



Evelyn Cheesman

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

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Evelyn Cheesman was an **entomologist** - a scientist who studies insects - who went on solo-expeditions to discover new species of insects, reptiles, amphibians and plants.

Ms. Cheesman was born in 1881 in England, the same year that London's Natural History Museum was opened to the public.

She had a deep love of the natural world and its history from an early age. When she was younger, she used to collect flowers. She also collected glow worms and tried to determine what made them glow. She hoped to become a veterinary surgeon, but in 1906, when she started to apply to schools, the Royal Veterinary College was not accepting female students.

She then met a man named Harold Maxwell-Lefroy who was a professor of entomology at the Imperial College of Science, and an honorary curator at the insect house of the London Zoological Gardens (also known as the London Zoo).

Professor Maxwell-Lefroy invited her to study **entomology**. She was one of only two female students in his class.

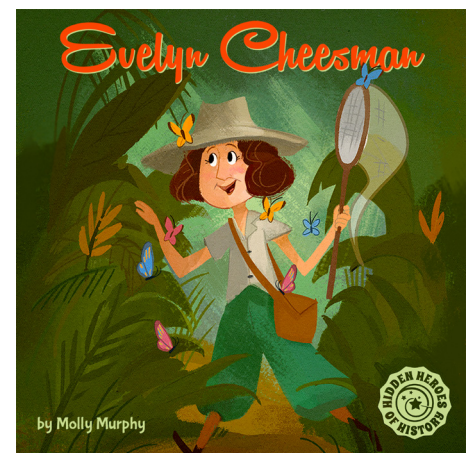
After completing her studies, Ms. Cheesman accepted the position of Assistant Curator of Insects at the London Zoo in 1917. Three years after that, she became the first woman to be hired as a full-time **curator**. When Ms. Cheesman took over the zoo's insect house, they were missing one very important detail: insects!

Ms. Cheesman started collecting species, designing displays, and even invited children in the community to collect as well, spreading her passion for entomology. Eventually, she built up a buzzing insect house.

After her time as a curator, Ms. Cheesman started traveling, kicking off nearly twelve years of **expeditions** across the world to collect species of insects, reptiles, amphibians, and plants.

She traveled on her own which was unheard of for a woman at that time. She made important scientific discoveries about things like **species dispersal**, or the movement of various plants, animals, and insects from their place of origin to other places in the world.

Her expeditions also taught her about extinction, climate change, and fascinating histories of the islands she visited. She leaned into her love of solo-expeditioning, resigning from the zoo to begin work with the Natural History Museum in London - the same museum that opened the year she was born.





Ms. Cheesman went on a total of 8 solo expeditions, and collected over 70,000 specimens of insects and plants that now are kept in London's Natural History Museum. One of the many interesting discoveries she made includes a rare blue-flowered orchid. Records show she collected the **specimen** on the summit of an extinct volcano.

In 1954, after hip replacement surgery and at the age of seventy-three, Ms. Cheesman went on her final expedition. During this last nine-month trip, she collected 10,000 insects and 500 plants.

She kept many notes and sketches, and authored numerous books and scientific articles on entomology and her travels. This was how she supported herself while she assisted the Natural History Museum, unpaid, for many years.

Her journeys took her to islands that were not frequently traveled or known about at the time. She met and respected island residents who came to know and respect her in return. She learned about their cultures and traditions in order to honor them.

Evelyn Cheesman knew how to observe the world around her! Thanks to her, scientists are still identifying new species and making discoveries from the specimens she collected over 40 years ago.

Glossary

Entomology - The science of insects and the study of their many kinds of interactions with humans and other forms of life on earth. It is a branch of zoology, which is the study of animals.

Entomologist - The scientists who study insects, their life habits, and how they are related to each other. Entomologists have discovered and described over 1 million species of insects on earth.

Curator - Curators are responsible for managing a specific group of a zoo's animals, including their care, overseeing other staff, and choosing what information to share with the public.

Expedition - A journey or voyage undertaken by a person or group of people with a particular purpose, such as exploration or scientific research.

Species dispersal - The movement of a species—animals, plants, insects, and others—from one area to another.

Specimen - An individual animal, plant, insect or other that is used as an example of its species for scientific study or display.

Give it Some Thought

How do you think Evelyn Cheesman felt when she couldn't attend veterinary college because she was a woman?
How did she fulfill her dream to work with animals?

How would you describe Evelyn Cheesman's character to be able to go on 8 expeditions so far from her home all by herself?

Why is it important to be a curious observer, like Evelyn Cheesman, and how can you find inspiration from her life?

Use Your Imagination

Evelyn Cheesman began her career at the London Zoo, serving as the curator of the insect house and sharing her passion for entomology with her community. Imagine yourself as a curator at a zoo, museum, library, or somewhere else entirely. Consider these questions:

- Where would you want to work as a curator, and what is a passion you would share with the world?
- What facts or stories would you tell about your subject?
- Envision your exhibit: How would you design and create a display so people can look and learn?

Now write your answers and thoughts in your journal or use the "My Dream Exhibit" worksheet to draw your dream exhibit! Share your work with your friends, family members or classmates.