



REVIEW

Darwin: Portrait of a Genius

by Paul Johnson

New York: Viking, 2012. 164 pages

The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought

edited by Michael Ruse

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 568 pages

reviewed by John M Lynch

It is probably fair to say that we know more about Charles Darwin than almost any other scientist. The sheer amount of primary material available has enabled historians to achieve a rich understanding of his ideas within the social matrix of nineteenth-century science. This “Darwin Industry” (as it is fondly referred to) has generally eschewed simple portrayals of the fate of Darwinism and has instead explored the contradictory and often less than savory ways in which Darwin and his ideas have been appropriated by various interest groups. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*, to which I will return, offers a clear survey of the state of contemporary scholarship on these and other matters.

Unsurprisingly, such “warts and all” analyses have been embraced by conservatives of all stripes, whether the likes of Gertrude Himmelfarb (1959) or Benjamin Wiker (2009). Central to this embrace is a claim that acceptance of Darwinian ideas has been socially pernicious. Into this group of conservative writers on Darwin can now be added the English journalist, Paul Johnson, who appears to be an industry unto himself, having produced biographies of Socrates, Jesus, Churchill, Elizabeth I, Edward III, Washington, and Napoleon (along with many thematic histories). *Darwin: Portrait of a Genius* is his first biography of a scientist and appears to be completely based on his reading of others’ works, namely the Darwin biographies offered by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (1991) and Janet Browne (1995; 2002), both of which are as accessible to the lay reader and infinitely more nuanced.

Johnson’s Darwin is a fairly bloodless individual, and the biography includes little of the narrative immediacy that characterize the biographies he depended on. More worryingly, Johnson says some strange things. For example, he states that Darwin’s eight years working on barnacles made no sense in light of the *Origin*, forgetting that JD Hooker advised Darwin to study variation if he was to be taken seriously in his attempt to crack what John Herschel called the “mystery of mysteries.” Darwin’s barnacle work allowed him to get a handle on variation shaped by natural selection just as his work on domestication allowed him to see variation shaped by humans. Furthermore, Johnson holds that it was Darwin’s lack of mathematical ability that prevented him from making Mendel’s breakthrough: “If

Darwin had understood and used mathematics, he might have penetrated to the molecular level and to the genetic dimension that completed his discoveries” (page 22). Of course, Mendel didn’t penetrate “to the molecular level” and, as any high school student knows, the math involved is hardly onerous.

Like many conservative critics, Johnson makes much of Darwin’s incorporation of Malthus’s work. Johnson sees Malthus as being wrong while advocating “a theatre of violence” (page 30) and a “horror scenario” (page 44) that would stain Darwin’s worldview. It’s hard to understand why Johnson cannot accept “nature red in tooth and claw” when it is so obvious. As the book progresses, he briefly mentions the initially rapid acceptance of Darwin’s ideas in Germany and Japan (thus foreshadowing events in the next century), associates Darwin with the destruction of weaker humans (ignoring Darwin’s own statements in the *Descent of Man* regarding human sympathy), and notes Marx’s initially positive reaction to Darwin (without mentioning his subsequent rejection of the ideas). It’s all a not very subtle attempt to engage in polemic and guilt by association.

Towards the end of the book, Johnson says that natural selection applies to “everything in the universe, from galaxies down to suns and planets, then with planets to tectonic plates and continents” (page 147) and in so doing demonstrates his confusion regarding Darwin’s primary mechanism. Johnson sees the “horror scenario” everywhere, and this leads him to infer that all that remains is “no point whatsoever in existence ... The result is nihilism” (page 147), a claim that could have come straight out of the writings of Wiker and is equally as muddled (see Lynch 2010).

If Johnson can be seen as an industry of his own, he is certainly eclipsed by Michael Ruse—the Lucyle T Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University—who has produced a seeming multitude of books on Darwinism, its implications, and its opponents. In editing *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, Ruse has done a valuable service in assembling sixty-three entries written by both seasoned and younger scholars in the field of history and philosophy of science. The articles are generally between six and eight pages in length, presented in two columns of small type, generously illustrated, and accessible to non-specialists. The body of the volume begins with entries on origins and evolution before Darwin. A series of subsequent essays discuss Darwin’s ideas within the areas of geology, vertebrate paleontology, taxonomy, barnacle systematics, taxonomy, and botany. Interleaved are entries on the development of his ideas regarding natural (and sexual) selection and speciation, along with entries regarding more philosophical topics such as teleology and chance. The volume concludes with entries that deal with the later history of evolutionary theory and the applications of evolutionary ideas to the human sciences. Of particular interest to readers of *RNCSE* will be the series of articles that examine the reception of Darwin’s ideas across different geographical areas (Britain, the United States, Germany, France, China, and Latin America) and across different religious traditions and modes of thought (creationism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism). All of this is prefaced with a thirty-page introduction by Ruse which details in broad strokes Darwin’s life, his ideas, and their influence. Any reader would get more of a measured and interesting impression of Darwin’s life and impact from Ruse’s thirty pages than from the 164 pages offered by Johnson.

The Cambridge Encyclopedia is not an encyclopedia in the traditional sense and can profitably either be dipped into or read from cover to cover. It is copiously illustrated with over three hundred black and white images along with fifty-two color plates. It's difficult to figure out why the latter had to be in color—does an encyclopedia on evolutionary thought really need a color plate of Raphael's image of Plato from *The School of Athens*?—and their presence, along with the publisher being a university press, probably account for the fact that the volume costs \$180 while Johnson's is a mere \$15. Such a price difference probably means that more individuals will read Johnson's strange vision of Darwin than get the opportunity to immerse themselves in the nuances and subtleties of Darwin's ideas and legacy. And that's a shame. It is to be hoped that a cheaper paperback edition is planned.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John M Lynch has written on nineteenth-century reactions to evolutionary thinking. He is currently editing a volume of letters of John Tyndall, the Victorian physicist who was a supporter of Darwin and scientific naturalism.

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