In *Genius Explained* Michael J. A. Howe addresses the commonly held belief that genius is born not made. Controversially, he suggests that genius is not a mysterious and mystical gift but the product of a combination of environment, personality and sheer hard work. The exceptional talents of those we call geniuses are the result of a unique set of circumstances and opportunities, but in every case they are pursued and exploited with a characteristic drive, determination and focus which the rest of us rarely show. Michael Howe develops these ideas through a series of case studies focusing on famous figures such as Charles Darwin, George Eliot, George Stephenson, the Brontë sisters, Michael Faraday and Albert Einstein in this fascinating and accessible book.

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Preface

I learned about geniuses at school. They were, I discovered, a race of godlike individuals quite unlike ordinary people, possessing marvellous and practically boundless capabilities that the common run of men and women could never dream of.

After some years my conviction that geniuses form a breed apart began to waiver. There were too many unanswerable questions. The idea of a class of intellectual giants who are inherently superior to everyone else seemed just about conceivable, but what about near-geniuses, or creative inventors and discoverers who are regarded as geniuses by some people but not by others? If there could be differing degrees of genius, and no clear dividing-line between them and others after all, how could geniuses possibly be a separate breed? And if they were not, could there really be genuine grounds for believing that geniuses are fundamentally set apart from those ordinary men and women who make themselves exceptionally capable by their own strenuous efforts?

Despite these difficulties, many people are reluctant to relinquish the belief in geniuses as a kind of super-breed. There is a suspicion that once these wonderfully creative individuals are perceived as being not altogether unlike ordinary people, geniuses will start to seem less fascinating and less admirable than we want and expect them to be. Stripped of their aura of apartness, geniuses might cease to be the exotic figures whose wondrous feats dazzle and astonish us, adding to the quality of our own lives.

There is no need for these fears. Having spent some time exploring the early lives of a number of geniuses, directing my attention as much towards the ways in which they resemble other and unexceptional people as towards their extraordinariness, I find that neither my admiration for them nor my astonishment at their creativity has diminished at all. These individuals really are amazing: their achievements are often quite wonderful, and far beyond anything that most of us could dream of doing. The fact that they spring from the same flesh and blood as everyone else makes geniuses all the more impressive, not less. Their triumphs are the
achievements of individuals who have been able to shape formidable capabilities from the same basic materials that millions of people are born with. Discovering how that has happened is often difficult but invariably fascinating. It is heartening and invigorating as well. Geniuses are often heroic figures, and finding out how they became what they were is truly inspiring.

Of course, my view that geniuses began their lives made from much the same basic materials as all the rest of us is one that not every reader will be easily persuaded to share. Some time ago I began to scrutinise the evidence relating to the more common belief that people who do exceptionally well in various spheres of expertise – including science, mathematics and the arts, and also numerous sports – do so largely as a consequence of having been born with special gifts or innate talents. At that time I was working, with my friends John Sloboda and Jane Davidson, on a research study investigating the backgrounds of young musicians. Among the hundreds of parents, music teachers and young people we talked to, the majority were (and still are) firmly convinced that a few children are born with an innate gift for music, and that only those who possess such a gift stand a chance of excelling as musicians. That account is perceived by numerous people as being straightforwardly factual, no more debatable than the Pope’s Catholicism.

Yet although those who hold that view do not question its truth, they can rarely produce positive evidence in support of it. Believers in innate talents may observe that people are very different from one another, which is undeniable, but hardly a convincing reason for concluding that some must have been born with special gifts. They may also remark that they cannot think of alternative reasons for individuals becoming as different as they are, especially when young people have been brought up in the same family and have attended the same school. But the logic behind an insistence on special innate gifts being the cause of genius, in the absence of independent evidence of the existence of such gifts, amounts to no more than asserting:

1. I cannot think of an alternative explanation to mine.
2. Therefore, my explanation must be the correct one.

In reality, however, the truth of a theory is never confirmed by someone’s inability to think of alternatives. My failure to provide a better explanation for the presents that appear on Christmas Day is not a sufficient reason for anyone sharing my belief that Father Christmas brought them down the chimney. With geniuses, the idea of their being born with special gifts is a plausible possibility, but, as we shall see, there are alternative explanations that are more convincing.
Writing is always a solitary activity, but plenty of people have given me help, assistance, advice or encouragement, and I am grateful to all of them. Listing names is always potentially embarrassing. As when making a list of wedding guests, one is painfully aware that the more who are included the larger the number of others who might feel pained by their exclusion. So, taking a coward’s approach, I shall keep the list very short. Howard Gruber first made me aware that psychologists do not have to be Freudians in order to have profound insights into genius. John Sloboda and Jane Davidson have been closely involved in the investigations of young musicians to which I have contributed. It has been good to work with them. Among those researchers investigating expertise and high abilities who have been especially helpful and encouraging, Anders Ericsson has been particularly inspiring, and he and Andrew Steptoe, Steve Ceci, Bob Sternberg, Andreas Lehmann, John Radford and Joan Freeman have all aided my efforts by inviting me to write on issues that are explored in this book. At Cambridge University Press my original editor Catherine Max and her successor Pauline Graham gave plenty of encouragement. Friends and colleagues at Exeter University have also been very generous with their support. Finally, but not least, my thanks to Sylvia.