

Eugenics at the Royal Society

Introduction

This research project will provide the first detailed examination of the role of the Royal Society in both the acceptance and rejection of eugenics in the period up to 1950.¹

The project is located within the ongoing efforts to critically reevaluate the history of eugenics, and will entail an extensive engagement with, and a detailed investigation of, unexplored and under-utilised archives at the Royal Society. It will contribute to, and enhance, a drive to digitise and make RS archives accessible, and will provide the student with a valuable employability skills and career development.

1. The research project

The student will work closely with staff at the Royal Society to delineate the historical relationship (personal, financial, and intellectual) between the RS and eugenics.

(a.) Context

Interest in eugenics has never been higher and the desire of established institutions to confront uncomfortable aspects of their past, especially those relating to empire and race, never more prevalent. This project sits within both contexts.

The Royal Society provided an important platform for the development of British eugenics: many prominent eugenicists (from Galton on) were active fellows; Pearson established biometrics in a series of articles in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions* (1894-1901); and the Eugenics Society held regular meetings at the RS. Yet there has never been a dedicated and detailed study of the relationship between eugenics and the Royal Society.

This project will allow this history to be charted for the first time, and in doing so will enable a fuller understanding of the interdependence of race, class, and empire in the construction of eugenic theory. British eugenics is primarily understood as a class doctrine, as opposed to the more obviously racially driven eugenics of the USA and Germany. A study of eugenics at the RS, however, is likely to show the importance of imperial activities and racial thought (expeditions, ethnological and anthropological studies, population studies), and how they intertwined with class concepts, in framing British eugenics.

(b.) Research Questions

The project will ask:

- What degree of support for/opposition to eugenics was there at the RS 1860-1950?
- How did the eugenic views of individual fellows impact on the policy of the Society?
- What does the place of eugenics tell us about the policing of boundaries between mainstream and non-mainstream science?
- How were government grants used to promote eugenic research?
- How does the history of eugenics at the RS connect with and inform the movement to decolonise and reinterpret key aspects of British history and literature through the intertwined perspectives of race and class?

(c.) Research resources

¹ NB - 1860 is chosen as the starting as this is when Francis Galton, nominated by Charles Darwin, was elected a FRS; 1950 is the end date to enable the student to take their study beyond the end of the Second World War. 1950 is the latest we can go, whilst still having full access to RS records, as some of the personal material has a 70-year privacy rule.

New research into the place of eugenics at the Royal Society is made possible by the extensive, archives held by the Society. Many of these, e.g. those relating to the distribution of Government Grants, are almost entirely unexplored, and some, including the Referees' Reports, are currently in the process of digitisation.

The project will make extensive use of:

- records of Government Grants awarded by the Society;
- Referees' Reports on articles submitted to *Philosophical Transactions*;
- records of the nomination and election of Fellows;
- reports of the *conversazione* associated with the Society;
- the Society's correspondence.

In utilising these sources the student will be making informed, interpretative judgements about eugenic affiliations, opinions, networks, and activities. These interpretative judgements will be guided by an expert and experienced supervisory team.

2. The supervision team

Keith Moore (Head Librarian, RS). Prof. Angelique Richardson (Exeter). Prof. David Stack (Reading).

The three supervisors bring complementary experience and expertise to the project:

- all three have supervised funded-PhD students to completion;
- Moore and Richardson have supervised successful CDA projects;
- both Stack and Richardson have worked successfully with non-HEI organisations, including the Natural History Museum, Dorset History Centre, Dorset Museum and the National Trust.
- Moore has worked previously with HEIs, including Reading;
- Stack and Richardson have supervised and published on the research area, and bring differing disciplinary skills (intellectual history and literary studies) to the supervision;
- both Stack and Richardson have worked with the SWW DTP.

The project has been developed collaboratively by all three members of the team and represents a coming together of their shared interests.

3. Relevance to the priorities and objectives of the non-HEI

The RS is committed to increasing public awareness of its archives, improving accessibility of its collections, and achieving a better understanding of how science is funded. This project aids all three objectives:

- i.) the student will contribute to the Society's ongoing work to digitise its archive and make resources available offsite;
- ii.) the project will explore how grants were awarded, and how academic access worked in the past, and this will feed into the desire of the RS to better understand current work in science policy;
- iii.) the project will help the RS to confront a contentious aspect of its own history.

4. Skills and employability

In addition to data and information gathering, and the evaluative, interpretative, and communication skills inherent to any PhD, this project will provide distinctive opportunities for the student to develop a range of career-enhancing attributes.

In particular, the student will gain:

- Cross-disciplinary experience by working with historical, literary, and archival experts, as well as pursuing a project related to science, at a scientific institution;
- Team-working experience, by being part of the archival team at the RS;
- Hands-on /in-house instruction in digitisation at the RS, and training delivered by the Digital Humanities Lab at Exeter, in collaboration with the digital humanities team at Reading.
- The opportunity to stage a workshop or conference, related to the project, at the RS.

NB - the digital aspects of this project are integral to its success and will involve both a high degree of interpretative skill and the development of technical proficiency.

The student will:

- contribute to the ongoing cataloguing of Referees' Reports, with the intention of making digital versions of these available;
- digitise Government Grant applications to allow for data extraction and make them word searchable;
- use digital tools to map networks of key individuals and their connections.

5. Commitment of the non-HEI to provide access to training, facilities and expertise

Building upon its previous experience in supervising and training CDA students, the RS is fully committed to providing access to the training, facilities and expertise necessary for the successful completion of this project.

The RS will:

- Ensure the student works closely with the RS archives team.
- Provide hands-on training in archiving and digitisation tasks.
- Collaborate with the digital humanities teams at Exeter and Reading to ensure the student receives appropriate support and instruction.
- Provide in-kind contributions, including guaranteed desk-space, full access to digital resources, and use of a subsidised restaurant.

The student will also be able to claim travel funding from the RS where appropriate.