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Book Review

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Perspectives on Genetics. Anecdotal, Historical, and Critical Commentaries 1987–1998. Edited by JAMES F. CROW *and* WILLIAM F. DOVE. University of Wisconsin Press. 2000. 723 pages. ISBN 0 299 16604 X. $19·95 (paperback).

Many will be familiar with the ' Perspectives ' articles published on a regular basis in the journal ' Genetics ', under the editorial guidance of James Crow and William Dove. This book now brings together over 100 of these articles, which appeared between 1987 and 1998. Even if you have been a regular reader, this book will be a joy, and for those who are not, it is a not-to-be missed opportunity to catch up. The contributions, many of which are by one or other of the editors, range from short, anecdotal and historical accounts of genetics to more conventional mini-reviews. The historical contributions are usually fascinating, always interesting and sometimes very amusing. A letter from the Office of Censorship to H. J. Muller, dated 23rd June 1943, asks him to explain a telegram he has received, which reads ' ARISTALESS DEAD WANTS ARISTALESS AND ARISTAPEDIA BADLY ', although the essay (on H. J. Muller, Communism and the Cold War) does not relate how Muller replied to the Censor.

I found the historical memoirs of the founding fathers of modern genetics the most interesting – my students are not surprised, they say an increasing interest in the history of your subject is a well-known symptom of senility. Some subjects are obvious choices, for example, James Crow's well-referenced piece on J. B. S. Haldane, published to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Haldane's birth, contains much more than an obituary but less than a biography, so usefully filling a gap. Other subjects are perhaps less well known and so the articles are all the more welcome. I was unfamiliar with the many contributions that Lancelot Hogben had made to genetics, and so I found Sahotra Sarkar's article, another commemorating the 100th anniversary of a subject's birth, especially illuminating.

Then there are numerous articles devoted to historical accounts relating to organisms rather than people. The usual suspects, *Caenorhabditis*, *Drosophila*, *E. coli*, maize, mouse, *Neurospora*, T4, yeast, are all well represented, but the essay ' Whatever Happened to Paramecium Genetics? ' is equally interesting. The histories of genes (*cyc* 1 in yeast, *engrailed*, *rosy* and *white* in *Drosophila*, *mut*S in *E.coli*, *waxy* in maize) as well as processes (unequal crossing over, illegitimate recombination, somatic cell hybridization, transposition) are also common subjects. Places are another theme. Bar Harbor, Caltech, Cold Spring Harbor, Edinburgh, Harvard, Oak Ridge are among those featured, perhaps displaying a not-surprising trans-Atlantic bias.

I am sure that some of the historical content needs to be treated with caution while it cannot be claimed that all articles give an unbiased account of their subject, but this does not detract from their readability. This is a book that can be dipped into at leisure. It has the advantage of any collection of short stories. Even a limited amount of time can be usefully occupied in its reading. But there is the added advantage that interest, that will inevitably be kindled, can be satisfied by pursuit of the numerous references included with each article.

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