

# Men of flowers

Peter Lyssiotis and Humphrey McQueen

As part of its 50th anniversary celebrations in 2009, the Baillieu Library commissioned a special copy of Peter Lyssiotis's and Humphrey McQueen's artist's book, *Men of flowers*. Of the ten copies and three artist's proofs that make up the limited edition of this book, the University of Melbourne's copy (no. 1) has a fine leather cover with a raised image of Darwin's hawk moth (*Xanthopan morgani*), while the Erasmus leather bookplate has an etching of the orchid upon which this remarkable moth feeds (*Angraecum sesquipedale*). The book is accompanied by a set of printer's proofs, working notes and drafts, and a specimen of the hawk moth.

The year 2009 marked not only the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Baillieu Library, but also the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the origin of species by means of natural selection*. *Men of flowers*, exploring as it does the work of three great 19th-century scientists—Darwin, Joseph Hooker and Gregor Mendel—combined with typesetting, illustration and binding of the highest quality, brings all these threads together in one superb volume that adds to the Baillieu's already considerable collection of artists' books.

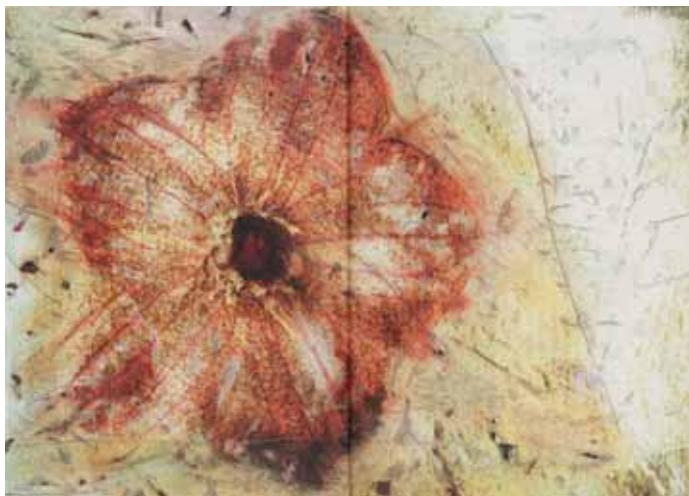
**Peter Lyssiotis:** *Men of flowers* is an artist's book. OK, but what is an artist's book? Well, I'm glad that no one has come up with a fully-working definition because that would immediately fence in a form that is omnivorous and depends on ranging widely and using so many of the possibilities on offer in the arts (and life). Of course, the French have had a go at knocking up a definition and it was Marcel Duchamp who came closest when he told us: 'it's an artist's book if the artist says it is ...', but that's too easy; too French.

If we look at what an artist's book isn't—what it *doesn't* do—we will get a clearer perspective of what it *is*—an indication, a suggestion, though not a clear definition. A book by an artist doesn't need a brief, it is not made with a target group in mind nor does it have a key message. Once it is made, it doesn't fall into step with a marketing strategy; nor does it follow corporate guidelines. It doesn't carry house colours, nor a brand name, and you won't identify it by its distinctive logo.

But they *are* books and *Men of flowers* wholeheartedly adopts the codex as part of its theatre. How long have we been living with the codex? Some 2,000 years—and yet as a form it hasn't been exhausted and that's because there are so many

tweaks and variations that can be played on the codex. As a form it reminds me of those folk songs which begin in the mists of time and come down to us through the digital fog of the 21st century, changed, but still identifiable, acknowledging their beginnings. Another characteristic that books and folk songs share is their demand for a story—a narrative in which something happens or an idea is thought through or played on as a variation or refinement of a story.

The narrative in *Men of flowers* revolves around Charles Darwin. As a way of introducing the narrative I have to ask a couple of questions: how many of us have written journals and made drawings in them? Well, so did Darwin. We know of 18 certified journals that he kept. How many of us have been on trips that we really didn't want to embark on? Well Darwin, being shy and reclusive, was by nature a stay-at-home-man, and yet he left on a five-year voyage on the *Beagle*. How many of us have collected stuff? Well, Darwin was a collector too. The story is told that as a kid he saw three beetles; he picked one up with his left hand, and the other with his right, but he also wanted the third beetle; so he popped one of the beetles he was holding into his mouth and grabbed the third one before it escaped.



