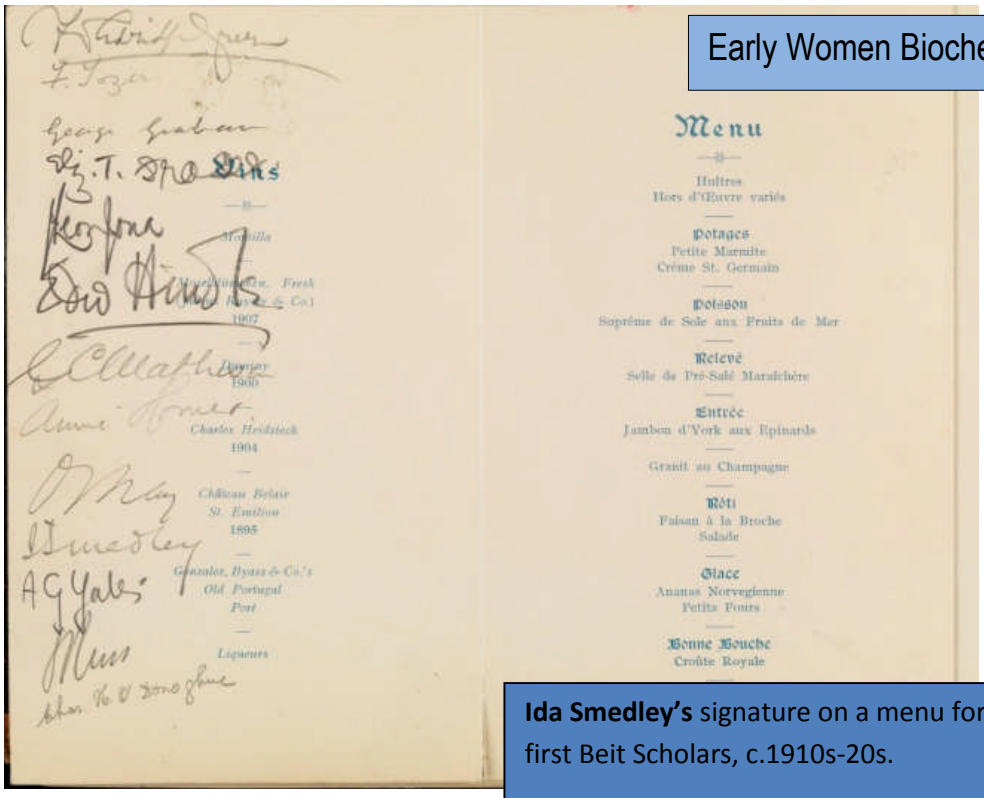
4



Ida Smedley's signature on a menu for a dinner held for the first Beit Scholars, c.1910s-20s.

Wellcome Library, Beit Fellowships Newscuttings Album and Commemorative Book, SA/BMF/G.1.

'The leading woman chemist of England'

A signed menu from a dinner held for the first Beit Scholars. Ida Smedley's signature can be seen 4th from the bottom. In 1911, the year after Smedley had become one of the first recipients of the award, Sir Henry Butlin lamented in the *British Medical Journal* that 'very few research scholarships which are open to men and women have been held by women'.[1] This was certainly true of the Beit Fellowships; at the point Butlin was writing, just four had gone to women (from 30 awarded: 13%).

Smedley led the way amongst biochemists in her receipt of scholarships (Beit Fellowship: 1910), election to professional societies (Biochemical Society, 1913; Chemical Society, 1920) and recruitment to permanent posts (Lister Institute, 1932). As early as 1904, the Australian *Brisbane Courier* described Smedley as 'the leading woman chemist of England', a position that these accolades and appointments helped consolidate.

The identification of Smedley as a 'chemist' is perhaps significant. Few women in the early twentieth century could count themselves chemists. As historians such as Mary Creese and the Rayner-Canhams have shown, chemistry remained a predominantly male discipline.[2] Nevertheless, in line with the *Brisbane Courier's* assessment, Smedley could count herself both a chemist and biochemist. It is notable that from 1906 to 1910 she was Assistant Lecturer in Chemistry at Manchester University. Moreover, her subsequent research on the structures of fats was identifiable as chemistry to a sufficient extent to allow her to become the first female member of the Chemical Society in 1920.

Ruth Watts has suggested that 'gendered perceptions' of what constitutes science have historically tended to marginalise women's contributions.[3] Smedley's participation in the archetypically masculine field of chemistry, therefore, to some extent broached traditional boundaries that demarcated the accepted limits of women's involvement in science.

[1] Sir Henry Butlin, 'Research in Medicine and Women in Research', *British Medical Journal* (7 October 1911), p. 837.
[2] Mary R.S. Creese, 'British Women in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries who Contributed to Research in the Chemical Sciences', *British Journal for the History of Science* **24** (1991), 275-305; Marlene F. Rayner-Canham and Geoffrey Rayner-Canham, 'Fight for Rights', *Chemistry World* (2009), 56-59.
[3] Ruth Watts, 'Science and Women in the History of Education: Expanding the Archive', *History of Education* **33** (2003), pp. 198-199.