Dame Miriam ROTHSCHILD

Naomi Gryn meets with a most remarkable Dame

The Honorable Dame Miriam Louisa Rothschild DBE, FRS, is a world authority on fleas, a pioneer of the organic movement and an ardent campaigner for the protection of animals and wildlife conservation. In her home in Ashton Wold, where she has lived for most of her long and remarkable life, a drawing of her legendary ancestor Nathan Mayer Rothschild – founder of the English branch of the great banking dynasty – is positioned discreetly on one wall, while above the fireplace hangs an oil painting of her glamorous mother, Rozsika von Wertheimstein, whose family were the first Jewish family in Europe to be ennobled. Now nearly 96, Dame Miriam charges across her living room in an electric wheelchair searching for a recently acquired hearing aid. Her eyesight is fading, but her fierce intelligence is undiminished by the years.

Born on 5 August 1908, Dame Miriam's earliest memory is of George V's coronation in 1911, when she was not yet three years old. 'I had been taken to my grandmother and grandfather's home at 148 Piccadilly to watch the procession pass in front of the building.' Her grandfather was the first Lord Rothschild, known to most as 'Natty'. 'I distinctly remember seeing the king through the window of his carriage as it passed under the windows of 148. I was extremely badly behaved. I snatched up a little flag and slapped my cousin over the head with it. We were both in nannies' arms and there was an awful scream from my poor cousin who was nearly assassinated by me at this early stage. It's a very funny thing, but this isolated episode sticks so strongly in my memory.'

Dame Miriam's father, Charles Rothschild, worked in the family's banking business and was a dedicated naturalist in his spare time, renowned for having discovered the flea that was the most important vector of the plague. He met his wife, Rozsika, on a butterfly-collecting trip in the Carpathians. Dame Miriam's next memory is of a visit to her mother's family where she first discovered her own entomological leanings: 'My grandfather on the Hungarian side was a retired army officer who had got a farm for himself by then and the great joy of my life was going with my aunts to see the various animals on the farm. He had a nice lot of pigs with curly hair all over their bodies and this absolutely fascinated me as a child. But on this holiday in Hungary, when I was only four years old, my father used to put a butterfly net in my hand and tell me to go out and look at the beautiful local butterflies on the hill behind our house.'

There was an incident over a nest of hornets in her bedroom. 'A fellow called Joszef called in to rid my bedroom of hornets. Of course I knew nothing about the dangers of hornets and was fascinated by these large wasps. I also remember lying in my cot looking at the ceiling and seeing all the moths around the lamp. Another of my great joys was catching ladybirds and I asked my father how it was that one ladybird had more spots than another, so this was an initial entomological observation. I also remember that I could tell a comma butterfly from a small tortoiseshell butterfly, both of which look very much alike even now if I look at them. There's a certain general resemblance. So I think I can say with all modesty that I was an early entomologist.'

Rozsika was one of seven children and Dame Miriam loved being spoilt by her aunts. 'They were so terribly kind to me. One of my aunts had a Dachshund called Masha which she used to put into the perambulator instead of my dolls. One of the happiest times of my life was just before the outbreak of World War One, wheeling Masha about in the dolls' pram.

'One of my favourite aunts asked me what I would like as a goodbye gift when we left and, after thinking the matter over for some time, I said a ring. And people didn't even know that I was aware of what a ring was and they all roared with laughter and then I felt terribly embarrassed and that memory comes down the years – about 90 years – to remind me of my two very, very nice aunts. It was a gold ring with pink topaz in it. I gave it to my oldest daughter as a present.

'That was just before we left for England at the outbreak of World War One. We had a hazardous journey home which I remember patchily. I was desperately unhappy because they left behind a painting book I'd had with coloured birds and that was really a great disappointment to me on the journey home, and

to add to the problem we lost all our luggage on the way back from Hungary to England. There was no connection between Hungary and Germany at that time and we had to walk across the frontier. My sister was so young that she had to be carried whereas I was old enough to walk myself, although I was rather a fat child at that stage.'

Dame Miriam also recalls that this was the first time in her life she had been hungry. 'Not just hungry between two meals or something like that but really hungry. We were each given on the train one small piece of cake – that was all that could be afforded or risked – and I remember looking with envy at my sister working her way through a rather – as I thought – bigger piece than I'd had. In the train I sang all the German national songs I'd learnt in the past and my mother went through agonies because it was really dangerous to talk in German. However, we finally arrived and the journey was over and somehow, although I was only five years old, I had a feeling that something else was over. I can't explain that. Something I must have heard or some song that had been sung.

