BOOK CLUB KIT

The Kinsale Correspondent

The Kinsale Chronicles · Book One



Victoria Ashbourne

Discussion questions · The real history behind the story · A Regency recipe for your meeting

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About the book

Kinsale, County Cork, 1813. For three years, the Royal Society's most remarkable Irish correspondent has been a botanist who signs every letter *E. M. Connell*. Nobody in London has ever met Connell. Nobody suspects that Connell is Mrs Rosaleen Connelly, a widow in a white house above Kinsale harbour, who has spent years recording the wild plants of the Burren and a small water plant she believes no one has ever named.

Then the Society sends Mr Edmund Doyle, a confident young Fellow of the Linnean Society, to arrange Connell's papers into a scientific book. He arrives on the Cork mail coach expecting to meet a gentleman. What he finds will change his work, his opinions, and his life.

The Kinsale Correspondent is a clean Regency romance about credit and courage, a love that grows through shared work, and the wild limestone country of the west of Ireland.

Using this kit

The questions on the next page are written for groups who have finished the book, so they contain spoilers. The history pages can be shared at any time, and the recipe is for whoever is hosting.

> Rosaleen and Edmund's story continues through the Kinsale Chronicles, twelve books set in real Irish places from Kinsale to Galway Bay. A free prequel novella, *The Turlough Stone*, is available from the author's website.

Discussion questions

> Contains spoilers for the whole novel.

1. Rosaleen writes to the Royal Society as "E. M. Connell". What does the pen name protect, and what does it cost her? Would you have done the same in 1813?
2. The first chapter tells us Edmund arrives and "forms several confident opinions". Which of his early opinions turn out to be wrong, and what changes his mind?
3. Edmund comes to Kinsale to arrange Connell's papers, "properly attributed", into a larger work. Who should get the credit for a discovery: the person who finds it, or the person who publishes it?
4. Rosaleen has been a widow since 1809. How does her first marriage, and the independence she has built since, shape the way she responds to Edmund?
5. The turlough is a lake that appears in winter and disappears in summer. How does the Burren landscape work in the story? Did it feel like a character?
6. Miss Brigid Daly tells Rosaleen, "Do not let it go to your head." What does their friendship give Rosaleen that no one else can?
7. Edmund is an Englishman in Ireland. How does the novel use his outsider's eye to show us Kinsale and the west?
8. Rosaleen names her plant *Elatine connellyana*. Why does the name matter so much, and why that name?
9. Small details recur, like the kitchen shutter that knocks and is never fixed. Which details of Rosaleen's home stayed with you, and why?
10. Romance and science move together in this book. Did the love story grow out of the shared work, or in spite of it?
11. Read the page about Ellen Hutchins, a real Irish botanist of the same years. Does knowing her story change how you see Rosaleen?
12. If you could ask Rosaleen one question, what would it be?

The real history behind the story

A real Irish woman botanist

Rosaleen is invented, but women like her were real. **Ellen Hutchins** (1785–1815) of Ballylickey, near Bantry in County Cork, is remembered as Ireland's first woman botanist. She specialised in seaweeds, mosses, lichens and liverworts, and between 1809 and 1812 she sent the English botanist Dawson Turner a list of almost 1,100 plants from around Bantry Bay. Their friendship was carried on entirely by letter; they never met. Hutchins never published under her own name, yet botanists named plants in her honour, and her specimens are still held in herbaria today.

Women and the learned societies

In 1813 a woman could not become a Fellow of the Royal Society or of the Linnean Society. Women's work usually reached them through letters, through a male relative or friend, or under initials. The Linnean Society did not elect its first women Fellows until 1904, and the Royal Society not until 1945.

The Burren and its turloughs

The Burren in County Clare takes its name from the Irish *boireann*, a rocky place. Its limestone pavements shelter Arctic-alpine and Mediterranean flowers side by side. Turloughs, from the Irish for "dry lake", are seasonal lakes that fill through cracks in the limestone in winter and drain away in summer, found almost nowhere outside the west of Ireland.

Kinsale in 1813

Kinsale was a busy harbour town where the River Bandon meets the sea, guarded by Charles Fort and served by the mail coach from Cork. Britain was still at war with France. In earlier wars, Desmond Castle in the town had held French prisoners, which is why it is still called the "French Prison".

For the host: Lemon syllabub

A favourite Georgian and Regency pudding: light, lemony and ready in minutes. Just the thing for Rosaleen's Tuesday botanical circle, or your book club. *Serves 6.*

You will need

- 1 lemon, zest finely grated and juiced
- 100 ml sweet white wine, sherry, or apple juice for an alcohol-free version
- 75 g caster sugar
- 300 ml thickened or double cream
- Shortbread or thin biscuits, to serve

Method

1. Stir the lemon zest, juice, wine and sugar together until the sugar dissolves. Leave for 15 minutes so the lemon flavours the wine.
2. Pour in the cream and whisk gently until it holds soft peaks. Stop before it turns stiff.
3. Spoon into small glasses and chill for at least an hour.
4. Serve with a biscuit on the side and a little extra zest on top.

> **Enjoyed the book?** The Kinsale Chronicles continue with *The Physician's Irish Bride*. Join Victoria's readers for free stories and news at **victoria-ashbourne.pages.dev**, and if your group enjoyed the book, a short review on Amazon helps more readers find it.

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