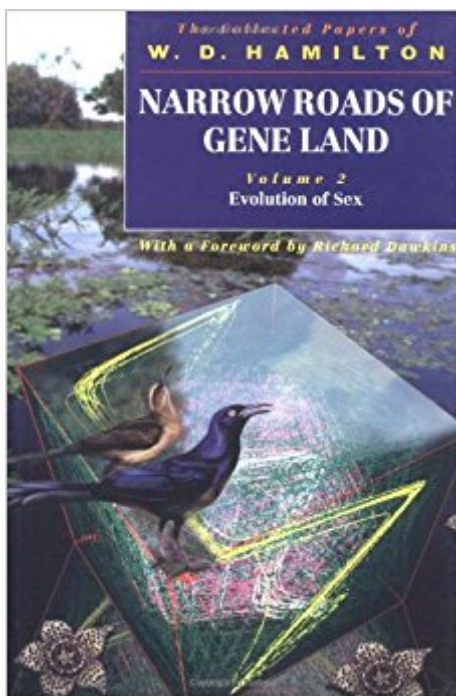


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Narrow Roads Of Gene Land, Volume 2: Evolution Of Sex



Synopsis

W.D. Hamilton is considered by many the most important theoretical biologist of the 20th century. He has made major discoveries in evolutionary biology, genetics, and social behavior, and his essays continue to exert tremendous influence throughout the discipline. This second volume of his collected papers focuses on his groundbreaking work on sex and sexual selection. It contains the 18 papers he published between 1980 and 1991, many of them examining the role of parasites and disease in promoting genetic diversity. For each paper, Hamilton has written an accessible introduction describing why the work was done, how the paper came to be written, and its eventual fate. An invaluable collection for biologists, this book also provides general readers with deep insights into the sometimes surprising mechanics of evolutionary processes.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Volume 1: "...the tale of a solitary boy who wandered the roads of Kent in search of insects and grew up to wander the roads of modern evolutionary theory." --Natural History
"This book is the evolutionary biologist's Harry Potter: the long-awaited sequel to a captivating story of a young man with extraordinary powers."--Nature

W. D. Hamilton is one of the most influential biologists of the 20th century and is widely regarded as the most important theoretical innovator in the evolutionary study of behavior since Darwin. He is

known throughout the world for his seminal work on social evolution (kin selection), sex ratio evolution and, more recently, for work on the involvement of parasites in sexual selection and on the evolutionary maintenance of sexuality. A Fellow of the Royal Society and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Hamilton is a Royal Society Research Professor in the Zoology Department at Oxford University. His awards include the Albert Wander Foundation Prize (Switzerland, 1992), the Crafoord Prize (Sweden, 1993), and the Kyoto Prize (Japan, 1993).

I bought this used. I quite happy with it, but it looks like the book had too much space in the box it came with and has moved around in it on it's way here. The pages are a little bent due to this. Except that everything is fine.

Bill Hamilton did a lot of thinking in things as simple as book reviews: This collection is highly recommended for these kinds of pithy insights

Richard Dawkins has described William Hamilton as "the greatest Darwinian since Darwin". The concept of kin selection, in particular, has been described by no lesser figure than Robert Trivers as "the only true advance since Darwin in our understanding of natural selection" (Trivers 2000). The clarity of his writing style, however, leaves much to be desired. Even the title of the work, 'Narrow Roads of Gene Land', is somewhat clumsy. On the one hand, his papers are notoriously heavily mathematical. His seminal paper on 'the Genetical Theory of Social Behaviour' was, according to John Maynard Smith, passed around several peer reviewers who had failed to understand it before it ended up in his own hands. Even with the modifications Maynard Smith had recommended, the lack of clarity in its style may partially explain why, until the mid-seventies, it was rarely cited (see *Defenders of the Truth: The Sociobiology Debate*). Actually, the mathematics is relatively basic if you take the trouble to understand it (and also rather ugly). However, for non-mathematically inclined biologists and social scientists, it is nevertheless daunting. Given that Hamilton's work is potentially of interest, not only to biologists, but also to many psychologists, anthropologists, other social scientists and even the educated laity, this inaccessibility is problematic. The autobiographical interludes which frame each of the papers adopt an entirely different style - rambling, poetic and anecdotal - but are only marginally more intelligible. A large part of the difficulty is Hamilton's tendency to adopt poetic analogies drawn from his own field that will be unintelligible to non-specialists. For example, a colleague who had turned down various lectureships and other

