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LIVES OF DARWIN IN THE EVOLUTION OF BIOGRAPHY

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a selection of biographical treatments of Charles Darwin dating from 1887 to 1991, and through these explores certain shifts in the purposes and assumptions of biography since the Victorian period.

An introductory discussion of problematic features in standard histories of biography is followed by an overview of the biographical material that surrounds Darwin. Four works are then analysed in detail. These are: *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* edited by his son Francis Darwin (1887); *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* by Geoffrey West (1937); *Darwin and the Beagle* by Alan Moorehead (1969); and *Darwin* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (1991).

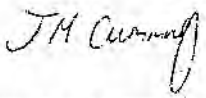
The disparities between these works — disparities in purpose, form, and the image of Darwin that each presents — are so great that one must question whether biography is a continuous, evolving family of texts. Is it not, rather, a conglomeration of approaches to life-writing — approaches which critics have grouped into a single genre much as the ancients grouped whales with fishes, on the basis that "because certain of their structural features are analogous, they must be generically-related"? The findings of this thesis do not supply a comprehensive answer, but affirm that we need to re-evaluate concepts like "the evolution of biography".

In an appendix I analyse *The Life of Richard Owen* by R.S. Owen (1894) and thereby reconsider certain of my conclusions about Victorian biography. (Owen was the most eminent naturalist of the era and is often supposed to have been Darwin's greatest rival, hence my choice of this particular work.)

Keywords: Darwin — biography — scientific — life — letters — autobiography — Victorian — modern — history — genre

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



Jonathan Cumming
27th day of February 1998

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the modern biologists who have encouraged, assisted and inspired me: my parents Margaret and David Cumming, my brother Graeme, my friend Mike Musgrave, and my late sister Beth.

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I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Professor Geoffrey Hughes, for his sympathetic guidance and for instilling in me a strong sense of confidence about this project. I shall not forget Professor Hughes's kindness in corresponding with me when I was based in Harare and seeking a research topic suitable to my interests.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Bracketed references may contain the following abbreviations:

LL	—	*The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* edited by Francis Darwin (1887).
CDFM	—	*Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* by Geoffrey West (1937).
DB	—	*Darwin and the Beagle* by Alan Moorehead (1969).
D	—	*Darwin* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (1991).
LDEB	—	refers back to this thesis, *Lives of Darwin in the Evolution of Biography*.
LRO	—	*The Life of Richard Owen* by R.S. Owen (1894).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On the term "biography"

"A biography" is commonly understood to be a substantial narrative description of a real person's life. "Biography", without an article, may refer to biographies in general, or to the practice of writing biographies. The term is rooted in the Greek *bios* — "life" — and *graphein* — "to write". It was not, as is sometimes supposed, introduced into the English language by Dryden in 1683. Donald A. Stauffer, whose *English Biography Before 1700* (1930) remains the most authoritative survey of early English biography, states that,

> The anonymous *Life of... Dr. Thomas Fuller* (1661) and the *Flagellum: Or The Life and Death... of O. Cromwell* (1663) use the word *biography* in its usual modern sense, without an explanatory synonym. These [and other] examples indicate that shortly after 1660 the word *biography* and its allies appeared [in England] in more than isolated instances, and appeared suddenly.
>
> (Stauffer 1930.219)

Stauffer adds that although the word was possibly "imported from France at the time of the Restoration", no "satisfactory appeal may be made to French lexicons as to whether the word *biographie* was then in common use." (219n) This uncertainty appears to remain. The 1989 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* states that "The first appearance of *biographe, biographia* in [French] is not recorded; so that their immediate relation to the [English] words is not yet determined." On the other hand, the authoritative *Robert* dictionary dates the appearance of *biographe* in French from 1721 — in which case, the word might have originated in England and travelled to France.

The aim and rationale of this thesis

This thesis sets out to explore certain of the major shifts in English biography[1] since the Victorian period. The central questions are:

— How might assumptions about the exercise of writing biography have shifted? (I refer to the assumptions both of biographers and of their readers and critics.)

— In which directions might the purposes of biographers have shifted?

— How might these shifts be apparent in the structure and content of biographical texts?

A number of survey-histories of biography are available, and these supply broad answers to such questions. It is for instance a truism among historians of biography that whereas the typical Victorian biographer assumed a duty to commemorate his subject's best qualities, the typical modern biographer assumes a duty to expose at least some of his subject's worst. My intention is not to reassert such truisms, but to investigate them; to explore the interplay between a general mode of biography and an individual work that has arisen from that mode.

Instead of surveying a broad selection of influential-seeming biographies, I focus on biographical treatments of a single outstanding figure, Charles Darwin. This singular focus will, I trust, show how changes in the general nature of biography can change our view of a specific person. Readers of modern Darwin biographies encounter images of Darwin that differ widely from those encountered by Victorian readers; and the differences correspond not only with the growth of Darwin scholarship but also with the general evolution of biographical preoccupations and techniques. A more random survey of biographies — here a *Life of Florence Nightingale*, there a *Churchill*, now a *John Lennon* — would fail to capture such a correspondence.

One might raise the following objection: when Victorian biographers wrote about

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[1] Given the close interplay between biography and autobiography — an interplay which will become obvious later in this thesis — I will not treat autobiography as an entirely separate genre.

Darwin, they were describing a contemporary. When we write about Darwin, we describe someone who died long ago. Biographers, whether Victorian or modern, may treat contemporary figures in a way altogether different from that in which they treat historically-distant figures. My method might mistake the lengthening of our historical perspective on Darwin for a change in the general nature of biography.

To answer this objection: neither Victorian nor modern biographies do in fact treat contemporary figures and historically-distant figures altogether differently. Victorian biographies, generally, are respectful, regardless of the subject's historical period: an English hero was an English hero, be he Alfred of Wessex or Gordon of Khartoum. Modern biographies, generally, are iconoclastic, catering to our curiosity about human foibles — again, regardless of the subject's historical period. If Charles Darwin is now considered "fair game" for biographical scrutiny, so too is, say, Stephen Hawking, or any other famous modern scientist.

It might be as useful to compare past and present biographies of Dickens, say, or George Eliot, or any of a host of literary figures. Why choose, as a kernel for literary research, biographies of a scientist?

Firstly, Darwin has had a more powerful impact on modern Western thought than any contemporaneous literary figure; and the variety of biographical material surrounding him is broader even than that surrounding Dickens (Dickens did not, for instance, produce an undisguised autobiography; nor have three major biographies of Dickens appeared between 1990 and 1995). Secondly, most book-length commentaries on biography seem to give precedence to biographies about literary figures. A sustained inquiry into biographies about a scientist may contribute to evening the balance.

Procedure and methodology

In this chapter, I go on to offer a critique of previous approaches to the evolution of biography. In the next chapter, I provide a broad overview of the biographical material that surrounds Darwin. I then analyse in detail the following works, devoting a chapter to each work:

— *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, "edited by his son, Francis Darwin" (1887).

The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin displays the Victorian preference for compiling, rather than composing, biographies: Francis Darwin reconstructs his father's life, not in a single narrative, but by compiling primary sources of information — letters, diary entries, reminiscences, by or about Charles Darwin.

I precede my analysis with a discussion of the Victorian biographer's milieu. This discussion incorporates a critique of other critics' views of Victorian biography.

In an appendix, I re-test certain of my hypotheses about Victorian commemorative biography against *The Life of Richard Owen* (1894). (Owen was the most eminent naturalist among Darwin's Victorian critics; hence my choice of this particular work.)

— *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* by Geoffrey West (1937).

This is one of the first modern biographies of Darwin. Instead of compiling primary sources, West composes a single birth-till-death narrative.

Again, I precede my analysis with a discussion of the biographer's milieu and a critique of other critics' views (of biography as it emerged after the First World War).

— *Darwin and the Beagle* by Alan Moorehead (1969).

Darwin and the Beagle provides a useful example of a dramatised, simplified version of Darwin's life, although it may appear rather superficial when compared against my other primary texts.

— *Darwin* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (1991).

This comprehensive study of Darwin's life combines popular and scholarly approaches to biography: on the one hand, it is a racily-written "blockbuster" about a troubled genius; on the other, it weaves strands of social, political, religious and scientific history into an argument about the nature of Darwin's science. However, despite its late-twentieth-century sophistication, it does not necessarily provide a truer view of Darwin than that provided by *The Life and Letters*.

This kind of analysis poses questions about quality and progress in the evolution of biography. May one describe a work as good simply on the grounds that it was received favourably within its own milieu? (if a Victorian biography was received favourably by Victorians, does that make it a good biography?). And may one describe a work as good if it was *not* well-received? (one thinks now of Froude's *Thomas Carlyle*, a biography which outraged Froude's contemporaries but is revered by modern critics). Is Desmond and Moore's reconstruction of Darwin's life better than West's, and is West's in turn better than Francis Darwin's? Or is it unfair to view a text from one era as if it were competing against a text from another, very different era?

I have found it worthwhile to evaluate my primary texts. The cornerstone of my evaluative method is a determination to read each text fairly. A fair reading of a text takes into account the original purposes of that text. The fair critic, presented with a book about Darwin written for schoolchildren and a book about Darwin written for professional historians of science, will not evaluate the two books as if they were in direct competition. The critic will focus rather on whether each book is likely to stimulate its intended readers. Equally, when evaluating a Victorian biography, one ought to bear in mind that it was written for readers whose requirements differed in some ways from the requirements of readers today. This is not to say we must maintain the kind of critical relativism that never judges one book to be more worthwhile than

another. Some books fulfil their purposes better than others do, and this can be seen even where book *A* has purposes different from those of book *B*. Also, some books are more ambitious than others, and thus more admirable if they succeed. A book that extends the boundaries of Darwin scholarship is in a league superior to that of *Darwin For Beginners*.

Then again, the question "Which of these two books is the better?" may not have a simple answer, because book *A* may have the advantage in some areas and book *B* may have it in others (for instance, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* provides a more intimate picture of Darwin's family life than Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* does; but is less forthcoming than *Darwin* about the politics of Victorian science). Nor need we reduce the question of progress in biography to such simplistic terms as "Is twentieth-century biography superior to Victorian biography?" In some areas twentieth-century biography has the advantage, in others it does not.

Reviews of my primary texts are considered closely. These reviews give some indication of how the reading public viewed or views the texts, and offer useful insights into past and present assumptions about biography. Obviously, a survey of reviewers' responses does not constitute an objective survey of general-readers' responses. Nevertheless, the reviews reveal more than would a solo effort on my part to project myself into the minds of Victorian and modern readers.

Background to my methodology: a critique of previous approaches to the evolution of biography, and a consideration of alternative approaches

A number of historians of biography, starting with Waldo H. Dunn in *English Biography* (1916), refer to "the biographical impulse". This term implies that biography is a universal human trait, impelled by our very nature (much as, say, singing and dancing might be). The implication is well-grounded, for throughout history storytellers have been drawn to describing prominent individuals. However, the term fails to distinguish between biography in the most basic sense ("description of an individual") and biography as a sophisticated literary genre. A frieze depicting the triumphs of an Assyrian emperor is one manifestation of "the biographical impulse"; today's three-minute television profile of a Hollywood star is another; the three-volume *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* is yet another. The variety of items that can be attributed to "the biographical impulse" is so broad that the term becomes trivial.

A more serious drawback of the term is that it encourages one to imagine that all biographical texts are related causally. For instance, Dunn begins his history of biography by discussing certain "important out-croppings of the biographical impulse", such as the late-seventh-century *Life of St. Columba* by Adamnan. For Dunn the *Life of St. Columba* is not just an example of hagiography, a bygone genre; it is also a step towards biography as we know it today: "The part of it which is biographical [as opposed to hagiographical] is reduced to the smallest compass, yet it is in this part that we recognise Columba, the man; it is in this part that we recognise the germ of biography — if not in the English language, at least in the British Isles." (3) The "germ", according to Dunn, reaches its fullest fruition in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, "toward which all English biography before 1791 tends, and to which all since that date looks back reminiscently." (112)

The *Life of St. Columba* and the *Life of Johnson* may both be said to result from "the biographical impulse", but there is no causal relationship between them. Adamnan did not start or join a cumulative biographical effort that culminated in the work of Boswell. The two men are separated by a millennium of extreme cultural changes. If we are to see in the work of Adamnan the germ of the work of Boswell, we might as well see in the friezes of ancient Assyria the germ of the *Superman* comic.

Most of the several book-length histories of biographies I have encountered follow Dunn's framework,[2] particularly in that they posit a continuity between ancient and modern biographical forms.

According to James C. Johnston, biography began tentatively in primitive mythology and more deliberately in the Old Testament: "While in the myths, it is true, biography is not present in a very conscious form, there is sufficient emphasis on the individual character and achievements of persons of the Old Testament to justify much more than the assignment of the mere biographical impulse to many of these stories." (1927.31) Similarly, John A. Garraty states that, "The roots of biography lie buried in man's search for immortality. Five thousand years ago Egyptian kings left in their tombs records of their fame [...]" (1957.41). "Roots", like "germ", implies growth and continuity — a causal continuum from ancient tombs to biography as we understand it

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[2] See David Novarr's *The Lines of Life: Theories of biography, 1880-1970*, 1986.24-27, for a more positive discussion of Dunn's contribution to the history of biography. Novarr does however reinforce my opinion that Dunn created a paradigm from which the history of biography has yet to escape: he describes Dunn's *English Biography* as a "pioneering book, to which so many have owed so much, frequently without proper acknowledgement of their debt" and "a storehouse of opinions which have become commonplaces".

today.

Paul Murray Kendall informs us that "the beginnings of modern biography" are located "in the fifteenth century, that century which until very recently has been regarded as a literary wasteland, at least in England and France. In this harsh soil the biographical impulse stirs again, after a thousand years in which life-writing had been wrenched from its own orbit to become a captive satellite of the Church." (1965.51) Is Kendall saying, among other things, that fifteenth-century life-writing is a continuation of fifth-century life-writing? Surely not; but the ability of "the biographical impulse" to "stir again" after a millennium does imply some form of continuation. (Kendall too uses the metaphors of rootedness and germination: in "harsh soil the biographical impulse stirs".)

"The medieval ancestor of biography was the saint's life or, to be more accurate about it, the saint's legend" declares no less a critic than Richard Altick (1969.5). "Ancestor" implies a line of descent and so implies, again, a causal continuum from hagiography to modern biography.

All in all, then, the histories of biography that we find in our libraries mistake the mere similarity between ancient and modern biographical forms (Adamnan writes about an individual, so does Boswell) for a continuous, causal link. In using the word "similarity", I refer to a *conceptual* link. Just as, say, dragonflies and eagles (which are similar simply in that both have wings and are predatory) can be linked within the concept "winged predators", so can certain ancient and modern texts (similar simply in that each focusses on an individual person) be linked within the concept "biography". This kind of conceptual link does not necessarily indicate a causal or evolutionary link: eagles need not have evolved — definitely did not evolve — from the primeval dragonflies; nor need modern biographies have evolved from ancient ones.

Moreover, our histories of biography are what a historiographer might term teleological, or Whig, or progressivist, or presentist; they are histories in which the historian assumes that events have directed themselves, as if by some inner purpose, towards an ideal he holds at present. Dunn states his bias openly: "In this volume, the ideal type has been adopted as the standard, the test by which all products of biography herein mentioned have been judged. Biography may be said to develop, therefore, in proportion to the degree [to which it matches that ideal]." (xiv-xv) While Dunn's "ideal type" is platonic, "in theory, purpose, plan, [Boswell] pointed out the ideal." (129) Hence Dunn's belief that "all English biography before 1791 tends, and [...] all since

that date looks back reminiscently" to the *Life of Johnson*. (112)

There is a particular danger in Dunn's tendency to personify biography — to turn it into an entity capable of "looking back reminiscently", for instance. This mode of personification glibly converts what is, in fact, a somewhat random selection of discontinuous texts, into a creature with a single identity and purpose.

The existence of biography does not depend on what literary critics say about it. It is a complex cultural phenomenon, not a formula or an ideal. When we make recommendations about what biography ought to be, we are not defining biography as it actually is. Dunn fails to mark this. His recommendation that biography ought to aspire to the best qualities of the *Life of Johnson* is in itself perfectly reasonable; but he gives it the status of a factual definition: biography develops to the degree that it matches the ideal suggested by the *Life of Johnson*. This preconceived definition of how biography develops determines Dunn's greater description of how biography develops, where logically the greater description should precede and determine any definition.

The Development of English Biography by Harold Nicolson (1928) is probably the best-known history of English biography. It is often cited uncritically by later commentators, so I will discuss it here at some length.

Nicolson, like Dunn, interprets the evolution of biography in terms of his own ideal type, the "pure" biography.

> Let me at the outset define what, in my opinion, are the elements which constitute a "pure" biography. In tracing the development of this art in England, I shall show how seldom it was properly differentiated or isolated; how frequently its outlines were confused by elements extraneous to the art itself. [...]
>
> [...] The primary essential [of "pure" biography] is that of historical truth, by which is meant not merely the avoidance of misstatements, but the wider veracity of complete and accurate portraiture. [...]
>
> The second essential of pure biography is that it shall be well constructed. [...] There must finally be a consciousness of creation, a conviction that some creative mind has selected and composed these facts in such a manner as to give them a convincing interpretation; that, in a word, the given biography is a work of intelligence.
>
> (Nicolson 1928.9-13)

Thus Nicolson too explores biography not as he finds it, but as he has already defined it.

Much of Nicolson's history of biography is a distillation of Dunn's, and again implies a continuum of biographical activity that stretches over the centuries. In his final chapter, however, Nicolson questions the validity of such a continuum.

> I have throughout accepted the convention of speaking (as if I really believed in such things) of "influences" and "innovators," of "reactionaries" and of "pioneers." I have told you of Bede and Asser, of Eadmer and William of Malmesbury. I have attributed to these people conscious artistic or biographical purposes which, I well know, they did not possess. I have contended that Roper "introduced" vivid dialogue, that Cavendish "introduced" deliberate inductive composition. I have examined the "influence" of Plutarch and Tacitus [...] But do not for one moment imagine that I believe any of these people (with the possible exception of Boswell) were conscious of what they were doing, were aware of the "tendencies" which they represented or of the "influences" to which they had succumbed. The development of the human intellect from generation to generation can rarely be ascribed to recognisable causes; it must generally be ascribed to that intricate weaving and unweaving of taste and distaste, that kaleidoscopic and continuous reshaping of intellect and indifference, of surprise and expectation, which we call, somewhat indolently, "the spirit of the age."
>
> (Nicolson 1928.132-34)

Having thus repudiated his "historical method", Nicolson goes on to explain that he has nevertheless used this method because,

> It is, in the first place, a convenient convention. It is much less cumbrous, for instance, to speak of Froude as having "introduced" into biography the spirit of satire, than to say that the particular brand of sceptical detachment which we realise to be the main element in twentieth-century biography can first be recognised, although only in germinal form, in Froude's treatment of the Carlyles. (Nicolson 1928.134-35)

This is not satisfactory. "Froude introduced into biography the spirit of satire" does *not* have the same meaning as "a particular brand of sceptical detachment appeared in germinal form in the work of Froude", and Nicolson should not have expected his readers to conjure the second statement from the first. Moreover, Nicolson's "convention of speaking [...] of 'influences' and 'innovators,' of 'reactionaries' and of 'pioneers'" is no mere appendage to his history of biography, but a major determinant of its structure. When he disclaims the existence of influences, innovators, etc. — "as if [one] really believed in such things [!]" — his entire edifice appears to collapse.