*Men of flowers*, text by Humphrey McQueen, illustrations by Peter Lyssiotis, [Melbourne]: Masterthief, 2010. Purchased by the Baillieu Library to celebrate its 50th anniversary, 2009. Baillieu Library Special Collections, University of Melbourne. Example of illustration.

How many of us have hidden letters, diaries, drawings and other ‘treasures’—stuff you didn’t want anyone else to see? Well, given Darwin’s personality and his experience of life after *On the origin of species*, I’m sure that he too would have secreted stuff away. *Men of flowers* is based on the 99 per cent likelihood that there was a 19th journal, somewhere, which Darwin had hidden and never revealed because he didn’t want to court any more controversy. *Men of flowers* speculates that this ‘missing’ journal was kept out of psychological necessity: to relieve the tensions of being away from home, of relationships on the *Beagle* and as a relief from the scientific rigour with which he kept the other 18 journals. In the ‘missing’ journal we see Darwin focusing on the beauty to be found in the sexual properties of flowers. ‘Let us imagine’, as Darwin himself directed, that he kept such a journal, then secreted it in his local library in Kent—he’d already been through the turmoil of publishing *On the origin of species*—and would naturally have wanted to avoid any further controversy.

And what if I found the 19th journal while researching steam locomotion in the Kent public library? Impossible? Well, probably

not. Just look at some of the things that in the last couple of years have had the dust blown off them: Christ’s burial papers were found on the Shroud of Turin in the Vatican; Elvis’s hair has been resurrected from a 1958 haircut by a barber now living in Chicago; Fritz Lang’s complete three-and-a-half hour version of *Metropolis* has been uncovered in Argentina, and a coded fragment of writing by Leonardo da Vinci has been discovered in a library in France. So even to a sceptic, the 19th journal shouldn’t seem so improbable!

In this journal, whose drawings are being reproduced for the first time in *Men of flowers*, we can see how Darwin had occupied himself with drawing in coloured pencils. Yet why are the resulting drawings not the ones we are accustomed to seeing in florilegia? Well, they were made according to Darwin’s mood at the time; so the traditional, surgically-white background has given way to colour. And the drawings themselves aren’t stiffened by detail, rather they are as they might appear in a corner of a painting by W.M. Turner, but enlarged. So it’s the *emotion* behind Darwin’s pencil work, rather than his scientific observation, which comes into play here. They were made, after all, to ward off depression, homesickness and loneliness.

They also show the ageing they have suffered from being secreted away—hidden away for nearly 200 years. So those enemies of librarians and bibliophiles: the damp, the silverfish, the chemicals in paper, insects and neglect have all fulfilled their divine mission. When we look at these images of plants and flowers we end up asking ourselves how much completion or final resolution do we really need in order to understand what we’re looking at; and how much should we allow colour to carry some of the burden of recognition, of identification?

Why Humphrey McQueen’s essay at the start of *Men of flowers*? Again, book tradition dictates that florilegia be prefaced by a learned essay. (And besides, Madame Inspiration told me it was going to be good for Humphrey to wade into an unfamiliar pool!)

Why the 30 point typeface? Because it suits the formal demands of the book and the Bodoni smells of the 19th century. Why is *Men of flowers* a big book? Because illustrated books of botanical specimens have traditionally been ‘elephant folios’—and if you choose to work in the field of books then there should always be an acknowledgment of their origins, their history.

I continue to believe in books even though I live and breathe under a digital sky. I happen to agree with Stephane Mallarmé who said something to the effect that all life exists in order to end up in a book. I also believe that books are, as André Malraux taught us, museums without walls and as such give work a longer and less frenetic life than the standard four-week exhibition. It was John Donne who in a sermon reminded us that no man is an island, entire of itself, and I respect the long queue of book history—where no single book is ‘IT’. I believe books exist best in companionship with other books; isn’t that why we stack them so tightly next to each other? And is it not possible that while we are not listening they pass on their secrets to each other, in one huge Chinese whisper? And how they ‘grow’ as they welcome and absorb each whisper, once they’ve left our hands!

Let us imagine what James Joyce’s *Ulysses* would have to say to the Koran; or Sam Beckett’s *Godot* would whisper to *Das Kapital*, or De Sade to the Bible, Jack Kerouac to Marcel Proust ... ah, to be able to listen in.

Perhaps the aspect of *Men of flowers* that continues to appeal to me the most is how it refuses to fall into step with those notions

of specialisation which hamstring our times: here we are with a faculty of this, a school of that, or a department of some other. A book by artists lets in anything it can and then synthesises it into its thinking. As Neil Young told me once, ‘... it’s all one song’.

