

## The University of Melbourne

### A. Frances Johnson

#### The Lost Garden

##### Abstract :

*The Lost Garden* is a parodic historical novel that examines French first contact encounters on the Tasmanian South Cape in 1792. The novel features a time-travelling, omnipotent character–narrator, the cross-dressing Marie-Louise Girardin, aka Louis Girardin. Stepping into Girardin’s shoes, the reader is invited to imagine the calamitous voyage, the displacement of a woman in a world of men. This revisionist fiction foregrounds the neglected figure of Marie-Louise Girardin, problematising masculine testimonials of the experience of European revolution and its aftermath. As a marginal or ‘ex-centric’ narrator, in Linda Hutcheon’s phrase (1998: 12), the character–narrator also provides a dramatic pivot whereby the first Tasmanian agricultural plantings, prior to British settlement, are rewitnessed as a postcolonial, ecocritical ‘colonisation by seed’. The intercultural encounters between the French and the Indigenous Lyluequonne people are also rewitnessed through Girardin’s eyes as a contested idyll.

An historical introduction, novel excerpt and brief research statement are appended below. For purposes of continuity, the creative scenes submitted are drawn from the novel’s opening, where the reader is introduced to Louis Girardin.

##### Biographical note:

A. Frances Johnson is a writer and artist, and a lecturer at the University of Melbourne. Her novel *Eugene’s Falls* (Arcadia 2007) retraces the so-called wilderness journeys of colonial painter Eugene von Guerard. She has published two collections of poetry, *The Pallbearer’s Garden* (Whitmore Press 2008) and *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street* (Puncher and Wattmann 2012), the latter receiving the 2012 Michel Wesley Wright Prize. Her poetry has appeared also in many journals and anthologies, including *The Best Australian Poems* (Black Inc.) for 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2013. An academic monograph, *Archival Salvage: The Australian Postcolonial Novel*, is forthcoming with Rodopi (2014). She is working on a new historical novel, *The Lost Garden*.

##### Keywords:

Historical fiction – Australian history – Scientific expedition – Botany – Indigeneity

## **Introduction: History and context**

In 1792 Indigenous Lyluequonney and Nuenonne encountered Bruny d'Entrecasteaux' expedition at the Tasman Southwest Cape. This encounter postdates earlier visits to Adventure Bay by William Bligh (1788) and James Cook (1777) and predates the settlement of Hobart in 1804. These scientific expeditions imposed the first European agricultural templates in the form of what were ultimately ephemeral gardens. The pre-settlement gardens sewn by the French and English expeditions at Adventure and Recherche Bays failed (Duyker and Duyker 2001, Diane Johnson 2012, d'Entrecasteaux 1808, Labillardère 1800), though sightings of William Bligh's stunted apple tree appear in the historical record (Labillardère 1800: 82, d'Entrecasteaux: 160). From the vantage point of 2013, such references offer important countersigns within the archive, appearing as ironic recasts of the biblical tree in the Garden of Eden.

If the records from the French expedition reveal one proto-colonial apple tree, they also, excitingly, reveal the presence of an 'Eve'. Though not a temptress in the sense of the biblical parable, Marie-Louise Girardin worked as a ship's steward or *commissaire* on the ill-fated 1792 voyage of the *Recherche*, where she took the name 'Louis Girardin'. Sources concur that Girardin was a disgraced bourgeois from the parish of St Louis, Versailles (Duyker and Duyker 2001: intro xxv, and Hoe 2010: 4).

In the aftermath of the revolution, Girardin fled paternal wrath after giving birth to an illegitimate child. Petite, plain and very youthful in appearance, she disguised herself as a man and journeyed to Brest with a letter of introduction. As Duyker observes, she nonetheless 'maintained her identity with dogged determination' despite taunts from the crew, and 'With operatic dash she was even slashed on the arm in a duel by an impertinent assistant pilot whom she had challenged' (Duyker and Duyker 2001: intro xxv).

What is clear is that she was someone without a familial and economic future in the violent aftermath of revolutionary France.

In actuality, Girardin was the first white woman to step ashore pre-settlement Tasmania.

