



The Double Helix

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James D. Watson

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Reliure: Poche

Extrait

Chapter 1

I have never seen Francis Crick in a modest mood. Perhaps in other company he is that way, but I have never had reason so to judge him. It has nothing to do with his present fame. Already he is much talked about, usually with reverence, and someday he may be considered in the category of Rutherford or Bohr. But this was not true when, in the fall of 1951, I came to the Cavendish Laboratory of Cambridge University to join a small group of physicists and chemists working on the three-dimensional structures of proteins. At that time he was thirty-five, yet almost totally unknown. Although some of his closest colleagues realized the value of his quick, penetrating mind and frequently sought his advice, he was often not appreciated, and most people thought he talked too much.

Leading the unit to which Francis belonged was Max Perutz, an Austrian-born chemist who came to England in 1936. He had been collecting X-ray diffraction data from hemoglobin crystals for over ten years and was just beginning to get somewhere. Helping him was Sir Lawrence Bragg, the director of the Cavendish. For almost forty years Bragg, a Nobel Prize winner and one of the founders of crystallography, had been watching X-ray diffraction methods solve structures of ever-increasing difficulty. The more complex the molecule, the happier Bragg became when a new method allowed its elucidation. Thus in the immediate postwar years he was especially keen about the possibility of solving the structures of proteins, the most complicated of all molecules. Often, when administrative duties permitted, he visited Perutz' office to discuss recently accumulated X-ray data. Then he would return home to see if he could interpret them.

Somewhere between Bragg the theorist and Perutz the experimentalist was Francis, who occasionally did experiments but more often was immersed in the theories for solving protein structures. Often he came up with something novel, would become enormously excited, and immediately tell it to anyone who would listen. A day or so later he would often realize that his theory did not work and return to experiments, until boredom generated a new attack on theory.

There was much drama connected with these ideas. They did a great deal to liven up the atmosphere of the lab, where experiments usually lasted several months to years. This came partly from the volume of Crick's voice: he talked louder and faster than anyone else and, when he laughed, his location within the Cavendish was obvious. Almost everyone enjoyed these manic moments, especially when we had the time to listen attentively and to tell him bluntly when we lost the train of his argument. But there was one notable exception. Conversations with Crick frequently upset Sir Lawrence Bragg, and the sound of his voice was often sufficient to make Bragg move to a safer room. Only infrequently would he come to tea in the Cavendish, since it meant enduring Crick's booming over the tea room. Even then Bragg was not completely safe. On two occasions the corridor outside his office was flooded with water pouring out of a laboratory in which Crick was working. Francis, with his interest in theory, had neglected to fasten securely the rubber tubing around his suction pump.

At the time of my arrival, Francis' theories spread far beyond the confines of protein crystallography. Anything important would attract him, and he frequently visited other labs to see which new experiments had been done. Though he was generally polite and considerate of colleagues who did not realize the real meaning of their latest experiments, he would never hide this fact from them. Almost immediately he would suggest a rash of new experiments that should confirm his interpretation. Moreover, he could not refrain from subsequently telling all who would listen how his clever new idea might set science ahead.

As a result, there existed an unspoken yet real fear of Crick, especially among his contemporaries who had yet to establish their reputations. The quick manner in which he seized their facts and tried to reduce them to coherent patterns frequently made his friends' stomachs sink with the apprehension that, all too often in the near future, he would succeed, and expose to the world the fuzziness of minds hidden from direct view by the considerate, well-spoken manners of the Cambridge colleges.

Though he had dining rights for one meal a week at Caius College, he was not yet a fellow of any college. Partly this was his own choice. Clearly he did not want to be burdened by the unnecessary sight of undergraduate tutees. Also a factor was his laugh, against which many dons would most certainly rebel if subjected to its shattering bang more than once a week. I am sure this occasionally bothered Francis, even though he obviously knew that most High Table life is dominated by pedantic, middle-aged men incapable of either amusing or educating him in anything worthwhile. There always existed King's College, opulently nonconformist and clearly capable of absorbing him without any loss of his or its character. But despite much effort on the part of his friends, who knew he was a delightful dinner companion, they were never able to hide the fact that a stray remark over sherry might bring Francis smack into your life.

Copyright renewed © 1996 by James D. Watson Revue de presse

This timely reissue of Watson's feisty memoir gives a dramatic account of how the double helix was mapped. (James Urquhart *FINANCIAL TIMES*)

An exhilarating memoir (John Dugdale *GUARDIAN*) Présentation de l'éditeur

The story of the most significant biological breakthrough of the century - the discovery of the structure of DNA. *It is a strange model and embodies several unusual features. However, since DNA is an unusual substance, we are not hesitant in being bold'*

By elucidating the structure of DNA, the molecule underlying all life, Francis Crick and James Watson revolutionised biochemistry. At the time, Watson was only 24. His uncompromisingly honest account of those heady days lifts the lid on the real world of great scientists, with their very human faults and foibles, their petty rivalries and driving ambition. Above all, he captures the extraordinary excitement of their desperate efforts to beat their rivals at King's College to the solution to one of the great enigmas of the life sciences.

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