

Embryonic Development

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Part A, Genetic Aspects; Part B, Cellular Aspects

Edited by M.M. Burger and R. Weber

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Part A, xxvi + 492 pages. £40.00; Part B, xxvi + 670 pages. £54.60

These two volumes contain a total of some 90 papers presented at the IXth Congress of the International Society of Developmental Biologists, held in the summer of 1981. Part A deals with gene structure and function, chromosomes, determination and differentiation, insect development, maturation of gametes, and developmental aspects of immunology; Part B covers fertilization and early development, membranes, cell interaction and pattern formation, development of muscle, cell and morphogenetic movements, neural development, plant development, and cancer. About 20% of the papers are, in effect, brief reviews by leading authorities, while the others are more detailed reports of specific research projects. Each paper is about a dozen pages long, and well-provided with references.

As volumes of conference proceedings go, these are good: there are many useful articles summarising important work, and the collection for the most part gives a fair impression of which areas of developmental biology are currently the most lively. Organogenesis, neural development and plant development are, however, under-represented. Predictably, the sections dealing with the revolu-

tion in molecular biology based on recombinant DNA techniques are the most impressive, though rapidly heading for obsolescence.

Despite their virtues, one cannot help asking who will want to read these large and expensive books. They are not for the newcomer to developmental biology wanting an overview of the subject, who will find in them only a compilation of titbits, without any unifying conceptual framework. The working scientist would probably spend his or her time better, and keep better up to date, by reading the standard journals. Writers of reviews and textbooks in search of a survey of the state of current research will not be satisfied: the topic of developmental biology is too broad for these volumes to provide a comprehensive coverage. The main function of such publications, I suppose, is to serve as souvenir and aide-mémoire for those who attended the conference. But it must be granted also that any developmental biologist who has the patience to read all the way through these 1160 pages will discover many interesting things that he or she did not know before.

Julian Lewis