In cultivating this fictional postcolonial 'garden', I redramatise aspects of the colonial archives as a polyphonic, novelised 'speech event' in which female and Indigenous characters participate. In the final Tasmanian scenes, still a work in progress, a collage of voices and fragmented archival texts jostle one another in continuous dialogical contestation. While it is one thing to offer a neat Bakhtinian justification for such literary approaches, it is important to note that I have pursued my critical creative solutions without professing to fully know or understand the losses and hopes of our continuing, shared colonial encounter. The story remains open-ended.

## ***The Lost Garden***

### ***Chapter one: Brest 1791***

With one exception, all the savants have revolutionary sympathies and small feet. I too have small feet, but sympathy only for myself. We are to sail together for months at a time, as you and I will sail, with impunity but not without hardship, across the page. The revolutions of my story are not dependent on footsize nor an ability to fight a duel, though like any duellist, I shall sail to the death or *à l'outrance*, in which case there can be no satisfaction until one party is mortally wounded.

It is between me and the sea then, this question of mortal wounding. I do not rate my chances high.

But I get ahead of myself. We are in Brest. It is 1791. For the first time in my life I am staring out to swells of ice-grey sea. Set against so much world and water, my story navigates across time, compressing it into neat waves and tricks.

This then, is my moment. My testimonial trick of compression and expansion. I am greedy for the telling as I was once greedy for escape into webs of latitude and longitude. I had known little of such things.

Watch me as I drop down and across, into my new life, salt-skinned, unmanned.

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A group of ten make up the *Recherche's* squad of small-footed scientists, engineers and artists. They board in clusters, brandishing projectile tools – rods and long-sabled brushes, T-squares and looking glasses – as if compensating for slim footholds upon the earth. They bristle across the poop deck in their blue coats as if the very salty air demands their urgent reckoning. I wait to board, unmoved. I see them bully the roughheads to ensure careful stowage of their precious equipment. Genial Hipolyte, the cabin boy, cops a serve on his way through, carrying Rossel's giant astrolabe.

I shudder at the sight of that globe. Somehow, the savants, more curious than superstitious, imagine instruments will keep us safe from palace-sized walls of water, roaring headwinds and the leather-hooded vagaries of Madame La Guillotine. Are we not shipping another version of revolution out to sea? Civilian clothing and the refinements of science will save no-one.

Rossel's astrolabe is a jinx, for the lost captain's boat, the one we are being sent to find, was named *Astrolabe*. The crew pin wrens' feathers inside their jerkins for luck. I see them do this. There is a great wash of anxiety across them. A dead captain, like a barefoot woman, brings misfortune. I look to the drab, birdless sky as if a feather might drop for

me. I am out of luck. Lapérouse, a clever man or a clever fool, is also featherless, missing in action.

Standing dockside, rugged by a bitter wind, I am proud of my bandaged chest and my recut steward's jacket. I am thirty-seven years of age, and this is not my first concealment. I am of that class of concealers who find, against the odds, ways of inhabiting the new. I am, all going well, to become something new. Never a blackguard or thief, but a waged woman, disguised among men. Let me repeat: *a waged woman*. I like the sound of this odd phrase. I am *savant* in my own way. Hardworking, curious as the best of them.

The terror has forced our hands, my hands, forcing the disguises of the modern into being. The times are strange enough. A cow might become a pig, a royalist a republican, a woman a man. It is that simple, that quick. At any given moment, you must think about what colour jacket you will wear on a given day in a given place. From village to village, city to city, at that time, your very life depends upon it. I have learnt the value of a swerving allegiance, to keep a bone in my pocket. To travel with three versions of the same coat.

The new wears a proud cloak of violence, but, unlike my grandfather, I will not be a cicatrice on its flayed back.

My long-faced, long-bodied grandfather, a kind man, inhabited the old. A templated royalist, though a servant to table at Versailles, he paid the price for declaiming his loyalties to anyone who would listen. By the time his cart came around, the blades at Place de La Concorde were as blunt as field scythes. His only failure was his inability to conceal that he loved his job. Concealment is not the same thing as theft. But by then it was too late to argue. I have learnt from his mistakes. I have taken from no man as they have taken from me. The best I can do is borrow their carapace. This hurts no-one.

