



Muriel Wheldale, Cambridge University Biochemistry Department staff photograph, 1930.

Cambridge University Archives, Biochemistry Department Photograph Albums.

Trials and triumphs

Muriel Wheldale, photographed alongside the staff at Cambridge Dunn Institute of Biochemistry in 1930. The cloche hat shown here became a personal trademark of Wheldale – a trait drawn out in the recent dramatisation of Wheldale's research, *Blooming Snapdragons* (2010).

Wheldale's life lends itself to such dramatic treatment. Torn between her loyal mentor **William Bateson** and the lures of independence in **Hopkins's** Cambridge biochemistry labs, Wheldale ultimately chose to take control over her own destiny. The resultant fusion of genetics, biochemistry, botany and physiology broke new ground, brightly painted on canvas and evoked in verse. Equally, however, much remained unfinished, with investigative findings from 1914 parcelled up and left for subsequent researchers like **Scott-Moncrieff** to take up after 1926.¹

The premature death of her husband, **Huia Onslow** (1890-1922) presented a trial of a more personal kind. It also reflects the complexity of Wheldale's character. Wheldale's biographers have described her self-contained nature, yet she also chose to publically commemorate Huia's life in a memoir.² Extant sources suggest a woman devoted to a life in research. Equally, however, Mary Creese has noted her witty sociability and love of travel, which in her later life included forays to more remote parts of central Europe.³

Following an illness, Wheldale died in May 1932 aged just 52. Feted yet enigmatic, this most artistic of scientists had lived a short yet colourful life.

¹ Rose Scott-Moncrieff, 'The Classical Period in Chemical Genetics: Recollections of Muriel Wheldale Onslow, Robert and Gertrude Robinson and J.B.S. Haldane', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* **36** (1981), p. 126.

² Muriel Wheldale, *Huia Onslow: A Memoir* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924).

³ Mary R.S. Creese, 'Onslow, Muriel Wheldale', *Dictionary of National Biography* at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/46/101046433/>