Scully's "Quaker Approaches to Moral Issues in Genetics" - Book Review

Nigel Dower

University of Aberdeen

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Horace Alexander is probably best known to Quakers as a peacemaker and friend of Gandhi, and particularly for his contribution towards Indian independence. Although Geoffrey Carnall has contributed an introduction dealing briefly with these and other aspects of his life, Duncan Wood's book is otherwise concerned with Horace's other major involvement—the pursuit of ornithology.

The book is most likely to appeal to those with an interest in birds and bird-watching, and in the history of ornithology in the twentieth century. It charts the pioneering role of Horace Alexander in the transformation of ornithology from a Victorian preoccupation with "dead birds in the museum" (often shot for the purpose) to that of a modern science looking at the living bird in its own environment. There is material here on ornithological politics, and a few fairly detailed digressions into the birds themselves, mostly in England but also in India and America. Whilst the author's enthusiasm for both birds and his subject's contribution to their study is evident throughout, the account is also enlivened by its human interest, the result of access to personal documents and the author's own long friendship with Horace. The book is illustrated very attractively by artists Robert Gillmor and Ian Wallace.

In his introduction, Geoffrey Carnall writes that Horace "studied" birds and human beings alike with close attention, and had a keen eye for phenomena that escaped the attention of observers less diligent and much less perceptive. Duncan Wood draws attention to Horace's own estimation of his passion for bird-watching in that it combined for him, in rich measure, both intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction. His account of his subject's achievements also demonstrates how, even in our own time, science can be pursued and the character of scientific enquiry changed, by those with little more equipment than a keen eye (and ear) for detail and an enquiring mind.

The author writes that, for Horace Alexander, 'peace-making and ornithology were both expressions of his Quakerism' and that he 'valued them equally and practised them simultaneously'. The concluding chapter seeks to explore the relationship between ornithology and Quaker faith. However, drawing as it does on evidence outside Horace's own (and indeed Quaker) experience, this is mostly concerned with a selection of contemporary Christian views rather than with a specifically Quaker perspective on the natural world and its study. Horace himself seems to have found the 'well-ordered life of birds' conducive to the renewal of his belief in the possibility of 'the peaceable kingdom', and an antidote to the frustrations of human politics that he encountered in his peace-making work. Duncan Wood refers to Horace's sense of 'companionship with the birds he watched, experiencing there 'that calm and quietness where, once again, he could find God's presence'.

The publication of this book is perhaps a timely reminder that natural history occupies a significant place in the traditions and experience of British and American Quakerism. This doubtless continues to be reflected in the lives and interests of some individual Friends. However, creative responses to the natural world currently recognised by Quakers as a group, have tended to take other forms; in the arts, or in the pursuit of advanced scientific research in the physical or biological sciences. Duncan Wood's account of the studies of his mentor and friend demonstrates that the pursuit of natural history can also provide a way of reconnecting not only with the world around us, but with the spirit within.
There follow chapters on various issues such as the genetic manipulation of non-human organisms and issues raised over ‘celebrating diversity: genetic variation and disability’.

One of the themes of the book is that of the role of genes in our understanding of our lives. As Scully remarks we often talk of there being a ‘gene for’ something, and this invites the idea that who we are and what we do is determined by our genes. This needs to be resisted, as she notes. Even in the case of ‘Scully’s disease’ which is so set up as to be inevitable if one has the gene (barring earlier death or gene therapy which stops an otherwise necessary process), what we do and how we respond are not. But generally so called genetic traits do not determine behaviour anyway – it’s our own choice whether we accept or resist the tendencies that may exist. In any case, as she notes, in family relations it is the emotional relationships that count not the biological ones. Whether we think that there is a separate ‘soul’ to each of us or not, who we are has really little to do with what genes we have. Answering that of God in others, whether acknowledging our common-ness or the unique special-ness of each of us, is definitely not to be reduced to recognising that another being has the genes he or she has.

There is a wealth of ideas, facts and moral perspectives in this book. Anyone wanting a rich survey of the ethics of genetics will be well rewarded. If however the reader wants to get a clear line of moral argument, or an assessment of which moral ideas are preferable, she or he will be disappointed. In the final chapter on ‘making moral evaluations’ a picture of ethics as contextual, relational and rooted in emotions which endorse our intuitions is presented. In the context of a scepticism about the Enlightenment attempt to find a rationally based ethic, Scully reports about the Quaker responses: ‘an observer might therefore have identified them as making indiscriminate use of justice ethics, principlism, Kantian deontology, rights theory, utilitarianism, feminists care ethics, casuistry or virtue ethics, all within the same moral evaluation’ (p 211). She came to see that it was not her role to provide better philosophical arguments. Earlier on p. 24 she remarks, ‘I emphasised there were no correct answers to any of these questions’ – a good Quaker approach at one level for listening to and accepting each perspective as serious moral thought, but at another level it is I sense problematic for the whole idea of moral truth. But without a truth about these matters, all these views on genetics, sincere as they are, are merely the data for mutual accommodation. I sense that Scully does have a view about what it really is reasonable to think about genetic ethics, but for the most part she bites her lip. For me as a philosopher as well as a Quaker, this absence is a pity. For some other Friends, it may be thought a blessing. Anyway, do read the book.

Nigel Dower
University of Aberdeen, Scotland