**Author’s acknowledgements:** A couple of acknowledgements are necessary because without the vision of a group of people *Men of flowers* wouldn’t have happened in the way it has: Angela Bridgland, Jock Murphy, Pam Pryde, the Bindery of Wayne Stock—especially Imogen Yang and Monica Oppen—and of course, Humphrey McQueen.

Peter Lyssiotis is a Cypriot-born Australian writer, photographer and photomonteur. His photographs and limited edition artist’s books have been purchased by private collectors, libraries and galleries throughout Australia, the US, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Cyprus.

**Humphrey McQueen:** Friendship and vanity account for my writing the introductory essay to Peter Lyssiotis’s latest book, *Men of flowers*.<sup>1</sup> The vanity is in my desire to be associated with the creativity of one of our country’s premier visual artists. Before we met, I admired Peter’s marriage of technical excellence with political perspicuity. I do not praise his achievements because we have become friends,

but rather welcome his friendship because of the qualities in his work, qualities which speak to character.

When he reflected on his inspirations for the magazine of the Socialist Alliance, *Seeing Red*, he tied his practice to the German anti-fascist photomonteur, John Heartfield:

Photomontage has the sort of enemies that ordinary people do.

Political photomontage allows you to read between the lies.

When you act in the interests of your class, it’s an absolute necessity. It’s not an act of bravery.

That manifesto illustrates that Peter is more than capable of providing his own texts, for he is a prose poet, whimsical and sage.

Throughout our encounters, Peter kept saying that he wanted to match a piece of my writing with his image-making. Our collaboration on *Men of flowers* began by his asking whether I could suggest someone to provide an essay to accompany a florilegium. Only later did it occur that this plea for advice might have been bait to get me to fulfil my promise to collaborate—one day. Unable to suggest an appropriate author,



I did offer to help out by writing a parallel text, not a botanical commentary on the species he was reworking. ‘Something on Darwin’ was as precise as I came, spurred by the commemorations that year starting with the exhibition from New York’s American Museum of Natural History at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

2009 was also the sesquicentenary for two of my other favourites: Marx’s *A contribution to the critique of political economy* and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. Jacques Barzun had brought that trio together in 1941 with an assertion of Gallic superiority and philosophical idealism. Pondering Barzun’s disparagement of Darwin, Marx and Wagner for being mechanical materialists is a way to grapple with them as exemplars of issues that dominated the long 20th century. Darwin was the odd man out, certainly a materialist but no dialectician.

My promise gained substance after finding Michael Gishelin’s *The triumph of Darwinian method* (1969) in the second-hand bookshop at Swifts Creek and Loren Eiseley’s *Darwin’s century* (1958) on my own shelves—unread. If I had to recommend only one book on Darwin it would be the superbly

crafted and open-minded *Darwin’s century*, which led me to Eiseley’s brief paper ‘How flowers changed the world’ (1957), which no one should leave school without enjoying. These two volumes introduced the puzzles around which I developed the essay for *Men of flowers*.

Eiseley’s account of Darwin’s responses to the two toughest challenges to natural selection is itself a challenge to Gishelin’s claim that Darwin triumphed by hypothetico-deductive reasoning. Nothing that the likes of Bishop Wilberforce flung at *On the origin of species* came within coo-ee of the damage wrought by William Thompson (later Lord Kelvin) and the engineer-mathematician Fleeming Jenkin.

Thompson came up with an estimate of the earth’s age at less than 100 million years, which allowed too few generations for single cells to evolve into *homo sapiens*. To make up the lost time, Darwin back-pedalled from natural and sexual selection into acquired characteristics. Meanwhile, Jenkin pointed out that every initial variation would be swamped through blending, the prevailing notion of inheritance. Here, Darwin did attempt a re-conceptualisation by advancing pangenesis, long acknowledged as his biggest mistake.

What do Darwin’s divergent reactions reveal about his method? His hypothetical-deductions did not protect him from making two gross errors. To what degree were they the outcome of what Marx called ‘the crude English method of development’ inbibed from Sir John Herschel, who anyway dismissed natural selection as ‘the law of higgledy-piggledy’?

‘Something on Darwin’ was a chance to draw on two of my long-standing and interlocked concerns: the first is the place of colour in Australian life; the second is historical materialism where teleology is the Great Satan. Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldridge had exposed the god-structured thinking among the perfect adaptationists. Atheists now have to hunt down remnants of teleology in writings by Marxists and neo-Darwinists. To be historical materialists, Marxists must be a-telic. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Marx was a proto-Popperian and Popper a closet Marxist.