'When we arrived at the station, I remember seeing the stationmaster with a top hat on, saying: "Thank God you've arrived!" Apparently he'd been given a terrible time by my grandfather who was worried that his son had got captured and was imprisoned.

'We went down to Tring to my grandfather's house. I remember playing Happy Families in the nursery. It was a game about natural history – plums and fruit and blossoms and various things – and I thought this was a wonderful game. Only this time the cards were in German and I could only call them in German because I hadn't learnt the names of fruit and so forth in English. The aunts had taught them to me in Hungary. Then comes the beginning of World War One and that I can remember with great clarity – I suppose the outbreak of war was the only topic of conversation. I remember all sorts of episodes. For instance soldiers who came to be initiated into drill. They were chaps from the mines, in mufti – that's what they called it – in ordinary clothes, being drilled by a single soldier in uniform and taught which was their right hand and which was their left because these people were so under-educated that they didn't know the difference between one hand and another. My grandfather used to go and sit on a little camp stool which was handed to him by the officer in charge and watch the drill. He was a very, very patriotic man and provided the regiment with cigars and all sorts of odd things. The Northumberland Fusiliers they were.

'As the nurses pushed our prams up the high street at Tring, any soldier who came up and said: "Hello, how are you?" received a packet of cigarettes, so we became frightfully popular and we were jokingly called the Rothschild Artillery – by the troops. Our nurses had a special fawn-coloured uniform with little bonnets and we must have been a really funny troop.'

When did Dame Miriam become aware of her Rothschild lineage? 'I wasn't aware of it at all at that stage. I just thought it was normal to have our perambulators decorated by the Queen, but Rothschild never entered my mind except as an ordinary name until I was almost in my teens.

'We finally left Tring when a house was ready for us in London. The house was called Arundel House. It was in Kensington Palace Gardens, a wonderfully quiet street on the outside of Kensington Gardens. All thoughts of Tring faded away and I became a child living in London.'

Kensington Palace Gardens stretches from Bayswater Road to Kensington High Street. Lined with palatial Georgian houses, it is one of the most prestigious private roads in the world; Arundel House is now the Romanian Embassy.

'When Rozsika gave birth to another daughter, she was named Kathleen Annie because,' says Dame Miriam, 'my favourite housemaid at Tring had been called Annie and I loved her dearly, so I insisted that my second sister should be called Annie. But afterwards Annie was dropped – although not officially – and she was always called Nica, which was short for Pannonica, the name my father had given to a new species of moth he had found in Hungary, which was where he went every year for at least six weeks of collecting of moths and butterflies and plants when he visited my mother's home.'

Nica married Baron Jules de Koenigswarter and became a much-loved patron of the New York jazz scene. Charlie 'Bird' Parker died in her Manhattan apartment, while Thelonious Monk named one of his songs *Pannonica* after her and eventually came to live in her home in New Jersey.

Dame Miriam's other sister was born Elizabeth Charlotte. 'I couldn't say "Elizabeth" and so I nicknamed her Liberty, and that was the name she was known by all the other members of the family and any friends.' Liberty won an art scholarship to the Paris Conservatoire, but in adult life she was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and lived quietly with a household of carers until she came to live with Dame Miriam in Ashton Wold. They had lunch together every day until her death at the age of 78.

Their mother, Rozsika von Wertheimstein, had been a champion lawn tennis player in Hungary. 'She was a very beautiful woman. She had a strange feature, too, which I've never seen again.' With the precision of a scientist preparing a lab report, Dame Miriam describes her mother's eyes: 'She had dark, dark brown eyes, but each eye had a purple ring to it, about a quarter of an inch of purple around these dark brown eyes. She must have had special muscles to the eyes because they could flicker in a way that I've never seen since on any human being. I think that's one of the reasons why she was a very quick reader – because the muscular power in her eyes was so great. She could move them rapidly up and down a line and she was a voracious reader. She was like the woman in Hans Andersen's fairy tales who would read all the newspapers in the world and then forget them again, whereas my mother seemed to remember

a thousand newspapers. Every day she had a Hungarian newspaper, a German newspaper, an English newspaper, and quite often a French one, too, and she read all the political articles in these papers. I can hear the sound of her flicking the pages over, so fast, and I've never again met a woman who could read at that speed.

