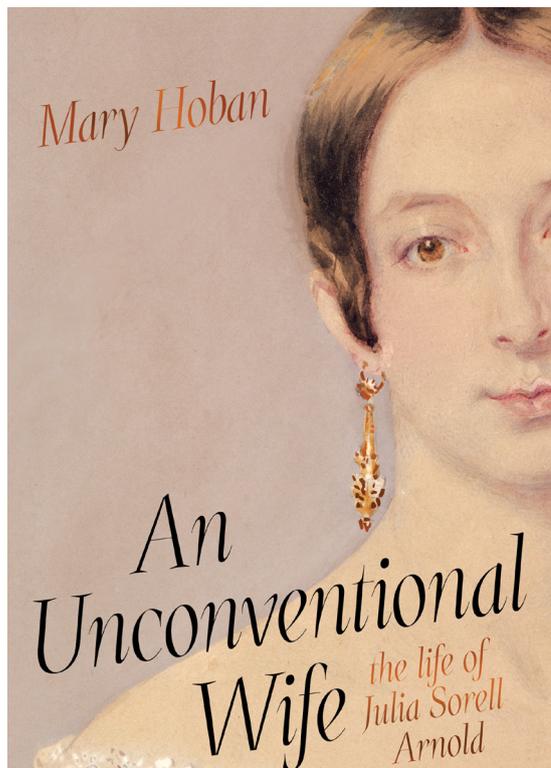


# An Unconventional Wife

MARY HOBAN



**BOOK DETAILS**

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Mary Hoban is a Melbourne-based writer and historian. Her first book was a history of Melbourne’s celebrated Queen Victoria Market. She has also authored, co-authored, and edited various textbooks, papers, and journal articles on Australian and Asian history and cultural studies. For some years she was employed in the philatelic section of Australia Post as a writer, editor, and researcher for the nation’s postage stamps, where she wrote and edited books on subjects ranging from Christmas Island to the Antarctic, from royalty to rugby. She holds a graduate diploma in biography and life writing from Monash University and an MA in public history from the University of Technology, Sydney. In 2012 she was awarded the inaugural Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship to write the biography of Julia Sorell Arnold.

The page-turning biography of an Australian woman who refused to bend to the expectations of her husband and her time.

Julia Sorell was an original. A colonial belle from Tasmania, vivacious and warm-hearted, Julia’s marriage to Tom Arnold in 1850 propelled her into one of the most renowned families in England and into a circle that included Lewis Carroll and George Eliot. Her eldest daughter became a bestselling novelist, while her grandchildren included the writer Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, and the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley.

With these family connections, Julia is a presence in many documented and famous lives, but she is a mostly silent presence. When extracted from her background of colonial life, extracted from the covers of marriage and family life, her story reveals an extraordinary woman, a paradox who defied convention as much as she embraced it.

What began as a marriage born of desire soon turned into a relationship riven by discord. Tom’s sudden decision to become a Catholic and Julia’s refusal to convert with him plunged their lives into a crisis wherein their great love for each other would be pitted against their profoundly different understandings of marriage and religion. It was a conflict that would play out over three decades in a time when science challenged religion, when industrialisation challenged agrarian forms, when democracy challenged aristocracy, when women began to challenge men. It was a conflict that would shape not only their own lives and that of their children, but also touch the lives of all those who came into contact with them.

Told with the pace, depth, and psychological richness of a great novel, *An Unconventional Wife* is a riveting biography that shines a shaft of light on a hidden but captivating life.

## REVIEWS

‘In *An Unconventional Wife*, Mary Hoban has given us an inconvenient heroine: a woman hobbled by her times, champing at the bit, going nowhere but telling us everything. Pieced together through impeccable research and told with all the urgency and intrigue of a soap opera, the story of Julia Sorell demands recognition of — and respect for — a woman who would otherwise be lost to history. Utterly charming.’

— CLARE WRIGHT

‘An exceptional exercise in factual delving and a feat of imaginative sympathy.’

— GIDEON HAIGH

‘A magisterial work of biography, utterly assured in research and style. This compelling and moving book reanimates the lost life of Julia Sorell Arnold, a spirited, independent woman in an age when women were expected to be quiet. With deep insight and empathy Hoban brings to life Julia and Tom’s troublesome marriage. Their passionate but fractious relationship speaks directly to the irascible relations between women and men in our own divisive times. This book is a remarkable achievement by an expert and gifted biographer.’

— ROD JONES

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Marriage is a central concern in this biography. In George Elliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, the heroine Dorothea at one point says of marriage: “I mean, marriage drinks up all of our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear—but it murders our marriage—and then the marriage stays with us like a murder—and everything else is gone.” To what extent does this remark summarise the marriage of Julia and Tom?
2. Does this biography offer an interesting and or different cultural portrait of life in the 19th century to other texts you may have read?
3. What observations does the book offer about marriage, family life, religious beliefs, education?
4. What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand about Julia’s life and the decisions she made? Would you have made the same decisions?
5. Which do you think is more important – the life being written about or the way the life is written about?
6. To what extent do you think biography is useful in revealing and exploring the issues of the past? Do you think a history or a novel is better able to achieve this?
7. Did you have a favourite passage or scene in the book? If so, what was it and why did it appeal to you?
8. To what extent does this biography demonstrate the power of social convention and belief in determining how Julia lived her life? How have these factors determined your life?
9. What title would you have chosen for this biography?
10. What questions do you think the book raises about convention, expectations and independently spirited women?
11. How does Julia’s story play back to us issues in our own world?

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12. Reading Julia's story, what progress do you think women have made since the 19th in terms of achieving equality?
13. To what extent do you think Julia's story is a universal one?