Nicolson adds that, "the historical method, although it often falsifies essential proportions, does in the end convey an impression of growth, does in fact indicate a line of development." This statement is confusing. Why presuppose "a line of development" when one has denied the validity of the "influences" and "tendencies" on which such a line would seem to depend? As one reads on, however, one gathers that Nicolson is referring now to a different sort of development to that in which Adamnan flowers eventually into Boswell. Nicolson is concerned instead with "the slow and somewhat confused evolution of English biography" in accordance with "the requirements of the reading public". The switch of focus from biographer to reader alters Nicolson's impression of past biography somewhat; he sees a "rhythmic ebb and flow":

> [...] in the sixteenth century biography made a signal advance, only to recede again in the century that followed [...] in the eighteenth century it reached a high state of excellence, and thereafter collapsed under the Victorians [...] The causes of this rhythmic ebb and flow are more profound than the accidents and whims which modify most literary fashions. Biography having no claim to be a specific branch of literature was never properly isolated. It possessed no independent existence; it rose and fell simply with the public interest in human personality, with their taste for psychology. This taste, in its turn, is governed by the ebb and flow of religious belief. In periods when the reading public believe in God and in the life after death, their interest centres on what they would call the eternal verities, their interest in mundane verities declines. At such periods

> becomes deductive, ethical, didactic, or merely superficial. In periods, however, of speculation, doubt, or scepticism the reading public become predominantly interested in human behaviour, and biography, in order to meet this interest, becomes inductive, critical, detached, and realistic.
>
> (Nicolson 1928.138-39)

Eighteenth-century humanism, Victorian confidence in God, Queen and Empire, and twentieth-century iconoclasm, are indeed reflected by many of the biographies of those periods. Do we not witness a flow towards psychological-probing in the eighteenth century, an ebb away from it in the Victorian era, and a resurgence of that flow in our own century? Possibly, but if one considers Nicolson's model more carefully it will be seen to be unsound. For instance, the popularity of Dickens and of those other authors to whom we ascribe "The Golden Age of the Novel" indicates that the Victorian public did in fact have a strong "interest in human personality". Likewise, Nicolson's concept that the sixteenth century was a time of "gay inquisitiveness" (27) and the seventeenth, by contrast, a time of "moral earnestness" (64), is too simplistic to be convincing.[3] Moreover, Nicolson is still interpreting the evolution of biography in terms of his own ideal type. When he refers to "a signal advance" or a recession in the "ebb and flow" of biography, he means an advance towards or a recession from that ideal, the "inductive, critical, detached, and realistic" biography.

Dunn, Nicolson, and those later historians of biography who work within their paradigm, imply that almost every biographical form merges into a "Story of Biography" wherein Biography becomes a kind of existential hero among genres, seeking to free its own true self from the mundanity imposed on it by its practitioners across the ages. This "Story" is epitomised in Kendall's image of "a thousand years in which life-writing had been wrenched from its own orbit to become a captive satellite of the Church" (1965.51), and in Garraty's chapter-heading "Biography Reaches Maturity" (1957.75). I have argued that it imposes continuity where there was in fact none: the *Life of St. Columba* did not mature over a millennium into the *Life of Johnson*.

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[3] For a discussion of "the fallacy of false periodization", see David Fischer's lucid and amusing book, *Historians' Fallacies* (1970). As Fischer puts it, "One common kind of false periodization might be termed hectohistory. It happens when history is neatly chopped into Procrustean periods, each precisely a hundred years long. The fascination of a rounded number is irresistible." (145)

Biography is a vast multiplicity of texts and projects, not a unified entity seeking an ideal.

I do not mean to imply that there are no causal connections whatsoever from past to present biographical works. *Some* (not all) are connected causally, and *sometimes* the connection can indeed stretch across the centuries. Take for instance the influence of Plutarch, who was born in or around 46 AD. His biographical works, which pair and compare the great figures of the ancient world, reappeared in French and then in English translations some fifteen centuries after his time. They have since informed the thoughts of a variety of biographers. A recent example is provided by Allan Bullock's *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel lives* (1991). "My purpose is not to show that [Hitler and Stalin] were both examples of a general category but to use comparison to illuminate the unique individual character of each," writes Bullock. "Hence my subtitle, 'Parallel Lives', borrowed from Plutarch: parallel lives, like parallel lines, do not meet or merge." (xviii) Bullock's words, "My purpose is [...] to use comparison to illuminate the unique individual character", are telling: Plutarch's purpose appears to have been exactly the same.

The fact that Plutarch has influenced later writers does not mean we have to give him a title like "The Father of Biography" (which belongs to the grandiose terminology that permits such pronouncements as "Biography Reaches Maturity"). His role in the evolution of biography is evidenced by small, specific events, such as Bullock's reference to his "Parallel Lives". We need not inflate that role into something greater than the sum of our evidence. The same holds true for the roles of Adamnan, Boswell, Froude, and all the other writers whom Dunn and Nicolson have elevated into a canon of biography.

The progressivist, presentist, "Story of Biography" mode of describing past biographical forms persists even in relatively recent commentaries.[4] One antidote to it

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[4] For instance, Robert Gittings concludes his lecture on the history of biography by stating that,

> It would seem that biography, first looking on man as an adjunct to religious example and precept of moral conduct, a part of the prevailing Church, then as an ornament to the prevailing State, an example of civic, secular virtues, has gradually come to portray as its subject the individual man or woman. It has been a movement towards humanism, and may take its place, and account for its own popularity, as a humanistic study. It has also developed from the official to the unofficial; it has admitted the lesser known, in their capacity and interest simply as human beings. This is modern biography.
>
> (Gittings 1978.40)

(continued...)

might be to describe the relevant biographical works in a rigorously non-evaluative way; for when we start to evaluate the quality of past texts and the competence of bygone writers, it is easy to slip into implying that they are nodes in a progression towards (or a regression from) our present conception of quality and competence.[5] However, rigorous non-evaluation is not an appealing option. If the literary historian is not to express or even imply his opinion of a text, all he can do is offer a flat précis of that text. Critical appreciation, discernment and conviction must absent themselves — yet we look to literary history to help us appreciate literature, not just to précis old texts.

How is one to avoid both the extreme of presentism and the extreme of non-evaluation?

One can adopt what is sometimes called "the recurrent approach" to historical phenomena, wherein one reflects on those phenomena in the light of present knowledge but is careful not to portray them as part of a movement towards the present (see Kragh 1987,92-93). Or one can attempt "historical criticism" in J.R. de J. Jackson's sense of that term: "criticism that tries to read past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new." As Jackson points out, historical criticism need not be an end in itself; "establishing the original meaning of a text, like establishing the original wording of a text, is normally undertaken with a view to providing reliable materials for all other kinds of criticism to work with." (1989.3-5) Certainly, historical criticism is compatible with the recurrent approach, and may indeed provide an excellent foundation for it. Alone or in combination with other critical modes, historical criticism is likely to aid fair evaluation, for, properly done, it provides a mediator (in the form of the real or potential responses of past readers) between the critic and the text.

Historiographically-defensible approaches to past literature appear to share at least one vital common factor, namely, empathy for the writers and original readers of

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[4](...continued)

Literary history, as a discipline, seems particularly vulnerable to presentist biases, for any text that stands before our eyes has a certain immediacy even if it was written centuries ago. This immediacy is evidenced in our convention of describing surviving texts in the present tense. A text need not be literary for the convention to apply: we would for instance say, "The Domesday Book *is* an economic record from 1086," rather than, "The Domesday Book *was* an economic record made in 1086." This second statement might imply that the Book had since been lost.

[5] Hence Richard Altick, who in the introduction to his *Lives and Letters: A history of literary biography in England and America* (1969) explicitly rejects the idea that biography "witness[ed] a steady refinement of form and technique", nevertheless declares in a later chapter that "Samuel Johnson was the most fortunate event in English literary biography [...] he is the giant who bestrides our story." (xv, 46)

that literature. The value of empathy to the historian and critic can be illustrated by contrasting Stauffer's approach to medieval hagiography with Nicolson's. According to Nicolson,

> [hagiographies] created a persistent tradition extending well into the thirteenth century and beyond. It was a bad tradition. The centre of interest was never the individual but always the institution; their insistence on the ethical message allowed the hagiographers no scope for insight or even accuracy; the desire to prove their case induced them to insert the legendary, the supernatural, and the miraculous. These prose and verse lives were the novels of the Middle Ages, but their influence upon biography was regrettable.
>
> (Nicolson 1928.19)

Stauffer is careful to "determine what the early biographers themselves considered as the ideal in life-writing." (1930.vii) Hence he is able to explain that,

> A saint's life is a moral biography. Since it deals with the history of a holy man, it is unsuccessful if it is not edifying, and imperfect if it does not teach Christian virtue and strengthen Christian faith. [...] Considered as a work of art, therefore, no piece of hagiography is complete without supernatural anecdotes, for without such divine favour, a saint is not a saint, but a mere virtuous man.
>
> Viewed as a dispassionate and objective chronicle, however, the saint's life meets with little sympathy today. [...] Between the sceptical modern and the credulous mediaeval attitudes there is a gulf apparently so wide that a discussion of saint's lives will be fruitless unless the sincerity of the mediaeval writer is acknowledged at the outset.
>
> (Stauffer 1930.4-5)

Stauffer suggests that while hagiography *as a conventionalized form* "render[s] sterile either creative imagination or detailed accuracy", some lively exceptions and indeed "masterpieces" are to be found in the writings of Adamnan, Bede and others (7-8).

That Stauffer's approach is fairer than Nicolson's is, one trusts, self-evident. Another essential difference between the two approaches is that, whereas it is not unreasonable to believe that Stauffer's statements are true, Nicolson's beg to be questioned. Were the hagiographers really *never* interested in the individual? Did their insistence on an ethical message *necessarily* allow no scope for insight or accuracy? Why did the hagiographers have to "prove their case" in an age which appears to have been saturated with faith in miracles and the supernatural? Whatever the answers, Nicolson's lack of empathy with his subject has not helped him to produce a convincing discussion.

In this thesis I have attempted to employ the recurrent approach, Jackson's historical criticism, and the kind of empathetic discernment demonstrated by Stauffer.

CHAPTER TWO: AN OVERVIEW OF DARWIN BIOGRAPHY

The purpose of this Chapter is to chart the broader body of Darwin biography, so that the works discussed in Chapters Three to Six do not appear in false isolation.

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Introductory discussion: sources available to biographers of Darwin — "the Darwin Industry" — a purported lack of satisfactory Darwin biographies

The existent letters written or received by Charles Darwin before 1862 fill nine volumes of *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Burkhardt, Smith *et al*, eds. 1985-94) — volumes which in some instances run to several hundred pages each. The *Correspondence* project is ongoing, and, as Darwin remained an enthusiastic correspondent up till his death in 1882,[1] many volumes are yet to come. The rest of the Darwin archive (his published works, notebooks, jottings, family papers, and so on) is similarly vast.[2]

Teams of scholars have devoted years to organising these letters and documents coherently, to deciphering Darwin's handwriting, and to publishing the whole for the benefit of the public. Hence Darwin, like Shakespeare, is often spoken of as an "industry". References to "the Darwin Industry" seem to imply both admiration for the "prodigious accomplishment" of the Darwin scholars in question, and amusement at their "obsessive probing" (Gould 1992.215).

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[1] Charles Robert Darwin was born on 12 February 1809 and died on 19 April 1882.

[2] Charles Darwin was perhaps not *quite* as compulsive a hoarder of documents as he is sometimes made out to be. According to his son and first biographer, Francis Darwin:

> It was his custom to file all letters received, and when his slender stock of files ("spits" as he called them) was exhausted, he would burn the letters of several years, in order that he might make use of the liberated "spits". This process, carried on for years, destroyed nearly all letters received before 1862. After that date he was persuaded to keep the more interesting letters, and these are preserved in an accessible form.
>
> (*LL*1.v)

The Industry's major productions, besides the multi-volumed *Correspondence*, include *A Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 1821 — 1882* (Burkhardt and Smith, eds. 1985), *The Works of Charles Darwin* (10 vols., Barrett and Freeman, eds. 1987), *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836 — 1844* (Barrett *et al*, eds. 1987), and *Charles Darwin's Marginalia* (Di Gregorio, ed. 1990). Much of the information in these volumes would otherwise be available only in the original and often barely legible manuscripts. Even so, Darwin biographers working prior to the full waxing of the Industry did not lack readily-accessible information. Most of Darwin's own published works (which contain much explicitly autobiographical material) have always been available to any member of a good library. The three-volume *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, including an autobiographical chapter* (Darwin, F. ed. 1887) was followed by the two-volume *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (Darwin, F. and Seward, eds. 1903). Further perspectives on Darwin appear in his wife Emma's *Family Letters* (Litchfield, ed. 1915) and in the life-and-letters biographies of colleagues like Thomas Huxley and Joseph Hooker. *Charles Darwin's Diary of the Voyage of HMS Beagle*, edited by his granddaughter Nora Barlow, appeared in 1933; it was eventually followed by *Charles Darwin and the Voyage of the Beagle* (Barlow, ed. 1945), a collection of letters and notes written by Darwin during the voyage.[3] Editions of a number of Darwin's notebooks have appeared since 1960 (see Colp, 1989.193 n.41).

While this abundance of information makes it possible to reconstruct many aspects of Darwin's life in minute detail, it does not necessarily make him an easy subject for biographers. He is surrounded by a hydra of Darwinisms — the various shifting interpretations of his work, and the uses and abuses to which to which these can be put.[4] And even if one did manage to work one's way through all the relevant scientific, historiographical and ideological issues, would one not find, at the centre, a phantom who defied description? For Darwin himself seems full of contradictions. How is one to connect, coherently, the younger Darwin, whose "passion for shooting and for hunting, and when this failed, for riding across country [...] got [him] into a sporting set, including some dissipated low-minded young men", with his older,

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[3] Neither of these books should be confused with Darwin's high-selling *Journal of Researches* (1839), which since 1905 has been marketed as *The Voyage of the Beagle*. John Tallmadge (1980) provides a fascinating comparison of the *Journal* with the *Diary*.

[4] See for instance Edward Caudill, *Darwinian Myths: The legends and misuses of a theory* (1998) and Linda Gamlin, "One thousand and one uses for Darwin" (1994).

seemingly rather precious self, who "for nearly forty years never knew one day of the health of ordinary men" (*LL*1.160,48) — ? How is one to reconcile Darwin's desire for recognition with his apparent "reclusiveness"?[5] Above all, how is one to grasp that which made Darwin (whose temperament was, to all appearances, more plodding than mercurial) the originator of the most powerful biological concept of our time? As Roy Porter states in his excellent discussion of the quest for "the origins of Charles Darwin's particular species of genius",

> [...] our myth of the scientist as paragon is riddled with contradictory messages: blinding-flash illumination, the Pauline conversion, jostles the sober grind; love of truth vies with love of honour or priority; "be humble" competes against "be original"; genius as inspiration — a vision fostered by Renaissance artists — challenges genius as perspiration.
>
> Our image of Darwin himself is a classic epitome of this schizophrenia.
>
> (Porter 1982.16)

The "schizophrenic" nature of Darwin's public image is evidenced by the frequency of the complaint that a Darwin biography worthy of its subject has yet to be written. Indeed, a thoroughly satisfactory Darwin biography would seem to represent, for his most devoted scholars, an ever-elusive Holy Grail. For an illustration of this, consider the following selection of comments (I have placed the citation dates on the left to emphasise the chronology of the sequence):

1882 The first duty of biographers will be to render some idea, not of what he did, but of what he was. And this, unfortunately, is just the point where all his biographers must necessarily fail. For while to those favoured few who were on

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[5] The fusion of Darwin's retiring domesticity with his international reputation is captured, perhaps unwittingly, by himself in this excerpt from his "Autobiography":

> After several fruitless searches in Surrey and elsewhere, we found [Down House] and purchased it. I was pleased with the diversified appearance of the vegetation proper to a chalk district [...] and still more pleased with the extreme quietness and rusticity of the place. It is not, however, quite so retired a place as a writer in a German periodical makes it, who says that my house can be approached only by a mule-track!
>
> (*LL*1.78-79)

terms of intimate friendship with him, any language by which it is sought to portray his character might seem inadequate, to every one else the same language must appear the result of enthusiastic admiration finding vent in extravagant panegyric.

(Romanes in Huxley *et al.*2 — memorial notice written soon after Darwin's death)

1937 Frankly, I have found the airy assumptions and unconfirmed borrowings of some Darwin biographers distinctly disturbing. When one against all the evidence can make Emma Wedgewood Charles Darwin's "sweetheart" in 1825, and another on no evidence at all adopt the acknowledged speculations of a psycho-analytical theorist as established fact, there seems no reason why one should not resort to fairy-tales direct.

(West.xii — Geoffrey West's introduction to his *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man*)

1958 The mystery persists. The man is not really explained, his inner adventures are not revealed in his own autobiography, in the family biography by Francis Darwin, or in the many other biographical sketches and books.

(Simpson.122 — review of *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin "with original omissions restored"*, edited by Nora Barlow (1958))

1982 [...] it is striking that no *academic* historian has written a biography of Darwin over the last twenty years. Instead, two *genres* flourish: a multiplication of bloodless monographs — of great learning and expertise — mapping the career of Darwin's *concepts* — their roots, articulation, refinement, impact — treated

independently of Darwin's personality [...] Secondly, there is the approach which denies interest in the individual, by seeing him, in the name of Marxist history or sociology, as a cypher of society or its *Zeitgeist*.

(Porter.18 — The italics in "no academic historian" are mine.)

1982 What is lacking from Mr Brent's account of 'a man of enlarged curiosity' is what is lacking from most biographies of Darwin: a satisfactory attempt to explain the inspiration that drove Darwin on year after year, decade after decade [...]

(Clark.28 — review of Peter Brent's *Charles Darwin: A man of enlarged curiosity* (1981))

1983 The much maligned general reader does not really want a description of isolated ideas, however earth-shattering they may be; on the contrary, readers hope to find a person, a real historical figure in a recreated era, something that tells them what it might have been like to live and work at a particular time and how deep philosophical concerns entered the picture. What they want, in short, is what professional historians of science have been doing all the time. Why, then, is there still no good biography of Darwin?

(Browne.285 — review of Wilma George's *Darwin* and Jonathan Howard's *Darwin* (both 1982))

1989 [...] because of the recent proliferation of new information about Darwin, all of his many biographical works — which were often rated as "definitive" — have become problematical or inadequate.

(Colp.167 — Ralph Colp Jr. in his monograph "Charles Darwin's Past and Future Biographies")

1991 A full portrait of Darwin, giving due weight to his petty conceits as well as his undeniable attractions, is still required.

(Erskine.578 — review of John Bowlby's *Charles Darwin* (1990))

1991 The full enigma of Darwin's life has never been grasped. Indeed, previous biographies have been curiously bloodless affairs. They have broken little new ground and made no contact with the inflammatory issues and events of his day.

Our *Darwin* sets out to be different [...]

(Desmond and Moore.xvi — Adrian Desmond and James Moore in the introduction to their *Darwin*)

1993 Desmond and Moore note in their preface that "the full enigma of Darwin's life has never been grasped". Although they unquestionably succeed in grasping an important and previously unrevealed part of the enigma, their statement still holds true. Charles Darwin was too complicated, and meant too many things to too many people, to be encompassed definitively in a single volume however big it might be.

(Fancher.270 — review of Adrian Desmond and James Moore's *Darwin*)

Despite the absence or impossibility of a perfect biography of Darwin, there is a sentiment — often expressed apologetically by Darwin scholars themselves — that the man has been so fully explored that Darwin studies are descending into self propagation and trivia. The next biography of Darwin will have to be extremely good if it is not to disappoint the much-practised reviewers in the field.[6]

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[6] Even as I wrote this, the first volume of Janet Browne's *Charles Darwin* (1995) appeared in the bookshops. Browne is a former member of the editorial team that produces *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, and her book is indeed extremely good. The *next* Darwin biography after Browne's will simply have to be better than extremely good.

A survey of biographical writings on Darwin: division of these writings into useful categories — questions of fairness in the evaluation of biographical works

The rest of this chapter offers a survey of biographical writings on Darwin. The survey is indicative rather than exhaustive, for Darwin has attracted so many books and monographs that an exhaustive survey would require a volume to itself.

Let us begin by dividing the biographical material that surrounds Darwin into four broad categories:

— autobiographical sources — revelations Darwin might make about himself;

— "niche" biographical studies — studies that specialise in, and limit themselves to, certain aspects of Darwin's life;

— full-scale scholarly biographies;

— popular and educational biographies — works that try, not so much to advance Darwin scholarship, as to present Darwin and his work in exciting and accessible ways.

Distinguishing between scholarly, popular and educational biographies is an aid to fair evaluation. For instance, it might be interesting to compare Peter Brent's *Charles Darwin: A man of enlarged curiosity* with Irving Stone's *The Origin: A biographical novel of Charles Darwin*; for both books appeared in 1981; Brent and Stone are both to some extent "professional biographers"; Brent is British, Stone is American; and so on. But to rank the the two books against each other on a single scale of merit would be like ranking a cricketer against a baseball player. Brent's *Charles Darwin* is in the game of disciplined knowledge advancement, whereas Stone's *The Origin*, by its very subtitle — "A biographical *novel*" — renounces participation in that game, and plays instead in a game where the first rule is to produce an absorbing story.