'My father went to Rothschilds every morning, leaving the house at eight am, because in those days it took about an hour to get from Kensington Palace Gardens to the bank. Despite all his interests in science and in natural history, he never missed a day.

'He was very interested in the gold refinery operated by Rothschilds and invented all sorts of things for collecting gold, and working on gold from a scientific point of view. When I was about 12 or 13 years old, he took me to see the refinery, and I'll never forget the thrill I had at seeing a man with an enormous long iron cup at the end of a rod pouring liquid gold from one crucible into the other. Liquid gold flowing, it was a marvellous sight. My father told me that he even collected gold from the mud off a worker's feet: that after they'd been at work in the refinery, they had to scrape their boots on a metal scraper because in the dust and the mud that came off, my father extracted gold.

'When my father came home in the evening, my mother not unnaturally felt that, as he'd been away all day, they might go together perhaps to a concert or to a dinner party or something amusing and enjoyable which she could take part in, but my father used to say to her: 'Come and watch me set my butterflies', and that was supposed to be the amusement for the evening. My poor mother just had to sit and watch him while he pushed the butterflies' wings about. Very characteristic of my father who thought that the most interesting thing in the world were the Hungarian butterflies he managed to catch.'

What does Dame Miriam now think of her father's butterfly collection?

'The haphazard collecting of butterflies is very bad, but I don't ban children collecting male butterflies with nets. You can never learn about butterflies so effectively as you can as a child just by looking at them. My father taught me to release the females because of their powers of reproduction, and to keep just a pair of males for my collection. I think that greatly added to my interest. Of course extensive collecting is very bad and you should always tell a child, after they've got a pair: let the others out. You can catch them to identify them but then let them out. When I was 12 years old I was an ardent collector and I think it was very good for me.'

Her only brother, Victor, who died in 1990, would grow up to become the third Lord Rothschild and an esteemed scientist. As a boy, he was also a keen butterfly collector. 'He was two years younger than I was and we collected together a good bit. He was very aggressive, and pushed me out of the way when he saw the specimen if it was worth catching.' Dame Miriam and Victor have the distinction of being the only brother and sister to be made Fellows of the Royal Society. 'But of course my brother got into the Royal Society long before I did. Chiefly, I think it was prejudice against women because, except for the fact that I hadn't been to a public school like my brother – I was educated, or uneducated, at home – I think I was always a rather better zoologist, the natural history sort, than he was.'

Dame Miriam Rothschild with three of her children, Charlotte, Charles and Johanna

From the collection of Dame Miriam Rothschild

Charles Rothschild's tragic death in 1923 when he was 46 years old was a terrible shock to 15-year-old Dame Miriam. 'I became highly nervous – you might say neurotic – for two years after his death and I completely gave up natural history. I thought it was a cruel and terrible thing to catch all these wonderful butterflies and stick a pin through them. Then, when my brother went to Harrow, which was a public school, he came home one holiday and said to me: "I've got a holiday task of dissecting a frog. Will you come and help me?" I was always anxious to try and help my brother and of course I said: "I'll come and help you", and then we killed this luckless frog by chloroforming it. We made the dissection and I was so thrilled with what I found – the blood system which you could see without any trouble because it was near the surface of the inside skin of the frog. I went straight back into zoology with a pair of scissors in my hand.'

As a child, Dame Miriam spent her summer months in Ashton Wold, the sprawling Northamptonshire house built by Natty Rothschild at the turn of the last century as a gift for Charles. 'Because we lived in the country the only way I could escape from my old governess was to go hunting. We never went to school, and so my sisters and I used to have to sit at a wooden desk, and were taught by an elderly governess. I was hideously bored by the lessons and the easiest and simplest way to get away was by playing tennis tournaments in the summer and going hunting in the winter.

'My mother disapproved of hunting, not because of the fox but because she thought sooner or later we were bound to have accidents, and she was right. Unfortunately only too right, because I had my ribs broken by a fall. I had 14 major falls over the hunting seasons and I also broke my thumb in one hand. The hunting was a very dangerous amusement, but that's what I did, hunting in the winter and catching butterflies and insects and so forth in spring and summer, and I also learnt a bit of botany from my father.'

