

**'EDWARD HERON-ALLEN AND SOME WOMEN
OF HIS ACQUAINTANCE'**

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REMINISCENCES OF MY GREAT-AUNT,
HELÈNE ELIZABETH BARGMANN PH.D., FL.S.,
F.Z.S., A.T.S. (1896-1987), BIOLOGIST

by JAN BARGMANN

Helène Elizabeth Bargmann was born in London in 1896; her parents, of Danish descent, had emigrated via Hamburg, Germany a decade or so earlier and had settled in East Dulwich. She had an elder sister Anna, with whom she lived in her later years and a brother Hans, my Grandfather. In the early 20th Century the family moved north to Hampstead and Belsize Park and that notable area of London became home.

A bright forward-thinking young lady she read Zoology at Bedford College, London [Fig. 1] where she was a member of the rowing club. In a time of unprecedented change in the lives of women she was influenced by the movement for women's suffrage, but as she told me in the late 1970's, by the pen and not the sword, insisting that rights were won by discourse not violence.



Fig. 1. Bedford College for Women, Regents Park, London NW - South Science Block (Postcard by P.A. Buchannan & Co., Croydon, no. 18890, c. 1913).

She was living at 43 Belsize Park, NW3, with her sister in 1922 when she was elected as a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London. This house was a substantial five-storey Victorian villa [Fig. 2] and they remained there, at one time having several women lodgers, until they moved just after World War II. This villa together with adjacent buildings (No. 42-45) became a hotel that in turn became ripe for redevelopment but unfortunately it collapsed during construction in 2008.

During the late 20's and 30s she wrote a number of papers including an article for the Linnaean Society of London in 1930 entitled *The Morphology of the Central Nervous System in the Gastropoda Pulmonata* and *A Biology Handbook for Schools* with Isabella Ferguson Henderson in 1932.

She joined the 'Discovery Investigations' in 1928, funded by the British Colonial Office and organised by the Discovery Committee in London - these were a series of scientific cruises



Fig. 2. Belsize Park, London NW3. No. 43 was a left hand villa similar to No. 40, second from the right. (© Mike Quinn, re-used under Creative Commons Licence).

and shore-based investigations intended to provide the scientific background to stock management of the commercial Antarctic whale fishery. Helène worked in the 'Discovery hut' behind the Natural History Museum producing two important reports by 1937: *The reproductive system of Euphausia superba* and *The development and life-history of adolescent and adult krill, Euphausia superba*. Her work, the last report being in 1980, contributed hugely to our knowledge of the whales, the krill they fed on, and the oceanography of their habitat.

With the outbreak of World War II she joined the Red Cross. In the London bombing she was responsible for the transfer of the 25,000 glass jars of specimens from the Museum collections to a place of safety in Stratfield Saye House in Hampshire.

When I asked about her 'War Years' she informed me that following a slight slip of the pen, a minor change to her age shown on a document allowed her to 'join up' to the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.), the women's branch of the British Army where she became a Junior Commander. During the War she also assisted at the Wellcome Foundation laboratories at Frant, East Sussex with the *Report of Special Operational Store Tyburn, Jan-Nov 1945*, by bacteriologist Marinus van den Ende



Fig. 3. No. 30/32 Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead NW3 (with Cranbrook's roof on the left). Edited screenshot of a street view; © Google, 2012).

(1912-1957) into the production of a scrub typhus vaccine for the armed forces.

Circa 1944 Helène and her sister moved to 30 Maresfield Gardens, NW3. They owned this house on the corner and the mews house 'Cranbrook' on Nutley Terrace [Fig. 3].

After the war she continued her work as curator, as well as doing editorial work on reports and helping with the examination of specimens collected annually from the Antarctic whaling fleet. Between 1951 and 1962 she is listed as a Principal Scientific Officer in the Admiralty's Royal Naval Scientific Service (Navy List).

Dr Bargmann also helped Arthur Knyvett Totton, with his monograph *A synopsis of the Siphonophora* a paper published by the Natural History Museum in 1965. One of her colleagues, S.G. Brown, described her as 'a charming and cultured lady who took a special interest in the new generation of biologists joining the *Discovery* Investigations after the war, and later the biological section of the National Institute of Oceanography; whom she affectionately called 'my boys'.

Around 1955 Helène and her sister Anna (whom I can now tell you, without penalty, had worked at Bletchley Park), moved downstairs to what became known as 32a, the garden flat of the large late Victorian house (which was divided into flats and now known as 30/32), with my bohemian Aunt living in 'Cranbrook' around the corner.

She retired from the Natural History Museum in 1964.

In the early 1970's Dr Bargmann decided to demolish the original mews house to provide more suitable accommodation for their old age and she commissioned a new building with some help from my late uncle John McKenzie Bargmann, then an architect with the Greater London Council. The modern but sympathetic building provided two flats, and the 'Aunts' moved in 1974 into the ground floor with access to the garden, leasing the upper floor and the other flats in the main house.

When I was studying in London in the late 1970's/early 1980s, Anna was in her 90s and in New End Hospital and I used to go to visit her there and my Great-Aunt Helène at the flat.

We discussed many topics and she showed a keen interest in all life around her. She used to scientifically monitor the pigeons in the garden noting their characteristics. She also used to nip about in her little Austin A40 driving those she referred to as 'her elderly' to Swiss Cottage Library. She herself was in her 80's at this time! Slim and elegant she took care of herself and her appearance. She cooked me dinner on occasion and she and I used to enjoy a drop of gin and one of her cigarettes. One evening, as it was much too late for me to walk or take the bus, she insisted upon driving me back across the Heath to Highgate and I don't know if I have ever been a more nervous passenger in my life as she sped off up Haverstock Hill in that old grey car!

Her sister Anna died in the summer of 1980 at the age of 95.

After my time in London I popped back to visit her now and then and the last time I saw her was in 1986 when I attempted to visit her without giving her the 'statutory' two days notice she insisted upon and had to wait, with my gift of flowers and her cigarettes, at a neighbour's flat in the main house until my audience was granted.

It was April 9th 1987 when Dr Helène Bargmann died at the Royal Free Hospital after the gardener found her unwell.

I am reliably informed that politically she was a Liberal.