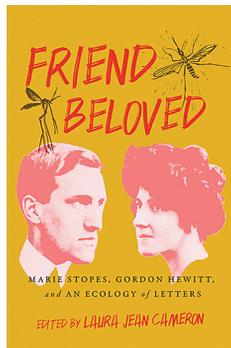


### Friend Beloved: Marie Stopes, Gordon Hewitt, and an Ecology of Letters

Edited by Laura Jean Cameron. 2021. McGill-Queen's University Press. 224 pages, 40.95 CAD, Hardcover. Also available as an E-book.

Naturalists will likely be drawn to this book for its possible insights into the enigmatic Canadian superstar biologist, Charles Gordon Hewitt (1885–1920). Hewitt was the British-trained entomologist hired in 1909 by the Canadian Department of Agriculture's Central Experimental Farm. He was to fill the entomological part of James Fletcher's research position made vacant by Fletcher's early death the year before at the age of 56. In the decade before Hewitt shockingly died at the even earlier age of 35, he completed a number of the nationally significant economic entomology projects initiated by Fletcher and undertook game-changing national and continental conservation initiatives that remain in force today. Among his many organizational commitments and associations, Hewitt was deeply involved in the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club (OFNC), especially during the existentially difficult World War I period, and he served as president in the last year of his life (1918–1919; see OFNC Collection, City of Ottawa Archives). He had no heirs nor long-time



professional associates to compile a full account of him personally or his approach to his work, however. There is virtually nothing but brief, formally published records to tell us how he managed to do so much, so quickly.

*Friend Beloved* is based upon the correspondence between Hewitt and British palaeobotanist, controversial social activist, and notorious eugenicist Marie Charlotte Carmichael Stopes (1880–1958). The letters were written almost entirely between 1907 (in England) and 1911 (after Hewitt came to Canada). Stopes and Hewitt were close friends as students and staff at the University of Manchester, England, from 1907 to 1909. There was little contact between them, however, in the last decade of Hewitt's life.

The speculations on feelings and motives that populate *Friend Beloved*, both in the correspondents' own words and in those of editor and author Cameron, paint a picture of two very bright but entitled and rather self-absorbed individuals. Their often jocular, flirtatious exchanges frequently exude youthful intellectual smugness.

*Friend Beloved*, however, fails its stated objective "not ... to cast judgment" (p. 141), because the author acknowledges having a problem with Hewitt's professional record and personal judgement. In places, it reads as if Cameron has a personal axe to grind with

him. This objectivity problem is exacerbated by a pattern of loaded personal characterizations in defense of various questionable actions and statements by Stopes. While Stopes's important role in women's suffrage and as a pioneer of birth control is appropriately lauded, her controversial darker side is virtually unmentioned in *Friend Beloved*. How can it not be pertinent to our understanding of the values being explored in this brief (three- to four-year) correspondence that Stopes was a strong believer in eugenics as a tool for preventing "inferior women of the lower classes" from having too many children (Britannica 2022) and advocated for forced sterilization (Williams 2011)? Similarly, how could it not be pertinent to note that in the years leading up to World War II she proclaimed these and other fascist views? It is not known (to this writer at least) if she was a card-carrying member and supporter of the British Union of Fascists (although her prominent brother-in-law, Alliott Verdon Roe, certainly was), but she clearly was at least a 'fellow traveller'.

While the personal shortcomings of Hewitt are prominently dissected and pinned out (to use entomological terminology) for all to see, Stopes's more odious social views and pronouncements (including her blatant anti-Semitism [Williams 2011] and correspondence with Hitler [Falcon-Lang 2010]) are barely examined. And while Stopes's subsequent achievements are heralded, Hewitt's groundbreaking advances in economic entomology are not celebrated, if mentioned at all.

For a biologically informed reader, the imprecise use of technical language is distracting. Perhaps most critically, the term 'ecology' is used almost entirely in a social rather than biological context. Notwithstanding whatever "an Ecology of Letters" is intended to

mean, 'ecology' is sometimes employed as a synonym for 'home' and at other times for 'relationships'.

So what can the naturalist or biologist looking to the Hewitt–Stopes correspondence for insights into the thinking and development of celebrated scientist and conservationist Hewitt expect to find here? The annotated letters provide a selective insight into the thinking of both Hewitt and Stopes over that period, which is of some value when clarified or supported by other more objective assessments of their world and those times. In her copious footnoting of the reproduced letters, Cameron has done an excellent job of identifying the people, places, and often the context mentioned in the letters that otherwise are identified only through personal short-hand and/or abbreviations.

Beyond these particulars, *Friend Beloved* exemplifies a major challenge for historical retrospectives: how difficult it is to fairly judge the worthiness of past achievements and achievers through the lens of our own times. And to achieve balance in our treatment of the cast of characters being examined.

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