Another example is provided by Peter Ward's *The Adventures of Charles Darwin*

(1982), which is written for nine to twelve year-olds and has a fictional hero, George Carter, "cabin-boy of HMS *Beagle*". *The Adventures of Charles Darwin* is an appealing story and — largely *because* it is an appealing story — provides a good introduction to Darwin for young readers. It would be ludicrous to criticise it for, say, factual inaccuracy in adding a cabin-boy to the *Beagle*'s crew.

This is not to say that the scholarly, the popular and the educational are always divided. Scholarly works may be written so as to be entirely accessible to freshmen and to general readers; and "truths of fiction" in popular novelisations may sometimes influence serious scholars.

Many of the books that focus on aspects of Darwin*ism* rather than on Darwin himself nevertheless include biographical sketches of the great scientist. Again, it is unfair to judge these books on the basis that they ought really to be full-scale scholarly biographies.[7]

More significant to this thesis are the "niche" biographical studies which surround Darwin. These range from long works like Ralph Colp Jr.'s 285-page *To Be an Invalid. The illness of Charles Darwin* (1977) to monographs in journals such as *History of Science*. What all the niche studies have in common is a strong focus on some particular aspect of Darwin's life. As with my separation of Darwin biographies into the scholarly, popular and educational, it is not always possible or desirable to draw sharp dividing lines between categories — between short papers, longer niche-studies and full-scale biographies. For instance, John Bowlby's *Charles Darwin* (1990) is undeniably a full-scale biography, but it also has a specialised angle: Bowlby, who was one of Britain's leading psychiatrists, takes a particular interest in the mystery of Darwin's ill-health, and uses his *Charles Darwin* as a vehicle to present his diagnosis.

The rest of this Chapter provides, firstly, a discussion of autobiographical sources on Darwin; secondly, a survey of niche biographical studies of Darwin; and thirdly a list of Darwin biographies with a brief critical comment on each. The list includes both scholarly and popular works, but not works written for children.

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[7] Wilma George's *Darwin* and Jonathan Howard's *Darwin* (both 1982) receive a particularly unfair joint review from Janet Browne, who describes Howard's book as "a disaster" (1983.285) because it focusses on Darwin's contribution to biology and glances over his life. Browne has apparently failed to grasp that Howard and George were tasked to write scientific textbooks, not biographies. In another joint review of the two books, Redmond O'Hanlon suggests that "Jonathan Howard has produced an intellectual *tour de force*, a classic in the genre of popular scientific exposition which will still be read in fifty years' time." (1982.653)

Discussion of autobiographical sources

Darwin's "Autobiography" is discussed at length in Chapter Three of this thesis, so I shall say no more about it for the moment — except to add that it is not the only strongly autobiographical source. Darwin's *Journal of Researches* (1839), which describes his experiences as a naturalist aboard the *Beagle*, is no mere chronicle of observations: as John Tallmadge demonstrates convincingly, "the geography of the voyage is aligned [in the text] with a pattern of development in the traveller's consciousness, and the principal effect is to make the traveller the hero of his own account." (1980.333) Moreover, Darwin uses self-involving narrative and rhetoric in much of his more specialised scientific exposition. The following example is taken from *On the Origin of Species*:

> [...] to show how liable we are to error in supposing that whole groups of species have suddenly been produced [...] I may give another instance, which from having passed under my own eyes has much struck me. In a memoir on Fossil Sessile Cirripedes, I have stated that [...] had sessile cirripedes existed during the secondary periods, they would certainly have been preserved and discovered; and as not one species had been discovered in beds of this age, I concluded that this great group had been suddenly developed at the commencement of the tertiary series. This was a sore trouble to me, adding as I thought one more instance of the abrupt appearance of a great group of species. But my work had hardly been published, when a skilful palaeontologist, M. Bosquet, sent me a drawing of a perfect specimen of an unmistakeable sessile cirripede, which he had himself extracted from the chalk of Belgium. And, as if to make the case as striking as possible, this sessile Cirripede was a Chthamalus, a very common, large and ubiquitous genus [...]
>
> (Darwin, C. 1859.310-11)

Through passages like this, a distinct, rather charming, Darwin *persona* emerges from the central body of his scientific works. As one of Darwin's first biographers recognised, "Darwin revealed himself so largely in his books that a vivid picture of

much of his life can be extracted from them. Thus it [is] possible to combine much biographical interest with sketches of his most important works." (Bettany 1887.9)

Finally, Darwin's letters might be taken to add up to a kind of super-autobiography — or something beyond that, if we include letters *to* him. In a review of the first volume of *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Burkhardt and Smith, eds. 1985), George Levine observes that, "The pleasures of this text are, oddly, as much in the letters of those writing to the young Charles as in his own writing [...] As in a strong epistolary novel, we get multiple perspectives on character and incident, a plethora of detail that renders the rich texture of the social and family world in which our protagonist dwells." (1987.255)

Indeed, one might ask how any biography could possibly compete with *The Correspondence*. The answer is that *The Correspondence* has certain intrinsic weaknesses to which a good biography would not be prone. It is, for instance, simply too long and too sprawling for most readers. Also, stories made by arranging real letters are not necessarily true stories. That a set of letters is authentic does not mean they communicate exactly what the person who wrote them was doing or thinking. Letters are not always confessionals; they can as readily serve as masks.

An important point of difference between autobiographies and collections of letters concerns the intended recipients. Generally, an autobiography is intended for posterity. An informal letter, on the other hand, is usually sent with the unspoken understanding that the recipient will consider it to be a temporary document, appropriate to a particular time and set of circumstances, and will not use it to bind the writer at some future date. (Consider the parallel scenario of a casual telephone conversation with a friend: it would be indecent to record the conversation on the offchance that one could use the recording to prove a point at some future date.) To publish a letter that was not intended for publication is to bind the writer permanently to statements he may have considered temporary. A publication composed of private letters (even if it only includes charming ones) does not necessarily convey to us the things that the letter-writers themselves would have wanted future generations to know.

Darwin's fourth son Leonard makes a similar point in his essay "Memories of Down House":

> [Charles Darwin's] mornings were devoted to his most arduous work, letters being left unanswered until the afternoon, even though he had not by that time

> recovered from the strain of writing for publication. Especially in correspondence with intimate friends, who well knew how to discount any over-strong impression he might have used, phrases were in consequence sometimes included which he would have omitted if he had known that they would ever be read by other eyes. For instance, certain very plain-spoken passages in his letters may fairly be held to indicate that he was entirely at variance with Lamarck on certain points; but they should never be quoted without reference to his well-pondered words concerning that "justly-celebrated naturalist" and his "eminent service" to natural science, which are to be found in the Historical Sketch preceding all the later editions of *The Origin of Species*. Greater weight should always be given to published as compared with unpublished words.
>
> (Darwin, L. 1929.121)

Survey of niche biographical studies

A thorough survey of niche biographical studies of Darwin would consume a disproportionate amount of this thesis, so I will simply point out some recurring themes. I have arranged these themes, not in order of priority, but in an order dictated by their associations (for example, Darwin's ill-health *may* have been caused partly by a fear that his theory would make him an outcast from the mainstream of Christian society, so "Darwin's ill-health" is followed by "Darwin's views on religion").

Darwin's ill-health

As an adult, Darwin suffered frequently, and at some stages continually, from a range of symptoms. These included: sensations of fainting or "dying", "ringing in ears, treading on air", distorted vision, shivering, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pains, debilitating flatulence, palpitations of the heart, numbness of the extremities, severe headaches, chronic exhaustion, eczema, boils... the list could go on. Darwin consulted a number of leading physicians, but none was able to say exactly what he was suffering from; nor did anyone prescribe a reliable cure. Modern physicians, psychiatrists and psychologists

who have examined Darwin's medical history have also been baffled (though not all would admit it): nobody — except, perhaps, Fabienne Smith (see below) — seems to possess an unassailable explanation for Darwin's ill-health. Explanations do abound, however, to the point where "the mystery of Darwin's ill-health" has become the most distinct "niche" within Darwin studies — almost a field in its own right.

Colp's *To Be an Invalid* provides the most thorough entrée to this niche, for it provides a history up to 1977 of the various published attempts to solve the mystery. However, Colp's own explanation over-emphasises the likelihood that Darwin's ill-health was caused psychologically. Also, *To Be an Invalid* is not the sort of book a non-specialist can read easily from cover to cover. Bowlby's *Charles Darwin* is fluently-written, but again seems biased towards a psychological explanation (albeit that "differences of emphasis" remain between Bowlby's explanation and Colp's — see Bowlby 1990.462).

The most convincing explanation of Darwin's ill-health that I have encountered is Fabienne Smith's (see Smith, F. 1990 and 1992). Smith argues that Darwin's immune system was unusually vulnerable to stress, and damaged cumulatively by it, and that he thus became prey to "extreme multiple allergy" — the terrible range of bodily reactions listed above.

Darwin's views on religion

A number of scholars (including Colp, and Desmond and Moore) have argued that Darwin's health was affected powerfully by his fears that his theory of evolution would upset his wife Emma, who was a committed Christian, and isolate him from the mainstream of Christian society (see Colp 1977.140-41). Whether or not this argument is correct, we can be certain that Darwin had no wish to be perceived publicly as an opponent of the Church. The relevant passages in Darwin's letters and autobiography, and his general reticence about religious matters, indicate that his views on religion became passively agnostic:[8] he doubted, for his own part, the existence of any god, but was happy to tolerate other people's faiths.

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[8] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "agnostic" was coined by Huxley in 1869. Francis Darwin uses it in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* to describe Darwin's attitude towards religion (see *LL*1.317n).

Pat Jalland, in her book *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996), provides a compelling chapter on "Victorian Agnostics and Death", and uses Darwin as her first example. She highlights the emotional difficulties Darwin faced when he "abandoned the belief system and the set of rituals which [Victorian] society normally used in dealing with death" (344).

If Moore (the co-author of *Darwin*) is correct, a supposition that Darwin converted to Christianity on his deathbed persists strongly in the United States. In *The Darwin Legend* (1994), Moore sets out to discover whether there is any truth in this supposition, and concludes that there is not. The historical interest of the supposition or "legend" lies in its background, a background of attempts by both religious and atheistic interests to appropriate Darwin's image for their own ideological purposes.[9]

Indeed, one might propose yet another category of biographical discussion of Darwin: "propagandist biography" in which Darwin's life is described with an eye to furthering some political or moral cause. A characteristic of this kind of biography is that it presents the subject's life and character as an argument for or against the value of the subject's ideas. David Herbert's *Charles Darwin's Religious Views: From creationist to evolutionist* (1990) provides a relatively recent example. Herbert quotes a letter in which Darwin suggests to Hooker that the sun will some day cool, the Earth will freeze, and "the progress of millions of years, with every continent swarming with good and enlightened men" will end. Herbert then informs us that:

> Death, indeed, was an enemy as it brought such finality to everything, even the solar system itself. Is it any wonder that Darwin had such a hopeless and pessimistic view of life within this naturalistic world view? Surely, there must have been times that Darwin saw his indefatigable efforts for the pursuit of science as being futile and vain.
>
> Nevertheless, on 19 April 1882 at 4 o'clock, Charles Darwin took his last breath. His soul winged its way to eternity.
>
> (Herbert 1990.81-82)

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[9] One must also mention Moore's monograph "Charles Darwin lies in Westminster Abbey" (1982), which provides a good explanation for why Darwin (who is so often perceived as an enemy of the Church) was buried in the Abbey. The monograph is a precursor to the last chapter of Desmond and Moore's *Darwin*, "An Agnostic in the Abbey".

Herbert is suggesting that naturalism (the position that supernatural phenomena do not exist) leads to "a hopeless and pessimistic view of life", and that in Darwin we find a powerful example of the naturalistic-thinker's tendency to hopelessness and pessimism. He is moreover linking Darwin's "pessimism" to a conviction that, "Surely, there must have been times that Darwin saw his indefatigable efforts for the pursuit of science as being futile and vain." To put what Herbert is saying here in plainer language: Darwin, in his moments of pessimism, saw that ultimately his science had no value.

A theory or line of thought that does not add to one's personal happiness may nevertheless be true, or morally valuable. If a theory makes one feel pessimistic about the world, one does not — if one is a rational person — say to oneself, "Because this theory makes me feel pessimistic, it ultimately has no value." Why, then, propose that Darwin spoke to himself thus? Whether or not Darwin had "a hopeless and pessimistic view of life" does not affect the truth of his theory of evolution. (Archimedes's character in no way affects the truth or non-truth of Archimedes's principle; equally, Darwin's character in no way affects the truth or non-truth of his theory of evolution.)

Darwin's family

Darwin's relationship with his father Robert has been subjected to a number of ingenious psychoanalytical interpretations. It is all too easy to portray Robert Waring Darwin as an overbearing tyrant, and to use this "tyranny" as a foundation for explaining his son. Perhaps the best-known example is the psychoanalyst Rankine Good's assertion that "if Darwin did not slay his father in the flesh, then in his *The Origin of Species, The Descent of Man*, &c., he certainly slew the Heavenly Father in the realm of natural history." (1954.106) E.J. Kempf's "Charles Darwin: the affective sources of his inspiration and anxiety neurosis" (1918) seems to hold the dubious honour of having established this school of interpretation within Darwin studies. The best counter to Kempf and his successors is probably Robert Graber and Lynate Miles's "In Defence of Darwin's Father" (1988).

The influence upon Charles Darwin of the *persona* and the proto-evolutionary ideas of his remarkable grandfather, Erasmus, is an obvious theme, and takes an interesting biographical slant when the two men's characters are compared. Yet one may question whether an understanding of Erasmus can contribute much to an

understanding of Charles. At some levels the relationship between the two men seems rather empty: Erasmus did not live to see Charles's birth, and Charles as a young man may have been more impressed by the works of William Paley (who argued that God crafts each species with His own hand) than he was by the works of Erasmus Darwin (see *LL*1.47 for evidence of Charles's "delight" in Paley). Charles was to state in *On the Origin of Species* that Erasmus's *Zoonomia* merely "anticipated the views and erroneous grounds of opinion of Lamarck" (Darwin, C. 1859.54). On the other hand, Charles *had* admired *Zoonomia* while a student at Edinburgh (Browne 1995.83-84), and in 1837 "inscribed in bold letters the word *Zoonomia*, to signal that he was treading the same path as his grandfather" on the title-page of his first "transmutation notebook" (Desmond and Moore 1991.229).

The chapter "A Family Weltanschauung" in Howard E. Gruber's *Darwin on Man* (1974) certainly links Charles and Erasmus Darwin in a substantial way: Gruber is concerned with "the general point of view that generated two expressions of evolutionary thought in one corner of English society" (48), but refers to "a *family* rather than a *class* outlook" because "The Darwin circle was only one part of the English *bourgeoisie*; there were other sectors who were orthodox in religion, conservative in politics, and antagonistic to the idea of an evolving universe." (68)[10]

A specialised introduction to the mature Charles Darwin's family life, and an overview of material on the subject, is provided by R.B. Freeman (1982).[11] Freeman states that "Biographers of eminent scientists [...] tend to ignore, beyond the needed limits, the intimate relationships of their subject with his family, his personal, rather than his scientific, friends, and his day to day environment in general." (9) Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* (among others) by no means ignores these things; Freeman's paper is included in their bibliography, so it is possible that two biographers at least have taken his statement to heart.

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[10] See also the appendix "On Charles Darwin and his Grandfather Dr. Erasmus Darwin" in Nora Barlow's edition of *The Autobiography* (Barlow, ed. 1958.149-166); Michael T. Ghiselin's "Two Darwins: History versus Criticism" (1976); and Ralph Colp Jr.'s "The Relationship of Charles Darwin to the Ideas of His Grandfather, Dr Erasmus Darwin" (1986).

[11] For an earlier example, see Leonard Huxley's "The Home Life of Charles Darwin" (1921).

Darwin's professional relationships and contacts

The influence of fellow scientists on Darwin — and Darwin's influence on them — has almost unlimited potential as a topic for specialised study: Darwin and Grant, Darwin and Sedgwick, Darwin and Lyell, and Henslow, and Hooker, and Huxley, and Herschel, and Wallace, and Gray, and Haeckel, and Owen, and Butler... the list goes on. Most of these men were important scientists in their own right,[12] and a number of book-length works concentrate on a relationship between Darwin and one of his colleagues or correspondents. Arnold C. Brackman's 370-page *A Delicate Arrangement: The strange case of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace* (1980), which argues — albeit not convincingly — that Darwin plagiarised Wallace's ideas, is one example. Another — less intensely focussed, but also flawed in its portrayal of Darwin's character — is William Irvine's "dual biography" of Darwin and Huxley, *Apes, Angels and Victorians* (1955). An appendix to Nora Barlow's edition of *The Autobiography* discusses the "once notorious quarrel between Samuel Butler and Charles Darwin" (Barlow, ed. 1958.167) and incorporates Henry Festing Jones's 1911 pamphlet on the subject (174-198).[13]

Darwin's contacts with people who were not primarily scientists have also been a source of interest. The relationship between Darwin and Robert FitzRoy, Captain of the *Beagle* and later an Admiral, is discussed by, for instance, Francis Darwin (1912), Nora Barlow (1932) and Stephen Jay Gould (1976);[14] and the connection or lack thereof between Darwin and Marx is debated in monographs such as L.S. Feuer's "Is the Darwin-Marx Correspondence Authentic?" (1975), M. Fay's "Did Marx offer to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin?" (1978) and Colp's "The Myth of the Darwin-Marx Letter" (1982).

Some writers are less interested in a "one on one" approach, which juxtaposes Darwin with Wallace, Huxley or some other individual, and more interested in locating

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[12] This has not altogether prevented the attachment of Darwin's name to biographies about his colleagues, as in A. Hunter Dupree's *Asa Gray: American botanist, friend of Darwin* (1988) and A. Williams-Ellis's *Darwin's Moon: a biography of Alfred Russel Wallace* (1958).

[13] See also R.A. Copland, "A Side Light on the Darwin-Butler Quarrel" (1977).

[14] One must add that FitzRoy, though not *primarily* a scientist, had scientific ambitions of his own, and played a key role in the development of weather-forecasting systems. Darwin's relationship with FitzRoy is discussed in some detail in Chapter Five of this thesis.

Darwin within a somewhat broader scientific group, such as the influential *x* Club.[13] In "Charles Darwin in London: The integration of public and private science" Martin Rudwick outlines "the social setting of Darwin's public science in his most creative period" (1982.187), and hopes to help "bridge the current gap in historical understanding between the individual and group levels of scientific practice." (206) John Campbell's "The Invisible Rhetorician: Charles Darwin's 'Third Party' Strategy" (1989) posits that Darwin was "the manager of his own campaign" (56). According to Campbell, the passive-seeming Darwin was in fact very active in recruiting and mobilising a network of defenders for his theory.

The Beagle *voyage, and Darwin's early development as a scientist*

These two topics tend to go hand in hand, as in H.E. Gruber and V. Gruber's "The Eye of Reason: Darwin's development during the *Beagle* voyage" (1962) and F.J. Sulloway's "Darwin's Early Intellectual Development: An overview of the *Beagle* voyage" (1985). Misconceptions about the *Beagle* voyage and its role in Darwin's life and thought are constructively attacked in studies like Sulloway's "Darwin and His Finches: The evolution of a legend" (1982). (The legend that the diversity of the Galapagos finches was a catalyst for Darwin's ideas about evolution continues nevertheless to be regenerated by popular wisdom and outdated biology syllabuses.)

Darwin's development as a scientist while still a student, at Edinburgh and then at Cambridge, offers yet another field for investigation. Whereas the city of Edinburgh harboured progressive, "Continental" thinkers in the extramural medical schools that supplemented and rivalled its University, Cambridge was a bastion of Anglican conservatism. The possible effects on Darwin of exposure to both these academic climates makes for fascinating reading (see Desmond and Moore 1991.21-73 and Browne 1995.36-143).

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[13] Named thus at the suggestion of the mathematicians in the Club: *x* symbolised all the many possible names suggested by the founding members (see Huxley, L. 1900.1.255-61 for a history of the *x* Club).

