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XIII. The Technique of Field Experiments

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Chairman's Opening Remarks

Sir A. D. Hall

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CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS

SIR A. D. HALL

Chairman

It gives me great pleasure to be present at to-day's conference, because I can claim a sort of paternal interest in the subject. I believe a communication of mine to the British Association, printed in the Journal of the Board of Agriculture for 1909, in which I discussed the probable error attached to a comparison of a pair of plots as deduced from some of the Rothamsted data, was the first presentation of the problem in this country. That led to the harvesting of an apparently uniform area of mangolds and wheat in units of $\frac{1}{200}$ and $\frac{1}{500}$ acre respectively by W. H. Mercer and myself, and an attempt to deduce therefrom the most practicable size of plot and the number of repetitions that would reduce the probable error to dimensions less than the differences to be expected in the trials. But we had no more than arithmetical methods at our command: Dr. Fisher's technique had not been made available for agricultural experimentation. Indeed all this was before the days of Government grants and refined apparatus: we had to improvise our bricks with a minimum of straw. I remember how Mercer constructed a thresher for his little bundles of wheat out of an old bicycle frame, on which he used to mount and pedal away in order to knock out the grain, thus combining research and exercise. Since that time the subject has grown in all directions and a due appreciation of its principles is a necessary part of the equipment of every agricultural experimenter. I would go further and insist that all biological investigation involves a statistical consideration of the results; no organisms exactly repeat one another and a valid conclusion can only be drawn when data are available in sufficient numbers to admit of an estimate of its probability. As is so obvious in human affairs a law of action may only be true statistically and not individually. Hence the importance of the subject with which we are dealing to-day.