Dame Miriam is now vehemently opposed to fox hunting: 'It's a cruel, unnecessary sport and very bad for children who learn violence and disagreeable habits from hunting. It's absolutely ridiculous. So-called drag hunting, which doesn't involve live animals but a scented bag of hay, is equally good. If you want to gallop across country, jumping over fences, you can do it in a way that is just as amusing, just as sociable, without the fox. There's only one reason you could put forward "in favour" of hunting, which is that if there was no hunting, the fox would have been virtually exterminated in this country – except perhaps in the Pennines – because people would have been allowed to shoot them. You know what people are like when they have a gun in their hands. You'd never have a fox left. That's the only possible excuse for a totally unnecessary, brutal so-called sport.'

Dame Miriam attended classes in English Literature at Bedford College – then in London's Regent's Park – and took evening classes in zoology at Chelsea Polytechnic, where she developed an interest in marine biology. During the Second World War, she was drafted into the Enigma decryption project at Bletchley Park. 'At the beginning of the war, if you were a scientist, you received orders not to join up any of the forces, you just had to wait. Well, at the outbreak of war I was at Plymouth, where I had been awarded a research table. I was told to wait for instructions, and so for a few months of the first year of the war I continued working on a special chicken food made from seaweed – it was thought to help the war effort if you could feed your chickens without having to feed them on grain which human beings or animals more important than chickens could eat. Suddenly we received a document asking the usual things, you know, "How tall are you?" – ridiculous things like that – and then, "What research are you interested in?" Very soon after that we were told to go to Bletchley, where I spent two years trying to help decode German wireless messages. For me they were the most hideous two years you could possibly imagine, because I was always nervous about secrets getting out and inefficient protection against careless talk. I hated Bletchley. We were very sparse on the ground at the beginning, but when we finished there were five thousand people. There is no shadow of doubt that Bletchley was a great success, but I agree with what people said after the war, that we didn't win the war – that was all rubbish – but we did shorten it probably by two years with our research.'

When war was looming, Dame Miriam came up with the idea that valuable collections should be moved out of the British Museum into large country houses such as Ashton Wold. 'My suggestion was turned down by the British Museum – on what grounds? That there would be no war, that I was just a silly female warmonger. I'd spent a lot of time in Switzerland and jolly well knew that there was going to be a war, but they thought I was talking rubbish. Nevertheless, the idea was simmering in the minds of people like the Marquis of Northampton and people with the really big houses. And so at the beginning of the war that quickly got going and this was one of the early houses that managed to get one of the departments – the helminthological one. The director of that part of the British Museum lived here during the war with his wife and daughter, and he brought the collection down here and stored it here.'

Ashton Wold was also turned into a hospital. 'I made a point of preferring to have private soldiers rather than officers and many of them were refugees from Nazi Germany.'

One of those wounded soldiers was a handsome water polo champion, Captain George Lanyi, a non-practising Hungarian Jew whose name was anglicized to Lane to protect him in case of capture. Dame Miriam met George while he was recovering at Ashton Wold, having injured his arm in a parachute jump.

'I said to him: "When you arrive at a village like Ashton, what do you do?" My husband's English was very funny at that time. What he said was: "When I arrive in a *willage* like this, I first look for a *wicar* and then a *wirgin*." He could be a very amusing person. It was a wonderful picture, of him looking for a *wirgin*.'

Dame Miriam and George married in August 1943 and have four children still living: Rosie, a psychotherapist; Charles, who was a distinguished biochemist before turning to business; Charlotte, who teaches literacy to adults; and Johanna, who was adopted as a young baby. Another three children died in infancy. Their marriage was dissolved in 1957, but they now share seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. 'We're still great friends,' Dame Miriam insists. 'We separated for very practical reasons. I was always hysterical with the miseries of a town, and when we got married we started off entirely bound to the country. My husband was a parachutist during the war, and got a medal for bravery. He was put into a prisoner-of-war camp from which he escaped for a time. His whole outlook on life had altogether changed when he came

out. All he wanted was to forget the war and have a peculiarly dedicated life in London. We had a family of young children, but I said I couldn't remain married to him if he lived in London, so we separated and got divorced.'

The certificates George won for his champion dairy cows at Ashton Wold still hang in the guest lavatory. George, seven years younger than Dame Miriam, is expected for lunch later in the week together with his second wife, Elizabeth – to whom he's been married for the past 40 years. It seems that Dame Miriam has a knack for synthesizing the many strands of her rich and diverse past.

'On the one hand I had a farm here, on the other hand I was attached to a zoological career. One of my main objects in life has been trying to get a special respect for animals, in the knowledge that the only way for both farming and natural history to continue is to link those two things together: good farming and good science. If you know enough about animal physiology and animal psychology, you have a better chance of finding a link with farming – and without farming where should we be? I can talk the proverbial donkey's hind legs off about the relationship between science, natural history, farming and food production – and medical matters, because we depend on animals for half our medicines. You've only got to think of one thing, penicillin, which has saved millions of lives, and which depends on fungus.'

