

Book review

POLLY PLUM: A FIRM AND EARNEST WOMAN'S ADVOCATE - MARY ANN COLCLOUGH 1836–1885

Jenny Coleman

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In *Polly Plum: A firm and earnest woman's advocate*, Jenny Coleman has produced a fascinating and thoroughly researched biography of Mary Ann Colclough. While there are short biographies of Colclough in the *Dictionary of New Zealand biography* (1993), *The book of New Zealand women* (1991) and *Standing in the sunshine* (1993), this is the first book-length biography, examining her life in as much detail as the archival sources allow. While much of the work focuses on Colclough's 15 years in Auckland, it does provide substantially more detail about her later life in Melbourne and Christchurch than previous biographies have done.

Mary Ann Barnes was born in Clerkenwell, London, in 1836, and was raised in a 'respectable working middle class' neighbourhood (p. 19). She received a good education and when she was 21 years old she decided to immigrate to New Zealand with her younger brother, for reasons that are unclear. Her brother died at sea, but not before gambling away their savings, so that when Mary Ann arrived in Auckland she was completely alone and without any means. Six months after arriving, she passed the Auckland Education Board exam and began teaching. In May 1860 she married Thomas Colclough, 30 years her senior, and as was the custom she stopped teaching. It soon became clear, however, that Thomas was an inadequate provider, and Mary Ann established a small private school for girls to provide the family with an income. She gave birth to a daughter, then a son, all the while continuing to run her school. Her husband died in 1867, leaving her in a financially precarious position. She had already been involved in literary circles, and began publishing her writing in the *Daily Southern Cross* and the *Weekly News* under the name Polly Plum, a persona which she used until late 1871. Through her writing she advocated for the importance of women's education, the need to increase the rights of married women, and improving the poor conditions in asylums and jails, as well as the need to provide support for women leaving prison, an issue which remains with us today.

In 1872 Colclough left Auckland to take up a teaching position in Tuakau and then in Kauaeranga, where she filed for bankruptcy in 1874. She then spent 15 months in Melbourne, where she gave lectures on women's rights; but with no connections there, she received a much more hostile reception from the press than she had in Auckland. In Melbourne she opened a residential home for working women, but this failed due to lack of financial support, and she was forced to ask for public assistance to fund the return fares to New Zealand for herself and her children. They arrived in Christchurch in January 1876. Colclough first secured a teaching position in Rangiora, but due to ill-health she had to take breaks from

working, followed by less and less prestigious teaching posts. She died in Picton in March 1885, while on a summer holiday, at the age of 49.

One of the issues in Colclough's life highlighted by Coleman is the personal abuse that was directed at her by those who disagreed with the opinions she espoused in her writings and public lectures. She certainly had her supporters, but the nature of the negative criticism she received will come as no surprise to contemporary women with a public profile. Most importantly, the views that Colclough espoused were very much shaped by her experiences, especially the financial challenges that she faced throughout her life, first because of her brother gambling away her savings, then through being married to a man who failed to provide adequately, then died and left her in a financially vulnerable position with two young children. Despite her qualifications and experience as a teacher, it was difficult to secure a permanent teaching position with a stable income, due to the fluctuations in student numbers as well as the poor organisation and funding of schools, particularly in the Auckland region. Colclough's bankruptcy in 1874 resulted from her salary not being paid in full to her each month, as well as the debts that she had incurred over time, while constantly struggling to make ends meet. The bitter irony of this was that for some time Colclough had voiced opposition to mercenary marriages, but she was also all too aware of the extreme challenges for women needing to financially support themselves, especially if they had dependent children.

Coleman is explicit regarding the difficulties of writing a biography of someone who did not leave behind extensive private papers. Instead, she draws heavily on newspaper sources, made easier, as she acknowledges, by the digitisation of newspaper collections. This results in the focus of the biography being on Colclough's public life and the ideas she espoused through her writings, as well as others' views of her. Discussing her bankruptcy, Coleman describes her as a high profile yet private individual (p.149), and she remains so to readers, as the sources do not exist to explore her personal life. For much of the narrative, while the reader knows that Colclough has her two children with her, it is not very clear who was providing their care while she was busy earning an income, giving public lectures and visiting asylums and prisons. We know nothing of the nature of the relationship between Colclough and her children, nor do we get a sense of any of her close personal friendships. Certainly, she had her supporters – she was given the honour of a public farewell when she left Auckland in 1872, and later her supporters raised the funds for her and her children to return to New Zealand from Melbourne – but there is no detail of longstanding friendships of a personal nature. I must emphasise that this is not meant as a criticism of Coleman's work, but rather an acknowledgement of the difficulties of writing a biography of someone who has left behind very limited sources. As a reader with an interest in families and the home, I find this especially frustrating; but for those who are more interested in the history of ideas and education, this limitation will be of less concern.

While I appreciate that this is a biography of Mary Ann Colclough and not of her two children, it would have been a valuable addition to provide readers with a summary of the subsequent lives of Lulu and William, particularly as they are largely absent from the main narrative, for reasons already discussed. Coleman has included a photograph of each of the children as young adults from the Canterbury Museum, which further increased my curiosity about them both. The bibliography lists the marriage certificate of Mary Louise Colclough (Lulu), dated less than two years after her mother's death, but this is not mentioned in the main text. A quick search of the Births, Deaths and Marriages historical website shows that Lulu died in 1953 at the age of 90, and that she had three daughters. Given her mother's views on marriage and women's education, it would have been interesting to know more about her daughter's education and marriage, and potentially whether Colclough's financially precarious position impacted upon her daughter's marriage prospects.

This biography is a welcome addition to the history of women and feminism in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, drawing attention to a woman who belonged to the generation prior to the more well-known suffrage feminists like Kate Sheppard. It will be of interest to historians of gender and education as well as to New Zealand historians more generally, and to those who have an interest in the literary history of New Zealand, trans-national knowledge networks, and the flow of ideas.

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References

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