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7.8.73

From the Department of Genetics

Dear Dr. McClintock,

I meant to reply some time ago to your letter of May 16, but I got distracted by other things. I was very sorry to hear that you will not be able to come to our meeting in Leeds in September. However, I will try to let you know what goes on. I am sure that your own results and ideas will be at the centre of things.

I think you are too despondent about the impact which your work has had. It's true that it took a long time for the implications to begin to sink in. This wasn't, I think, due to lack of clarity in what you said and wrote - it was rather that people couldn't see how on earth it all related to anything else that they knew about. Something that can't be fitted into any existing framework of knowledge and ideas tends to get pushed out of mind, even if it isn't actually disbelieved. I think that genetics has now very nearly caught up and geneticists are now likely to be very much more receptive to what you have been reporting all these years. Newer knowledge about chromatin structure and its plasticity has certainly helped, and the whole new world of plasmids and mutagenic bacteriophages provides us with some very powerful analogies. So I think the maize phenomena are no longer so difficult to comprehend in principle, though of course obtaining evidence on detailed molecular mechanisms is a more formidable challenge than it is in a simpler prokaryotic system.

Some time ago I rather rashly agreed to contribute a review to Annual Reviews of Genetics on controlling elements in maize. I shall be relying to a very large extent on your Carnegie Institute Reports, of which I have a complete set up to number 66. A little time ago you were kind enough to send me no. 70, but I still lack the intervening numbers 67, 68 and 69. If you have copies of these to spare I would be most grateful if you could send them to me.

Yours sincerely,