If I defend myself early on, it is because you too may need to defend yourselves from revolutions still to come, to inhabit the bright new selves they provoke into being. I do not wish to distract you from such future responsibilities with my selfish fable. I am steeped in the telling, in the remembering. In other words, I am at your service! Marie-Louise Girardin! *Louis Girardin!* Revolutionary sailor, purser and steward!

But I get ahead of myself. I have arrived too early in the story, character unformed. Let me talk of *my old self*, the mother of an illegitimate child. This Marie-Louise, she cannot bear to think of him, even now. She no longer cares about the father, a n'er do well who has set her up to fail, to despair. But the child – she does not know if he is dead or alive.

She though, is alive and well, making a spectacle of herself on the docks at Brest. She is her baby's living sorrow, strapped into milky serge, about to circumnavigate the globe, cabbagey breasts bound tight, grief stuffed in her pocket. It is six weeks since she gave birth, a son. She clutches her gut often as if to find to a ghostly red-haired newborn, waiting to arrive. She stops herself making the sign of the cross, her hand floating idly in the air. To the outside eye, a small man is swatting imaginary flies in winter. The baby

does not magically reappear; *le pauvre Alexandre* is with the nuns at the orphanage of St Ange. She has left him behind, waiting for her as she waits for him, eternally. She has paid for an extra blanket. For the midwife to come. For other small things. She has gifted him a well stone inheritance: a family disguised.

So now I stand alone at Brest, absconding in a season of fear and snow, waiting to make it up the gangway. I greet him, this Louis, as I must become him. My breasts seep beneath my smart serge suiting, threatening to give the game away. The sea slaps the stone piers in a deadly Lorelei rhythm. There is no sign of the cabin boy I am supposed to meet. At the last minute I may turn back. Or I may jump. I stand mute in that bitter wind, heart thumping, awaiting my fate.

What other world would welcome her? Would welcome him?

As redcoats and bluecoats swarm about, I resolve to keep my shoes on, day and night. I shall have no truck with fairytales. I shall keep my small chest pinned down with strips of dear Sophie's good sheeting, body plucked and shaped as the live poussin my grandfather once oversaw dropped into bubbling cognac cream in the grand dining hall at Versailles.

A belling voice pitches over portside: *Girardin! An hour 'til Steward and goods! Aye, aye.*

An hour to wait upon a strange stewardship. I stand nervously amongst a pyramid of goods, the victuals of the voyage under my dubious care. Though I am small, I read as a giant amongst a city of lined crates and coopered drygoods. I see him now, this Louis. This ludicrous, giant version of myself. Floating free and finless under a cobalt sea. Chalky pale. Off to meet the ghost of Lapérouse.

*Of his bones are coral made:*

*Those are pearls that were his eyes:*

*Nothing of him that doth fade,*

*But doth suffer a sea-change*

*Into something rich and strange.\**

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\* *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare.

**Chapter two: Mob garden**

Someone was calling in a high sweet voice. Was it my grandmother? Or perhaps Sophie de Kermadec from the pier? I stepped left and right, careful not to stray too far. I saw a sailor blow me a kiss from the davits, where he swung down like an expectant monkey, ready to hook up the heavier cargoes around me. How he cajoled me, skinny arms importuning the air with a suitor's dancing sweetness. It was as if a devil had dropped from the sky on a swing. A devil that knew exactly what I was and what I hoped to be. I looked away from him, uneasily, regretting my tightly sewn pants. I covered my chest with my arms and I flashed him a glare I supposed to be onyx-like, hard as a bishop's ring. He looked put out. He was, I later learnt, merely doing his job. Gesturing to the drygoods, seeking direction from one who ought to know about such things. I had forgotten the lines Sophie's brother Jean-Michel had patiently taught; I had likely made my first enemy.

I had never been on board a ship of this size, with its roles so carefully housed. Charge of the goats and pigs would also fall to me! I was a 'styward' in more ways than one, keeper of the pigs. I liked pigs in general. I would take comfort from a society of pigs. These little creatures were not food for the voyage but rosy gifts for the savages of Van Diemen's Land, Jean-Michel had said in his brief. I would delight in keeping them healthy.