research opportunities until he received the one he really wanted is commended as practicing "an optimal foraging strategy... in the patchy landscape of Euro-American academia" (p549). Worse still, the buildings housing the zoology and psychology departments at Oxford University are described as resembling "rather rectangular cilian protozoans syzygy" (p545). To be fair, he does (thankfully!) take the time to explain this analogy. However, given that the explanation itself takes up about a page, this only serves to further illustrate the nature of the problem. Apart from the difficulty of the writing style, more sensitive potential readers ought also to be cautioned about Hamilton's extreme political incorrectness. While this may seem a refreshing trait in a world covered by modern McCarthyism, it may also prove unsettling. Mainstream advocates of evolutionary psychology typically (and rightly) emphasise the lack of connection between their field and such supposedly nefarious and discredited practices as eugenics with which opponents of the field attempt to taint it through guilt by association. It therefore comes as a surprise that the researcher responsible for much of the theoretical basis of evolutionary psychology openly describes himself as an enthusiastic eugenicist and touches on the topic with obsessive frequency throughout his rambling autobiographical interludes. Having issued this warning, I might add that, to me at least, Hamilton comes across, not so much as a prejudiced bigot, but rather as the stereotypical 'absent-minded professor', brilliant in his own field, yet oblivious to changing social attitudes in the outside world. For example, he describes his bemused bewilderment when he gets into trouble for commending a graduate student in a letter of recommendation for having a mathematical ability "especially remarkable in view of her sex" (p307). More amusingly, he describes how, on being invited to present a paper on a topic of his choice at a conference on biology hosted by - of all places - the Vatican, he proposed to present a paper discussing overpopulation and how "our recent and unnatural ethic that every conceptus, no matter how mutated, was deserving of every technical effort we knew to help it survive" could lead to "the collapse of civilisation" (xli). He then professes to be surprised when the time allotted for his presentation at the Pontifical Academy is conveniently cut and he receives a less than enthusiastic reception. (I might add that, unless his style of humour is so dry and deadpan that I am oblivious to it, Hamilton appears completely oblivious to the humour in this episode.) Overall, political correctness aside, the *Narrow Roads of Geneland* is a purchase advised only for serious students of Hamilton's life and work. There is nothing to prevent great scientists from also being great writers. Robert Trivers, a figure responsible, like Hamilton, for a large part of the theoretical basis of sociobiology, behavioural ecology and evolutionary psychology, published his collected papers in a format apparently modelled on the work currently under review (i.e. framed by autobiographical interludes). However, the resulting book (*Natural Selection and*

Social Theory: Selected Papers of Robert Trivers (Evolution and Cognition)) is eminently readable and insightful. However, Hamilton's own collected papers, in contrast, are definitive proof of the old maxim that great scientists are not always great writers. Trivers R (2000) 'Obituary: William Donald Hamilton' Nature 404(6780) p828

...marred only by the untimely death of the author. Volume Two focuses on the second half of the extraordinary career of the MOST extraordinary W.D. Hamilton. The papers presented here are almost without exception key components of much of what many of us regard as an appropriate evolutionary approach to the origins of sex, kinship, disease response etc. and the book would be worth having just to get all of these in a convenient bound form instead of the dog-eared xeroxes that doubtless clog up many of your files. Beyond that however we also get more of Hamilton's delightful insights into just how he came up with an idea, who he was talking to, where he was while he was working on a concept, what he thought of a piece of work years later, etc. etc, -in other words all the "gossip" that when you know it makes science a real human endeavor, and when it is left out tends to leave many of us cold. Above all else one gets the sense that here was someone who was without question a genius, but was also a lovely person as well -someone with a sense of humor and a sense of his own mortality, who at the same time could revel in the sheer beauty of an idea, or the notion of life as a cosmic joke that must nonetheless be taken seriously. Anyone who is interested in the DOING of science as well as the content would be well advised to browse through this book. The intro by Dawkins is frankly skippable, but the rest? Sheer joy!

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