BOOKS: HISTORY OF SCIENCE

The Childless Father of Eugenics

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Like his cousin Charles Darwin, Francis Galton (1822–1911) was a striking example of the amateur scientist in Victorian Britain. Each had the good fortune to be born into a prosperous family, had a passion for exploring the natural world, and was deeply conventional in his social tastes and attitudes, but equally unconventional in his religious beliefs. In different ways, each man helped shape the modern world. Despite their sharing these cultural similarities, their personal circumstances differed and their historical fortunes have diverged. In *A Life of Sir Francis Galton*, Nicholas Gillham offers a fascinating portrait of the comparatively neglected cousin and his contributions to a wide range of fields.

A Life of Sir Francis Galton From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics
by Nicholas Wright Gillham

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Both Darwin and Galton married late, but Darwin sired ten children (not seven, as Gillham states), whereas the father of eugenics was childless. Darwin fretted that his children would bear the marks of his anxieties and ill health: indeed, had Galton coined the term before Darwin's death, Darwin would probably have thought himself eugenically unsound. In actuality, he continued an intellectual dynasty, with three sons who became Fellows of the Royal Society and a still-vigorous pedigree. Darwin deeply loved his wife, Emma; the record is not especially revealing about the private life of Francis and Louisa Galton. Although never touched by scandal, their marriage does not seem to have overflowed with affection. Gillham reasonably speculates that Galton and Louisa regretted their childless state: certainly Galton never revealed any fears that children of his would have been eugenically unsound.

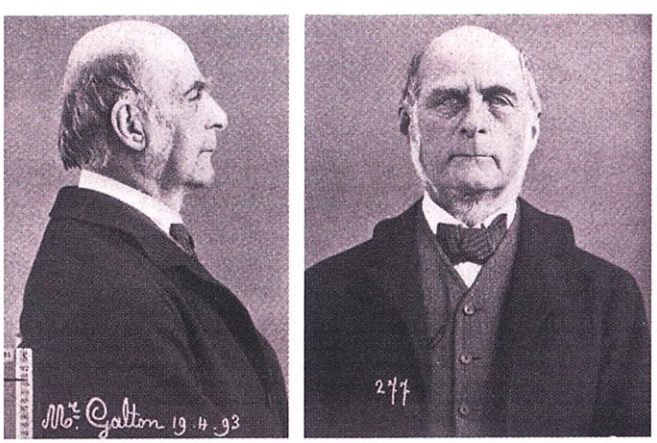
Galton's relationship to his cousin was also slightly fraught. There is no reason not to believe Galton's famous statement, in his 1909 autobiography, that reading *The Origin of Species* marked an epoch in his life. Evolution obviously provided him with a scientific credo, and Darwin offered that. But Galton hardly spent the next half-century arguing für Darwin. His critique of Darwin's unfortunate theory of pangenesis was not done with much subtlety, and his work after Darwin's death altered rather than perpetuated the Darwinian tradition.

Nor have Darwin and Galton fared equally well historically. Darwin has become an icon. New biographies, which appear almost annually, are simply part of the ongoing attempt to interpret Darwin's ideas in a modern context. The previous full biography of Galton (*1*) is almost three decades old, and too many people remember Galton simply as the father of eugenics. There is much more to him than that, as Gillham, a professor of genetics at Duke University, systematically reveals.

There is much to admire in this book. It has been difficult for would-be Galton biographers to escape the shadow of the statistician Karl Pearson's monumental, four-part *Life, Letters and Labours* of his patron (*2*). To his credit, Gillham has returned to the extensive Galton archive in University College London and reconstructed his subject's life afresh. He is wonderful on Galton's African expedition, a serious attempt to explore new regions of what was still the "Dark Continent." In many ways, Galton's adventure was more taxing (if less revealing) than Darwin's *Beagle* years. Africa helped establish Galton's credibility as a serious Victorian man of science. It demonstrated his physical vigor and capacity to negotiate in tight situations. In addition, these African years are hard to square with the photographs of Galton in old age, when the staid Victorian male shines through, the man who traveled mostly to European watering places.

After the Royal Geographical Society provided Galton with his entry into scientific circles, he gradually extended his brief to include anthropology, meteorology, psychology, criminology, and, above all, heredity. He became obsessed with genealogy, trying to quantify exactly what the burdens (and rewards) of history had left to each of us. He spent large sums trying to encourage people to write down their pasts and keep regular records of themselves and their children. He wanted to measure everything, from seed size to muscular strength. His lasting contribution to statistics, the notion of correlation, was the result of his passionate desire to know how generations were related to each other. He often massaged his figures (as Gillham points out), but his mathematical tools were better than his data.

Gillham describes all these many facets of Galton's long life with care and a nice narrative touch. He sticks admirably to his sources: Galton's own writings, the archival remains, and the reactions of those around him. His reconstruction of Galton's relations with Pearson, the marine biologist Walter Weldon, and other disciples, as well as his account of the origins of famous debates between the biometricians and the Mendelians are executed with the eye of a modern geneticist who has done his homework. The result is a modern interpretation of Galton and his legacy: the positive and the negative, the science as well as the scientism.



Mug shot. Galton was photographed and had his measurements taken during his 1893 visit to Alphonse Bertillon's Criminal Identification Laboratory in Paris.

What Gillham doesn't do, and it may not be possible, is to make Galton into a fully rounded human being. After Galton's death, his grandniece Eva Biggs, who had taken care of him after Louisa's death, wrote of the wit and fun that dinner parties with Galton had exhibited. One hopes that it was so, but Galton firmly kept any lightness out of his published writings. Even after reading Gillham's informative biography, Galton remains low on the list of great past scientists with whom I would choose to spend an evening.

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References

1. D. W. Forrest, *Francis Galton: The Life and Work of a Victorian Genius* (Elek, London, 1974).
2. K. Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge), vol. 1 (1914), vol. 2 (1924), vols. 3a, 3b (1930).

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