
Book review

Bennett, J. H. (ed.): Natural Selection, Heredity, and Eugenics. Including selected correspondence of R.A. Fisher with Leonard Darwin and Others. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983. vii + 306 pp., 3 figs., 1 tab. Hard bound £ 17.50.

This book represents a selection from R. A. Fisher's letters on natural selection, heredity, and eugenics.

The structure of the book has been greatly influenced by Fisher's extensive correspondence with Leonard Darwin over more than 20 years. Many of their letters in the period 1915–29 were concerned with questions later considered in Fisher's book "The genetical theory of natural selection" (1930). This fact and the considerable influence of that book on much of the other correspondence have necessitated a somewhat lengthy introduction. Chapter 1 is concerned with the circumstances in which "Genetical theory" was written, its main features, the reception it was given, and its impact on evolutionary thought. Chapter 2 contains two unpublished papers by Fisher from 1911–12 dealing with Mendelism, biometry, and selection. The Darwin-Fisher letters, separated into pre- and post-Genetical theory periods, are presented in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, and Fisher's letters to other

correspondents in Chapter 5. Fortunately, it has been possible to add to the interest of this material by including in Chapters 3 and 4, extracts from Darwin's letters to Fisher and, in Chapter 5, some relevant correspondence from a few of the eminent individuals to whom Fisher was writing. Before 1930 Fisher had very little correspondence on natural selection and heredity with anyone other than Darwin, whereas after "Genetical theory" was published, various readers wrote with questions and comments stemming from the book. A number of Fisher's letters in Chapters 4 and 5 may be seen as providing an extension or elaboration of arguments contained in "Genetical theory". Of the four appendices in the present volume, A and C comprise reprints of two reviews by Fisher referred to in the text, whilst B and D contain material hitherto unpublished – a review by Fisher of J. B. S. Haldane's book "The causes of evolution" and Fisher's last paper on natural selection which he read at a meeting in Adelaide in 1959.

Geneticists, who are interested in history, will find this book most valuable.

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