



# The very private life of Becky Saunders, 1865 - 1945



Despite being a respected scientist, and an instantly-recognisable participant at some major scientific events for over 40 years, very little is known about the 'real' Edith Rebecca Saunders. She was highly focused on her work, and her life centred around Newnham College, the place where she was able to flourish, which she entered in October 1884, just before her 19th birthday, and never really left. Even after she officially retired from teaching in 1925, she remained closely linked to the College.

Aside from her published papers, little remains. No private letters are known to exist, and those to William Bateson, her colleague of over 30 years, are abrupt and always get straight down to business, with no polite preambles whatsoever. Because of the highly focused nature and range of detail in her research, her published work and the talks she gave reveal little of her personality [... aside from persistence and 'attention to detail']

Although she produced a large number of papers for a woman scientist of her time, there is no full bibliography of her work, let alone a biography [although Marsha Richmond and Mary Creese have made some valuable information available] Her notes are lost, apart from a few loose sheets kept by Bateson, now in the John Innes Archive. The University Library holds 16 sweet pea notebooks, contributing to Bateson's research 1903-11, which at some point should be available online. However, it is unclear which of the scribbled annotations in them were made by Saunders. The huge collection of scientifically valuable histological slides she made was destroyed after she died.

Whilst evidently an exceptional scientist, Edith Saunders was still extremely lucky to not only receive an education in a uniquely free and supportive environment, and to obtain Scholarship funding to undertake research, but most of all to enjoy the rare stability of a secure academic post, at a time when women had access to none of these through the University of Cambridge itself – All thanks to Newnham College. Her first year there was spent studying for the Higher Local Exams, which would ensure she was fully prepared to face the demands of a Cambridge education. She won a Scholarship and went on to study for the Natural Sciences Tripos, obtaining the equivalent of a First Class degree in Physiology in 1888. After one year of Bathurst Scholarship-funded research, she was retained as a Demonstrator and remained employed by the College all her working life. She became a Lecturer in Natural Sciences in 1892 and a Lecturer in Biology 1899-1918, then a Fellow of Newnham and Director of Studies 1918-1925.

Another fortuitous association with Newnham was that two of William Bateson's sisters happened to be students there with her. Mary Bateson began her studies at the same time as Saunders, specialising in mediaeval history. Anna Bateson, a botanist, was two years ahead.



This may be the last photo of Edith Saunders, taken at the 1939 BAAS meeting

As an active woman, the manner of Edith Saunders' death, resulting from a bicycle accident on 6 June 1945, is perhaps not a surprise. Just a month after VE Day, she was about to resume her research, having given it up for war work.

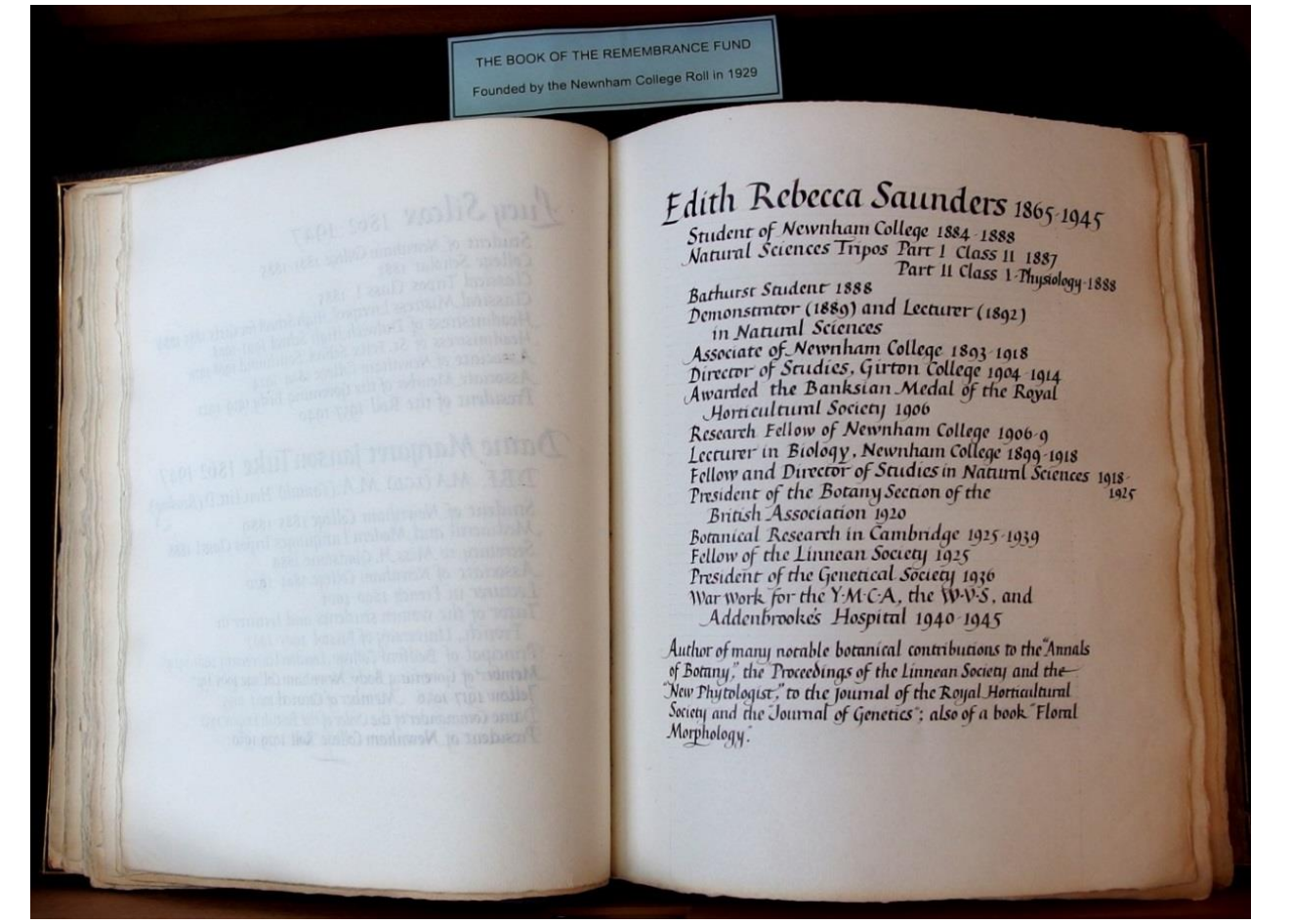
'This return to active scientific work at the age of nearly 80 indicates very clearly the salient features of Miss Saunders's character: her devotion to science, her vigour, and the thoroughness and consistency of her mind which made it intolerable to her to feel that she had not fulfilled her intentions down to the last detail'.

