

EDITOR'S NOTE

SIR FRANCIS GALTON IN PERSPECTIVE

The legacy of Sir Francis Galton—an industrious inventor, explorer, statistician, hereditarian pioneer, and founder of eugenics—is one that properly deserves further reflection and greater appreciation. Our second in an occasional feature titled *The Classics' Corner*, offers to TOQ readers Galton's influential two-part article, "Hereditary Talent and Character," which originally appeared in *Macmillan's magazine* in 1865. The often cited piece formed the basis of his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius*.

In fact, much of what is taken for granted in behavioral science research, a substantially refined understanding of the *interaction of nature and nurture* in human behavioral development, stems from Galton's visionary insights. As with most geniuses, Galton was far ahead of his time in proposing the study of twins as a research tool for identifying the impact of inherited traits. His work is just beginning to receive the appreciation it justly merits. In the second edition of their textbook, *Behavioral Genetics: A Primer*, authors Robert Plomin, John C. DeFries, and Gerald E. McClearn summarize Galton's early influence upon the field, noting,

But it was Galton who championed the idea of the inheritance of behavior and vigorously consolidated and extended it. In effect, we may regard Galton's efforts as the beginning of behavioral genetics.¹

In his 1998 tome *The g Factor*, the distinguished psychologist Arthur R. Jensen summarizes Galton's career and pioneering role in the history of the behavioral sciences. Jensen recognizes Galton as "one of the two founding fathers of empirical psychology, along with Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), who established the first laboratory of experimental psychology in 1879 in Leipzig."²

Perhaps Galton's most important contribution to the *survival* of Western civilization was his enthusiastic dedication to developing the science of eugenics. For Galton, the effort to "improve the inborn qualities of a race" was paramount. Everything else depended on it. Advanced and evolving societies required men and women of sound stock, exceptional character, and remarkable talent to cultivate the best physical, cultural, and mental qualities of any race. Civilized societies that failed to grasp this essential fact mortgaged their future with a dysgenic decline in racial qualities.

Galton noticed a phenomenon he referred to as the regression to the mean, which he elaborated in terms of character traits in his 1883 book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty*,

The fact of an individual being naturally gifted with high qualities, may be due either to his being an exceptionally good specimen of a poor race, or an average specimen of a high one. The difference of origin would betray itself in his descendants; they would revert towards the typical center of their race, deteriorating in the first case but not in the second. The two cases, though theoretically distinct, are confused in reality, owing to the frequency with which exceptional personal qualities connote the departure of the entire nature of the individual from his ancestral type, and the formation of a new strain having its own typical center. It is hardly necessary to add that it is in this indirect way that natural selection improves a race. The two events of selection and difference of race ought, however, to be carefully distinguished in broad practical considerations, while the frequency of their concurrence is born in mind and allowed for.

So long at the race remains radically the same, the stringent selection of the best specimens to rear and breed from, can never lead to any permanent result. The attempt to raise the standard of such a race is like the labor of Sisyphus in rolling his stone uphill; let the effort be relaxed for a moment, and the stone will roll back . . . Whenever a low race is preserved under conditions of life that exact a high level of efficiency, it must be subjected to rigorous selection.³

Galton's grasp of the significance of individual and racial differences across human traits of character, intellect, and temperament, exceeded many of his contemporaries and remains, in certain quarters of society, lost on elites who cling to the "blank slate" concept of human nature. Galton's impact serves as a lesson for Western nations, namely that one individual can profoundly influence the course of history, particularly the future course of an advanced civilization.

Gavan Tredoux's excellent review in this issue of Nicholas Wright Gillham's biography *A Life of Sir Francis Galton* puts Galton's life into perspective, weighing the achievements of an exemplary individual who exhibited an unusual curiosity, drive, and intelligence to contemplate the means of improving the future of the race.

END NOTES

1. Robert Plomin, John C. Defries, and Gerald E. McClearn *Behavioral Genetics: A Primer*, second edition, New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1990, p. 29.
2. Arthur R. Jensen *The g Factor: The Science of Mental Ability*, Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998, p. 9.
3. Francis Galton *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*, second edition, London: J. M. Dent Ltd., 1928, pp. 198-199.