



William Bateson (third from left), at the 3rd International Conference on Genetics, 1906.

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Genes and Genius

The geneticist, **William Bateson** (1861-1926) shown at the 3rd International Conference on Genetics, London, 1906. It was Bateson who coined the term 'genetics' and who employed several women amongst his group of research students at Cambridge, including Muriel Wheldale. Marsha Richmond has suggested that this preponderance of women partly reflected the reluctance of men to take up his new branch of science. Bateson's letters, however, also support Richmond's view that he both admired his female colleagues and advocated strongly on their behalf.¹

Wheldale joined Bateson's research group directly after completing her undergraduate studies at Cambridge in 1903, on a coveted Bathurst Research Studentship. Thereafter, Wheldale sourced the flowers for her scientific studies directly from Bateson's private gardens in Grantchester, Cambridge.

Mary Creese has suggested that Bateson 'strongly influenced' Wheldale's early work.² Nevertheless, Wheldale began to set her sights further afield.

Bateson worked hard to retain Wheldale in his research group between 1908 and 1914. In a glowing testimonial that Bateson wrote for Wheldale in 1908, he stated he had 'formed a very high opinion of Miss Wheldale's powers as an investigator'. More regrettably, he continued: 'if she leaves us, her loss will be a serious one [to the department]'.³ Ultimately, Wheldale left for **Frederick Gowland Hopkins's** Biochemical Laboratories at Cambridge in 1914. Both Bateson's testimonial and his subsequent correspondence with Wheldale, however, reflect the mutual admiration these two scientists held for each other.

¹ Marsha Richmond, 'Muriel Wheldale Onslow and Early Biochemical Genetics', *Journal of the History of Biology* **40** (2007), pp. 395, 406.

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), p. 284,

³ John Innes Centre, William Bateson Letters, William Bateson to University of Sheffield (via Muriel Wheldale) 14 February 1908.