Henry Fairfield Osborn Encyclopedia Article

Henry Fairfield Osborn

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Henry Fairfield Osborn

1859-1935

American naturalist, evolutionary biologist, and long-time head of the American Museum of Natural History. Osborn studied natural history and biology with some of the premier scientists of the nineteenth century, including Arnold Guyot, T.H. Huxley, and Edward Drinker Cope. In 1891 he was offered simultaneous positions teaching biology at Columbia University and running the vertebrate paleontology department at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. He helped transform the museum from a Victorian curiosity cabinet to one of the world's leading centers of scientific research. He developed a theory of human evolution that stressed an interaction of what he called an internal guiding principle, or "race plasm," and the individual's conscious effort to overcome hardship in the environment. He saw different groups of people having different levels of this race plasm, making some better equipped to survive and prosper than others. As a result of this thinking Osborn became involved with the racist Eugenics movement, and immigration restriction legislation.