

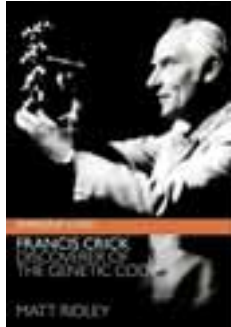
Matt Ridley: *Francis Crick. Discoverer of the Genetic Code*

A Nonchalant Mastermind

Widely known as the co-discoverer of the molecular structure of DNA, Francis Crick was significantly more than James Watson's alter-ego but an incessant and keen thinker. A worthy read, this biography reminds us of that great scientist.

It was fortune, really great fortune that Uncle Arthur avoided fabricating shoes at that time. Otherwise, one of the brightest masterminds of the 20th century would never have visited a university and James Watson would have failed miserably later-on in the fifties, trying all alone to decipher the structure of DNA.

At the beginning of a fascinating biography, author Matt Ridley, briefly narrates this anecdote. Crick's father, who had severe financial problems when following the traditional shoe manufacturing business of his family, could not afford the fees for his son to attend college. Fortunately, uncle Arthur, [who] set up as a pharmacist in Kent, [was] sufficiently wealthy to pay for his nephew Francis to



stay at University College as a graduate student. [That] undoubtedly saved Francis from having to give up science.

Tennis at Wimbledon and Nazi bombs to the rescue!

Numerous such amusing anecdotes have found their way into *Francis Crick – Discoverer of the Genetic Code*. We learn that Crick's father

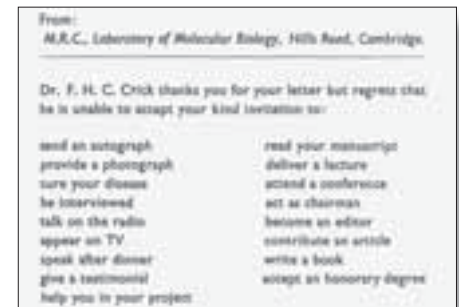
was a skilful tennis player (and unfortunately, lost his only Wimbledon match) and that the famous son was far away becoming a scholastic prodigy and consequentially emerged with a disappointingly second-class degree. We also learn that Nazi head Hermann Göring receives at least one merit: In WW II, a stray German bomb “rescued” Crick from his dull PhD work: a naval magnetic mine dropped by

parachute from an aeroplane scored a direct hit on the irreplaceable apparatus he needed for his experiments (by the way: when Watson and Crick solved their DNA puzzle in early 1953, the latter was aged 36 and still without a doctorate...).

Another weird event even suggests that there could be a kind of “ancestral predestination” with Crick. Ridley found a link between the greatest biologist of the twentieth century, Francis Crick, and the greatest biologist of the nineteenth: Crick's grandfather, Walter, an amateur naturalist and beetle collector, had a correspondence with Charles Darwin himself! Finally, this even led to a very special *Nature* paper. It was to be Darwin's last publication: 13 days later, he died.

Ridley must have undertaken laborious enquiries whilst researching for his

book (for example, in all likelihood he visited the churchyard where Francis Crick's great-grandfather is buried). On the other hand, he is far from being a mere bean counter. In addition to summoning up thousands of intrinsic details, Ridley finds an approach to Crick's behaviour and his way of thinking. He brings close to the reader Crick's intellectual technique (Ridley calls it “dyadic pairing”), a long-running two-way conversation with a chosen



Self-made reply card to refuse annoying invitations (ca. 1963), also mentioned in the book.

friend, somewhere between an interrogation and a Socratic dialogue. In the periods when he had no such intellectual sounding board he was visibly at a loss. [...] This part was filled [by] Jim Watson, Sydney Brenner, and Christof Koch. The department head in Cambridge, Lawrence Bragg, had another expression for Crick's irritating habit, “He's doing other people's crosswords.”

Matt Ridley's brilliant appraisal of a nonchalant mastermind completes Jim Watson's famous 1968 tale *The Double Helix* perfectly. Once again, we meet all the famous scientific heroes of emerging molecular biology at that time such as Wilkins, Franklin, Chargaff, Pauling and Perutz inside and outside of Britain's most famous physics' laboratory, the Cavendish. And from page 145 onwards, we learn what Crick dealt with after the 1962 Nobel Prize. It was a lot! You should read it for yourself. WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

Matt Ridley: *Francis Crick. Discoverer of the Genetic Code*. Harper Press/HarperCollinsPublisher, 2006. 230 pages, £12.99 (€19.50).



Once in the fifties: Francis Crick, lecturing at Cambridge University.