Genétique

Professor Lints, head of the genetics laboratory at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, has given us a good, solid, up to date introduction to genetics, starting at square one. He pursues a fairly straight and narrow path through cell division, Mendel, mapping, extra-nuclear inheritance, mutation, molecular genetics, developmental genetics, and evolution. The treatment is broadly historical, the tone academic. I would characterise it as an Establishment book: it is authoritative, didactic, sound. It traces the development of the central ideas of genetics without rattling the skeletons in the cupboard. In case that makes it sound boring, I hasten to add that it is an attractively produced and well illustrated book, pleasant to handle and pleasant to read.

For an Anglo-Saxon reviewer it is not too easy to place the likely readership. According to the preface, it is directed “aux étudiants, aux passionnés, aux curieux des choses de la vie”. As a student textbook it suffers from the avoidance of statistics—even tests of segregation ratios—and of chemistry. Sixty years ago, in the heroic days, English extra-mural students used books like this, which gave them the chance to take a first year university course with just a few of the most inaccessible parts judiciously pruned. Now, in my experience, they’ve gone soft, they want lots of human interest and pop topics, or they’ve gone cynical and demand a critical outsider’s view. Perhaps Francophones are made of sterner stuff and if so they would be very well served by this book. It is up to date without any hint of trendiness, and I noticed very few mistakes (Lyonisation in man is said to occur at 12 weeks, and the few formulae given of nucleotides show L-ribose). I particularly liked the explanation of regression to the mean in quantitative characters, a topic second to none as a source of confusion and error in non-technical books. Professor Lints makes it all crystal clear and obvious in a few sentences.

It may be that some readers of this Journal, having mastered clinical genetics through their own efforts from roots in some other discipline, have always wondered what ‘real’ genetics students do. Read this book and you will find out, and enjoy finding out.

ANDREW P READ