

Book review

A Life of Sir Francis Galton

Nicholas Wright Gillham

Oxford University Press, New York. 2002; 416 pp. £22.50, hardback. ISBN 0-19-514365-5

Heredity (2002) 89, 328. doi:10.1038/sj.hdy.6800125

In 1865, Francis Galton published two articles on 'Hereditary Talent and Character'. Already in his early forties, he was known in scientific circles as a geographer with a flair for quantification, most recently working in meteorology (it was Galton who identified and named the 'anticyclone'), and to the wider public as an explorer of southern Africa and a travel writer. The new articles marked a decisive shift. Emphasising the pedigrees of eminent families, Galton argued that attaining high status was largely a matter of biological inheritance. He also suggested how desirable it might be to encourage breeding among superior men and women and discourage it among their inferiors. As Galton's first biographer and major disciple Karl Pearson pointed out, Galton here announced themes that would occupy him for the rest of his long and productive life, including anthropometry, statistics, the analysis of pedigrees, the dominance of 'nature over nurture' (a phrase Galton popularised) and 'eugenics' (his coinage).

In this new biography, Nicholas Wright Gillham draws extensively on Pearson, but also on contemporary reviews and news reports, recent historical scholarship and his own archival diggings. The result is a splendidly readable and informative guide to Galton's life, works and impact. There are fine chapters on Galton's education, his travels and his many and varied contributions on such topics as the use of fingerprinting in forensics and the study of mental imagery. The inevitable and

numerous scientific quarrels are chronicled in detail. Galton's central role in the promotion of eugenics is dealt with unflinchingly. But it is the accounts of Galton's investigations of heredity and their reception that make the book so useful and so absorbing. Gillham writes as a biologist and, I suspect, an experienced teacher of biology; for he succeeds remarkably well at communicating the shape and content of Galton's work on the physiology and populational dynamics of inheritance. The outstanding example is the evocative description of Galton's 1877 evening discourse before the Royal Institution on 'Typical Laws of Heredity', where, by way of some clever physical modelling, Galton introduced the notion of regression to the mean.

If there is disappointment for the reader, it is because, in the end, Gillham does not manage much better than previous historians in making sense of Galton as a thinker or a person. For all the superb exposition here of Galton's scientific arguments, there is no wrestling with the question of why, despite serious and sustained criticism, Galton became so fervently committed to hereditarianism. Nor does Gillham probe much behind that other major commitment, eugenics. Others had read Darwin on the selective breeding of plants and animals without seeing the selective breeding of humans as a logical next-step. Perhaps Gillham does not face these issues squarely because there are no satisfying explanations to be had. If so, then Galton, for all the generous attention of this excellent biography (and surely it will be *the* biography for a long time to come), will remain much as he has been, impressive but also inscrutable.

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