



Portrait of **Constance Armfield** (née **Smedley**).

From *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley (Mrs Maxwell Armfield)*, 1929.

Sisterhood

The authoress **Constance Smedley** (1876-1941), shown here, bore a striking likeness to her elder sister, Ida. The sisters shared a common outlook on life, despite their divergent career choices. Constance would recall in her autobiography *Crusaders* (1929) that once Ida ‘took up chemistry as her calling and went to Newnham [College Cambridge], our close association naturally ceased’.¹ Nevertheless, the sisters would retain contact through the Lyceum Club. Constance established the Club in 1903 as a debating forum for women. Ida immediately joined its sub-committee for ‘the Universities and Science’.

It was through participation in organisations and networks that the idea of ‘sisterhood’ can be applied to Ida Smedley in a wider sense. She worked hard to promote the position of women, which from 1907 would include her role as a leading member in the new British Federation of University Women. From its inception, Ida became the Federation’s Secretary. After the war, she then became its president on two occasions, once after 1919 and again from 1929 to 1935.

After her death in 1944, the leading physiologist Winifred Cullis would describe Ida Smedley’s ‘instrumental role’ in the Federation’s establishment. Cullis wrote that it owes much to her devoted service and the breadth of vision she brought to its work’.²

Constance’s memoirs suggest that as each sister became busier with their careers, they saw much less of each other. However, in other respects the extra-curricular activities that these women undertook on behalf of others also reflects their shared outlook. The scientist Ida Smedley and the fiction-writer Constance diverged in their careers, but they converged in their involvement with networks that promoted women’s freedom of thought.

¹ Constance Smedley, *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley (Mrs Maxwell Armfield)* (London: Duckworth, 1929), p. 6.

² Winifred Cullis, ‘Dr Ida Smedley-MacLean’, *Nature* **154** (22 July 1944), p. 110.