Darwin's science: his thinking, his creativity and his difficulties

A survey of the many works devoted to Darwin's scientific thinking is beyond the scope of this thesis; the reader seeking such a survey should start instead with Antonella La Vergata's congested but highly rewarding "Images of Darwin: A historiographic overview" (1985). One must however mention H.E. Gruber's much-cited *Darwin on Man* (1974), which Roy Porter once described as "The best study of Darwin's scientific creativity" (Porter 1982.22); and Dov Ospovat's *The Development of Darwin's Theory* (1981), which was considered by F.B. Churchill to be "the outstanding achievement in Darwin scholarship since the [1959] centennial" (Churchill 1982.64).

Darwin's creativity as a writer — and his ingenuity in devising experiments — is discussed by Stanley Hyman in *The Tangled Bank* (1974), which also deals with "Marx, Frazer and Freud as imaginative writers". Hyman at one point does Darwin an unnecessary discourtesy by likening him to "nothing so much as a mad scientist in Hawthorne or Poe" (66); otherwise, the discussion is a welcome antidote to the dryness which pervades many commentaries on Darwin.

Barry G. Gale's 238-page *Evolution Without Evidence* (1982) is not, as the title might suggest, an attack on a concept of evolution; rather, it attempts to demonstrate that when Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, he had little confidence in his evidence. Noteworthy monographs on Darwin's scientific difficulties include Robert J. Richards's "Why Darwin Delayed, or Interesting Problems and Models in the History of Science" (1983), which provides a broad insight into the debates around the question of why Darwin delayed publication of his theory of evolution; and M.J.S. Rudwick's "Darwin and Glen Roy: a 'great failure' in scientific method?" (1974), which examines Darwin's misinterpretation of a famous (and, in Darwin's time, puzzling) geological feature, the "parallel roads" of Glen Roy.

Again, I must stress that this survey of "niche studies" of Darwin is by no means comprehensive. The survey does however arrive at a broad conclusion. Almost every "niche study" surveyed points to some controversy in the interpretation of Darwin's life and work: it seems then that an uncontroversial biography of Darwin is an impossibility.

List of Darwin biographies

A chronologically-ordered list of Darwin biographies in English follows from the next page. The list is not comprehensive, but to the best of my knowledge includes every biography that could reasonably be described as "important". It also includes several works that, although not biographies in the full sense, might point to wider biographical trends (the re-publication of obituaries, the emergence of "pocket" and "pictorial" biographies, of "biographical novels", and so on). A number of works[16] have been excluded on the grounds that they focus more on Darwin's science than on his life and character.

In compiling this list, I have been greatly indebted to two monographs in particular: "Darwin and the historian" by Frederick B. Churchill (1982); and "Charles Darwin's Past and Future Biographies" by Ralph Colp Jr. (1989).

[16] For example, Poulton (1896), Eiseley (1958), Darlington (1960) and Bowler (1990).

1882	T.H. Huxley *et al*: *Charles Darwin: memorial notices reprinted from "Nature"*	As one would expect, Darwin's obituarists set out to commemorate, not to investigate.
1883	L.C. Miall: *The Life and Work of Charles Darwin: A lecture*	Miall's lecture is a standard Victorian panegyric to Darwin.
1885	Grant Allen: *Charles Darwin* 206 pp.	Part of the Longmans "English Worthies" series. To the modern reader, this pocket biography seems unadventurous in content and imperiously adulatory in tone.
1887	G.T. Bettany: *Life of Charles Darwin* 170 pp.	This book is almost indistinguishable from Allen's.
1887	Francis Darwin, ed: *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* 3 vols. totalling 1205 pp.	The empathy and quiet authority of this work have not been matched by any other biography of Darwin. It was supplemented in 1903 by the two-volume *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (Darwin, F. and Seward, eds.) (*The Life and Letters* is discussed fully in Chapter Three of this thesis.)
1892	Francis Darwin: *The Life of Charles Darwin* 348 pp.	An "abbreviation of *The Life and Letters*" for readers who are more interested in the "personal" than in the "purely scientific" aspects of Darwin's life (see Darwin, F. 1892.v) The appearance in 1995 of a paperback edition seems to support the view that there has recently been a "boom" in Darwin biographies.

1921	Leonard Huxley: *Charles Darwin* 119 pp.	This book is so little different from Allen's (1885) and Bettany's (1887) that one begins to suspect their brand of Victorian pocket biography did not die with the Victorian era.
1926	Gamaliel Bradford: *Darwin* 315 pp.	Bradford splits Darwin's character into seven parts — "The Observer", "The Thinker", "The Discoverer", "The Loser", "The Lover", "The Destroyer" and "The Scientific Spirit" — and devotes a chapter to each. This is a ridiculously forced technique (why separate observation from thought and thought from discovery? for instance); and the book is made still sillier by Bradford's fondness for platitudes like "There is a pure, inexhaustible delight in just living with the insects and birds" (12).
1927	George A. Dorsey: *The Evolution of Charles Darwin* 300 pp.	According to a *New York Times* reviewer (1927), "Dr Dorsey has done more than tell finely a great story: he has added chapters of very sound and conservative criticism, showing just what problems Darwin solved and what he left unsolved." The years have been less kind to Dorsey's book: both Churchill (1982.56) and Colp (1989.170) see no lasting value in it.
1927	Henshaw Ward: *Charles Darwin: The man and his warfare* 472 pp.	A curious mixture of novelisation, explanatory discourse, and wholesale reproduction of sources (Ward at one point admits openly to "pirating" Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences" (368)). As the word "warfare" in the subtitle suggests, the book is combatively pro-Darwinian — and thus typically American, for America has generally been divided more fiercely than Britain over the truth of Darwin's theory. (Ward had previously written a book titled *Evolution for John Doe*.) Ward himself seems to fit the stereotype of the eager American biographer: he makes it abundantly clear that he has made the "pilgrimage" to Downe House, Darwin's home in Kent (218).

		"Journalistic, poorly referenced, overly melodramatic, Ward's biography dissected Darwin's world into opposing camps of good and evil [...] With such an epic to present the author had little time to spare for the development of Darwin's career and thought [...] It was a case, so common among biographies of scientists, of a career devoid of the very science that made the career worth studying in the first place." (Churchill 1982.56-57)
1934	R.W.G. Hingston: *Darwin* 144 pp.	Yet another panegyrical, Victorian-style pocket biography.
1937	Geoffrey West: *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* 351 pp.	One must concur with Colp that while this is "a flowing, artfully written narrative, which reflected current concepts of 'modernizing' the telling of lives by breaking away from the life-and-letters form [...] West had only limited empathy for Darwin's scientific development [... and] wrongly described his subject as a 'fragmented man' who lived in a cultural vacuum" (Colp 1989,170). (The classic error among early Darwin scholars of assuming that Darwin came to lose his aesthetic sensibilities is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. West's *Charles Darwin* is discussed fully in Chapter Four.)
1955	William Irvine: *Apes, Angels and Victorians: A joint biography of Darwin and Huxley* 399 pp.	Irvine's characterisation of Darwin as a fortunate muddler is mistaken, and some of his comments about Darwin's science — such as, "Darwin explains vaguely and he explains too much" (98) — are ludicrous. His style seems to irritate as many reviewers as it pleases: "[*Apes, Angels and Victorians*] has been so highly praised that it seems otiose to ask whether [Irvine] has been successful; but as one lays it down a number of irritating doubts flit across the mind [...] The defects of tone and conception make this book disappointing." (*Times Literary Supplement* 1955)

1955	Arthur Keith: *Darwin Revalued* 294 pp.	This is not a full biography, for it does not deal with Darwin's youth or the *Beagle* voyage; nor does it offer an adequate treatment of Darwin's later development as a scientist. However, Colp considers it "unusual for its warmth and vividness (suggesting Francis Darwin's 'Reminiscences' in *Life and Letters*)" (Colp, 1989.172). Keith spent "more than twenty years [...] living under the shadow of Darwin's old home, Down House" and conveys his "mental picture of the day-to-day life led by the great naturalist" (Keith 1955.vii).
1957	Ruth Moore: *Charles Darwin* 207 pp.	This "pocket"-type biography is over-dramatised and, by the standards of more recent Darwin scholarship, inaccurate.
1958	Nora Barlow, ed: *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin "with original omissions restored"* 253 pp.	"[...] a more complete and penetrating study of Darwin than any yet made is possible. When it is written, the author will be greatly indebted to Nora Barlow." (Simpson 1958.122) (The differences between this edition of Darwin's "Autobiography" and his "Autobiography" as it appears in *The Life and Letters* are discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.)
1959	Gertrude Himmelfarb: *Darwin and The Darwinian Revolution* 422 pp.	Himmelfarb's crusty tone has a certain appeal (as when she writes, "It is ordinarily difficult enough to establish a relationship between a man and his ideas. To try to establish one between Darwin's mother and his ideas is hopeless." (13-14)). However, her portrayal of Darwin is not accurate, and appears to be ideologically biased: "By picturing Darwin as a brainless yokel, [Himmelfarb] could impugn the mechanism of natural selection, simultaneously opening the road to those neo-Lamarckian alternatives much favoured by certain leftists in the 1950s." (Ruse 1986.513)

1963	Gavin de Beer: *Charles Darwin: Evolution by natural selection* 290 pp.	Though de Beer's overall contribution to Darwin studies is respected greatly by other Darwin scholars, further research has made this book obsolete. It is included in this list because it is mentioned frequently in a biographical context; however, as de Beer explains, it should not be judged as a biography: "My aim has been to ensure that the biographical treatment was sufficient to situate Darwin in his period and circumstances, but that the emphasis should be on his scientific achievements without going into the minutiae of his private life." (de Beer 1963.vi)
1964	H.E.L. Mellersh: *Charles Darwin: Pioneer of the theory of evolution* 124 pp.	This short introduction to Darwin's life (part of Barker's "Creators of the Modern World" series) is remarkably sensible and affectionate in its tone and content. These qualities recur in Mellersh's later, more ambitious biography of FitzRoy, which is discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis.
1965	Julian Huxley and H.B.D. Kettlewell: *Charles Darwin and his world* 144 pp.	This appears to be the first "pictorial" Darwin biography; almost every page carries an illustration. The text is less interesting than the pictures. This book's worst feature is its idealisation of Julian Huxley's famous grandfather, which is both inaccurate and embarrassing.
1969	Alan Moorehead: *Darwin and the Beagle* 280 pp.	Another "pictorial" work, first written as a film script. It provides an exciting, though sometimes inaccurate, introduction to Darwin's life. (*Darwin and the Beagle* is discussed fully in Chapter Five of this thesis.)
1973	John Chancellor: *Charles Darwin* 231 pp.	The third heavily illustrated Darwin biography. The text is competently-written, but again does nothing to advance Darwin scholarship.

1974 James Bunting: *Charles Darwin*
121 pp.

Bunting opens by claiming that, "Comparatively few biographies of Charles Darwin have been published and most of them are incredibly dull." (7) Bunting's attempts to "spice" his facts "with a little imagination" (8) leave one wondering whether the book has been written mostly for younger readers. When Bunting's Darwin impales a live earthworm on his fish-hook, Emma Wedgewood, his wife-to-be, "storms" at him "I think you are horrid!": "something lay deeper between them than just a teenage friendship" concludes Bunting (25).

As Bunting himself admits, "this is not an erudite work" (8).

1981 Peter Brent: *Charles Darwin: A man of enlarged curiosity*
536 pp.

Colp seems to regard this book more highly than any other Darwin biography published between 1967 and 1984 (see Colp 1989.176); and W.F. Bynum considers it to be "underrated" (Bynum 1990.27). Ronald W. Clark is less complimentary: "What is lacking from Mr Brent's account of 'a man of enlarged curiosity' is what is lacking from most biographies of Darwin: a satisfactory attempt to explain the inspiration that drove Darwin on year after year, decade after decade [...]" (Clark 1982.28)

1981 Irving Stone: *The Origin: A biographical novel of Charles Darwin*
743 pp.

"[...] we are sometimes unsure whether the events on the page are genetically historical or artistic truth, just plain history or just plain fiction. And this oscillation between fact and fantasy does eventually produce its own kind of reading sea sickness [...]

In short, although there is little sense of the man whom Francis Galton characterised as the 'Aristotle of our days' and no large attempt to follow the intricacies of his work, this is far and away Irving Stone's best researched and best written book to date." (O'Hanlon 1981.690)

1982	Barry G. Gale: *Evolution Without Evidence* 238 pp.	Gal[illegible]mpts to demonstrate that when Darwin published *The Ori[illegible] of Species*, he had little confidence in his evidence. *Evolution without Evidence* is included in this list because its real value may lie, not in its central argument, but in its broader presentation of Darwin's life.
1984	Ronald W. Clark: *The Survival of Charles Darwin: A biography of a man and an idea* 449 pp.	Almost half this book is devoted to the development of Darwinism after Darwin, hence the subtitle "biography of an idea". "Clark's insistence on Darwin's initial ordinariness leads him into some blunders which stem from too low an estimate of his intelligence.[...] The value of Clark's book lies in the directness with which he describes and interrelates all the complex work of which Darwin is still a part — even though he oversimplifies the man." (Beer 1985:853)
1990	John Bowlby: *Charles Darwin: A new biography* 511 pp.	Bowlby writes more elegantly than Desmond and Moore, but this sympathetic, psychologically-orientated biography has been superseded by their *Darwin*.
1991	Adrian Desmond and James Moore: *Darwin* 808 pp.	*Darwin* was praised highly by many reviewers and won the 1991 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography, among other awards. However, beneath the acclaim lie some significant reservations. Desmond and Moore disregard Darwin scholarship that does not support their own interpretation of his life, and their style veers sometimes into near-tabloid brashness. (*Darwin* is discussed fully in Chapter Six of this thesis.)

1995	Janet Browne: *Charles Darwin: Voyaging* ("Volume I of a Biography") 605 pp.	This first volume of Browne's biography closes in 1856, when Darwin has yet to realise that Wallace threatens his scientific priority. If the ensuing volumes match its comprehensiveness, Browne's complete biography of Darwin will be the weightiest yet. She writes with greater human insight than Desmond and Moore; but her narrative flows less easily than theirs, for she is even more determined than they are to relate the smallest details of Darwin's life.
1995	Michael White and John Gribbin: *Darwin: A life in science* 322 pp.	Essentially a textbook, not a work of original scholarship. It provides a clear and reasonably up-to-date overview of Darwin's life and thought.

CHAPTER THREE: VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY AND *THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF CHARLES DARWIN* "EDITED BY HIS SON, FRANCIS DARWIN" (1887)

The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin belongs to one of the most formalised biographical genres, the Victorian commemorative life-and-letters. This Chapter will discuss the influences that appear to have shaped the genre, and will consider how *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* might, and might not, conform to certain of our preconceptions about Victorian commemorative biography.

I hope to achieve some insight into the real motivations of Victorian biographers, and to improve our understanding of Victorian biography as it actually was. I will begin, then, by challenging the type of critical attitude that would have us dismiss Victorian biography with a few sweeping generalisations.

*

The initial modern response to Victorian biography: a backlash against "Victorianism"; and an undue emphasis on Boswell's *Life of Johnson*

In the Preface to his *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey caricatures Victorian biography as,

> Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead — who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism. One is tempted to suppose, of some of them, that they were composed by that functionary, as the final item of his job.
>
> (Strachey 1918.22)

This passage, though much-quoted, is not as revolutionary as one might at first suppose, for dissatisfaction with standard commemorative biographies had already been expressed by Edmund Gosse, Sidney Lee and others (see Novarr 1989.27-31). Strachey was nevertheless the most cutting of these critics, and the passage reflects this well.

Eminent Victorians appealed powerfully to readers whose faith in the old order had been shattered by the First World War, and appears to have inflated early-twentieth-century cynicism about the Victorians. Richard Altick, a much-respected scholar in the field of Victorian studies, describes Strachey's influence thus:

> But *the Victorians* — ! The very word was ineffaceably and banefully associated with Lytton Strachey and, even worse, his tinhorn imitators. In 1941, the twenty-three-year-old shadow of *Eminent Victorians* cast a retrospective pall, as well, over the whole long era that bore the name. Most of the popular writing that had been done on the Victorians since the First World War was wearisomely jokey, simply because the Stracheyan image of the age required it to be. Practically nobody under the age of fifty took the Victorians seriously.
>
> (Altick 1982.310)

One presumes that Victorian biographies were taken even less seriously than their subjects.

Esmé Wingfield-Stratford's *The Victorian Tragedy*, which appeared in 1930, purports to provide a more rounded view of the Victorians than do Strachey and his imitators; yet we find in *The Victorian Tragedy* opinions such as,

> [...] the Victorians would not have been Victorian had they given their whole heart and mind and soul and strength to the quest for the truth, wherever and whatever it might be. They had their reservations, their decencies, to which truth had got [*sic*] to conform. And so, after their time, truth itself followed God and the human soul into the darkness [...]
>
> It is a just nemesis on the Victorians, that any protest against the libels by which their [modern, Stracheyan] biographies are so freely seasoned is usually silenced by a reminder that, after all, what you want in a biography is not that it should be literally accurate, but a work of art — the art of fiction. If they had

been better lovers of the Truth, she would be guarding their memories now.

(Wingfield-Stratford 1930.288)

The editors of *The Great Victorians* (1932), a collection of biographical essays on personages ranging from Matthew Arnold to Cecil Rhodes, introduced their book to the public of the 1930s with the comment that,

> Up to a few years ago we were too near the Victorians to get any nourishment from them. In a sense we were in the same mood as the early leaders of the Reformation, who could see nothing but faults in the system that had reared them. These growing pains are now subsiding. [...]
>
> A popular conception of the Victorian age is that it was a stagnant one, intrinsically derivative in thought and art. Actually, it was an age when leading minds, as in the Renaissance, began to explore in every direction.

(Massingham, H.J. and Massingham, Hugh eds. 1932.ix-x)

Even so, the editors continue, the Victorian era "tended to become one of capital dogmas in capital letters [...] very few of the Victorians emerged clearly enough from the particular problems of the day to concern themselves with abstract verities and eternal values [...] there was obviously something impure in Victorian thought, and it is this which accounts for [their] tragic wastage of talent and genius." (xi)

With defenders like these, who would need enemies?

Negative attitudes towards Victorian biography were reinforced by Strachey's Bloomsbury contemporary Harold Nicolson. Nicolson, in his influential *The Development of English Biography*, dismisses Victorian biography as a "catastrophic failure" whereby "the full and sparkling stream of our riper [biographical] tradition [was] rendered fat and sluggish" (1928.111). At a still greater extreme of anti-Victorianism, A.J.A. Symons, writing just after Nicolson, devotes much of his essay on "Tradition in Biography" to ridiculing the "petrified and meaningless solemnity [of] the biographies of yesterday: long rows of *Lives and Times*, *Lives and Letters*, or unadorned but still intolerable *Lives*, testaments perhaps, to the affection of relatives or the industry of hacks, but not to the intelligence of the biographer." (1929.150)

Such views have been remarkably persistent. For instance, Paul Murray Kendall, writing in the 1960s, could still declare that,

> By the 1840's the cultural-social forces of the age had throttled the development of biography. These forces, which we encompass under the too-large term, *Victorianism*, have been studied in detail; their effect upon life-writing is clear to behold; and I shall move quickly to certain ancillary considerations. As Sir Harold Nicolson pointed out a generation ago, "Then came earnestness, and with earnestness hagiography descended upon us with its sullen cloud..."
>
> (Kendall 1965.103-04 Here, "hagiography" refers sarcastically to the saintliness that Victorian biographies are supposed to have attributed to their subjects.)

Finally, in Dennis W. Petrie's otherwise excellent *Ultimately Fiction: Design in modern American literary biography*, which appeared in 1981, one finds a summation of Victorian biography based almost entirely on Nicolson's (see Petrie, D.W. 1981.11-12).

Strachey's — and so, to some extent, Nicolson's — conceptions of the Victorians and of Victorian biography have been countered by other scholars.[1] The case against Strachey is summarised elegantly by Robert Gittings (and the first sentence in the following quotation applies as appropriately to Nicolson as it does to Strachey):

> Strachey mistook the natural length of Victorian family reading, two or three volume for deliberate padding, and the language perfectly natural to Evang ical works, with its Biblical references, for insincerity and hypocrisy. His own Bloomsbury style was just as insincere and hypocritical in its own way [...] He accused Victorian biographers of suppression but himself suppressed every bit of historical evidence that did not make a "good", this time in the sense of "scandalous", story.
>
> (Gittings 1978.38)

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[1] For a concise refutation of Strachey's approach to history, see Fischer 1970.87-88,97-99. The reader might also care to examine Bernard M. Allen's *Gordon and the Sudan*, which contains "A Digression" written in response to Strachey's treatment of General Gordon (see Allen, B.M. 1931.82-101).

