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GREGOR MENDEL: HIS LIFE AND LEGACY.

Daniel J. Fairbanks. Guilford, CT: Prometheus Books. \$28.95. xix + 223 p.; index.

ISBN: 2021054683. 2022.

In my copy of Siddhartha Mukherjee's 2016 blockbuster *The Gene: An Intimate History* (London: Bodley Head), next to a passage about how Gregor Mendel chose the garden pea only after earlier hybridizing experiments using mice were stopped by the abbot of his monastery, Cyrill Napp, who judged them "a little too risqué" (p. 49), I wrote: "is this true?" It sounded suspiciously silly, not least in its resemblance to the myth about flat-earth clerics opposing Columbus and other staples of science-versus-religion polemics; and Mukherjee cited no sources. But my search through the historical literature on Mendel turned up either the same story – in the usual version, the villain is a bishop, A. E. von Schaffgotsch – or silence about it. One of the many merits of Daniel J. Fairbanks' new biography is that it not only addresses the doubt I raised but delivers an authoritative verdict. According to Fairbanks, there is zero evidence that Mendel ever bred mice, and even if he had, the idea that anyone in or around a monastery devoted to improving sheep breeding in particular and agricultural breeding generally would have been scandalized by mouse sex is ludicrous.

Gregor Mendel: His Life and Legacy offers a concise cradle-to-grave-and-beyond account of Mendel interpreted along traditional lines, as the discoverer of the gene and the laws of heredity. Accessibly written and attractively illustrated, notably with original drawings by the author, it radiates admiration for Mendel the founder of genetics, engaging in myth busting not to revise the image of Mendel familiar from textbooks but to present that image as accurately as possible, the better to appreciate Mendel's achievement – in the words of Fairbanks' concluding sentence – "as an enduring foundation for biology and as a timeless paradigm of experimental science" (p. 150). A geneticist by training, Fairbanks has become a

leading Mendel specialist, esteemed especially for his work on longstanding concerns that the data reported in Mendel's famous 1866 paper on pea hybrids are too good to be true and – in collaboration with Scott Abbott, a German-English translator – for a superb new English translation of that paper, highlighting previously unnoticed echoes of the German edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a copy of which Mendel owned and annotated. The translation is republished here as an appendix, while a chapter on Darwin and Mendel summarizes and amplifies Fairbanks' linguistic detective work.

Gregor Mendel: His Life and Legacy came out in 2022, when biologists marked the bicentenary of Mendel's birth. Since that year of celebration, books giving prominence to revisionist perspectives on Mendel have appeared, among them one of similar length but contrasting mission to Fairbanks': *How We Get Mendel Wrong, and Why It Matters: Challenging the Narrative of Mendelian Genetics*, by the biology educator and historian Kostas Kampourakis (London: CRC Press, 2024). As someone who – full disclosure – is a friend and a collaborator of both authors, I reckon that reading their books in tandem makes for the most valuable introduction to the historical Mendel, and the debates surrounding him, currently available.

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