[Clapham Gilson and Godwin obituary]

However, for someone who had both benefited greatly from Newnham College, and spent 40 years serving it, her Probate notice does come as a surprise: She left her reasonably large estate [over £19,000, when William Bateson left only £25,000] to a prominent City goldsmith and another woman, to both of whom her connection is unknown. The large house where she last lived is still there, on a street the *Cambridge Evening News* recently described as one of the most affluent in Cambridge.

## Why 'Becky' Saunders?

Edith Rebecca Saunders is sometimes referred to as Becky Saunders. This does not appear to be a name her closest colleague ever called her. She was always 'Miss Saunders' and he 'Mr Bateson'. The more familiar form seems to have been how she was referred to within Newnham College by her teaching colleagues and [probably behind her back] the students.



Memorial book in Newnham Library



### ‘Handsome, formidable and renowned’

‘To some of us she seemed the embodiment of dedicated search for scientific truth. Rather austere in her tweed coat and skirt, with a very masculine collar and tie, yet with such a kindly twinkle in her eye. At dinner her severely plain black silk, with the gold medal on a gold chain her only ornament, might look ... forbidding ... but an encouragingly kindly remark followed by a somehow friendly silence was most reassuring’

[M D Ball, Newnham student 1908-11]

'When I was a student she was a celebrated but remote figure whom we regarded with awe, so when I returned to take up a resident post ... I came in fear and trembling as to what impression I might make upon the handsome, formidable and renowned scientist'

[E M Chrystal, friend of 20 years]

**‘Two features of her character stood out: her great energy and thoroughness, and the power and lucidity of her mind. These characteristics emerged even in the most ordinary conversation, as did her great kindness and her delightful quiet humour. She was a most stimulating companion, permitting no mental laziness or confusion of thought’** [Uncredited death notice in the *Times*, but most likely Harry Godwin]

## Surprising glimpses

Despite his respect for her capabilities, William Bateson [understandably?] described the conscientious Saunders in less than flattering terms in letters to his wife:

**‘Long spell of Saunders today. Her intelligence is certainly much quickened from two years ago : but trying moments come. Her voice rings in my head’. [1904]**

'Saunders is so terribly bent on business. The Conference struck her as frivolous, I fear.' Yet later at that same meeting he was taken aback when she flirted with his distinguished visitor Hugo de Vries, despite his dislike of soap and water: **'Saunders talked and chatted as I never saw her before.'** [1899]

'We soon encountered Miss Saunders, very imposing in her dark tailored suit and shirt blouse with stiff linen collar and tie, surmounted by a severe black hat, in fact the Typical Blue Stocking as envisaged in pre-war days, and indeed the fashionable dress of all women who claimed equality with men ... I was left alone with the Gorgon. She nobly started explaining an intricate experiment to me and I did my best to look intelligent .... Suddenly she turned and flashed upon me that wonderful smile which could irradiate her whole face and was so much part of herself. 'Come on' she said, 'Let's get out of here – I shall be a grease-spot in a minute!' Her use of the colloquial slang astonished me – she too was human after all ... [Rona Hurst, wife of C C Hurst, describes her first encounter with Saunders]

But E M Chrystal, in her obituary, provides us with the most delightful surprise : **'She was throughout her life a brilliant skater whose gyrations on the points of the skates round an orange were the wonder and terror of student neophytes'**

## The 'real' Becky Saunders?

By a remarkable piece of luck, just a few personal photos of Becky Saunders have survived in an album in Newnham College. They show her with her friend Marion Greenwood on possibly a single mountain climbing trip in the Alps. The poses were not just for the camera – Saunders was an experienced climber. They are in the company of men, identity unknown, though one of them could be Greenwood's husband George P Bidder, or her brother. In one shot, a man points a telescope at Saunders, a private joke perhaps, its meaning sadly lost.