For more sympathetic, in-depth critiques of *Eminent Victorians* and of Strachey's other biographical works, see the second volume of Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey: A critical biography* (1968).

In my introductory chapter, I argue that many histories of biography are pervaded by the notion that biography is a unified entity seeking an ideal state. The negative view of Victorian biography is reinforced by a tendency among critics to insist that Victorian biography ought to have risen to "the ideal" pointed out by Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Nicolson speaks of "the central position which [Boswell] and his formula must always occupy" (1928.87), and goes on to portray Victorian biography as an unfortunate decline from this position:

> And on 30th August 1828 Thomas Arnold arrived at Rugby. On that day Victorianism was born.
>
> The religious earnestness of the Arnold generation, being inimical to pure biography, was inimical to the Boswell formula. It was some years, however, before the true Victorian fog descended upon English biography. The complete rejection of truthful representation, the bag-and-baggage return to hagiography, cannot be dated earlier than 1844, the year in which Stanley published his egregious *Life of Arnold*.
>
> (Nicolson 1928.113)

Even among the more sympathetic commentators on nineteenth-century biography, one finds an undue emphasis on the *Life of Johnson*.

Richard Altick, for instance, is well aware of the limitations of the *Life of Johnson* — its neglect of Johnson as he was before he met Boswell, its structural disorderliness, its frequent lack of selectivity, and so on. It was not an ideal model; nor, notes Altick, was it a model that could be followed: "its subject, the character of its sources, and the special genius of its author" were "inimitable" (1969.66-70).

Up to this point, Altick's discussion is sound. However, he then states that there was a "danger" in the *Life of Johnson*.

> The danger, as critics of biography in the next generation never tired of pointing out, was that in less gifted hands the same recipe could produce not a soufflé but a leaden pudding. And it did. Invoking Boswell's illustrious precedent without appreciating the subtle craftsmanship it involved, biographers loaded their books

with copious unsifted detail, much of which was trivial, irrelevant, and dull.

(Altick 1969.71)

Altick concludes that,

> All subsequent English biography was written, and read, in the shadow of Boswell. But far from advancing the art of biography, the *Life of Johnson* actually retarded it, by providing a model incapable of imitation in an era when the very qualities that made it great were themselves being devalued. The book's historical importance lies, rather, in Boswell's having elevated large-scale biography to a place of dignity in the hierarchy of literary forms.
>
> (Altick 1969.73)

This ascription of so great an influence to a single text is not convincing. Many nineteenth-century biographical works — including such prominent examples as Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813), Macaulay's biographical essays (1825-1844) and Samuel Smiles's *Lives of the Engineers* (1862) — are not structured on Boswellian or quasi-Boswellian lines. Certainly, many nineteenth-century biographies lack artistic confidence and aesthetic completeness; but a good, central explanation for this lack does not lie in the notion that nineteenth-century biographers could neither ignore nor competently imitate the *Life of Johnson*. (A number of alternative explanations will be suggested as this Chapter progresses.)

A.O.J. Cockshut's *Truth to Life: The art of biography in the nineteenth century* is for the most part thoroughly sympathetic towards its subject; yet Cockshut's interpretation of the significance of the *Life of Johnson* is similar to Altick's.

> The most admired of all biographers was Boswell; but for most of his nineteenth-century followers one half of his example proved much easier to follow than the other. Boswell had given thorough documentation, with many letters *in extenso*, interspersed with detailed records of living conversation. The first needed only conscientious industry; the second needed a unique combination of opportunity, genius and memory. In the circumstances, the failure to

reproduce the Boswell formula was predictable.

> All the same, it is doubtful if the implications of this half-following of Boswell were fully perceived. Obviously, it led to less intimacy and liveliness. Less obviously, it imposed certain unintended biases [such as a tendency to ignore those aspects of the subject's life which were not already documented].
>
> (Cockshut 1974.16-17)

Again, nineteenth-century biography is portrayed in terms of a "failure" to either bypass or emulate fully the work of Boswell.

A more plausible view of the "influence" of Boswell is provided by a critic writing at a slightly earlier date than either Cockshut or Altick. Joseph W. Reed, in his *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century* (1966), asks why, "With the example of the masterpiece of biography [the *Life of Johnson*] immediately available to it in a number of editions, biography in the early nineteenth century moved instead in the direction of the jerry-built hodgepodge." Reed examines early-nineteenth-century reviewers' responses to John Wilson Croker's 1831 edition of the *Life of Johnson*, and discovers that Boswell was *not*, in fact, highly admired. Rather, the predominant attitude towards Boswell's work was condescending: "that it was regrettable to pry so, and to publish the results of such pryings; that once published it might be amusing, but never art." Indeed, the worst reviewers "admired the reflection of Johnson in the mirror and ignored, vilified, or denigrated the mirror itself." This response was in keeping, Reed suggests, with a general refusal among early nineteenth-century critics to acknowledge biography as an art — "if there was an art to biography at all, it was the subject's art in designing his life." Reed concludes that, "Imitation [of the *Life of Johnson*] would doubtless have been more likely had Boswell been universally praised as an artist of biography, or had it been widely held that biography was an art at all." (see Reed 1966.3-6)

My examination of initial reviews of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* suggests that the status of biography as an art had improved little by 1887/88. The thirteen British and American reviewers in question[2] devote themselves to summarising

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[2] T.G. Bonney in *Nature* (1887), Edward Clodd in *Knowledge* (1888), Thomas Hill in the *Unitarian Review* (1888), David S. Jordan in *The Dial* (1888), and anonymous reviews in *The Athenæum* (1887), *The Atlantic* (1888), *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1888), *The Catholic World* (1888), *The Edinburgh Review* (1888), (continued...)

Charles Darwin's life and to promulgating their own opinions of the great man's character and "philosophy". Francis Darwin is congratulated for having performed a filial duty well,[3] but there is little substantial discussion of his book's literary or historiographical qualities. One suspects that the entity that is under review is not, ultimately, the text, but the late Charles Darwin. In an extreme case, *The Atlantic*'s reviewer, who fills several tightly-set pages with his musings on "the man of science as Marlborough was the soldier", does not even *allude* to Francis Darwin. Hence the chief author of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* would appear to be Charles Darwin himself. When *The Atlantic*'s reviewer announces that, "The blank page of this charming biography is the page of spiritual life", he is speaking not of an oversight on Francis Darwin's part, but of *Charles* Darwin's apparent lack of spirituality (see *The Atlantic* 1888.560,566). For this reviewer, a fault in the subject is a fault in the biography; the mirror and the mirrored become one. There seems to be no place for recognition of the text as a work of art in its own right, or for recognition of the biographer as an independent artist.

Obviously, a survey of a dozen reviews of a single work covers only a minuscule part of the range of Victorian readers' responses to biographies. This survey does, nevertheless, provide a small counter-example to Altick's assertion that Boswell had "elevated large-scale biography to a place of dignity in the hierarchy of literary forms."

"Thorough documentation, with many letters *in extenso*" was not, as Cockshut seems to imply, introduced into biography primarily by Boswell. As Reed recognises, it was rather,

> [...] a survival of certain biographical trends of the eighteenth century before Boswell: the tendency to see biography as an ordering and filling-in of all available autobiographical documents; the great principle of preservation — saving every scrap in blind faith that *any* material is worth saving, all material equally valuable [...] (Reed 1966.11)

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[2](...continued)
The Quarterly Review (1888) (the same review appears in *Littell's Living Age*, 1888), *The Scottish Review* (1888), *The Spectator* (1888) and *The Westminster Review* (1887,. Twenty-one different reviews of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, including all the aforementioned except the *Nature* review, are listed in *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*.

[3] Francis Darwin (1848-1925) was Charles Darwin's third son, and the son most devoted to natural history. He had been, even in adulthood, his father's close assistant.

These "trends" cannot be traced back to any particular writer; they appear to have arisen, rather, from a general taste for collecting antiquities and past ephemera (see Reed 1966.12-14 and Stauffer 1941.248-49). Letters were seen as items of literary interest long before 1791, when the *Life of Johnson* first appeared. This interest is evidenced in an apparent parallel between the development of epistolary biographies and epistolary novels. Samuel Richardson's popular epistolary novel *Pamela* appeared in 1740; in 1741, Conyers Middleton, in the Preface to his *Life and Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, asserted that:

> I have taken care always to leave the facts to speak for themselves, and to affirm nothing of any moment without an authentic testimony to support it [...]
>
> In my use of [materials from Cicero's own works], I have chosen to insert as many of them as I could into the body of my work; imagining that it would give both a lustre and authority to a sentiment, to deliver it in the person and very words of Cicero; especially if they could be managed so as not to appear to be *sewed on*, like *splendid patches*, but woven originally into the text as genuine parts of it. With this view I have taken occasion to introduce several of his letters, with large extracts from such of his orations as gave any particular light into the facts, or customs, or characters described in the history, or which seemed on any other account to be curious and entertaining.
>
> (Middleton 1741, as reproduced in Clifford, ed. 1962.39)

(I am suggesting, not that Middleton was influenced directly by Richardson, but that both appear to be part of the same cultural phenomenon. Richardson was not the first eighteenth-century writer to use letters as a narrative device; he is simply the most prominent.)

So, the *Life of Johnson* did not necessarily exert a major influence, either for good or for bad, over the bulk of nineteenth-century biography. In all likelihood, "failure to emulate Boswell fully" was not the cause of the aesthetic incompleteness that modern critics perceive in the majority of nineteenth-century biographies. This incompleteness can be explained more plausibly by referring to broader cultural factors: belittlement of biography as an art; undiscriminating faith in the historical value of raw source-materials; and (a factor I will discuss in a moment) a seemingly-exaggerated

respect for the subject's privacy. Boswell need not — indeed, should not — feature prominently in the explanation.

To summarise my discussion up to this point:—

Among historians of biography, there has been a strong tradition of disparaging the Victorian life-and-letters. I have by no means refuted absolutely the justice of this tradition, for I have not examined enough Victorian lives-and-letters to be able to say that most are defensible. I have however been able to argue that two bases of the tradition are faulty: Stracheyan anti-Victorianism has long outlived its usefulness; and the claim that the *Life of Johnson* "retarded" the artistry of later biographers is insubstantial.

The rest of this Section discusses some of the factors that are considered by the best historians of biography (Reed, Altick, and Cockshut, among others) to have had a negative impact on nineteenth-century and Victorian biography. For the sake of clarity, I have divided these factors into two broad categories: **social obligations of Victorian biographers** and **biases in the life-and-letters method.**

Social obligations of Victorian biographers

Respect for privacies

Intimacy is expressed *respectfully* in many commemorative life and letters biographies, but plays a Jekyll-and-Hyde rôle in the eyes of modern critics. Usually the biographer was a relative or friend of the subject, and knew him as later researchers never can. He had a unique opportunity to portray his subject's most human qualities. Yet the opportunity was often unfulfilled, because intimacy also carried obligations: at the time *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* was compiled, the biographer's task was to "raise a fitting monument" for his deceased relative or friend, not to gossip about him.[4] The justness of discretion, and of public figures' rights to ordinary privacies, seems not

[4] "Dr. Francis Darwin has raised a fitting monument to his father" declares *The Westminster Review* (1887.1146) of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. This comment concludes an entirely complimentary review; it implies that Francis Darwin has done exactly as a biographer ought.

to have been questioned by the Victorian public (in contrast to our own age, where indiscretion can be justified in the name of "transparency", and a high public profile entails the forfeiture of rights to ordinary privacies). Moreover, the accepted standards of discretion extended beyond not spelling out anything scandalous, such as sexual peccadilloes, alcohol or drug abuse, debts, unstable behaviour, mental illness and blasphemous utterances. One did not intrude, either, upon *happy* marriages, or upon financial *successes*. As Alan Shelston puts it, "the most obvious taboos were not the only ones [...] The intimacy between author and subject which had previously made for authenticity had [...] become a more ambivalent quality; in Victorian commemorative biography the closer the family tie the more securely the curtain of discretion was likely to be drawn." (1977.50-51)[5]

Certainly, the reader of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* is given little inkling of the financial acumen and considerable wealth of the Darwin family. For instance, Robert Waring Darwin, Charles's father, was "For fifty years the most sig'ificant financier in [Shropshire...] on a level with the merchant princes of the era" (Browne 1995.9),[6] yet in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* we are told merely that "[Robert Darwin] was a cautious and good man of business, so that he hardly ever lost money by any investment, and left to his children a very large property." (*LL*1.19)[7]

More alarmingly for the modern reader, Charles Darwin's wife Emma, née Wedgewood, is hardly mentioned. This is not because of any marital strife, or filial resentment on Francis Darwin's part; on the contrary:

> [Emma] shielded [Charles] from every avoidable annoyance, and omitted nothing that might save him trouble, or prevent him becoming overtired, or that might alleviate the many discomforts of his ill-health. I hesitate to speak thus freely of a thing so sacred as the life-long devotion which prompted all this constant and tender care.
>
> (*LL*1.159-60)

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[5] Shelston's *Biography* (1977) is the best critical introduction to the genre I have encountered.

[6] Janet Browne's discussion of Robert Darwin's activities as an investor and private money-broker is precise, fascinating and well-backed by facts and figures (see Browne 1995.7-9).

[7] *LL* is my abbreviation for *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* edited by Francis Darwin (1887).

The key phrase is "hesitation to speak freely of a thing so sacred"; what we are witnessing here is extreme delicacy. Francis is true to his word and does not mention his mother's "life-long devotion" again.[8] Short though the passage is, its significance was not lost on reviewers of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. *The Athenæum* notes "a touching reference to the devotion of Mrs. Darwin, a thing so sacred that her son hesitates to speak of it" (1887.714); while *The Quarterly Review* refers to "the lady whose tender devotion to her husband is, from motives which all will respectfully appreciate, hardly told by their son, his biographer." (1888.18)

Francis Darwin does more than merely hesitate to speak of his mother; he excises from the autobiographical chapter of *The Life and Letters* a long passage in which Charles Darwin — evidently with only his children in mind — declares:

> You all know well your Mother, and what a good Mother she has been to all of you. She has been my greatest blessing, and I can declare that in my whole life I have never heard her utter one word which I had rather have been unsaid. [...] I marvel at my good fortune that she, so infinitely my superior in every moral quality, consented to be my wife. [...] I have indeed been most happy in my family, and I must say to you my children that not one of you has ever given me one minute's anxiety, except on the score of health. [...] When you were very young, it was my delight to play with you all, and I think with a sigh that such days can never return.
>
> (see Barlow ed. 1958.96-97)

Francis replaces this passage with a single sentence: we are told only that Charles Darwin spoke at this point "of his happy married life, and of his children" (*LL*1.69).

The excision does not at first appear to provide a strong example of a Victorian biographical-convention of courtesy, for the passage seems over-sentimental, and one

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[8] Shelston's comment that "the closer the family tie the more securely the curtain of discretion was likely to be drawn" comes to mind again when one compares two other "scientific" life-and-letters biographies, *The Life and Letters of Faraday* by H. Bence Jones (1870) and *The Life and Letters of Sir Joseph Prestwich* by his wife, Grace Prestwich (1899). Jones, who was a pupil and later an intimate friend of Faraday, offers us a detailed (and delightful) account of Faraday's courtship and marriage (277-87). Grace Prestwich has this, *and no more than this*, to say about her courtship and marriage: "On the 26th February 1870 Mr Prestwich's marriage took place at St Marylebone Church, London, with Grace Anne, eldest daughter of James Milne, Esq., J.P., Findhorn, Morayshire, and widow of George M'Call, Esq., Glasgow. She was the niece of his lamented friend Hugh Falconer, at whose house they had met." (216)

feels sure most people would be embarrassed to see it in their father's biography. On the other hand, the part of the passage which describes Emma Darwin was published by Francis after her death;[9] so perhaps the excision of that part from *The Life and Letters* does after all evidence a convention rather than any embarrassment.

It is tempting, from our position in the 1990s, to criticise Francis Darwin for not considering his mother as person in her own right, and to hold him up as an example of Victorian chauvinism. The example would not, however, be a good one, because in *The Life and Letters* Francis does not digress into character sketches of *anyone* other than his father: the male characters, too, are considered only in their orbits around Charles Darwin. (There are a number of striking character sketches in *The Life and Letters*, but these come from the pen of Charles Darwin himself.)

Reticence about the subject's religious views

Shelston asserts that in commemorative biography, "religious doubts were rarely a subject for discussion" (1977.50). If he is correct, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* is one of the exceptions: a chapter titled "Religion" (*LL*1.304-317) is devoted to Darwin's agnosticism. However, I do not mean to contradict Shelston. Darwin is a special case, because, whether he liked it or not, his work was easily seen as a pillar of atheism. His "religious doubts" were to that extent public knowledge, and "a subject for discussion" regardless of what any biographer might choose to expose or suppress. Soon after Darwin's death, slanted accounts of his religious views were aired by a number of parties. "Religion" is in part an attempt by his son to straighten the record. In the final footnote, Francis Darwin states that:

> Dr. [Edward] Aveling [the radical secularist] has published an account of his conversation with my father. I think that the readers of this pamphlet ("The Religious Views of Charles Darwin," Free Thought Publishing Company, 1883) may be misled into seeing more resemblance than really existed between the positions of my father and Dr. Aveling; and I say this in spite of my conviction that Dr. Aveling gives quite fairly his impressions of my father's views [...] My

[9] See *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (Darwin, F. and Seward eds. 1903.1.30). Emma Wedgewood Darwin died in 1896.

> father's replies implied his preference for the unaggressive attitude of an Agnostic. Dr. Aveling seems (p.5) to regard the absence of aggressiveness in my father's views as distinguishing them in an unessential manner from his own. But, in my judgement, it is precisely differences of this kind which distinguish him so completely from the class of thinkers to which Dr. Aveling belongs.
>
> (*LL*1.317n The references to Aveling's pamphlet are Francis's.)[10]

Nora Barlow's 1958 edition of Darwin's "Autobiography" includes a section on "Religious Belief" (85-96) that is entirely absent from the autobiographical chapter of *The Life and Letters*. The more discreet passages from "Religious Belief" can be located under "Religion" in *The Life and Letters*; but comments such as the following were deemed by Darwin's wife and some of his children to be unsuitable for publication:

> Nor must we overlook the probability [writes Darwin] of the constant inculcation in a belief in God on the minds of children producing so strong and perhaps an inherited effect on their brains not yet fully developed, that it would be as difficult for them to throw off their belief in God, as for a monkey to throw off its instinctive fear and hatred of a snake.
>
> (see Barlow, ed. 1958.93)

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[10] James Moore writes,

> Ever since the English establishment appropriated the body of Charles Darwin and buried it in Westminster Abbey, the interpretation of Darwin's religious life has been controversial. Right from the start partisan opinion was divided; explanations had to be dredged up pro and con. No sooner had the coffin sunk ironically beneath the Abbey pavement than the flotsam of Darwin's religious life began to surface in the press. On the weekend the evangelical *Record* reported how the Lord Bishop of Derry had told a crowd of cheering clergymen about Darwin's support for Church of England missions. Some months later readers of freethought literature were gratified to learn from Karl Marx's son-in-law, Edward Aveling, about a conversion in which Darwin admitted giving up Christianity at the age of forty. In 1885 the Duke of Argyll graced the godly pages of *Good Words* with an account of a conversation in which Darwin admitted sometimes glimpsing design in nature; and in 1889 G.W. Foote and the Progressive Publishing Company repeated at second-hand how Darwin often escorted his family to church but did not himself "go through the mockery" of attending.
>
> (Moore 1985.435 Moore supplies precise bibliographical references.)