The filthy sailor who had blown me a sardonic kiss, swung back down from the davits like an acrobat, ready to hook up the heavier cargoes.

'Pleasure to help, Darlin', he called, with an insouciant wink. 'S'pose I'll keep the meats and drygoods separate, eh?'

Mother of God, I had given my first order, but one lacking clarity. I'd be cast as lazy, stupid or both.

'Can yee see the wood for the trees, Duckie?' The insolent gob was still swinging and staring, only half of his face smiling. He held one hand to an ear in extravagant gesture, as if he was straining to hear what I might say.

'I thought's that what ye said. Bit of a mermaid, are yee? Well I be a merman then!'

He pulled a glass eye from his socket and with dexterity and proffered it to me from on high, as if to trade a trinket for some other kind of favour. His banter produced a chorus of laughter from the nearby seamen, though Hipolyte ignored him, drawing his thirteen-year-old self into a stunning, tutored hauteur. Horrified, I blushed to the roots of my mown red hair, my bishop's stare failing miserably. Gob and officer alike had seen through my masquerade.

'We be jinxed then,' the pendulous devil added as he swung the pallet high, lurching hypnotically on ropes of grey sky as the first load of dead-looking trees swept skywards. 'All of us jinxed alive-o!'

The young gardener Delahaye inadvertently saved the day, shouting something about careless handling as cloth-bound, dry-rooted trees and seedboxes tilted this way and that on the winched pallet. It was clear that they could tip and fall. A peal of laughter and unspecified clapping came down from the rigging for Delahaye wore a pleated Parisian gardener's smock that made him look as fetching as any young girl. An officer intervened, a different one, perhaps Rossel, and made the men slow the journey to accommodate the trees' height and instability. Then it began all over again.

Delahaye had saved me then, in his slow armed, slow-spoke way, but I ignored him too and laughed along nervously with the others, letting the sweat subside under the tight brim of my tricorne. His genial protestations reminded me that I had eight brothers and sisters, five that lived. I didn't want my heart broken remembering them.

Finally, I floated up the gangway. A cold breeze dried the sweat on my neck and brow. I dared not look down. The mermaid chorus was still there, seeking auditionees. I heard the applauding slap, slap, slap of black water against stone.

That, though, was the easy way.

As we stepped onto the swaying vessel, another disaster struck. Three sailors lowered a heavy crate quick and fast off the davits so that it split upon the deck. Was this an accident, or a joke designed to annoy the savants? Where was the discipline on this creaking tank? There was no sign of our esteemed captain. Unfortunately this particular box also belonged to Delahaye whose status sat unhappily between savant and ordinary seaman. 'Blue skirt' (they had begun to call him this) pushed past me to grab at the mostly bookish contents that spilled across the deck. Suddenly chaos broke out. One of the goats, unloosed from its halter, got there before him, eating and shitting all over the place. Delahaye snatched a book or three away, but damage was done.

When he came close with the remains of one enormous chewn book in his arms, I saw the words *Dictionnaire Elementaire de Botanique* printed on its hanging spine. But I also saw, incredulously, that his eyes had misted over. The poor gardener would not last a week. Could he not see he had to play a harder game? I was relieved some other sop had deflected attention from my differently damp silhouette. He was surely crying over his lovely wife. He had left her weeping at the docks, a weary looking, landlocked maid, mousy hair coiling into her aprons, disguising the swollen promise of a child.

I jibbed him again with the others. He knew where power's brute illusion lay. I now knew how to 'lay' it. The boxes of garden seeds and books had made a satisfying crunch as they landed. Two of the gobs, to their credit, looked contrite and swept books and spilt seed into a great uncatalogued mess.

Delahaye was an easy target. And for me, a practice run. I'd face no kindness on board, so I

would become a mob of one. When I boarded the *Recherche*, my bound breasts were as wet with milk as the port's shocked, strapped-faced houses were dry of succour. My first

feeling was that to survive, I needed to hate that kind young face beside me. To lie low and merge with the general views.

Meanwhile, I kept my shaking hands locked tight behind my back. As I made my way cabinwards, I remembered my small orchard, untended, trees pruned hard, concealed by snow. Then Hippolyte was beside me and we were suddenly making our way down to the hold.

