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RA Fisher and the science of hatred

The great statistician was also a racist who believed in the sterilisation of those he considered inferior.

By Richard J Evans





Ronald Fisher in 1957 (Photo By Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)



In 1989, the fellows of Gonville and Caius College (founded in 1348, and one of Cambridge University's largest, wealthiest and most prestigious collegiate institutions) had the genial idea of fitting stained-glass windows in the dining hall to commemorate prominent scientists who had been among its members, counterbalancing the many lawyers and divines whose portraits adorn its walls. By the early 2000s the collection included a double helix, paying homage to Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, and other windows showing the scientific achievements of men such as the mathematician and philosopher John Venn, the physicist James Chadwick and the physiologist Charles Sherrington.

The collection also includes a "Latin Square", a mathematical device promoted by Ronald Fisher, who is widely regarded as the most important biostatistician of the 20th century. Richard Dawkins has called him "the greatest biologist since Darwin". His book *Statistical Methods for Research Workers*, published in 1925, exercised a huge influence, and he is often referred to as the father of modern experimental design – the subject of another important book. For a long time he taught at University College London (UCL), where a professorship is named after him, before moving to Cambridge as Balfour Professor of Genetics and fellow of Gonville and Caius College, where he had studied as an undergraduate between 1909 and 1912.

His work in statistics was closely integrated into the science of eugenics – the supposed improvement of the human stock through selective breeding, the encouragement of "superior" genetic stock (Fisher himself put his beliefs into practice by siring no

fewer than eight children), and discouragement, either by persuasion or by some form of compulsion (including sterilisation) of “inferior” lines of heredity. Head of the Department of Eugenics at UCL, editor from 1934 of the *Annals of Eugenics*, and a prominent member of the British Eugenics Society, he was also co-founder in 1947 of the journal *Heredity* with the Oxford Professor of Botany Cyril Darlington. Darlington claimed that as slaves in America, Africans “improved in health and increased in numbers” because they were living in an environment far superior to that of their home continent; emancipation had destroyed this advantage, he argued, by removing the discipline under which they had lived as slaves, leading to problems of “drugs, gambling and prostitution” in the African-American community.

Racist and eugenic ideas such as these were widespread in the first half of the 20th century, but they were discredited by the crimes of the Nazi regime in Germany, which, besides enacting measures to encourage healthy members of the “Aryan” master-race to have more children, also sterilised some 400,000 supposedly inferior Germans and, during the war, murdered by gassing, lethal injection or starvation and neglect anything between 100,000 and 200,000 German men, women and children. More than 400 mixed-race Germans, the legacy of Germany’s pre-1914 colonial empire in Africa, were forcibly sterilised, while on a larger scale, the Nazis’ General Plan for the East envisaged the death of at least 30 million “Slavs” whom they considered racially inferior, and, of course, the Nazis murdered six million Jews, again purely on racial grounds. Eugenics and racism were inextricably intermingled, not least in the United States, where the compulsory sterilisation of the eugenically “inferior” was also widely practised.

Fisher was less unsympathetic to Nazi eugenics than most of his British colleagues were. In the mid-1930s he campaigned for the legalisation of eugenic sterilisation, especially of the “mentally defective”. He was a British representative at the International Federation of Eugenic Organizations until the war, where he met regularly with German colleagues involved in the compulsory sterilisation programme. In Britain, the mainstream of the Eugenics Society wanted to keep the Germans at arm’s length and did not support compulsory sterilisation, not least because it knew that a law to this effect would never get through the House of Commons.

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However, the line between compulsory and voluntary sterilisation was a fine one, and in practice all too easily crossed by medical officials. The extent to which the 17 per cent of the British population estimated by Fisher to be “defectives” were capable of objecting to their own “voluntary” sterilisation when advised to do so by medical authorities must be extremely doubtful. The opposition of the Catholic Church was a given, but objections also came from the Labour Party, based on the fact that those identified as “defectives” were concentrated in working-class areas, so the definition of “defective” was as much social as anything else. Fisher left the Eugenics Society in 1934 because he felt it was paying too little attention to scientists and giving too much weight to political factors.

Before and after the war, Fisher corresponded with Otmar Baron von Verschuer, an eminent German “racial hygienist” and PhD supervisor of the notorious Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele. In a report to the German Research Council in 1944, Verschuer acknowledged Mengele’s assistance in supplying his institute, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, with some “scientific materials” from Auschwitz: “My assistant, Dr Mengele (MD, PhD) has joined me in this branch of research. He is presently employed as Hauptsturmführer and camp physician in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Anthropological investigations on the most diverse racial groups of this concentration camp are being carried out with permission of the SS Reichsführer [Himmler]; the blood samples are being sent to my laboratory for analysis.” These included blood from twins infected by Mengele with typhus, and in some cases samples obtained from twins by murdering them.