This particular comment became the subject of a letter from Darwin's wife Emma to Francis:

> My dear Frank [Francis],
>
> There is one sentence in the Autobiography which I very much wish to omit, no doubt partly because your father's opinion that *all* morality has grown up by evolution is painful to me; but also because where this sentence comes in, it gives one a sort of shock — and would give an opening to say, however unjustly, that he considered all spiritual beliefs no higher than hereditary aversions or likings [...]
>
> [...] I should wish if possible to avoid giving pain to your father's religious friends who are deeply attached to him, and I picture to myself the way that sentence would strike them, even those so liberal as Ellen Tollett and Laura, much more Admiral Sullivan, Aunt Caroline, &c., and even the old servants.
>
> Yours, dear Frank,
>
> E.D. [Emma Darwin]
>
> (see Barlow, ed. 1958.93n)

Francis Darwin wished to keep his father's comments on religious matters intact, and to publish them in their entirety. He seems to have believed that complete openness, besides being the most honest course, would provide the best protection against those who would slant Charles's religious views for political ends. And he argued that Charles's comments might, moreover, comfort "many who cannot believe in the old faith and yet feel it wicked to doubt". His sister Henrietta opposed him vigorously, and even threatened to take legal action. Eventually the family reached the compromise evidenced in *The Life and Letters* (see Moore 1994.31-40 and Barlow, ed. 1958.11-13. For a detailed analysis of the "Autobiography" as an account of Darwin's rejection of Christianity, see Moore 1989.).

At least one Victorian reviewer of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* hesitates to comment on "Religion":

> As to Mr. Darwin's religious views we shall say nothing, "for he felt strongly that a man's religion is an essentially private matter, and one concerning himself

> alone"; and as to the question, which, in a suitable place, may be justly discussed, Do Darwin's teachings incline to agnosticism or atheism? it is not proper here to say more than that a large number of evolutionists — such as Prof. Cope, whom we quoted a few months since — are most certainly neither agnostics nor atheists.
>
> (*The Athenæum* 1887.715)

It is possible to read this as a hint that Francis Darwin should have left all religious matters out of the biography. However, given the laudatory tone of the rest of the review, it is difficult to be sure whether any such hint was intended. The reviewer may simply have felt it *improper for himself* to discuss Darwin's religious views; he did not necessarily consider a similar prohibition to be appropriate to Francis, who was after all Darwin's son. (All the same, the reviewer makes clear his own stance: evolutionism and Christianity are not incompatible.)

Expectations of heroism and patriotism

Particularly around the time *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* was produced, biography was expected to inspire, not to expose. Walter Houghton states in his *The Victorian Frame of Mind* that:

> The notorious evasions of Victorian biography owed something to Mrs. Grundy, forcing the biographer to omit anything which might seem unbecoming; but their main source lay in a theory of biography conditioned by the anxieties of the time. When the impact of religion was declining and that of commercialism increasing, the aim of the biographer was not to deepen the reader's insight into human nature [...] As Tennyson created his Arthur an ideal man in order to combat the selfishness and materialism of the age, so his son, largely with the same purpose, created Tennyson himself, in the official biography, as King Arthur in modern dress. If a writer so far forgot his function as to expose a man's weakness, an outburst of indignation showed how strongly the public wanted to keep its heroes inspiring as well as proper. (Houghton 1957.417-18)

One suspects that "the impact of religion", and certainly of charismatic evangelism, did in fact *grow* in antagonistic tandem with Victorian commerce and industry; just as the New Age movement of today has grown by purveying alternatives to Western materialism. All the same, Houghton has provided an explanation of Victorian biographical reticence that is better than any which stops after evoking "Mother Grundy". We have long known that the Victorians, like every other set of people, could be fascinated by human foibles and eccentricities (why else would the novels of Dickens have been so popular?); curious and inventive about sex;[1] and fond of a scandal. All this is evidenced in a variety of their publications (some, understandably, "underground") and would perhaps have emerged in Victorian biographies had there not been curtailing factors over and above superficial prudishness — factors such as a strongly-felt need to "keep heroes inspiring".

Victorian conceptions of heroism appear to have mingled frequently with a sense of patriotism. Darwin did not extend or protect the political borders of Britain's Empire; nevertheless, he was perceived as having expanded her realm-in-science, and as having brought glory to his countrymen.

> It is to Englishmen of pure blood that the great divisions of modern science owe their fundamental theories. To Harvey, Newton, William Smith, and Dalton must be traced back the effective beginnings of physiology, astronomy, geology, and chemistry. It was reserved for Charles Darwin to found the science of biology, to connect the phenomena of organic life by a great law of being, as Newton had brought the phenomena of the physical cosmos under the eternal principle of universal gravitation.
>
> (*The Spectator* 1887.1619 — opening passage of a review of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*)

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[1] See for instance Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A study of sexuality and pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964); and Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in The Bud: The world of Victorian sexuality* (1969). Scholarly works on Victorian sexuality aside, the frequent reprinting of Victorian pornography by modern publishers suggests that such pornography still appeals to many readers: the Victorians were not, after all, a different species. (Consider, say, Wordsworth Editions's "Classic Erotica" series, published around 1995 and containing novels like the anonymous *Frank and I*, "an erotic and delightful Victorian novel of hidden sexuality and erotic escapades"; or the New English Library's series of seedy-looking paperbacks containing "selections from *The Pearl*, the erotic underground magazine of Victorian England.")

> Is it mere national prejudice which makes one add with congratulatory pleasure that Darwin was born in England, rather than in France, in Germany, or in America? Perhaps so; perhaps not. For the English intellect does indeed seem more capable than most of uniting high speculative ability with high practical skill and experience: and of that union of rare qualities Darwin himself was a most conspicuous example. It is probable that England has produced more of the great organising and systematising intellects than any other modern country.
>
> (Allen, G. 1885.32-33)

Today such chauvinism is unfashionable, and brings to mind questions about "cultural sensitivity" and "political correctness" in biography. I will consider such questions when I come to discuss the Darwin biographies of the 1990s, for I will by that stage be better positioned to compare past and present levels of "cultural sensitivity".

Some points in defence of Victorian biography

Despite its general failure to appeal to twentieth-century tastes, Victorian biography often reveals a humane quality that the bulk of modern biography lacks, or simply does not aspire to:

> The commemorative spirit [...] is not always the encumbrance that detractors of Victorian biography would have us believe. To suggest, as does Sir Harold Nicolson, that "Hagiography... returned in stately triumph with Dean Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, and continued throughout the century, culminating in such works as Mr Horton's study of Tennyson in the 'Saintly Lives' series of Messrs. Dent" [Nicolson 1927.125-126] is grossly to misrepresent both a major work and the Victorian achievement in general. *The best commemorative biography capitalizes on its commitment to its subject, offering a personal viewpoint that no clinical analysis could obtain.*
>
> (Shelston 1977.60-61, my italics)

The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin is full of passages that illustrate Shelston's point. To select but one:

> [My father, writes Francis Darwin,] sometimes combined his metaphors in a curious way, using such a phrase as "holding on like life," — a mixture of "holding on for his life," and "holding on like grim death." It came from his eager way of putting emphasis into what he was saying. This sometimes gave an air of exaggeration where it was not intended; but it gave, too, a noble air of strong and generous conviction; as, for instance, when he gave his evidence before the Royal Commission on vivisection and came out with his words about cruelty, "It deserves detestation and abhorrence." When he felt strongly about any similar question, he could hardly trust himself to speak, as he then easily became angry, a thing which he disliked excessively. He was conscious that his anger had a tendency to multiply itself in the utterance, and for this reason dreaded (for example) having to scold a servant.
>
> (*LL*1.141)

This description has its own quality of "strong and generous conviction". No recent biography of Darwin contains anything that can match it.

Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (1897) — the "King Arthur in modern dress" to which Houghton refers — is cited frequently as a particularly disappointing example of Victorian biography: "we are conscious throughout Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* that one of the most interesting of Victorian personalities is being hidden from us by familial circumspection," comments Alan Shelston. "Here is a case where reticence clearly acts as a soporofic and we are forced to ask whether biography worthy of the name can be written under such cramping conditions." (1977.52)

A.O.J. Cockshut suggests rather that "what we are apt to mistake for prudery was [sometimes] a simple absence of curiosity". In Cockshut's view, Hallam Tennyson was not necessarily a deliberate dissembler; he may have been merely and in all innocence "a rather unimaginative writer, who would never have written a biography if he had not been the son of a great and much-revered father." When we read Victorian commemorative biographies, we cannot *know* "how much really is reticence, how much is concealment amounting to falsification, and how much is simple unawareness of what

has been omitted". This, for Cockshut, is "the student's greatest difficulty in dealing with biography in its most reticent period" (1974.38-39).

Christopher Ricks, who provides a powerful defence of "Tennyson's Tennyson", notes that, "A.O.J. Cockshut is likely to be right in thinking that this was the only biography which Hallam Tennyson would ever have been moved to write, but this has no bearing on whether, when so moved, Hallam Tennyson was capable of imagination." (1996.196) Ricks then supplies concrete evidence that Hallam Tennyson possessed imaginative and literary abilities. If I may add to Ricks's commentary: Hallam Tennyson did not direct his abilities towards describing his father's darker self; hence, perhaps, the main reason why many modern critics dislike *Tennyson: A Memoir* — the book is gentle, in a field where merciless investigation has become the order of the day.

Biographical ethics did not remain static throughout the nineteenth century. This point is substantiated well by Cockshut, who concludes that "in 1829, Moore [the biographer of Byron] would rather have referred without names [the names of the persons involved] to some gross or unnatural physical acts than have said that a named lady had been unfaithful to her husband. Thirty years later *topics* had become unmentionable; the moral welfare of the reading public was the issue rather than the personal dignity of individuals." (1974.35) Moreover, one is inclined to agree with Joseph Reed that the effect on biography of the evangelical movement (or any other movement towards sterner morality) cannot possibly have been "felt all at once".

> Survey historians of biography seem to insist upon regarding the results of the Evangelical influence as a social symptom peculiar to the reign of Victoria. It is more productive, and far more realistic, to separate the artistic history of biography from identification with reigns [...] Victoria did not establish moral earnestness by royal decree. Earnestness was a growing mood, not a descending cloud.
>
> (Reed 1966.28)

A final point: in considering the obligations society placed on nineteenth-century biographers, one is inclined to forget that writers could be constrained not only by the possibility of offending their readers, but also by the law. Howard Gruber, discussing Darwin in relation to the repression of new scientific ideas, supplies a pertinent example

when he refers to "a strange law in England dealing with the property rights of authors [...] in its interpretation in the 1820s, if a work was held to be blasphemous, seditious or immoral, its author had no property rights in it. A publisher could ask for a ruling, and if the work fell under the disfavour of the court, the publisher could then issue a pirate edition without the consent of the author and without paying him." Byron, adds Gruber, "was twice a victim of such suits." (1974.204)

Biases in the life-and-letters method

Both nineteenth-century and modern critics complain of unwieldiness in life-and-letters biographies. Letters were often thrown together so haphazardly that one had to struggle to follow whatever narrative they were supposed to add up to; and biographers would sometimes showcase even the most trivial of their source-materials.

> In one volume of biography, which we have been lately looking over, the bill of the upholsterer who furnished a poet's cottage is printed; in another a washer-woman's accounts and a tailor's day-books occupy pages upon pages; a third, mentioning a gentleman's marriage, gives three letters stating the fact, and nothing but the fact, which had never been a subject of dispute or doubt, and not content with this, adds an extract from a local newspaper, and a copy of the entry in the parish register. Why all this? ... Books may easily be made too long to be read at all; and it is scarcely fair to the fame of Southey, already oppressed by the weight of his own works, to increase the burthen by volume after volume [...]
>
> (extract from a review of Cuthbert Southey's six-volume *Life and Correspondence* of his father — *North British Review* 1850, 13.226-27; as reproduced in Altick 1969.199n)

A central cause of such multi-volumed excesses appears to have been a belief that the more source-materials the biographer incorporated, the more the life would "write itself".

The idea that a life can "write itself" is expressed explicitly in *George Eliot's*

Life as related in her letters and journals. Eliot's husband J.W. Cross, who "arranged and edited" the work, states in his Preface that,

> With the materials in my hands I have endeavoured to form an *autobiography* (if the term may be permitted) of George Eliot. The life has been allowed to write itself in extracts from her letters and journals. Free from the obtrusion of any mind but her own, this method serves, I think, better than any other open to me, to show the development of her character and intellect.
>
> (Cross, ed. 1885.v)

Francis Darwin, likewise, does not claim full authorship of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*; the title page of each volume credits him as the editor, merely. This stance seems to have been appreciated by Victorian readers: the *Quarterly* reviewer speaks approvingly of "the author [of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*], or as he modestly terms himself, the editor" (see *The Quarterly Review* 1888.2); and Edward Clodd pronounces in *Knowledge* that,

> [*The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*] is executed with consummate skill and reverent care. The biographer is in no wise obtrusive; he comes between the reader and subject only to supply the needed links to connect the letters which comprise four-fifths of the work, adding a sketch of his father's everyday life and methods of working, not gratifying overmuch the idle curiosity which hungers for gossip about the private life of celebrities, but just putting us on easy terms with Darwin, so that we feel we know what manner of man he was, and find every favourable impression given us by his books and his relations with his contemporaries confirmed.
>
> (Clodd 1888.65)

Gestures towards authorial modesty and objectivity seem to occur throughout life-and-letters biography. In 1741, Conyers Middleton, author of the *Life and Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, felt that "it would give both a lustre and authority to a sentiment, to deliver it in the person and very words of Cicero" (see Clifford, ed.

1962.39). Similar reasoning was invoked by some of the latest of late-Victorian biographers.[12] Frederic Maitland, for instance, introduces his *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906) with the statement:

> [...] nor did I observe Stephen as some expert in psychology, or as some heaven-born novelist might have observed him. If I am to write of him at all I must use other words and other eyes than mine, more especially his own — which means that I shall copy a good many extracts from his letters, and report what has been told me by his sister, his children, his pupils, and his friends. I do not think the public will be entitled to complain if it gets some first-hand evidence instead of my epitome of it [...]
>
> (Maitland 1906.2)

The irony of taking this approach to Stephen, the champion of epitome in biography, is not lost on Maitland: he stresses that "The powers, natural and acquired, which enabled [Stephen] to sum up a long life in a few pages, to analyse a character in a few sentences, are not at my disposal" (2).

It is easy — perhaps too easy — to point out the fallaciousness of the idea that a life can "write itself". The biography that reproduces a wide variety of source-materials is not necessarily more autobiographical, or more objective, than the biography that does not; for those source-materials are chosen and arranged by a very human biographer, who is invariably prey to a number of biases.

One suspects that neither Victorian biographers nor their readers were so naïve

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[12] This is not to say that the credo that the life can somehow "write itself" is expressed in all forms of Victorian biography. G.T. Bettany's pocket-size *Life of Darwin*, for instance, has no such pretensions to objectivity; it immediately thrusts Darwin's "magnificence" upon us in a prose-chant that modern readers may find embarrassing.

> If ever a man's ancestors transmitted to him ability to succeed in a particular field, Charles Darwin's did. If ever early surroundings were calculated to call out inherited ability, Charles Darwin's were. If ever a man grew up when a ferment of thought was disturbing old convictions in the domain of knowledge for which he was adapted, Charles Darwin did. If ever a man was fitted by worldly position to undertake unbiassed [sic] and long-continued investigations, Charles Darwin was such a man. And he indisputably found realms waiting for a conqueror.
>
> (Bettany 1887.11)

The pæan continues for another several lines.

as to believe that anyone was being allowed to form an entirely first-hand view of the subject. A compilation of source-materials about a person *X* can, however, be more open-ended, or less devastatingly conclusive, than an omnipotent third-person character description ("*X* was this, *X* was that, *X* was the next thing and stupid too"). Open-endedness compliments the reader's intelligence; and may also constitute a refusal on the biographer's part to assume total omnipotence over the subject — thereby preserving what Cockshut has described as "the salutary humility of all good biography in the august presence of another soul" (1974.20).[13]

Before one attributes self-effacement to the compiler-biographer, though, one must bear in mind that compilation lends itself equally to sloth.[14] In the preface to his *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon* (1853), Tom Taylor rather gives the game away:

> This is not the biography of Haydon, but his *autobiography* — not a life of him by me, but his life by himself.
>
> It may be the biographer's part to paint his subject with as heroic lineaments as he can manage to give him, without falling into glaring disproportion or taking too great liberties with the truth. I do not say this is my conception of even a biographer's duty; but readers appear to expect this of those who write lives.
>
> But the editor of an autobiography is relieved from all difficulty on this point. He has only to clean, varnish and set in the best light the portrait of himself which the autobiographer has left behind him. He may wipe away chills or mildew; he may stop a hole, or repair a crack; he may remove impurities, or bring obscure parts into sight: but he has no right to repaint, or restore or improve.
>
> (Taylor, ed. 1853.xxix)

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[13] Postmodernist styles in literature and journalism have in some instances returned us to author-effacing, compilation methods of biography. For instance, the autobiography of punk-rocker John Lydon, a.k.a. Johnny Rotten, is to a large extent a compilation of interviews with Lydon's former associates. Lydon thus reneges — or appears to renege — total control over how he will appear to the reader (see Lydon 1994).

[14] Here I am indebted to Richard Altick's perceptiveness. Altick suggests that, "Whatever theoretical reasons may be advanced for the wholesale printing of letters in the name of biography, allowance must be made for the familiar fact of human indolence." He refers us to a letter in which Thomas Moore, the biographer of Byron, declares that "to make Byron *tell his own* story [...] is not only the pleasantest sort of biography to the reader but by far the easiest to the writer" (see Altick 1969.197n).

A tendency to ignore the under-documented aspects of the subject's life seems to be inherent in the life-and-letters method. Cockshut has argued that certain of the dullest elements in nineteenth-century biography result from this tendency rather than from more general social factors.

For instance, many life-and-letters biographers gloss over the subject's childhood and youth, and so present us with a rather monolithic adult. And yet, as Cockshut points out, "We are dealing here with a period when the cult of the child flourished mightily. An age in which Wordsworth was the idol of the intellectuals, and Dickens of the crowd, can only have been keenly sensitive to the grandeur, the pathos and the comedy of childhood." This apparent contradiction between the sentiments of the era and the content of the era's biographies is explained by Cockshut's observation that, "The time when the lowest proportion of [a man's] letters is kept is the early time before his talents are known or his future fame suspected." The average life-and-letters biographer did not *deliberately* undervalue his subject's childhood; he was simply unable to compile a full documentary description of it (see Cockshut 1974.17-18).

Cockshut suspects that an over-reliance on the compilation of documents may also have been responsible for a general absence from nineteenth-century biography of descriptions of impulsive behaviour. The apparent lack of impulsiveness in the nineteenth-century hero is not, Cockshut writes, "just a question of whitewashing. If the sudden, unexpected power of sexual impulse and anger is forgotten, so too is the sudden force of moral inspiration." He explains that, "The process of writing is more deliberate, even in a way more artificial than speech or action. To draw mainly on written evidence involves emphasis upon conscious and deliberate mental activity, and a corresponding failure to emphasise impulse." (1974.18-19)

This is a problematic claim. A letter written by an excited person may be far less deliberate or "artificial" than a speech or action performed by a composed person. And a letter may contain a description of impulsive behaviour; or even a confession from the letter-writer about some impulse he has not acted upon — an impulse we might otherwise never have attributed to him.

This is not to say Cockshut's point is entirely invalid. As he suggests, mere "whitewashing" seems too simplistic an explanation for a general absence of descriptions of impulsive behaviour. Most of the letters available to the nineteenth-century biographer may indeed have lacked impulsiveness, and may thus have fortified that biographer's customary discretion.

In summary, then, the general weaknesses perceived in life-and-letters biographies include:

— poor narrative structure;

— lack of selectivity, as evidenced in excessively long works which contain much repetitious and trivial material;

— failure to grapple with the under-documented aspects of the subject's life.

Among the intertwined causes of these weaknesses are:

— the fallacy that a compilation of source-materials allows the subject's life to "write itself";

— inflated perceptions of the historical value of past ephemera;

— idleness about shaping and condensing source-materials.

It seems useful to distinguish between weaknesses like the ones listed immediately above, which seem to reside largely in the life-and-letters method itself, and weaknesses which seem to be linked more directly to societal pressures. In the view of most twentieth-century critics of biography, weaknesses of this second kind are exemplified where the nineteenth-century biographer censors himself, suppressing "improper" truths and failing to make artistic use of his intimate knowledge of his subject.

