketched and painted their new lives as a record to keep or send to relatives overseas; and the 'accomplished gentlewomen' of the drawing room who painted birds, flowers and views, their art being more decorative than informative (Kerr 1984, p. 3). While describing Meredith as of unusual competence, Kerr places Meredith in the 'pioneer' and 'accomplished gentlewoman' categories, citing her exceptionally competent flower paintings (pp. 9–11). She does not credit the importance of Meredith's fish paintings as accomplished natural history illustrations, other than briefly mentioning that Meredith painted the 'frog fish' [spotted handfish] (Kerr 1984, p. 14).

In discussing nineteenth-century female colonial artists including Louisa Anne Meredith, Jordan (2005, p. 176) referred to their 'affectionate anthropomorphised representations of native fauna'. In the case of Meredith's paintings, the fish, although vivid, are neither affectionately rendered nor anthropomorphised but accurately depicted and dispassionate.

Carey (2023) noted that the contribution by women to Australian science is significantly more extensive, complex and nuanced than may be generally thought, and that their contributions remain largely hidden. With regard to

the role of women in nature writing, Carey remarks that Meredith was typical in the way she adopted the persona of an amateur in her 'intrusion' into the scientific realm. In analysing passages in Meredith's *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, Carey observed that Meredith's writing was infused with scientific references that contradicted this stance (Carey 2023, p. 23). Meredith's previously-mentioned 'Memoranda' on the paintings of tiny marine worms she donated to the RST in 1878 provide a further example of this: in her postscript to the 'Memoranda', Meredith offers her thanks to Mr RM Johnston for assigning the worms to their probable genera, adding that 'he thinks they are most likely species hitherto unnoticed' (Meredith 1878).

Meredith's approach to learned gentlemen, combining modesty and flattery, appears to have been a conscious strategy to promote acceptance and recognition of her natural history work. In her private life, quite a different picture is presented of her social manner. Tasmanian lithographer, printer and picture framer RL Hood, who took over his father's business in Hobart in 1851 (McArthur 1988, p. 60), narrated a first-hand encounter with Meredith:

I was hanging some pictures for Mrs Cameron, living at Heathfield, Davey St one day, and among them was a Glover – same with Gum Trees. Mrs Charles Meredith came into the room and said "I am told you have a Glover there Mr Hood, may I see it?" I turned the picture around, & she looked at it for a second, and turned impetuously towards the door, saying as she went out "Just like all of Glovers, he never could paint a Gum Tree. He puts all his trees to the front, – leaves behind!" Mrs Cameron came in afterwards and asked me what Mrs M. said about the picture, and when I told her she seemed very much annoyed and said "She might have kept that to herself". Charles Meredith was just after the same style – imperious, push-you-aside style. (Hood nd)

Her brusqueness in this encounter is quite at odds with the tone she adopted in written communications with scientists, as exemplified by her notes on marine worms to Dr Agnew, (Meredith 1878) and letters to Dr Günther (Meredith 1890, 1891a, b, c). On viewing ten of Meredith's fish illustrations at a Melbourne exhibition in 2009, evolutionary biologist Mark Elgar from the University of Melbourne noted his surprise at seeing the 'vivid images of Tasmanian fish'. Elgar observed that Meredith had corresponded with many scientists and was an authority on Tasmanian natural history (Elgar 2009, p. 732).

Gates (2005, p. 78) posited that one of the reasons colonial women naturalists and illustrators such as Meredith have been inadequately recognised in either the history of colonisation or the history of science is that the audience for their work has been underestimated, and that there was actually a large number of people '... hungry for new information about the world's flora and fauna and ready to read or view information from anyone who could describe this exotic world outside Britain'. Also observed by Gates (2006, pp. 192–196) is the way the combination of text and images in Meredith's books aided the spread of scientific

knowledge, commenting that *Tasmanian Friends and Foes: Feathered, Furred and Finned* (Meredith 1880) 'covers a multiplicity of possible audiences for her popular science writing by means of her fictional characters, her labels, and her footnotes'. It is worth noting that the pension awarded to Meredith by the Tasmanian government towards the end of her life was for her work in having 'by her writings and paintings rendered considerable services to the cause of Science, Literature, and Art in Tasmania' (Moyal 1986, in Gates 2005, p. 86).

This begs the question: for this woman who was 'an authority on Tasmanian natural history', where is the recognition from the learned men, both professional and amateur scientists, who admired and used her work? Where are the citations and the accolades? Brief mentions in private letters; occasional comments in the RST records; citations of her illustrations such as by Johnston (1883, p. liii), Ewing (1863, p. 5) and Scott (1933, p. 35): that appears to be the extent of it. It is evident from the letters cited in this article that, in the English-speaking world, there was in the nineteenth century a circle of male professional and amateur ichthyologists corresponding, sending specimens and citing each other's published work, with Dr Günther at the centre. An overview of women in science in Australia from 1830–1950 concluded, in part:

From their earliest participation, women contributors to scientific knowledge and information in Australia have been marginalised and rendered largely invisible in the record of science. ... Across the nineteenth century, scientific 'amateurs and gentlemen' accepted women in the cultural background, used their services and data, and, even before professionalization grew, edged them from the mainstream of science. (Moyal 1993, pp. 184–185)

Such seems to have been the case for Meredith.

In no way does this diminish Louisa Anne Meredith's consummate skill as an observer, collector and illustrator of natural history specimens. The value of her paintings in bringing to life the beautiful colours of Tasmanian fish for scientists on the other side of the world as well as closer to home, and assisting with the identification and documentation of specimens, adds an important scientific dimension to Meredith's magnificent *oeuvre*.

In recognition of her contributions Meredith was awarded Honorary Membership of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1881, the first woman to receive this honour. Meredith, as a female, was not precluded from ordinary membership of the RST. From inception, the Society (originally the Botanical & Horticultural Society of Van Diemen's Land, before receiving royal patronage in 1844), specified that 'Ladies may be admitted as Fellows upon the same terms, with the same privileges, and under the same Regulations in all respects as Gentlemen' (Botanical & Horticultural Society of Van Diemen's Land 1843, Rule VIII, pp. 7–8). In 2023, the RST established the Louisa Anne Meredith Medal to be awarded to similarly worthy recipients. The medal was first awarded in 2024.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to the reviewers and also Rebecca Keddie at the Natural History Museum, London; and Don Garden, Andrew Dean and Sally Bryant for their help.

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(accepted 20 June 2025)