

Anne Pratt

5th December 1806 – 27th July 1893

— Deborah Gasking —

Anne Pratt was a botanical and ornithological illustrator who wrote more than 20 books, which she illustrated with chromolithographs. The process of chromolithography involves printing each colour individually. The colours are oil-based and, when multiple colours are applied, the outcome is a vibrant print with a depth that is like a painting.

Born in Strood, Kent, Anne was the second of three daughters of grocer Robert Pratt and his wife Sarah. As a child, she was sickly and would sit and draw while her sisters played. It was at this time that a family friend, Dr Dods, introduced her to botany and her elder sister fostered the interest by collecting plants.

Anne had her first book published in 1838 and in 1846 she moved to London to work as an illustrator.

Three years later, in 1849, possibly for health reasons, Anne came to live in Dover at 39 Castle Street, which obviously agreed with her, for the seventeen years that she lived there proved to be her most prolific period. The importance of her books in spreading a knowledge and love of botany was acknowledged by a grant from the Civil List.

It is unclear if Anne met John Pearless in Dover, but they were married at Christchurch, Luton, Kent on 15th December 1866 and then moved to East Grinstead and later Redhill. Once married she ceased to write, but when in 1879 the copyright for *Flowering Plants and Ferns of Great Britain* expired, she was persuaded by publishers Frederick Warne and Co to

revise it. Published in a cheaper form the following year, it was an instant best seller.

Her works were written in a popular style but were said to be accurate and are partly responsible for the popularising of botany in her day. From her first book, *Flowers and Their Associations*, her work sold well, but she never achieved critical acclaim, owing to prejudice against her on the grounds that she was self-taught and a woman.

Through her books, she attempted to instil a love of botany in her readers. She also endeavoured to inspire and educate them, sprinkling her works liberally with religious references and little-known facts. She wrote under the "Bluebell" entry in her book *Wild Flowers*, "Although the bluebell has no particular use now, in former times it was greatly prized.... When still ruffs were worn, the sticky juice of the bluebell was used as a starch. Book binders used it also to stiffen the spines."

Her works included:

- 1 *The Field, the Garden, and the Woodland*, 1838.
- 2 *Flowers and Their Associations*, 1840.
- 3 *The Pictorial Catechism of Botany*, London: Suttaby and Co., 1842.
- 4 *The Ferns of Great Britain*, c. 1850.
- 5 *Wild Flowers*, 1852 (2 vols.). Also published as classroom wall hangings.
- 6 *Poisonous, Noxious, and Suspected Plants, of our Fields and Woods*, 1857.
- 7 (Her masterpiece) *The Flowering Plants, Grasses, Sedges, and Ferns of Great Britain and Their Allies the Club Mosses, Pepperworts, and Horsetails*, London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1855–1873, 6 vols. (Originally only 5 volumes,

published 1855–1866, as *The Flowering Plants of Great Britain*. The 6th volume, on grasses, sedges, and ferns, was added in 1873).

This work had a remarkably long life as a standard reference work. The illustrations of ferns in the final volume continued to be used into the second half of the twentieth century, appearing, unattributed and very much reduced in size and in half tone, in the *Observer's Book of [British] Ferns*. Although expensive, at the time, it was to be found in nearly every wealthy drawing room in the country. It contains details of 1500 species, with 300 illustrations.

- 8 *Chapters on Common Things of the Seaside*, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1850.
- 9 *Our Native Songsters*, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1853.
- 10 *Haunts of the Wild Flowers*, Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1863.
- 11 *The Garden Flowers of the Year*, Religious Tract Society, 1846.
- 12 *Wild Flowers of The Year*, Religious Tract Society, 1846.
- 13 *The Excellent Woman as Described in Proverbs 31*, Religious Tract Society, 1863.

Now virtually unknown, Anne Pratt remains an important Victorian illustrator, naturalist, and populariser of science. Her book, *Wild Flowers* (1852), made such a strong impression on Queen Victoria that the Queen made a royal command to receive all of Anne's subsequent publications.

While Anne's works addressed a largely female audience, her profound botanical knowledge and astute insights into flower study, had an ever broader reach into the general public. Although she brought the interest of botany to the masses, she never received academic acclaim.

Her studies, according to one biographer, were written in “popular style,” “accurate,” and “instrumental in spreading a knowledge and love of botany.” A Royal Agricultural College Special Collections Exhibition Catalogue, *The Art of Botanical Illustration*, includes Pratt among women illustrators of the nineteenth century whose studies were “aimed at a general, and often primarily female, audience.” She was celebrated for her “accurate, clear, and precise writing,” “winsome paint-ings,” and “delightful anecdotes about plants.” A naturalist of “great talent,” Pratt was able to “blend botany with the romance of nature,” fulfilling, on the one hand, “the demand for nature writing and flowers” and, on the other hand, “the need for botanical knowledge for ladies.”

Anne died in Shepherd's Bush, London, in 1893.



Columbine and Larkspur, (Wild Flowers 1852), Anne Pratt