What does Dame Miriam think of food imports?

'That is a good example of what I'm saying. BSE and the large number of disasters that occur because of this disease need never have happened if proper care had been taken in slaughter houses and that sort of thing.'

But has BSE been a big enough scare to make people wake up to the consequences of intensive farming?

'Unfortunately the human race is so married to money, isn't it? Everything depends on money and people don't see that if you want to survive in this world you've got to think beyond that. It was perfectly unnecessary to have dirty slaughterhouses. Cruel, too. It wasn't necessary and it was a very difficult subject to look into from a scientific point of view. Hideously difficult, and it still isn't solved.'

Dame Miriam doesn't eat meat or wear leather. Famously, she once wore white rubber boots to Buckingham Palace under her evening dress. 'I'm tremendously opposed to the bad treatment of animals from every point of view. I was looking into having trains as slaughterhouses which went from place to place, instead of these appalling trips that those poor animals have to make to get to the slaughterhouse from where they are reared. These movable slaughterhouses were perfectly feasible in every way except they were too expensive. I still think the expense could have been cut down if it had been tackled properly. It would have introduced a system which was beneficial to the animals and to the people who slaughtered them. It was ignored just because it was said to be difficult. It was the correct procedure that should have been taken and wasn't.

'It's like so many things that, when they do happen, people don't understand that there was a period when they didn't happen. For instance, I was terribly against castration without anaesthesia. It cost some ridiculously small sum to give an animal a local injection before he was castrated, but they wouldn't do it. I had a long fight on that one, and people were abysmally stupid over it. Of course now it's practice, people can't imagine why it wasn't done earlier. My own farm manager here said to me: "Mrs Lane, you'll have to give up the farm in the end if you go on like this." So I said: "What does it cost to give a bull a shot before he's castrated?" "It will cost three pence each," or some ridiculous sum like that, so I said: "Oh get lost," and I introduced it at once and then it just caught on. You wouldn't believe it possible how stupid people were over a simple thing like that.'

Her father's legacy has been profound. In 1997 Dame Miriam and Peter Marren co-authored *Rothschild's Reserves, Time and Fragile Nature,* revisiting 182 nature reserves created by Charles Rothschild 85 years before to see what had become of them. Regrettably more than half had been damaged or destroyed. 'All my life I've had close connections with organizations in this country trying to conserve nature. Conservation, farming and landscaping should be closely linked if we're going to succeed.

'My father invented conservation in this country and started the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves. I served on their chief committee for 30 years and helped to get the right areas and make notes about fauna and flora.'

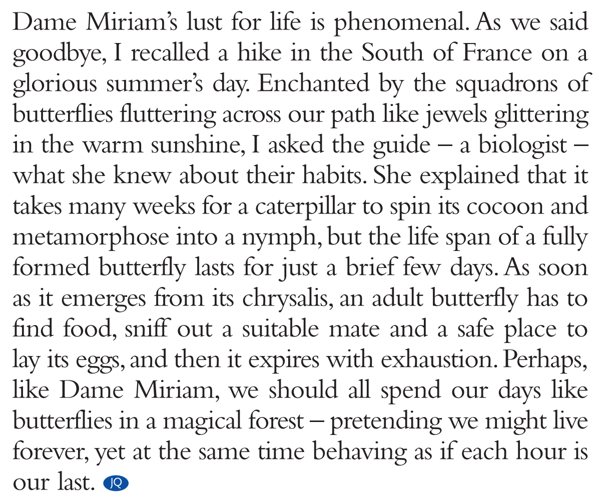
Rothschild Archive

Dame Miriam Rothschild's mother, Rozsika von Wertheimstein

The list of other organizations with which Dame Miriam has been involved is dizzying. 'I generally run four or five committees at a time. Sometimes they achieve important goals, but often they entail endless meetings which are an awful waste of time. Here at the County meetings we look for local effort, which is important. For the first time in my life, I've seen a rise in consciousness in the population, although it's far too little, but it's going in the right direction. When I was chairman of the local RSNC [Royal Society for Nature Conservation], I said that I'd only be chairman until we doubled our number of members, but that when we'd doubled it, I was going to leave. Everyone thought I'd be there for a long time, but within a year our numbers had doubled and therefore I feel we are going in the right direction.'

