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Francis Galton: Pioneer of Heredity and Biometry

Michael Bulmer

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If not for the work of his half cousin Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory might have met a somewhat different fate. In particular, with no direct evidence of natural selection and no convincing theory of heredity to explain it, Darwin needed a mathematical explanation of variability and heredity. Galton's work in biometry?the application of statistical methods to the biological sciences?laid the foundations for precisely that. This book offers readers a compelling portrait of Galton as the "father of biometry," tracing the development of his ideas and his accomplishments, and placing them in their scientific context.

Though Michael Bulmer introduces readers to the curious facts of Galton's life?as an explorer, as a polymath and member of the Victorian intellectual aristocracy, and as a proponent of eugenics?his chief concern is with Galton's pioneering studies of heredity, in the course of which he invented the statistical tools of regression and correlation. Bulmer describes Galton's early ambitions and experiments?his investigations of problems of evolutionary importance (such as the evolution of gregariousness and the function of sex), and his movement from the development of a physiological theory to a purely statistical theory of heredity, based on the properties of the normal distribution. This work, culminating in the law of ancestral heredity, also put Galton at the heart of the bitter conflict between the "ancestrians" and the "Mendelians" after the rediscovery of Mendelism in 1900. A graceful writer and an expert biometrician, Bulmer details the eventual triumph of biometrical methods in the history of quantitative genetics based on Mendelian principles, which underpins our understanding of evolution today.

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