## Colour

Colour intersects with the teleology of the perfect adaptationists. Darwin’s account of sexual selection pictured flowers as a device to attract insects and birds for the pollinations that result in stronger progeny.

**D**arwin's contributions to botany had a shifting relationship to the flora of Australia. Before he had been born, British naturalists knew of its abundance from the collections that Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander had made with James Cook, displayed at Botany Bay House in the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. Banks enriched that imperial treasure by dispatching Archibald

This botanical process crossed my research into the place of colour in Australian life—human pigments, vegetation, Wunderlich roofs and Don Dunstan's shorts. Although my concerns are socio-cultural, I had to bone up on the physics and physiology of perception to understand why 'redness' is not a primary quality of a Jonathan apple. Hence, what an insect registers is not necessarily what the human eye-brain perceives. In addition, the Stephen Pinkers have to be reminded that, until 80 years ago, pink was for boys.

### Historical materialism

Ever since reading Gould's *Ever since Darwin* (1977), I have been alert to the biological dimension of human activities for, as Marx stressed, we are part of nature. Gould's *oeuvre* served as a model of what it means to be a materialist and to reason dialectically.

Although historians must never judge the rightness of any explanation about the natural world, we are experienced at interrogating what people say, a knack applicable to how scientists describe the world. In particular, we can dissect their logic and weigh their choice of words.

A materialist historian refutes any philosophically idealist

explication of scientific advances by great minds encountering each other across a vacuum: 'If only Darwin had read Mendel, 60 years of delay and bickering in reaching the neo-Darwinian synthesis could have been avoided.' Nonsense. No one in the 19th century had the mental tools with which to rescue natural selection from blending or pangenesis. The way forward awaited more than the mathematising of the life sciences prevalent in 1870.

### Teleology

After Marx's first reading of *On the origin of species*, he rejoiced that Darwin had both vanquished and grounded teleology—an Hegelian *Aufhebung*: 'not only is the death-blow dealt here for the first time to "teleology" in the natural sciences but its rational meaning is empirically explained ...'

This view was shared by Charles and Francis Darwin and Thomas Huxley for whom natural selection has no goal beyond survival. The colour in plants was for propagation, not to convey the creator's benign aesthetic. Nonetheless, any recasting of purpose leaves the door ajar for perfect adaptationists to slip back into god-structured thinking, often turning natural selection into an actor.

By late June 2009, I had to accept that I had run out of time to work out whether a want of dialectical reasoning in Darwin's method was why he had retreated from his great insight. The essay stopped short at a survey of how flowers changed Darwin's world, aided by his closest friend Joseph Hooker, while the defeat of 'blending' came to be identified with a third man of flowers, Gregor Mendel.

### Limited editions

Peter's admirers puzzle over why he confines so much of his finest work to limited editions. Artists' books embody a conflict between reaching the masses and becoming a creature of mass marketing. Post-war artists around New York either went in for abstraction—Pollock and Rothko—to avoid the capitalist realism that is advertising, or they mocked its totalitarian reach through mimicry, as with Warhol and Oldenburg. The extreme was the conceptualists' refusal to produce objects. Peter's meticulous practice is far from that reaction yet richer in thoughtfulness than most who sought refuge from commodification by eschewing the maker's hand. Artists' books are a collective labour between the image-maker, printer and binder. Typically, Peter encouraged an apprentice to bind one set of his montages with her

idea of the Madagascan moth that fertilises Darwin's orchid (a detail of the binding is illustrated on page 11).

That unique volume is in the Baillieu Library's rare book collection. By 2111, will all printed books be rare? It is becoming harder to find commercial publishers for books about teleology. Websites offer access to such writings, as the eBook might do. But can we know *Capital*, *On the origin of species* or the score of *Tristan* without scribbling in their margins? Colour is sidelined in projects for digitising. Looking back to the elephant pages of David Roberts and John Gould, the models for two of Peter's projects, will it be possible to encounter their glories on an iPhone?

Humphrey McQueen is a Canberra-based freelance historian.

1 Humphrey McQueen's text for *Men of flowers* can be found at [http://home.alphalink.com.au/~log27/Science/science\\_men\\_flowers.htm](http://home.alphalink.com.au/~log27/Science/science_men_flowers.htm)

