

CBCA NSW Branch

The Charlotte Waring Award

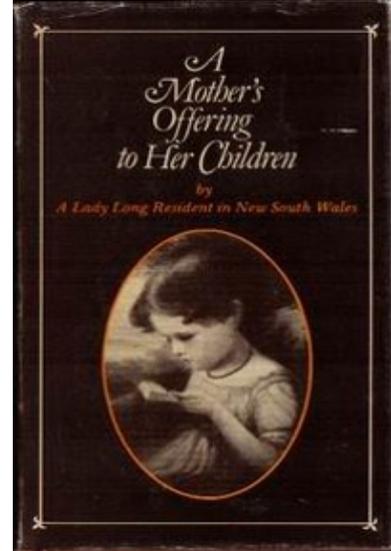
The Charlotte Waring Award is presented annually by the CBCA NSW Branch Inc to an unpublished author that is the winner of the Aspiring Writers Mentorship Program.

The award is named in honour of Charlotte Waring (1797-1867), the author of Australia's earliest known children's book.

The book is titled: *A Mother's Offering to her Children: By a Lady, Long Resident in New South Wales*. It was published anonymously in 1841 by the Gazette Office in Sydney. The identity of the authorship was discovered in 1980 by Marcie Muir.

The National Library of Australia has fully digitised the 1841 edition. It can be accessed from their collection.

Read below the fascinating biography of Charlotte Waring Barton, the first published author of a children's book in Australia.



Charlotte Waring - Our first National Literary Treasure

Charlotte Waring was an extraordinary woman. According to a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald she was “one of the most accomplished women of her era.” She was a child prodigy, a fiercely independent, well-educated woman, an early feminist, a loving mother with progressive views on girls education who brought her daughters up to be some of the finest scholars, artists and writers in the colony, a pioneer in the fight for women’s legal rights, a naturalist and the first Australian children’s author.

Charlotte Waring was born in London in 1796, the third daughter of a wealthy family. Her mother Elizabeth died in childbirth when Charlotte was a toddler. By all accounts Charlotte was very clever and could read fluently by the time she was two. Her father, Albert Waring, ensured she had an outstanding education, focusing particularly on art, music and languages. She was taught painting and drawing by the famous landscape artist John Glover.

At the age of 15, Charlotte became a governess, continuing her education under various masters. In 1826 she became a highly paid governess for one of the leading families of the colony of NSW. On the voyage out she met James Atkinson. They were married a year later and lived at his estate, Oldbury in the Southern Highlands. Over the next six years Charlotte had four children - Charlotte, Emily, James and Louisa. In 1834 James Atkinson tragically died, leaving Charlotte with four children under six, several vast estates to run and the added difficulties of rebellious convicts and frequent bushranger attacks. In 1836 she married her overseer, George Barton, who turned out to be violent, alcoholic and mentally unstable. After three years, Charlotte fled with her children

to a primitive hut in the wilderness, to their cattle station at Budgong. The journey was a remarkable one, through remote and impenetrable wilderness, down the Meryla Pass on horseback.

Charlotte then had to fight through the colonial courts for the right to her income and custody of her children, becoming a pioneer for women's legal rights. *Atkinson vs Barton* became a landmark case in the Australian courts. Through all the difficult times, Charlotte educated her children at home, teaching them art, music, languages, botany and natural sciences. At night around the fire Charlotte would tell the children stories, creating a safe and enchanted family circle.

In 1841, Charlotte had received no income for two years. She wrote *A Mothers Offering to Her Children* by a Lady Long Resident in NSW, in the form of a dialogue between a mother and her four children. The book was released to critical acclaim and was an immediate bestseller. To us now it seems quaint and old-fashioned, but it is important for many reasons. It was the first book published about Australia for children. It was the first time that an author wrote stories set in Australia featuring Australian children and adventures, historic events, natural science, and Australian Aborigines. The book gives a rare insight into colonial domestic life, and the unique role played by mothers in educating their children. The book is considered so important that a first edition copy recently sold for \$60,000.

Charlotte won the battle to retain custody of her children and to control her own income. Her daughters became notable writers, artists and naturalists with Louisa becoming the first Australian born female novelist and journalist. Charlotte died at Oldbury in October 1867, but her legacy lives on with many of her descendants becoming successful writers and artists. Her great-great-great-granddaughters, Kate Forsyth and Belinda Murrell are both best-selling, internationally published authors.



This is a sketch by Charlotte of the surrounding countryside and the house, *Oldbury*, which was built by her first husband for their family, at Sutton Forrest in the Southern Highlands of NSW.