

Beyond nature v nurture

Convenor: Jane Miller, Cesagen

This workshop addresses the following questions about 'Darwins' legacy':

- What does it stand for today?
- To what ends has it been used as a justification?
- In what ways has it been manipulated?
- Where is nature v nurture after Darwin in the context of genetics/ genomics?

This workshop involves an exhibition and the opportunity to explore these questions with the participants, short presentations from the participants and a panel discussion.

Workshop Outline:

Introduction: Jane Miller	11.45 – 11.50
Prof Steve Hughes	11.50 – 12.05
Dr Mairi Levitt	12.10 – 12.25
Dr Michael Arribas - Ayllon	12.30 – 12.45
Discussion	12.50 – 13.15

Participants:

Prof Steve Hughes: Refloating the Laboratory

Darwin's skills in observing and interpreting and elucidating nature were, in a major way nurtured by his experiences throughout the voyage of HMS Beagle. The Beagle, with its cosmopolitan complement of navigators, surveyors, meteorologists, artists and naturalists was just one of a sequence of floating laboratories, consortia of the inquisitive, which were mustered and commissioned by the European academy to explore the southern oceans and continents during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Observations of novel and fascinating topographies, fossils, geological processes like vulcanism, indigenous peoples, and above all biological diversity were shared by the communities of the floating laboratories and formed an empiricist platform for further exploration, for the interpretation of the natural world and for theory building.

My presentation celebrates those who cast off in their sailing ships to investigate the unknown world and to negotiate fresh views and understandings of nature. Their names make a roll call of achievement immersed in the illustrated accounts of their voyages and enshrined evocatively in the names of their ships, like Roebuck, Endeavour, L'Uranie, Astrolabe, Naturaliste, Geographe, Investigator, Beagle, Rattlesnake, and latterly Challenger. Their findings tested and challenged the accepted knowledge of their times and still illuminates ours today. The imagery I use is derived mainly from drawings made by the artists who accompanied Darwin, Conrad Martens, Philip Gidley King, Syms Covington and Augustus Earle.

As laboratories have increasingly become spaces of extreme normativity, hierarchy, control, theory ladenness and isolated expertise, my work seeks to reassess multidisciplinary approaches like the EGNetwork as opportunities to refloat laboratories as spaces for more broadly negotiated empiricism.

Dr Mairi Levitt

Work on genes and crime has focussed particularly on violent and antisocial behaviour in children and young people. In behavioural genetics it is now standard practice to talk about gene-environment interaction and to declare that the nature/nurture debate is redundant. Rather, nature and nurture affect behaviour through complex and not yet fully understood interactions. In practice the debate continues, as does the behaviour. This session looks at the policy-making implications of genetic research in this area drawing on the views of professionals who deal with problem families and criminals.

Dr Michael Arribas-Ayllon

Philosophers would argue that nature/nurture is a false divide perpetuated by a 'slippage' in the language of scientists, notably geneticists. This is a convincing and interesting argument. However, in re-examining Darwin's legacy an alternative line of inquiry might consider not so much whether this distinction is true or false, but how it operates and functions. 'What does it do?' and 'Who does it serve?' are equally interesting questions. In this presentation, I give a brief visual and textual history, tracing the rhetoric of nature/nurture distinction from Darwin to the present.