

The Life Project

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*The Extraordinary Story of
70,000 Ordinary Lives*

HELEN PEARSON



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2016
001

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Typeset in Bembo Book MT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-846-14826-2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To Ashby, Lynton and Edwin, my life project

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Author's note

This book is about the British birth cohort studies, a remarkable series of longitudinal studies that track generations of babies from birth to death. The cohorts span over seventy years of British and scientific history, have generated a vast range of books and academic articles across many disciplines, and have involved hundreds of scientists. This book gives just a flavour of that work. Much of it is based on over 150 interviews that I conducted over the course of five years with scientists, science administrators, cohort members and others connected with the studies. I have also drawn extensively on academic publications, as well as press clippings, historical archives and other research.

The identity of people in the cohort studies is confidential and fiercely guarded by scientists. I was able to talk to just a few people who had previously revealed that they were cohort members or were willing to do so for this book, and who allowed me to write about them. In some cases, their names and other details have been changed at their request. All the data on the cohort members is meticulously and securely stored, as are the biological samples they have donated, some of which are discussed in this book. The samples are kept in facilities that meet the approval of the Human Tissue Authority, a government regulatory body.

For simplicity, I have often mentioned only a cohort director or project leader in connection with a project or piece of research, even though science is almost always a group endeavour and others may have played vital roles in the work. And

Author's Note

regarding the number of people in each study, I have stated the number of children at its outset, but the figures used vary in the scientific literature and change over time as people die, drop out or join up.

The birth cohort studies in Britain and around the world comprise a huge scientific enterprise – and this is just one book. Please forgive its many omissions. I urge anyone wanting to know more to explore the rich academic literature, or to talk to the scientists – the real experts – themselves.