

OCT 5 1972

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October 2, 1972

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Dear Josh:

With regard to Harriett and Avery, my principal source of information is the brochure entitled "Titres et Travaux Scientifiques de Harriett Ephrussi-Taylor" which Harriett prepared for the Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique. Boris sent me a copy after her death, when I had been asked to write an obituary for GENETICS. I am enclosing Xerox copies of two pages that are relevant to your questions.

As you see, she herself speaks of having obtained knowledge of Avery's work in 1944 after the publication of the paper with MacLeod and McCarty. She does not mention having had prior information about the Rockefeller work in progress, although it is possible that she had obtained knowledge of it in some way and was able to give a seminar about it (as Dave Perkins seems to recall) in late 1942. You will note also that she was circumspect in referring to the professors of genetics at Columbia who tried to dissuade her from working for Avery after the completion of her doctoral thesis. She does not mention names, but my guess is that both Dobzhansky and Dunn were involved. It is interesting, for example, to read the revised first edition (1941) of Dobzhansky's "Genetics and the Origin of Species" (page 47-50). Obviously Dobzhansky had some information about the work going on in Avery's lab. But he is quite cautious about the significance of the phenomenon of transformation, and subsumes it under the heading of "mutation". These pages in Dobzhansky's 1941 publication show, however, that geneticists were aware of and discussing Avery's work -- even before the definitive 1944 paper -- and strengthen the possibility that Harriett may have known about Avery's work in advance of the 1944 publication.

Harriett spoke to me often about Avery. She really admired him and felt deeply that he had not received sufficient recognition for what he had done. I do not recall the exact date when she first met him, but my impression is that she went to see him in 1944 as she states in her brochure. The enclosed material also confirms that Dunn was the supervisor of her doctoral research.

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
October 2, 1972
Page Two.


Harriett also spoke to me about her father. He worked for the government at times, the Navy I think. His work on radar certainly dates from Harriett's early childhood. Would an early edition of "American Men of Science" tell?

I did not know of your reply to Wyatt in Nature. I would appreciate receiving a reprint. For reasons I'd like to make clear to you some day, I have become deeply interested in the historical development of our ideas concerning DNA as genetic material, and the Griffith-Avery story seems to me to deserve a more profound exploration than it has received to date. If my plans for next year come about, I shall do some of this exploration myself.

Thanks also for your article on the control of chemical and biological weapons.

With best regards,

Sincerely,



Arnold W. Ravin

AWR/bsm
Enclosure