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[p. 391a]

‘Science Jottings.’

The battle about heredity, and whether or not characters acquired by the parents can be transmitted to the offspring, proceeds merrily. Scientists are divided over this question. On the one hand, the disciples of Dr. Weismann deny the possibility of such transmission; while their opponents regard the handing on of parental acquired characters as not only a possible, but a natural process of the vital economy. This is an old story to my readers, and I have already given my reasons for casting in my lot with the latter party. I may quite wrong in my opinions, of course, but if so, I sin in good company.

Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, co-worker with Darwin himself, has lately placed on record a very valuable and singularly interesting suggestion regarding the influence on children’s character of the parental mind. If memory serves me aright, Dr. Wallace leans to Weismann’s view of matters. His contribution to which I allude (published in *Nature*) tends to show that in the sphere of mental influence of parents on their offspring’s character, at least, he is open to admit the validity of the “other side” of the heredity question. If there is any reality at all in the instances Dr. Wallace records—he says rightly, “They seem to afford grounds for further investigation”—then the influence of the parents in regard to the transmission of ordinary acquired characters cannot surely be put out of court, as some biologists would maintain, as “entirely unsupported by any trustworthy facts.”

Dr. Wallace’s recital begins with the mention of an instance quoted by George or Andrew Combe (I think it is George Combe who mentions the circumstance), in which the character of a child appeared to have been affected by the pre-natal studies of the mother. This item becomes interesting in view of the fact that, after a perusal of Dr. Wallace’s articles on the question of the inheritance of acquired characters, an Australian lady wrote him on the subject of the influence of the parental mind on the unborn offspring. Some of the details given by this correspondent with reference to her own experiences, and to those of another lady, will be read with deep interest by every intelligent person interested in the problems of heredity, and in what may fitly be called the romance of science.

The first cases are those of the correspondent’s own children. Her first child, a girl, is now twenty-two years of age. She exhibits special aptitude for sewing, planning, and cutting out. Before her birth, the mother, passing to reside in a new country, had to plan and sew for herself. The girl has also strong aptitude for history, which the mother traces to her own study of Froude. The girl’s other tastes for art and literature are “distinctly hereditary.” A second child, also a daughter, has marked literary tastes, and at six years of age, used to read and enjoy Tennyson’s ballads. She is B.A. of the Sydney University, taking her degree when barely twenty. Before her birth, the mother had interested herself in literary pursuits.

The third child was a boy. Prior to his birth, the current of the family life had changed. The mother had no time for literary studies, or other “studious pursuits,” and her occupations were more mechanical in character than at any previous time. The boy “does not inherit the studious tastes of his sisters at all.” He is intelligent and persevering, but prefers outdoor work or handicraft to study. This most intelligent mother next passes to the experience of her friend in support of the idea that parental influences may be thus clearly and directly handed on to the children. This friend, before the birth of her eldest girl, took to

the study and practice of ornithology, and did a good deal of bird-stuffing well. At the age of three years the girl shows an intense desire to study insects and other animals, and later on, takes to dissecting them. This predilection for natural history studies still remains with the girl. The next child, a boy, exhibits a marked liking for medical and surgical studies, and often expresses the wish that he had been “made a surgeon.” Prior to his birth, the mother, strangely enough, had nursed a friend suffering from an accident for three months. On the theory of pre-natal influences, the nursing and surgical duties of the mother are accountable for the lad’s strong bias towards medical studies.

The third child, a girl, exhibits artistic tastes of unmistakable nature. She draws well and excels “in artistic talent of many kinds.” The mother’s life, prior to her birth, is described having been idyllic in character; her parents then “did nothing but fish, catch butterflies and paint them. At least,” adds the mother, “my husband painted them after I had caught them, and mixed his colours.” There may be direct heredity here, of course. The fourth child is a most prudent, economical girl, splendid housekeeper, and a good cook, and will work till she drops, but has no taste for reading, but seems to gain knowledge by suction.” Before the birth of this child, the mother had experienced many trials. Her husband fell ill of fever, and she had to nurse him without help of any kind. The family also sustained losses by floods, “I don’t know how I got through that year,” adds the mother, “but I had no time for reading.”

I confess these recitals are to me startling as well as deeply interesting. It may be said, and possibly will be said, that the mothers are only “wise after the event” when all is said and done. But there is such a singular correspondence of exact kind between the characters of the respective children and the occupations which engaged the mothers’ attention prior to their birth, that it is impossible to dispose of the cases thus related on the convenient supposition that the facts have been dovetailed into their places and made to fit the mothers’ theory. Dr. Wallace remarks that materials must exist in family records and experiences for determining whether there is anything in the idea thus promulgated of pre-natal influence on character. I shall be glad to hear what my readers have to say on the subject, and to consider, in confidence, any histories which may be sent me. My readers will please bear in mind that we want accurately recorded facts as the stones wherewith the scientific edifice may be builded.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.