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**From the Selected Works of Desiree Butterfield-Nagy**

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Spring 2013

## Edith Patch Papers Reveal the "Duality of Her Powers"

Desiree Butterfield-Nagy



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## Edith Patch Papers Reveal “The Duality of Her Powers”

by *Desirée Butterfield-Nagy*, archivist, Special Collections Department

For two years after graduating from the University of Minnesota, Edith Marion Patch had applied for positions in entomology in nearly every state in the country. While responses to her applications varied, the underlying theme was fairly unanimous – the work of an entomologist was not appropriate for a woman. When, in 1903, she received an offer from Charles D. Woods, head of the Maine Agricultural Experiment Station, to come and organize a department of entomology for the university, Patch promptly borrowed money to defray travel expenses and made plans to arrive in Orono – despite the fact that she was being offered the chance to serve as a volunteer assistant, a position without pay.

When Dr. Woods realized she was serious, he noted her dual background in writing and research and to provide at least minimal wages, arranged for her to teach two courses, one in English and the other in entomology. Patch had been teaching high school in Minnesota, and had won prizes for essays and poetry in high school and college. For years, she saved three letters of recommendation written by her professors at the University of Minnesota, letters that were likely distributed with her applications across the county, two from English instructors who expressed that she was a student of extraordinary ability with a gift as a writer, and one from a professor in animal biology who noted that she had satisfactorily completed all of her science requirements. From the very beginning of her career, the University of Maine benefited from both talents.

The “conflicting elements in Miss Patch’s nature which make her both scientist and writer” are one of many themes found within her personal and professional papers held in the Special Collections Department of Fogler Library. It seems to have been quite difficult for many news writers and colleagues of the early 1900s to reconcile that a tendency toward artistic expression, and such a keen scientific mind, could reside in the same person.





An article in *The Minnesota Alumni Weekly* in 1927, for example, indicated that as a student, Patch had been elected to a national science society, Sigma Xi, had won a sonnet contest in the same year, and that these events were “pathetic prophesy of her career... Pathetic because a scientific attitude of mind and an impulse to artistic expression imply elements so conflicting that complete reconciliation is seldom possible.”

Other writers highlight both roles with less alarm, as was true in a *Lewiston Journal* article published around 1920. Patch had just published a book that, while written primarily for children, the writer assured, would also be extremely fascinating for parents. In addition, “This lady is considered one of the best authorities on [entomology] in the country... she can determine the character and danger of any insect pest known to the American Farmer.”

Over the course of her career, Patch published eighteen nature books for children, many articles for popular national magazines, and became internationally known through scientific work that generated more than 80 published technical papers. In his memorial remarks in 1954, Reverend Milton

M. McGorrill expressed, “There were combined in her some very remarkable elements. A scientist in every sense she was. Yet she wrote books on nature for children. She had the childlike capacity to clothe birds and animals with personality.”

After reading Patch’s autobiographical sketch, letters, news clippings, essays and poetry, those consulting her papers may be left wondering whether Patch was surprised by the continual framing of conflicting talents. Although her own, direct statement seems hard to find, one article shared that Patch’s initial career plan had been to become a writer, but then realized that “Nature appreciation was her goal.” In her view, becoming a scientist or a writer could easily extend from the love of nature, and “she decided to become first a scientist.”

At least one person, Mary E. Russell, in writing for *The Independent Woman* in 1924, explained, “Although she writes with signal success for the scientific world in its jargon,” Patch had tremendous talent in interpreting her findings in ways that became accessible and compelling for the general public. Having written several books for children was yet another step in the progression of Patch’s abilities to simplify things technical. Not only did Russell seem to think that these multiple abilities were reconcilable, they were, in fact, evidence of “the duality of her powers.”

Those who would like to access the Edith M. Patch papers can contact the Special Collections Department by phone at 581.1686 or email [spc@umit.maine.edu](mailto:spc@umit.maine.edu).

