

Professor Iyiola Solanke
Chair of the Inquiry into the History of Eugenics
University College London

16 January 2019

Dear Professor Solanke,

I am writing regarding the Inquiry into the History of Eugenics at University College London (UCL) with particular information referring to Francis Galton.

UCL has an intimate connection with the development of statistical science. It formed the world's first dedicated Department of Statistics, and many of the statistical methods that are used today were developed by researchers based at UCL, who included WFR Weldon, Francis Galton, Karl Pearson, Gossett ('Student'), Ronald Fisher, and Jerzy Neyman. Many RSS members have studied or worked there, and so there is considerable interest in the current debate about the naming of buildings and rooms after Francis Galton.

Heritability was an obsession of the late Victorian era, and its study drove the development of many statistical techniques. In addition, many prominent early statisticians were eugenicists, in the sense of wanting to improve the 'race' through selectively encouraging the 'fit' to breed more, and the 'unfit' to breed less. These were respectable opinions in intellectual circles from around the turn of the 20th century up to the 1930s. Enthusiastic supporters included Winston Churchill, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, HG Wells, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, and William Beveridge, while John Maynard Keynes was Director of the British Eugenics Society (1937-1944). One hundred years ago, almost the entire population used to hold views on race, gender and sexuality that would be thought abhorrent now, and if everything associated with supporters of eugenics were going to be rebranded, there would be a lot of work to do.

However, it should be acknowledged that Galton may be a special case, since he came up with the term 'eugenics' and is widely seen as the founder of a movement that was later used as a justification for sterilisation programmes in the US and the murder of people with disabilities in Nazi Germany. It could therefore be argued that his name should not be actively celebrated.

However, we urge that there should be no blanket condemnation of the whole man, who apart from being a major innovator in statistics, was also an early developer of weather forecasts and the use of fingerprints in crime detection. And there should be no link made



between early statisticians' views on eugenics and the statistical techniques that they developed: it would be absurd if there were criticism of the term 'regression' simply because it was invented by Galton to refer to the limited heritability between generations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deborah Ashby'.

Deborah Ashby

RSS President