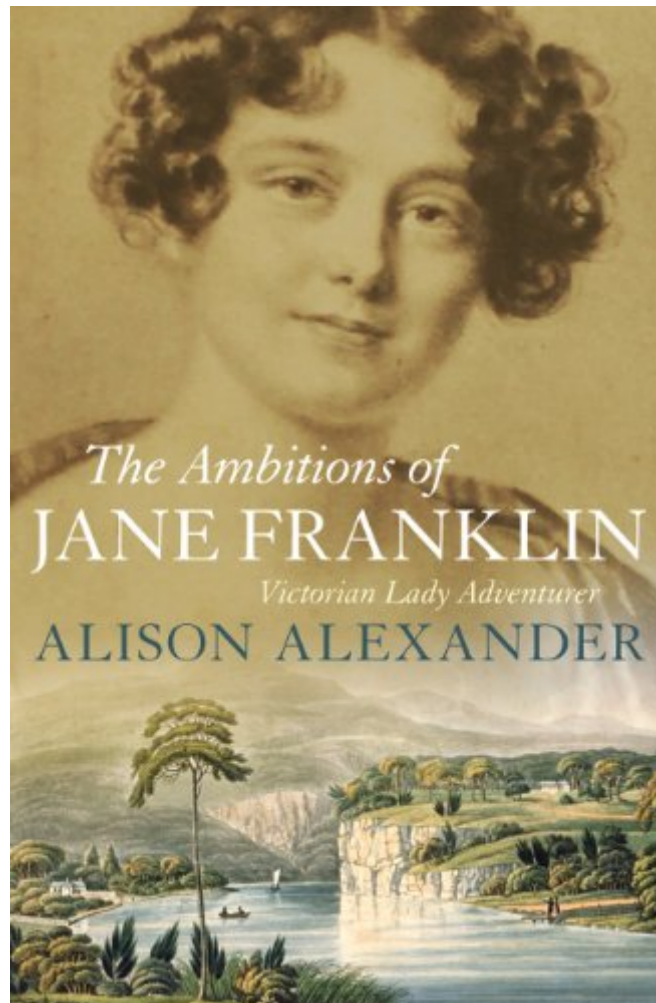




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The Ambitions Of Jane Franklin: Victorian Lady Adventurer



Synopsis

Winner of the 2014 National Biography Award In a period when most ladies sat at home with their embroidery, Jane Franklin achieved fame throughout the western world, and was probably the best travelled woman of her day. Alison Alexander traces the life of this inimitable woman, from her birth in late eighteenth-century London, her marriage at the ripe age of 36 years to Sir John Franklin, to her many trips to far-flung locations, including Russia, the Holy Land, northern Africa, America and Australia. Once Jane Franklin married, her original ambition - to live life to the full - was joined by an equally ardent desire to make her kind and mild husband a success. Arriving in Tasmania in 1837 when Sir John became governor, she swept like a whirlwind through the colony: attempting to rid the island of snakes; establishing a scientific society and the Hobart regatta; adopting an Aboriginal girl, and sending a kangaroo to Queen Victoria. She continued her intrepid travels, becoming the first white woman to travel overland from Melbourne to Sydney. When her husband disappeared in the Arctic on an expedition to discover the Northwest Passage, she badgered the Admiralty, the public and even the President of the United States to fund trips to locate him, and then defended his reputation when remains of the expedition were located and there were claims of cannibalism. Single-handedly, she turned him from a failure into one of England's noblest heroes. She continued travelling well into her 70s and died at age 84, refusing to take her medicine to the last.

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Customer Reviews

This book gives an insight to the early history of Tasmania. Jane was very influential in the affairs of government and exercised considerable power, which is unusual for that time in history.

I enjoyed reading this biography of Jane Franklin because in so many different ways, I felt this book clarified who Lady Franklin was “ through letters, careful research, and reconstruction of her life. The book clearly describes her childhood, her early, rather adventurous and intrepid travels, her late-in-life marriage to Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin, and, of most interest to me, her subsequent sojourn in Van Diemen’s Land (current Tasmania) during his governorship there. Despite the considerable research that underpins this biography and a consistently even-handed style, the book is quite readable and brings an accurate picture of Lady Franklin to life very effectively. Through snippets from her surviving letters and journals, for example, we learn of Lady Franklin’s anguish and private misgivings about how she could best support her husband, a genial and deeply religious man, who most agree lacked the political skills to navigate the rough-and-tumble politics of colonial Van Diemen’s Land. Alexander’s retelling of the political infighting that led ultimately to Franklin’s recall clarifies the different groups who supported and opposed Sir John without editorializing. Alexander suggests that those newspapers that criticized Lady Franklin’s “meddling” do not accurately reflect how the Franklins were regarded and what they achieved in Van Diemen’s Land. In the Victorian Era, Alexander points out such women of a certain class were expected to stay home and embroider, to “ornament” their husbands’ careers. They might help out, in this age before photocopying, to copy out documents. Lady Franklin did copy such documents, but she also critiqued them, suggested editing changes, and lobbied for the good of the colony. Lady Franklin was too independent, too worldly, too well educated, and passionate about her interests, to submerge herself into a submissive role. But Lady Franklin had flaws as well. She was flirtatious, demanding, and very aware of class distinctions (and enforced them). She can’t have been easy to live with; yet, despite her bouts with ill health, she inspired those around her with her generosity and perseverance. She was outraged and humiliated by public criticism. The picture that

emerges from The Ambitions of Jane Franklin is of an indomitable, almost driven woman, one much larger than history recognizes. If you are drawn to history about the Victorian Era, women's lives in general (and Lady Jane Franklin, in particular), or the colonial period in Australian history, this is a remarkable, well-researched and written resource. I'm now on my second read through.

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