

The letters of Caroline Abraham

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At the end of the United Nations Decade for Women and of the first ten years of women's studies at the Turnbull it is salutary to remember and acknowledge the debt owed to those colonial women who kept journals and wrote letters. With access denied to provincial assembly or General Assembly, to clubs or (for the gentler sort) to pubs, to church vestry or school board, to jury lists or editorial columns, there was little opportunity for a woman's voice to be heard in public. Women did, however, use well—those who were able—the one talent colonial society allowed them; they wrote letters. Thank God for the letters of Charlotte Godley, Jane Maria Atkinson, Sarah Selwyn, Sarah Greenwood, Mary Taylor, to name but a few among many who now provide so much of the minutiae of colonial life, who flesh out the speeches, documents, enactments and incidents with their own trenchant and perceptive comments. A recent purchase¹ by the Turnbull Library has enabled Caroline Abraham to join the company.

The bulk of the Caroline Abraham collection² consists of letters written between 1841 and 1877 to Sophia Marriott, a life-long friend, and to Sophia's mother. In 1898, when she was 80, Sophia Marriott put together a selection of letters from what remained of Caroline Abraham's correspondence in five exercise books, with pockets for the letters and her own comments on the facing page, and sent them to Caroline's son, Charles Thomas Abraham.

On the death of her father Charles Palmer, Caroline together with her mother and sisters left their home Wanlip in Leicestershire for Farnborough Hill in Hampshire, where their near neighbours were the Abrahams of Frimley. Charles Palmer's sister Harriet had married John Richardson, whose daughter Sarah was to marry George Augustus Selwyn. Both Caroline and 'Sasa' as she called her cousin were born in 1809. This propinquity brought Caroline into the Etonian circle of friends of which Selwyn, the acknowledged leader, was aptly known as 'the Royal George'. Caroline was among those who farewelled the *Tomatin* party on 26 December 1841 and she felt equally uprooted by the departure, so completely had her 'brightest hopes & thoughts for the future . . . intertwined themselves with George & Sarah'.³

For the next few years she suffered from the principal malaise of Victorian gentleladies—not enough to do: 'I cannot be content