

## REMEMBERING MIRIAM

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Miriam was terrifying when she was middle-aged, especially to her nephews and nieces. She became gentler with the passing years, and the passing generations. But her intimate family - Rosie, Charles, Charlotte, and Jo and their children, her sisters Liberty and Nica and her brother Victor, their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren - were at the heart of her existence, over so close to a century of striving and achieving. I am the daughter of her younger brother, Victor, and I have known her for as long as I can remember. She was most serene, in her long life, at tea-time on Saturdays in Ashton, with her beloved grandchildren, Rosie's and Charlotte's daughters and son, Joel, Lydia, Miriam, and Naomi. The house was like somewhere in a fairy tale, overgrown with wall plants, surrounded by birds, and with a continuing flux of descendants and photographs of descendants, Nica's daughter Kari, her great grand-daughter also Nica, Miriam's aunt Evelina's great grandson David, Jane and her children, Sarah's son Tom, Jacob's daughter Beth, who planted a tree in the clearing in the Ashton woods where Miriam and Liberty are buried, Amschel's daughter Kate and his granddaughter Iris.

Miriam was endlessly interested in the history of her own larger family or families. She lived in an imagined and remembered world of the past; a shifting scene, as all her visitors will recall, of stories, secrets, memories, letters. She wrote exquisite memoirs of her Rothschild ancestors and their menageries, laboratories and gardens. She was fascinated, too, by her Wertheimstein ancestors, her mother Roszika's brothers and sisters and distant Austro Hungarian-Romanian forebears. Her landscape of the past was populated, to a striking extent, with women; her grandmothers, her French cousin Alix, all the nineteenth century underestimated Charlottes, her murdered Aunt Arunka. She wanted to recover them, to know how they lived. She even once said to me, sitting by the river in Cambridge in 2003, that if a fairy were to offer her a single wish, it would be to have her mother back on earth for an hour, to answer all the questions that she had never asked.

Miriam was intimidating, in part, because of the extraordinary intensity with which she sought to ask questions, and to understand. The past, the natural world around her, the secrets of insect life: these were all scenes that she investigated with sometimes awesome single-mindedness. It was as though her scientific interests were continuous with everything else in her life. This could be disconcerting. I remember going into the bathroom at Elsfield, where she lived in the 1960s, and finding it very hot and damp; the explanation, as though unexceptional, was that the bathroom had to be as close as possible, climatically speaking, to home, for the bushbaby whose bathroom it was. The last time my sister Tory and I saw her, a few weeks before she died, Tory noticed a cage beside her bed, and asked whose cage it was. "Rats", said Miriam; "I'm interested in how they smell and how they are smelt; how other animals smell rats."

Miriam lived for an extraordinarily long time. I asked her, in the course of the same conversation in 2003, at a particularly dispiriting moment in the period before the Iraq war, whether it felt the same as it felt immediately before the Second World War. She thought for a moment and then said - it was a very characteristic one-line put-down - "No, but it feels very much like it felt immediately before the First World War."

Science changed almost beyond recognition in Miriam's lifetime, and so did the lives of individuals, including her own family. The history of her scientific life has a mythic aspect;

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she did not go to school, she did not go to university, she found her way to a laboratory, she worked on eccentric subjects, she became world famous, she made a discovery of potentially momentous importance, as John Gurdon has told us, when she was in her 90s. I think it would be a mistake to see all this as matter of myth, and to underestimate the extraordinary powers of determination and concentration that made it all possible. Miriam may have been, towards the end of her life, something close to a genius. But she also worked ferociously, even frighteningly hard, she minded a great deal about the details of a scientific career (submissions and publications), and she had to fight in almost every sort of way, as a woman born in 1908 in a milieu in which no woman worked, a woman herself who had many children, to become a great woman scientist, and a great scientist.

I don't believe that Miriam thought of herself as the sort of person would be a model for others. As someone to be admired, certainly, and recognised; as an individual. But she really was a model in respect of her life in science. She was a model, above all, in the extent to which the life of the mind was at the heart of her own life, over almost the entire extent of the twentieth century. A few months ago, when she was talking to us about her new work, the work on naturally occurring antibiotics, she at one point gestured to the overgrown garden outside the vast windows at Ashton. It's full of information, she said, full of sounds that we can't hear, insects that we can't see, and smells that we can't smell. She continued to discover new secrets about this natural world, this world full of beings and information, until the very end of her life, and the life of the mind, I think, kept her alive. She was admired, and loved, and she will be remembered and missed.