I have not, perhaps, emphasised strongly enough that life-and-letters biographies need not be approached from an automatically hostile, neo-Stracheyan, critical standpoint. Their use of primary source-materials conveys an appealing sense of authenticity; and their respect for the subject is not always artistically disadvantageous. The late twentieth-century's seeming hunger for exposé — our rooting after the sordid aspects of the lives of the famous — may in some future age be considered even less desirable than "Victorian reticence".

A closer examination of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*: the responses of Victorian reviewers

Most of the Victorian reviews of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* that I have examined deal only superficially with its literary and historiographical qualities. Still, almost all are enthusiastic. The reviewers — and, apparently, many readers — had been aware that a large-scale life of Darwin was in preparation, and were keen to examine it.[15] *The Quarterly Review* for January-April 1888 opens by stating that "Expectation of no common kind has for the past five years been aroused by the report, that a memoir was, naturally enough, being prepared of the great biologist" (1). This is echoed in *The Westminster Review*: "To no biographical work since the publication of Mr. Froude's 'Reminiscences of Thomas Carlyle' have the reading public looked forward with the same interest".[16] *The Westminster Review* goes on to declare that "filial piety has in this case been found so coupled with literary skill as to produce what is, in many respects, a model biography" (1887.1136-37). In *The Dial*, David Jordan's first comment is that "No more delightful work of biography than this which Mr. Francis Darwin has given us of his father has been published during the present generation." (1888.215) And, according to *The Spectator*,

> Of such a man, of so rare a genius and so lofty a nature, the record cannot fail to be of deep and abiding interest for us all; and for such as are, happily, qualified by their studies adequately to comprehend the work of his life, of particular value and importance. It was no easy task to do justice to so great a theme, nor was the difficulty lessened by the eagerness with which the appearance of these long-expected volumes was awaited. But the task has been executed in a manner satisfying the keenest criticism. The book is at once a

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[15] "*The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* "went on sale for almost two pounds — a week's wages for a well-paid worker. Four thousand copies sold in a month, making it a best-seller." (Moore 1994.39) Moore probably does not mean to imply that *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* was excessively expensive. Its price (36 shillings, to be exact) appears to have been standard for works of its size.

[16] While these comments may exaggerate the case somewhat, there is no doubt that readers who were interested in Darwin had for some years been aware that Francis Darwin was preparing his father's biography. Two years before Francis's work was published, Grant Allen stated in his pocket-size *Charles Darwin* that "As Mr. Francis Darwin was already engaged upon a life of his father, I should have shrunk from putting forth my own little book if I had not succeeded in securing beforehand his kind sanction [...] I trust the lesser book may not clash with the greater, but to some extent may supplement and even illustrate it." (1885.iii-iv)

> biography, an autobiography, and the history of a great idea. With a truly remarkable literary skill, the man and his work are so presented as never to be dissociated.
>
> (*The Spectator* 1887.1619)

Curiously, *Nature* — a scientific rather than literary periodical — carries the one review that attempts to place *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* within the canon of biography: the reviewer, T.G. Bonney, predicts that "It will take its place [...] with Boswell's Life of Johnson, Lockhart's Life of Scott, Stanley's Life of Arnold, and the comparatively small number of biographies which have attained to first-class rank in literature." (1887.73) (Perhaps this response is not so "curious" after all, for *Nature* had generally been pro-Darwinian.)

The few negative critical responses to *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* seem mostly to have been directed against Darwin's status as a philosopher, rather than against the literary and historiographical qualities of the biography itself. *The Catholic World* of New York noted Darwin's homely virtues only to grumble that his mind was "limited", and that, "in our times the duty of submission to the authority of scientific men is earnestly inculcated and generally acquiesced in far beyond the limits of what is just, and far beyond what scientific men deserve" (1888.759). Similarly, *The Edinburgh Review* proffered barbed compliments:

> [Charles Darwin's] kindness, his amiability, his candour, his industry, his zeal for natural history, his affectionate regard for relations and personal friends, his courteous and gentlemanlike feelings, and his considerate kindness and generosity in action, were known to us before. But his intellectual range seems to have been most restricted and concentrated with singular intensity on various minute inquiries all bearing upon one central idea, imperfectly conceived and clung to with an exaggerated eagerness.
>
> (*The Edinburgh Review* April 1888.447)

This review is mentioned in George Romanes's essay, "Recent Critics of Darwinism", which appeared in the June 1888 issue of *The Contemporary Review*. Romanes

responds to "the two or three notes that have been sounded in the press that are strangely and disagreeably out of tune with the general concord" — out of tune, that is, with "the otherwise unanimous acclamations of approval with which the publication of Mr. Darwin's biography has been greeted" (836).

> First, there were some articles by the Duke of Argyll in the *Nineteenth Century*; next, some shorter papers and letters by the same writer in *Good Words* and in *Nature*; lastly, a long essay by an anonymous writer in the current number of the *Edinburgh Review* [the April 1888 issue quoted above]. This list, I think, exhausts the unfriendly criticism [attending the publication of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*...] criticism which, for the most part, is directed against the late Mr. Darwin's philosophy, but also in some measure against his mind and character. [...]
>
> [...] One remark, however, of a general kind may here be appropriately made. Seeing that this writer [the *Edinburgh* reviewer] must be totally devoid of any sense of the ludicrous, it is desirable for his own sake that in future he should remember how serious a defect it is under which he thus labours. By so doing he may perhaps learn the expediency of avoiding the tone of lofty authority in matters of science and general reasoning, which has an indescribably comical effect in a man who gives us no ground to suppose that he is worthy of serious attention, either as a naturalist or as a philosopher.
>
> (Romanes 1888.836-839)

The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals (Houghton *et al*, eds. 1966-1989) confirms that the "anonymous" *Edinburgh* reviewer was St. George Mivart, a former protégé of Huxley and Darwin who had since become one of the most persistent critics of Darwinism. Despite Romanes's dismissal of him as "a man who gives us no ground to suppose that he is worthy of serious attention, either as a naturalist or a philosopher"; it appears Mivart was taken seriously enough in his time, not least by Darwin himself.[17]

Though Romanes's support for Darwin bordered occasionally on the fanatical,

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[17] "[...] Mivart's clever critique *On the Genesis of Species* [1871] arrived, the most devastating all-round attack on natural selection in Darwin's lifetime. It was also a pre-emptive strike on the *Descent of Man* and, coming from a man so close to the inner circle, it left Darwin badly 'shaken'. He was so angry he could barely speak." (Desmond and Moore 1991.577)

his essay does add to one's impression that negative responses to *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* were mostly, in fact, responses to Darwin's "philosophy", not to the quality of the biography itself.

The greater structure of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*:— the documents from which the work is compiled — weaknesses arising from Francis Darwin's method of compilation — some Victorian critics' responses to this method

The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin is divided into a number of parts:

— a chapter on "The Darwin Family" which incorporates Charles Darwin's notes on his grandfather Erasmus, father Robert and brother Erasmus Alvey Darwin. Incorporated also is a passage on Erasmus Alvey from Carlyle's "Reminiscences", followed by Julia Wedgewood's response to Carlyle.[18]

— Charles Darwin's "Autobiography".

— Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences of My Father's Everyday Life".

— extracts from Charles Darwin's letters and diaries, as selected, introduced and edited by Francis. These extracts make up the bulk of the work. They are not presented in one chronological series, but grouped according to the topic of research (for example, the letters relevant to "Work on 'Man' — 1864-1870" appear in one particular chapter, while the letters written between those same years on "Climbing and Insectivorous Plants" only appear several chapters later).

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[18] Francis Darwin states that his father "did not appreciate" Carlyle's sketch of Erasmus Alvey because "he thought Carlyle had missed the essence of [Erasmus's] most lovable nature." The response to Carlyle from Julia Wedgewood, Charles and Erasmus's cousin, is reproduced from *The Spectator* (3 September 1881). Wedgewood suggests, very gently, that there was more to Erasmus than Carlyle was capable of discerning (see *LL*1.22-25).

Hence we receive a multiplicity of perspectives on Darwin. For modern readers (or, readers who prefer biographies to read like novels) the value of this multiplicity of perspectives is diminished by a related weakness: the various parts are too disparate, and too loosely linked, to sustain any overarching narrative. Huxley's contribution, for example, is slotted into a good strategical position (between letters to do with *On the Origin of Species*) but still interrupts the flow of one's reading and demands consideration as a separate piece. Here, as at many other points in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, the narrative continuity that might grip our attention from first page to last is broken.

None of this appears to have troubled the majority of the book's Victorian reviewers. For well over a century, most large-scale biographies had been works of compilation rather than tightly-plotted compositions. The readers to whom *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* was addressed could not have expected anything different, and it is possible they would have found less to approve of in a more integrated work.

> [...] with pious care and great skill in selection, Mr. Francis Darwin has furnished a fitting portrait of his father [...]
>
> We have advisedly called the present "Life" a threefold picture, for it commences with a most interesting autobiographical account or picture of Mr. Darwin, consciously drawn by himself for his children; it is followed by a touching chapter entitled "Reminiscences of my Father's Every-day Life," by Mr. F. Darwin; while the letters show us Mr. Darwin as he unconsciously revealed himself to others. The general result is that reader gains an excellently vivid picture of one who was even greater as a man than as a naturalist [...]
>
> (*The Athenæum* 1887.713)

While *The Athenæum*'s reviewer seems to be aware that Huxley's chapter does not quite mesh with the rest of the work, he directs his criticism against Huxley's aggressive style rather than against Francis Darwin for having included Huxley's contribution in the first place: "The historian of [Darwin's theory] will be much indebted to Prof. Huxley for the vigorous chapter which he has contributed 'On the Reception of the Origin of

Species'; but at this moment, while every one must recognize its great value, its vigour impresses the reader not unfavourably, but painfully, when compared with the calm atmosphere of Darwin's benign geniality; it is a 'tempest after sun,' and not the 'sunshine after rain.'" (715)

The plainest statement of dissent about Francis Darwin's method that I have been able to find is in *The Edinburgh Review*, which complains that "there is a good deal of apparent repetition in the work, owing to its not being arranged in chronological order, but in a series of separate subjects" (1888.408). Francis appears to have predicted some such complaint, for in his preface he explains that:

> In choosing letters for publication I have been largely guided by the wish to illustrate my father's personal character. But his life was so essentially one of work, that a history of the man could not be written without following closely the career of the author. Thus it comes about that the chief part of the book falls into chapters whose titles correspond to the names of his books.
>
> In arranging the letters I have adhered as far as possible to chronological sequence, but the character and variety of his researches make a strictly chronological order an impossibility. It was his habit to work more or less simultaneously at several subjects. Experimental work was often carried on as a refreshment or variety, while books entailing reasoning and the marshalling of large bodies of facts were being written. Moreover, many of his researches were allowed to drop, and only resumed after an interval of years. Thus a rigidly chronological series of letters would present a patchwork of subjects, each of which would be difficult to follow.
>
> (*LL*1.iii)[19]

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[19] In the *Life and Letters* of Darwin's friend and colleague Thomas Henry Huxley, we find that the author, Huxley's son Leonard, has prefaced the work with a manifesto that seems the very opposite of Francis Darwin's:

> My father's [i.e., Thomas Henry Huxley's] life was one of so many interests, and his work was at all times so diversified, that to follow each thread separately, as if he had been engaged on that alone for a time, would be to give a false impression of his activity and the peculiar character of his labours. All through his active career he was equally busy with research into nature, with studies in philosophy, with teaching and administrative work. The real measure of his energy can only be found when all these are considered together.
>
> (Huxley, L. 1900.v)

If we demand no more than a series of portrayals of Darwin in relation to one or other of his areas of research, this works well. But it tends to undermine the stated aim of illustrating Darwin's "personal character", because it makes it difficult for the reader to gain a sense of Darwin's overall development over the years. Still, loose-knit as *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* may appear to the modern critic, it is structured better than many biographies of its type. If Richard Altick's well-argued point that "The biography-told-in-documents often was, in fact, chaos in three volumes," (1969.199) is correct, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* may even have appeared to be rather well structured — it is, at least, not *chaotic*.

Mrs. Oliphant's view of the work

Of the reviews I have examined, only that by "The Old Saloon" columnist of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* gibes at the work's length and level of detail. Though parts of this review are unnecessarily facetious, I quote it at length because it is in fact written from an elaborate critical standpoint.

> Everybody by this time has received so much information about Mr. Darwin, that the literary historian is perplexed by a record too complete. If we do not know everything which that remarkable thinker was and did, it is not for want of details. His methods, his looks, his clothes, his little walks and his great ones, the refreshments he "partook of," to use a newspaper phrase, the kind of chair in which he sat, the manner in which he used his books [...] are all before us [...] In the three huge volumes which are put forth to embalm the philosopher's name, he is observed like one of his own specimens under a microscope, and every peculiarity recorded, for all the world as if a philosopher were as important as a mollusc, though we can scarcely hope that a son of Darwin's would commit himself to such a revolutionary view. Shakespeare himself — heaven reward him for leaving no record behind him! — could not have been more sedulously set forth, or considered by his belongings more absolutely interesting to all time [...]
>
> [...] Indeed we remember no man amid all the range of biography who has been so minutely described — by himself in the first place, and by his son in

> the second. The record of his life is like a combination of the camera and the microscope. There is something of that absence of atmosphere and perspective in it which we find in the photograph, and of the extravagance of fact exaggerated, which belongs to the other scientific instrument. There is little or no distinction between the small and the great, between essentials and details. But fortunately the character of the philosopher is one which does not suffer from this treatment as others might. A human creature full of amiable tendencies, without any passions to confuse his path through the world, or temptations to lead him astray, or troubles to test his mettle, has less need than most of those unconscious selections of the artist, which are wanted to give a recognisable portrait.
>
> (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* January 1888.105-107)

Technically the reviewer is anonymous; however, *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* reveals that *Blackwood's* "Old Saloon" columnist for January 1888 was none other than Margaret Oliphant — "the formidable Mrs. Oliphant", as she is regularly described (and it is something of literary convention to prefix her name with that stern-sounding "Mrs."). Mrs. Oliphant is better known to historians of biography for her essay "The Ethics of Biography" (1883), which she wrote in response to James Froude's then-notorious *Thomas Carlyle* (1882).[20]

The notion that Darwin had no "passions to confuse his path through the world, or temptations to lead him astray, or troubles to test his mettle" is wrong. Like any other human being, he faced these things throughout his life; if it appears that he did not, it is because they never overwhelmed him. Still, it is worth asking why Mrs. Oliphant considers a man "of amiable tendencies" to have "less need of those unconscious selections of the artist, which are wanted to give a recognisable portrait." (I assume the "unconscious selections of the artist" are those selections which result in a satisfactory "distinction between the small and the great, between essentials and details.") An answer may lie in "The Ethics of Biography", where she makes a more impassioned plea for a distinction between essentials and details.

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[20] For reliable insights into the apprehensions and controversies that surrounded Froude's *Carlyle*, see Hamilton 1992.158-176 and Ricks 1996.146-171

> [The true biographer] is expected to enable us to surmount or to correct such momentary impressions as we may have taken up from chance encounter with his subject, and to give guidance and substance to such divinations of character or life as we may have gleaned from the public occurrences in which he was involved, or the works he left behind. [...] In every portrait the due value of differing surfaces and textures must be taken into account, and we must be made to perceive which is mere drapery and apparel, and which the structure of the individual beneath. [...] That which is accidental, and due to force of circumstances, is [...] on a different *plan* from that which is fundamental. The most patient may be subject to a burst of passion, which, seen unconnected with the rest of his life, would give a general impression of it, in reality quite false, though momentarily true.
>
> (Oliphant 1883, as reproduced in Clifford, ed. 98-99)

Given that "The Ethics of Biography" is largely a condemnation of cynicism in biography, Mrs. Oliphant's position appears to be that the ideal biographer does not let compromising details ("mere drapery and apparel") overshadow the subject's fundamental strengths. For her, the sympathetic portrayal of a great man's *greatness* is the prerequisite for "a recognisable portrait."[21]

Mrs. Oliphant seems to approve of Charles Darwin as a man, but dislikes his "philosophy": she considers Darwin's afterlife and hopes "that in the higher satisfaction of finding something far better than he had ever conceived, he has accepted now with equanimity the position of the ignorant, learning how many more things there are in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy." (1888.115)

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[21] If Joseph Reed is correct, Wordsworth, in the earlier part of the century, had taken a similar stance. Reed concludes that,

> Wordsworth's opinion of the efficacy of biography is clear. Since it is impossible for any life to capture the spirit which activated all the strengths and "infirmities" of any particular human character, no "infirmities" or shortcomings should be set forth. Since the "whole truth" is not obtainable in biography, the biographer should limit himself to instances which illustrate the highest reaches of the virtue, talent and intellect of the subject. If the biographer can't say something good, he had better say nothing at all.
>
> (Reed 1966.52)

The three key elements of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* — Charles Darwin's "Autobiography", Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences of my father's every day life", and the letters — are now examined in some detail. As the arrangement of the letters has already been mentioned, I will consider these first. I will then turn to Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences". The "Autobiography" in fact predecedes the "Reminiscences" and the letters, but, because it has come to stand as a separate work through Nora Barlow's 1959 edition, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, and because it poses for critics its own very particular set of questions, I will consider it last.

The letters

Darwin's letters, as the *Quarterly* reviewer says, "abound in a kind of vivacity and sprightliness which we can only term boyish. This characteristic is continued to the very last [...]" (1888.27). Certainly, Darwin's tone of enthusiasm alters little over the years. There is a wealth of examples, but one trusts the two following passages (written some forty years apart) will suffice.

> ..... I am quite charmed with Geology, but, like the wise animal between two bundles of hay, I do not know which to like best; the old crystalline group of rocks, or the softer and fossiliferous beds. When puzzling about stratification, &c., I feel inclined to cry "a fig for your big oysters, and your bigger megatheriums." But then when digging out some fine bones, I wonder how any man can tire his arms with hammering granite [...]
>
> I am now reading the Oxford "Report" [of the second meeting of the British Association]; the whole account of your proceedings is most glorious [...] My [geologist's] hammer has flown with redoubled force on the devoted blocks; as I thought over the eloquence of the Cambridge President, I hit harder and harder blows.
>
> (C. Darwin to J.S. Henslow, March 1834, as reproduced in *LL*1.249-51)

MY DEAR MR. DYER, — I fear you will think me a great bore, but I cannot resist telling you that I have just found out that the leaves of Pinguicula [a carnivorous plant] possess a beautifully adapted power of movement. Last night I put on a row of little flies near one edge of two *youngish* leaves; and after 14 hours these edges are beautifully folded over so as to clasp the flies, thus bringing the glands into contact with the upper surfaces of the flies, and they are now secreting copiously above and below the flies and no doubt absorbing. The acid secretion has run down the channelled edge and has collected in the spoon-shaped extremity, where no doubt the glands are absorbing the delicious soup. The leaf on one side looks just like the helix of a human ear, if you were to stuff flies within the fold.

Yours most sincerely,
CH. DARWIN.

(C. Darwin to W. Thistleton Dyer, probably December 1873, as reproduced in *LL*3.324-25)

How many other naturalists, past or present, would describe digested flies as "delicious soup"? Darwin's ability to empathise with carnivorous plants, with rock formations, barnacles and other less-than-cuddlesome natural phenomena, gives a peculiar charm to his letters; perhaps because we are amused to find a great biologist indulging in anthropomorphism. Moreover, as T.G. Bonney remarks in *Nature*, "there is not seldom a terseness of phrase, and always a vigour of composition, which makes [Darwin's letters] peculiarly attractive [...] and they show, on rare occasions, that capacity for indignation without which a character so amiable might have degenerated into weakness" (1887.73). Bonney may have in mind, particularly, the letter that begins "MY DEAR HOOKER — I am burning with indignation and must exhale [...] I could not get to sleep till past 3 last night for indignation." (*LL*3.4-5) (Unfortunately Francis Darwin cuts this letter short with a footnote that "It would serve no useful purpose if I were to go into the matter which so strongly roused my father's anger. It was a question of literary dishonesty, in which a friend was the sufferer, but which in no way affected himself.")