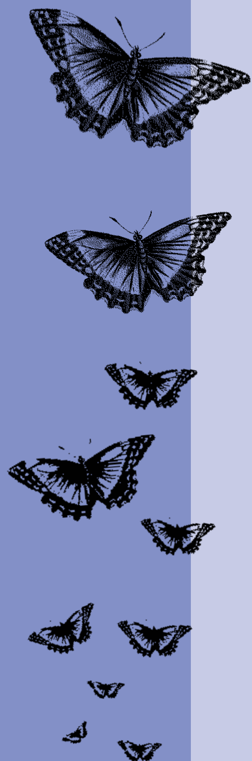
Her latest book, *Insect and Bird Interactions,* which she co-edited with Professor Helmut Van Emden for the Entomological Club, was published at the beginning of this year. 'This volume is about the relationship between birds, insects and modern farming methods. There's one particularly good paper in it on bird eyesight.'

The book should have come out in 1997, but when the original publisher decided to stop publishing books on scientific subjects, a new publisher had to be found. Dame Miriam deeply regrets the delay in its publication. Her own contribution is a paper about the effects of a chemical called pyrazine, and how its odour stimulates the memory of day-old chicks, but she feels that this paper has been superseded by her next paper on the subject, published elsewhere and widely acclaimed, about how, if you subject chickens to pyrazine, they lay larger eggs.



Dame Miriam's lust for life is phenomenal. As we said goodbye, I recalled a hike in the South of France on a glorious summer's day. Enchanted by the squadrons of butterflies fluttering across our path like jewels glittering in the warm sunshine, I asked the guide – a biologist – what she knew about their habits. She explained that it takes many weeks for a caterpillar to spin its cocoon and metamorphose into a nymph, but the life span of a fully formed butterfly lasts for just a brief few days. As soon as it emerges from its chrysalis, an adult butterfly has to find food, sniff out a suitable mate and a safe place to lay its eggs, and then it expires with exhaustion. Perhaps, like Dame Miriam, we should all spend our days like butterflies in a magical forest – pretending we might live forever, yet at the same time behaving as if each hour is our last. JQ

Naomi Gryn is a writer and documentary filmmaker.



Dame Miriam Rothschild

was the first woman to serve on the National Trust's Committee for Conservation and the first woman to become a Trustee of the Natural History Museum. She also became the President of the Society for the Study of Insects, Vice-President of Fauna and Flora International and served on committees for the Royal Entomological Society, the Zoological Society of London and the Marine Biological Association, to name but a few of her professional associations.

In the 1950s she helped gather scientific evidence on homosexuality for the Wolfenden Committee, which produced a report in 1957 that led to the decriminalizing of homosexuality in England. Other humanitarian activities include the creation of the Schizophrenia Research Fund, dedicated to promoting the understanding, treatment and cure of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses.

Dame Miriam has written prolifically, with over 300 scientific papers published to date. She revealed that wood pigeons with darkened plumage were suffering from tuberculosis of the adrenal glands and were a major source of avian tuberculosis among cattle. In another paper she observed that warning coloration in insects is directed against predators that hunt by sight and that insects also produce odours to protect themselves against predators that hunt by smell. In 1972 she provided the first description of the flea's jumping mechanism.

Her first book, co-written with Theresa Clay, *Fleas, Flukes, and Cuckoos,* was published in 1952. Over the next thirty years, she co-authored six volumes cataloguing her father's collection of fleas – the largest such collection in existence – followed by a wonderful biography of her uncle, *Walter, Dear Lord Rothschild: birds, butterflies and history* (1983). Other works include *The Butterfly Gardener* (1983), *Colour Atlas of Insect Tissue* (1985), *Animals And Man* (1986), *Butterfly Cooing Like A Dove* (1991) and *Rothschilds' Gardens* (1996).

Despite lack of formal academic credentials, Dame Miriam has been awarded many honorary degrees and fellowships for her scientific research – including a DSc from Oxford University – as well as serving as visiting Professor of Biology at the Royal Free from 1968 to 1973. In 1985 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In her citation from the Royal Society, she was credited for her work in the histology, morphology and taxonomy of fleas, for having made many distinguished advances in scientific knowledge and for having been the first to establish that the reproductive cycle of rabbit fleas is under the direct control of the hormones of their host.

Having been made a CBE in 1982, Dame Miriam was awarded a DBE in 2000 for services to nature conservation and biochemical research.