PALMOPLANTAR HYPERKERATOSIS AND DEAFNESS

I found the paper written by Sharland et al. most interesting. However, in addition to the reference to Bittici they mentioned, the combination of palmoplantar keratoderma and deafness has been described before, without widespread ectodermal dysplasia, in two atopic brothers,1 in two brothers in a later paper by Hatamochi et al.2 and in three female members of a family in two of whom there was evidence of minor atopy.3

The extent of the keratoderma may vary and there does seem to be a wide range of onset of keratoderma from infancy to late childhood. This compares with the usual early infancy onset of dominant palmoplantar keratoderma when it occurs as an isolated abnormality.

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Historians have in recent years uncovered a rich seam in the history of human genetics and, in particular, eugenics. This book analyses the history of the Eugenics Society in Britain from the time of its inception in 1907 to its recent demise (at least in its original form). It is based mainly on unpublished papers held by the Society itself, which often give a more vivid reflection of the attitudes of those involved than do their publications. The author hopes that her account will not upset those in the Society who gave her free access to its records, but I expect that it will, at least for those whom the concept of eugenics still holds an attraction.

The Eugenics movement in Britain, led by the Eugenics Society, was in many respects a mirror for the views and prejudices of society, or more accurately the narrow segment of society which was predominant up to the end of the Second World War.

The opening section shows how the Society was preoccupied by class, by the dangers that poverty and social injustice posed in threatening to overturn the established order, and how its proponents attempted to provide a valid biological basis to underpin their strategies. ‘Pauperism’, ‘the residuum’, ‘the dangerous class’ are terms that recur in the agenda of problems to be combated.

The author traces the closely intertwined development of eugenics and human genetics; the use of pedigrees, especially in relation to mental and physical handicap, was often more polemical than scientific, though in contrast to America (and later Nazi Germany), the medical profession and politicians were never to accept the view proposed, that society as a whole would degenerate unless legal measures for isolation and sterilisation of affected people were adopted. Especially fascinating to geneticists is how the extraordinary talent in human genetics between the two world wars, including Haldane, Hogben, Fisher, and Penrose, was arrayed on both sides of the eugenics debate. Even the most convinced anti-eugenists, such as Hogben, and Penrose, nevertheless developed their mathematical approaches and main research areas around the problems dictated by the eugenics movement.

The insights into the personalities of these remarkable scientists are also valuable in understanding how their attitudes were formed: Hogben and Penrose as conscientious officers in the First World War, with Hogben imprisoned during the later part of it; Haldane embracing Marxism just before Hogben was becoming disillusioned with it; Fisher and his 17 year old bride farming a smallholding before his move to the plant breeding station (Buttenheath); what an amazing group of people these were!

In Britain the eugenicists, and the Eugenics Society, largely lost their battle. The irony of Penrose, holder of the Galton Chair, stating that during his tenure ‘nobody taught eugenics and the Galton Professor of Eugenics was not a eugenicist’, and his changing the titles of his department and its journal from Eugenics to Human Genetics, can be seen as the end of eugenics as a coherent philosophy and policy in Britain, with the change of the Society’s name to ‘Galton Institute’ in 1989 as the epilogue to a long drama. It is now for the members of the new society to ensure that its policy is as new as its constitution.

In the closing pages of this valuable book, the author points out the dangers posed by the human genome project in providing the possibility of a ‘new eugenics’. These dangers are real, but, in Britain at least, I wonder whether we will be more likely to see eugenic policies again proposed as the answer to the deep seated social problems of deprivation, inequality, homelessness, and their attendant medical and educational aspects. As the author of this book can give pictures not so far removed from those of the Victorian England that gave rise to the deeply flawed science and damaging social philosophy of eugenics.

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NOTICE