Fisher remained on friendly terms with Verschuer after the war, as the American historian Bradley Hart noted in his Cambridge PhD thesis (2011), and tried to arrange a postwar visit to Britain for him, complaining to Verschuer in 1948 that “It does not seem to be at all easy to arrange a visit to this country. There has evidently been a good deal of denigration, which I do not believe has any substantial basis.”

The “denigration” to which he referred was publicity given to Verschuer’s close collaboration with Mengele, of which Fisher cannot have been ignorant. However, Verschuer destroyed sufficient incriminating evidence to ensure that the International War Crimes Tribunal’s attempts to bring him to trial for crimes against humanity came to nothing. He reinvented himself as a “geneticist” and resumed his career in postwar West Germany with some success.

In 1950, Fisher was consulted by a Unesco commission set up as a result of the Nazis’ crimes. Its consensus statement concluded that there was no scientific basis for the idea of racial difference in intelligence and character. But Fisher had a “fundamental objection to the statement”, it was reported. “He believes that human groups differ profoundly ‘in their innate capacity for intellectual and emotional development’.” In his correspondence with Reginald Ruggles Gates, a Canadian-born eugenicist who believed that human races were actually separate species, Fisher stated that he was “sorry there is propaganda in favour of miscegenation in North America”.

Fisher’s views were far from uncontroversial in his own day. It took 15 years for the idea of a commemorative stained-glass window at Gonville and Caius to be accepted, and the proposal made no mention of the fact that he was a eugenicist and did not contextualise the window with any reference to his views on sterilisation and race.

At the beginning of this year, however, the issue of the commemorative window was raised by the Gonville and Caius Student Union BME officer. A petition for the window’s removal received more than 1,400 signatures, many of them present and former college members. It objected in particular to Fisher’s “endorsements of colonialism, white supremacy and eugenics” in a 1930 publication where “he wrote that civilisations fail because people of ‘low genetic value’ [read black and brown people] have more children than people with ‘high genetic value’” (read white Europeans) and said that this was already happening in Great Britain.

The college’s senior tutor, Dr Andrew Spencer, accepted the petition and asked pointedly what kind of message the window was sending to the black, minority ethnic and indeed working-class students, staff and fellows of all races. At Caius, students dine in Hall every evening and most lunchtimes, under “a window that memorialises the achievements of a man who regarded races as differing profoundly ‘in their innate capacity for intellectual and emotional development’.” “This”, Spencer said, “is the opposite sentiment of the kind of fellowship that we seek to promote at Caius by living and dining together.” Widening participation is a key aim nowadays of Cambridge colleges, and the window in such a prominent location did not exactly encourage this.

On 24 June the College Council decided that the window should be removed, subject to Listed Building consent, and it has now been taken down. Dr Spencer had suggested it be put in a dedicated space as part of a small exhibition about Fisher, so it would not be forgotten. The episode has raised key questions about how to deal with racism, both scientific and everyday, that is now the focus of a wide debate in the college community. This has led to impassioned debates within the College Fellowship about the values that should prevail in an academic community. Which is more important – a scientist’s undoubted eminence, influence and distinction in his special, technical field, or the fact that he espoused broader views that now arouse strong objections in a community of scholars and students? The debate is far from over. The college has set up a working group to consider wider issues of diversity and representation, which will include the vexed question of the Fisher window. And it is organising a public conference which will address these issues as well.

Other academic institutions are engaged in similar discussions. University College London has re-labelled buildings named after two other, perhaps even more prominent eugenicists of the late 19th and early 20th century, Francis Galton and Karl Pearson. The point is not to denigrate their achievements in areas where recognition is due – Pearson established a range of statistical methods that like Fisher’s, are still in use today. The point is, any memorial to racists and eugenicists “creates an unwelcoming environment for many in our community”, as Michael Arthur, provost of UCL, has rightly said. The right way to understand them and their ideas is through a properly contextualised display in a museum, not through an uncommented memorial that conceals more than it reveals.

Memorials in the end are less about the past than about the present and the future. The questions institutions need to ask of themselves are, what contribution do the memorials they display make to building a future that is democratic and inclusive and encourages all their members to respect one another’s identity? And what should they do with those that don’t?



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