***Research Statement:***

***The Lost Garden – a postcolonial historical novel-in-progress***

Marginalised or ‘ex-centric’ characters feature across postcolonial postmodern novels as revelators of so-called archival truths. Kim Scott’s *Benang* (2000), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Rohan Wilson’s *The Roving Party* (2011) foreground issues of narration and power, assembling marginal viewpoints as a radical polyphony. Scott and Morrison also recruit techniques of historiographic metafiction.<sup>1</sup>

As chapter one demonstrates, the marginal narrator–character Marie-Louise Girardin periodically interrupts the teleological adventure story with omnipotent metafictional flourishes. Thus the imperial voyage narrative is problematised and the first agricultural plantings in Tasmania are critiqued as colonisation by seed. The narrator also re-lenses the French’s intercultural encounter as supposed Rousseauesque idyll.

Unlike the better-known, cross-dressing Rose de Freycinet, commemorated in Judy Johnson’s poetry sequence ‘The Navigations of Rose de Freycinet’ (2010: 91–100), the figure of Girardin remains relatively obscured.<sup>2</sup> Thus my creative method has involved extensive fieldtrips and cross-referencing of voyage journals with botanical, anthropological, social and cartographic records. In place of the satirical gender ventriloquy of Kate Grenville’s bicentennial novel *Joan Makes History* (1988), *The Lost Garden* proposes a darker, ambiguous protagonist based on a real subject.

The project’s significance inheres in resuscitating and sketching Marie Louise Girardin as a complex participant in history. Her character’s odyssey offers revisionist counterpoints to masculinist tropes of imperial voyage literatures. Through her oblique viewpoint I also tell a different first contact story in which enduring colonial tropes of ‘wilderness’ and ‘doomed race’ elegies are challenged.<sup>3</sup>

**Endnotes**

1. Techniques of historiographic metafiction show that ‘history and fiction are themselves historical terms, and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time’ (Hutcheon 105, discussing Seamon 212–16). These techniques are especially relevant to portraits of Indigenous characters in postcolonial novels. Recent literary Indigenous portrayals in historical novels have increasingly recruited narrative techniques such as parody, mimicry, metafiction and polyphonic intertextuality to acknowledge

the failings of official archives to ‘speak’ the lives and experiences of Indigenous subjects. Such parodic techniques also call attention to the postcolonial novel as artifice, foregrounding that which Gayatri Spivak, in ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern’, has described as its impossible translation (Spivak 1988). As I have argued elsewhere, the ‘new’ millennial postcolonial historical novel, in raiding the archive with impunity, evokes an Australian past that is intercultural rather than monocultural, and it strives to do so without ever presuming to ‘know’ a gallery of cultural others (A. Frances Johnson 2007, *Eugene’s Falls*, epilogue).

2. Girardin’s story has elsewhere been imagined and memorialised in folksongs, in an unpublished radio play by Paddy Prosser (2005), based on an unpublished stage play by Prosser, Bruce Poulson and Greg Hogg (2001). The historical figure’s sudden rise from obscurity in the early 2000s is, according to historian Suzanne Hoe, due to campaign efforts waged in 2002 to preserve what was thought to be the rediscovered site of the 1792 French vegetable garden from proposed logging (Hoe 4). The above authors were part of that campaign, and their romanticized, imaginative interpretations show Girardin meeting Lyluequonney women (Diane Johnson 2012).

3. These techniques also pertain to the portraits of Indigenous characters. Recent literary Indigenous portrayals in historical novels have increasingly recruited narrative techniques such as parody, mimicry, metafiction and polyphonic intertextuality to acknowledge the failings of official archives to ‘speak’ the lives and experiences of Indigenous subjects. Such parodic techniques also call attention to the postcolonial novel as artifice, foregrounding that which Gayatri Spivak, in ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern’, has described as its impossible translation (Spivak 1988). As I have argued elsewhere, the ‘new’ millennial postcolonial historical novel, in raiding the archive with impunity, evokes an Australian past that is intercultural rather than monocultural, and it strives to do so without ever presuming to ‘know’ a gallery of cultural others (A. Frances Johnson 2007, *Eugene’s Falls*, epilogue).

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