

such things only a glancing mention while either confessing that he has no real explanation or assuming that it must be a simple one. He says of the chemical precipitation patterns called Liesegang rings, “For a discussion of the *raison d'être* of this phenomenon, the student will consult the textbooks of physical and colloid chemistry.” The student would have found little there in 1917, and some aspects of this chemistry are still being clarified.

The logarithmic spiral was, to Thompson, evidence of the universality of form.

The tradition from which Thompson's great work emerged was rather different from the early interest in complex systems by the likes of Henri Poincaré: it was indebted to the biophysics and biomechanics of anatomists such as Wilhelm His and Wilhelm Roux. It is probably this strand that ties Thompson most securely to the present, for much of cell biology now centres on how the mechanics of cell structures determine the fates, forms and functions of tissues. This undervalued aspect of biophysics is becoming more integrated into the rest of molecular biology, as we come to realize how much mesoscale mechanics modulates gene and protein behaviour.

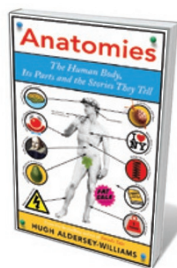
But much of the admiration for *On Growth and Form* expressed by fans such as Peter Medawar and Stephen Jay Gould stems from a more general consideration: Thompson's breadth of scholarship, coupled to the elegance of his writing. He was a classicist as well as a scientist (the many Greek and Latin quotes in *On Growth and Form* pass untranslated), and there is something of the antiquarian in his persona. At a time when science was succumbing to the specialization that has now become something of a liability, Thompson showed the value of synoptic thinkers who are prepared to risk being quite wrong here and there for the sake of an inspirational vision. Like the modern mavericks James Lovelock, Benoit Mandelbrot, Gould and Stephen Wolfram, he presented his ideas in an extended, almost incontinent, gush, rather than with a conventional succession of closely argued papers.

Such figures excite strong responses. They are sometimes exasperating. But we must make sure that they do not — in an age of Big Science, citation-counting, tenure battles and funding crises — become extinct. ■

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The D'Arcy Thompson Zoology Museum at the University of Dundee, UK, is currently displaying the first works acquired through a grant from the Art Fund to build a collection of art inspired by Thompson's work. A special issue of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* on D'Arcy Thompson and his legacy will be published in March 2013.

Books in brief



Anatomies: The Human Body, Its Parts and the Stories They Tell

Hugh Aldersey-Williams VIKING 320 pp. £18.99 (2013)

How comfortable are we with our corporeal selves? Hugh Aldersey-Williams, whose best-seller on the periodic table eulogized the elements, here turns a cultivated eye to the body eclectic, limbs, liver, lungs and all. He roves from Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) — with its intent crowd of medics round a pallid corpse — to his own observations of cadavers and their nested organs, so distinct in hue, density and texture. A seething melange of science and culture follows: the iconic status of the nose, the shapeliness of kidneys, extreme longevity and much more.



Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone

Jon Agar ICON BOOKS 288 pp. £12.99 (2013)

In this update to his 2003 history of the mobile phone, science and technology historian Jon Agar reassesses the ever-evolving nature of this multitasking machine clamped to the ears of billions. Agar reports on the developments with characteristically clear precision. His four-part chronicle deconstructs a typical mobile phone; traces its genesis and evolution, touching on regional differences; dives into the cultures embracing it, from phone-hacking journalists to African farmers; and, weaving in Apple's part in the story, ends with a bang at the smartphone.



Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex, Dating, and Love

Glenn Geher and Scott Barry Kaufman OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 320 pp. \$27.95 (2013)

Human courtship is as convoluted as the human mind. In generating and maintaining relationships we can be master tacticians, deploying everything from humour and compassion to bling and 'bad boy' displays. It is this nexus of intelligence and mating that psychologists Glenn Geher and Scott Barry Kaufman explore in this lively, copiously researched treatise on the roles of factors from creativity to biases and emotional intelligence.



Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age

Susan Crawford YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS 256 pp. £20 (2013)

The United States may be a pioneer of digitization but, says Susan Crawford, it has lost its early lead in broadband pricing and speed — and, in turn, Internet access. In her history-cum-analysis, telecommunications policy specialist Crawford avers that many US citizens pay significantly more than their counterparts elsewhere; and whereas more than half of South Korean households have fast fibre lines, the US figure is just 7%. With monopolies running US cable companies, it is time, she argues, for government regulation.



Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People

Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald DELACORTE 272 pp. \$27 (2013)

Unconscious biases that guide behaviour act like retinal blindspots — even blindsight, in which people with brain damage can grab an object without consciously seeing it. So say psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, arguing that such quirks can trump ethical intent owing to adaptations that may have been evolutionarily advantageous. Starting with perceptual mistakes based on habits of thought (mindbugs), they cover psychological self-trickery in depth.