I noted earlier that the letters are arranged according to the topic of research,

rather than in one chronological sequence, and mentioned the difficulty this creates in tracing the development of Darwin's character over time. The difficulty is however compensated for by the way the arrangement helps us follow Darwin's scientific thinking. A more roundly unsatisfactory aspect of the letters is that they are almost all *from* Darwin *to* whomever; with the result that the reader is in a similar position to someone overhearing one end of a fascinating telephone conversation. Many of the letters contain Darwin's responses to criticisms and suggestions about his ideas. One would like to read these criticisms and suggestions as they were originally phrased; instead, one has to guess from Darwin what they were. None of the reviewers mentions this problem, so presumably letters *to* Darwin were not expected. However, Francis does raise the matter in his preface.

> Of letters addressed to my father I have not made much use. It was his custom to file all letters received, and when his slender stock of files ("spits" as he called them) was exhausted, he would burn the letters of several years, in order that he might make use of the liberated "spits." This process, carried on for years, destroyed nearly all letters received before 1862. After that date he was persuaded to keep the more interesting letters, and these are preserved in an accessible form.
>
> (*LL*I.v)

Unfortunately, one has to look elsewhere for such letters — the "accessible form" in which they are preserved does not happen to be a volume of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. Nor has Francis Darwin given here a solid explanation for why so few letters to his father are included. Letters written to Charles Darwin before 1862 are by no means non-existent, as an examination of the *Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Burkhardt *et al*, eds. 1985) will show. Even if they were non-existent, Volume Three of *The Life and Letters* is composed almost entirely of letters written after 1862, and Francis would have had no difficulty in producing a less one-sided array. One might speculate that the publication of letters from outside the family — particularly if the writers were still alive — would have been considered a breach of trust and good taste. However, a couple of letters from colleagues like Huxley and Gray are reproduced in *The Life and Letters* with no apparent qualms. It is more likely

that Francis simply felt bound to make his father dominate the work, which is after all a life and letters *of Charles Darwin*, not of Huxley, Gray or anyone else.

An instance of inexcusably poor editing occurs where Darwin writes to Hooker that "I have just received your note, which has astonished me, and has most truly grieved me. I never for one minute doubted of your success [...]" (*LL*1.342). What awful tragedy has befallen Hooker? wonders the uninitiated reader. Francis Darwin gives no explanation, nor do the surrounding letters provide any clues. Yet the solution could have been provided with a minimum of fuss, as the modern *Correspondence of Charles Darwin* demonstrates with a footnote below the same letter: "Hooker had lost the election for the chair of botany at Edinburgh University to John Hutton Balfour." (Burkhardt and Smith, eds. 1987.3.257-58)

Many of the letters have been shortened. Editor's ellipses (...) indicate omitted sentences and passages. One's broad impression is that, in the letters, the omissions indicated by ellipses simply spare the reader from irrelevancies, and are not of the same order as the significant, unmarked (with ellipses or anything else) omissions from the "Autobiography". As we shall see, this impression may not be entirely correct.

First, however, a point in Francis Darwin's favour: contrary to the negative expectations aroused by our knowledge that he was under strong pressure from his family to whitewash the "Autobiography", he does reproduce some letters which reveal that his father's attitude to others was not always saintly.

> I met old ____ this evening at the Athenæum, and he muttered something about writing to you or some one on the subject [of an expected quarrel at the meeting of the British Association in Newcastle?]; I am however all in the dark. I suppose, however, I shall be illuminated, for I am going to dine with him in a few days, as my inventive powers failed in making any excuse. A friend of mine dined with him the other day, a party of four, and they finished ten bottles of wine — a pleasant prospect for me; but I am determined not even to taste his wine, partly for the fun of seeing his infinite disgust and surprise.
>
> (C. Darwin to C. Lyell, August 9, 1838, as reproduced in *LL*1.295 The insertion in square brackets is mine.)

It would be unfair to expect Francis Darwin to name "old ____". More than a century

stands between ourselves and the social and legal consequences of discourtesy to any of Charles Darwin's associates; for Francis, the margin was far narrower.

Proof that Francis Darwin was prepared to offend where offence was truly due is provided by Samuel Butler in a letter to *The Athenæm* (1887.716). Butler expresses anger that *The Life and Letters* mentions his persistent attempts to quarrel with Charles Darwin, and seems particularly displeased by Francis's conclusion that "The [Butler] affair gave my father much pain, but the warm sympathy of those whose opinion he respected soon helped him to let it pass into well-merited oblivion." (*LL*3.220)[22]

In "Darwin and Divergence: the Wallace connection", an assessment of the fairness of Darwin's scientific priority over Alfred Wallace, Barbara Beddall (1988) points to a seemingly less-than-innocent pair of omissions from one of Darwin's letters to Charles Lyell (letter of June 25, 1858, as reproduced in *LL*.2.117-18). Comparison with the original letter reveals that Francis Darwin edited out two "key references" to Wallace (albeit that he does indicate their absence with ellipses). Beddall concludes that these omissions "demonstrate that Francis Darwin, the editor of his father's papers, was not above omitting key references to Wallace" (52-53).

By using the phrase "not above", Beddall suggests that Francis's motives were unethical. In this she may be mistaken.

The first omitted statement is:

> I [Charles Darwin writes to Charles Lyell] should not have sent off your letter without further reflexion, for I am at present quite upset, but write now to get subject for time out of mind. But I must confess that it never did occur to me, as it might, that Wallace could have made any use of your letter.
>
> (see Beddall 1988.51)

Beddall herself is unable to specify with certainty what letter or letters Darwin had in mind. Indeed, the statement is so imprecise that it seems impossible to discover exactly and unambiguously what Darwin meant. Francis may have omitted it for this very reason; not because he was driven by unethical motives.

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[22] Like St. George Mivart, Butler was a disillusioned former Darwinian. A thorough examination of "The Darwin-Butler Controversy" is provided in an appendix to Nora Barlow's edition of Darwin's "Autobiography" (see Barlow, ed. 1958.167-219).

The second omitted statement is:

> I [Charles Darwin] do not in least [sic] believe that that [sic] [Wallace] originated his views from anything which I wrote to him.
>
> (see Beddall 1988.51)

This might be interpreted as a deliberate attempt by Francis to erase Darwin's confirmation of Wallace's originality. The problem with this interpretation is that Francis generally misses no opportunity to demonstrate his father's selflessness. Perhaps the two statements were omitted, rather, out of delicacy: had they been included, they might have been construed as hinting that Darwin did, at some point, entertain the possibility that Wallace was a plagiarist. This would not have reflected well on either man. Moreover, Francis would have been concerned to safeguard Wallace's reputation, for Wallace and Darwin had become friends, and Wallace was still alive.

Hence Francis Darwin's motives in omitting the two statements about Wallace were not necessarily unethical.

A final point on the Darwin-Wallace connection as it appears in *The Life and Letters*: Charles Darwin's hand-wringing over the possibility that Wallace would take scientific priority over him is evidenced clearly in the letters. To Lyell he declares, "all my originality, whatever it may amount to, will be smashed"; and, "It seems hard on me that I should be thus compelled to lose my priority of many years' standing" (*LL*2.116-19) However, in the autobiographical chapter he states, "I cared very little whether men attributed most originality to me or Wallace;" (*LL*1.88). The discrepancy reveals an area of potential weakness in *modus operandi* of life-and-letters biographers in general: how can we trust the life to "write itself" if it is liable to contradict itself?

Darwin's letters to Lyell about Wallace were written in 1858, whereas the autobiographical note about Wallace was written in 1876, when Darwin was sixty-seven. The discrepancy might, then, be viewed as an illustration of Darwin's forgetfulness in old age, rather than as a point of confusion which the editor ought to have noticed. However, the relevant letters to Lyell and the autobiographical note about Wallace are separated by over 400 pages of text, and are not conjoined by any editorial explanation. This hardly constitutes an "illustration".

Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences"

The chapter by Francis Darwin, "Reminiscences of my father's every day life", opens as follows:

> It is my wish in the present chapter to give some idea of my father's everyday life. It has seemed to me that I might carry out this object in the form of a rough sketch of a day's life at Down, interspersed with such recollections as are called up by the record. Many of these recollections, which have a meaning for those who knew my father, will seem colourless or trifling to strangers. Nevertheless, I give them in the hope that they may help to preserve that impression of his personality which remains on the minds of those who knew and loved him — an impression at once so vivid and so untranslatable into words.
>
> (*LL*1.108-09)

What is the reader to make of this? Are Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences" somehow meant only for those who knew Charles Darwin, and better skipped by us "strangers"? Is the intention here really only to "help preserve that impression of his personality which remains on the minds of those who knew and loved him"? Does the remark that this impression is "untranslatable into words" amount to a warning that we will never be able to grasp Charles Darwin's personality from the text? Or should we accept the passage lightly, and read between the lines nothing more than an affirmation of modesty?

The answer may be that genuine uncertainty about exposing Charles Darwin's private self to the public gaze co-exists here with a somewhat coy modesty. Francis's doubts about his "Reminiscences" — "Many of these recollections [...] will seem colourless or trifling" — are hardly overriding: he has, after all, gone ahead with publication. Yet he never quite overcomes his initial uncertainty. This is not to say that he writes grudgingly — in fact, he provides an abundance of charming anecdotes and precise details. Rather, he lacks commitment to a broader narrative purpose: his descriptions — of his father's appearance, manner of walking and sitting, affection for dogs and so on — delightful as they are, do not lead to anything beyond themselves.

Moreover, "Reminiscences" becomes an unwieldy compilation in itself, for it incorporates material from Francis's sister Henrietta (whom he does not name, calling her only "my sister"); from one of Charles Darwin's doctors, Dr. Lane; and from Brodie Innes, a neighbouring curate and friend. It incorporates, too, the most moving of all Charles Darwin's letters — that written to himself, in remembrance and sorrow, a few days after the death of his daughter Annie. On this, Francis makes no comment other than that his father's account of Annie shows "the tenderness of his nature" (*LL*1.132).

In short, the major weakness of the greater structure of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, the tendency of the parts to override the whole, reveals itself again in the microcosm of the editor's personal chapter. George Gaylord Simpson's summation of Charles Darwin's "Autobiography" — "The mystery persists. The man is not really explained, his inner adventures are not fully revealed" (1958.122) — is as true for Francis's "Reminiscences".

Perhaps one is being too demanding — there is no rule that delightful descriptions *ought* to lead to anything beyond themselves. To expect Francis Darwin to "explain" his father — or Charles Darwin to "explain" himself — may be to expect them to anticipate modern psychology. Any such expectation would be anachronistic and unfair. However, one can offer two arguments for why one should not drop Simpson's line of criticism on the grounds of anachronism. Firstly, the most astute Victorian reviewers *notice* the "scientific" detachment of the work. This suggests the Darwins' biographical approach was not entirely the Victorian norm. If I may again quote Mrs. Oliphant in *Blackwood's*,

> [...] we remember no man amid all the range of biography who has been so minutely described — by himself in the first place, and by his son in the second. The record of his life is like a combination of the camera and the microscope. There is something of that absence of atmosphere and perspective in it which we find in the photograph, and of the extravagance of fact exaggerated, which belongs to the other scientific instrument. There is little or no distinction between the small and the great, between essentials and details.
> (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1888.107)[23]

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[23] The *Quarterly* reviewer, too — albeit that he is full of praise for the "Recollections" — notices the "scientific" quality of Francis Darwin's prose: "In the simplest style, wholly without affectation, and *as though he was merely describing the way in which some species of plant or animal lives*, Mr. Francis Darwin
(continued...)

Here, indeed, is the heart of the problem. Darwin's walk, his talk, his love of dogs and flowers, his weaknesses for sweets and snuff, his "pet economy in paper" — all these, and many other pleasant details about the man, are so beautifully magnified that the big questions — questions like (I paraphrase Ronald Clark) "What drove Darwin on year after year, decade after decade?" — fade away unanswered.[24]

The second reason why it is not anachronistic to demand more by way of "explanation" from Francis Darwin is that, although the Victorians were obviously not privy to twentieth-century developments in psychology, this does not mean they were without strategies for interpreting human nature. Often, such strategies had a religious derivation: "the spiritual autobiographer borrowed his fundamental interpretive strategy from biblical typology, the account he produced often resembled — in its formal features — a sermon or a segment of biblical commentary." (Peterson 1986.7) The agnosticism of Charles and Francis Darwin did not rule out the application of a biblical "interpretive strategy" to Charles's life; if Cockshut is correct, "Victorian agnostic biographers [...] tend to assimilate to [the dominant religious mode of interpretation ... as] perhaps some believing Christians of the twentieth century find the psychological causation in which they do not literally believe, a useful working model." (1974.20) In any case, one did not have to follow biblical models slavishly, as Heather Henderson demonstrates in her study of "the bizarre and often ironic ways in which Victorian autobiographers adapted and transformed the narrative options that typology afforded them" (1989.12). Nor was the set of interpretive and narrative strategies available to Francis Darwin limited to biblical typology. The great novels of the period — with which he, as a cultivated man, was surely acquainted — demonstrate that the Victorians were as keenly aware as ourselves of patterns in the development of character, and as capable of rendering those patterns in a variety of narrative structures. Francis Darwin's

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[23](...continued)
has drawn a picture that, we think, from its intrinsic literary merits will survive." (*The Quarterly Review*, 1888.28, my italics)

Similarly, the *Unitarian* reviewer remarks on Francis Darwin's "scientific conscientiousness": "We have here Darwin's opinions, not only on science, but on almost every conceivable subject, and all the details of his daily life, down to the very tones of his voice as he spoke to his dog." This reviewer considers that, "The volumes give us Darwin's life and character with as much accuracy as the photographs by which it is illustrated give us his personal appearance." (*The Unitarian Review* 1888.386)

[24] Clark suggests in his review of Peter Brent's *Charles Darwin: A man of enlarged curiosity* that, "What is lacking from Mr. Brent's account of 'a man of enlarged curiosity' is what is lacking from most biographies of Darwin: a satisfactory attempt to explain the ... piration that drove Darwin on year after year, decade after decade [...]" (1982.28).

failure, not only in his "Reminiscences" but throughout *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, to give a clear account of his father's development over time, is probably the penultimate reason why the work finds no place among the great — or even the outstanding — biographies.

Perhaps that failure arises, partly, from a tendency among children (including, in some cases, grown-up children) to perceive their parents as towers of security and constancy, static amid the hurly-burly of the world. When we watch Darwin through his son's eyes, we often find ourselves contemplating an elderly parent pottering through a fixed routine. This image is not in itself false, but in Francis's "Reminiscences" it tends to override any broader picture. The reader starts to forget that Charles Darwin was for much of his life a developing, dynamic person.

At one point in his "Reminiscences", Francis Darwin declares: "How often, when a man, I have wished when my father was behind my chair, that he would pass his hand over my hair, as he used to do when I was a boy." (*LL*1.135) Affection of this kind, and deep respect, may have discouraged Francis from moving beyond the boundaries of "filial piety", and from probing (probing in print, at any rate) his own assumptions about his father.

Charles Darwin's "Autobiography"

To the best of my knowledge, no critical study of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* as a whole has been attempted since the reviews of 1887/88. However, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (Barlow, ed. 1958), which first appeared as "an autobiographical chapter" in *The Life and Letters*, is in its own right the subject of several relatively recent reviews and monographs. *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* also receives detailed consideration in a number of books on autobiography.[25] In this Section, then, I am able to draw from a pool of critical ideas that is broader and fresher than the pool of ideas around *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* as a whole.

Charles Darwin began his "Autobiography" at the end of May 1876 and completed the bulk of it in just over two months. Later he was to make a number of

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[25] See Olney 1972.182-202; Peterson 1986.156-63; and Stumock 1993.212-22

additions, among them an endearing portrait of his father Dr. Robert Waring Darwin.[26] The final work is, in length and density, closer to a novella than a full-scale novel. Darwin moves chronologically over his childhood, university experiences, voyage with the *Beagle*, return to England, and settled life in London and later at Down; and concludes with a summation of his career as an author and thinker.

The title of the work as it appears at the head of the original manuscript is *Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character*. John Rosenberg notes that, "Of the approximately one hundred editions in at least twenty-two languages, only one — that of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1957 — gets Darwin's title right." (1989.104 n.3) Rosenberg argues that the title given by Barlow to her 1958 edition, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*,[27] is "unfortunate"; it "arouses in the reader false generic expectations, for it suggests a more self-consciously shaped and 'literary' life than Darwin ever intended." (1989.83) However, Rosenberg's argument is softened by our knowledge that Darwin once referred to the work as "my little Autobiography" (see Colp 1985.360), and because my main focus is on *The Life and Letters*, I will continue to refer to the work in accordance with Francis Darwin's chapter-heading, which is simply "Autobiography".

"Autobiography", or the "autobiographical chapter", opens with Francis Darwin's note that,

> My father's autobiographical recollections, given in the present chapter, were written for his children, — and written without any thought that they would ever be published [...] It will be easily understood that, in a narrative of a personal and intimate kind written for his wife and children, passages should occur which must here be omitted; and I have not thought it necessary to indicate where such omissions are made.
>
> (*LL*1.26)

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[26] This portrait of Dr. Darwin, Francis Darwin states, "was written about 1877 or 1878" (*LL* 1.11-20). In *The Life and Letters* it is incorporated not into the "Autobiography", but into the preceding chapter on "The Darwin family". The portrait is composed mostly of anecdotes that illustrate Robert Darwin's ability to combine shrewdness with sympathy.

[27] This title seems to be used as a matter of course by most modern Darwin scholars. Invariably the work is cited as *Autobiography*, not *Recollections*.

If this seems a little defensive, one must recall that Francis himself did not moot the omissions, and only made them under strong pressure from other members of the family (see Barlow, ed. 1958.11-13).

Charles Darwin's own introduction begins:

> A German Editor having written to me for an account of the development of my mind and character, I have thought that the attempt would amuse me, and might possibly interest my children or their children. I know that it would have interested me greatly to have read even so short and dull a sketch of the mind of my grandfather, written by himself, and what he thought and did, and how he worked. I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life. Nor have I found this difficult, for life is nearly over with me. I have taken no pains about my style of writing.
>
> (*LL*1.26-27)

It is difficult to judge how far we should accept all this. The "Autobiography" is no mere "sketch" and is far from "dull". Francis Darwin's statement that there was no thought that it would ever be published is problematic, because by 1876 Charles Darwin must have known his fame would be lasting; it could not have been difficult to predict that any substantial manuscript he produced about himself would eventually find a readership beyond his children and grandchildren. Yet it seems unreasonable to doubt that Darwin was motivated strongly by thoughts of his progeny, not least because by May 1876 he had learned that his first grandchild was on its way (Colp, 1985.361). Also, before we claim that the "Autobiography" was written with more than a glance towards public posterity, we should refer to the intensely private passage addressed to his children, which begins, "You all know well your Mother, and what a good Mother she has ever been to all of you. She has been my greatest blessing [...]" (Barlow, ed. 1958.96). This material was definitely not intended for publication. And we must ask ourselves whether Darwin would have wanted us — with our lack of familial sympathy — to know he entertained thoughts like, "Mr. Samuel Butler abused me with almost insane virulence [...] Huxley consoled me by quoting some German lines from Goethe, who had been attacked by someone, to the effect 'that every Whale has its Louse.'"

(Barlow, ed. 1958.134-35) Given the circumstances of the Darwin-Butler controversy, Darwin's words are almost moderate. They are not, however, attractive — heroes do not find consolation in flattery — and were omitted from *The Life and Letters*.

Darwin took his "Autobiography" seriously enough to rewrite several pages, to make frequent small changes (see Colp 1985.360) and to add to it over the years. Yet he did not wrestle with it as he did with scientific works he intended to publish. These were revised and re-revised, painstakingly and sometimes at the cost of great mental and physical stress,[28] whereas the "Autobiography" was never revised thoroughly. Colp notes that while Darwin "was careful to record when he began and finished a work", the only reference to the "Autobiography" in his journal is "Began my little Autobiography." (see Colp 1985.360 n.13) One suspects that if Darwin had been keen that the work should be published after his death, he would have been less casual about it.

Darwin seems to have completed the bulk of his "Autobiography" too rapidly to have bothered overmuch about style: by his own account, he spent no more time on it than "an hour on most afternoons" between May 28 and August 03 1876 (Barlow, ed. 1958.145). Further evidence of the casualness of Darwin's approach to his "Autobiography" is provided by the fact that his best working hours — morning hours — were still reserved over this period for his scientific writing (Colp 1985.360).

Colp identifies the "German Editor" as Ernst von Hesse-Warteg, who wrote to Darwin in ≀ ≈ Autumn of 1875 to ask for biographical information (Colp 1985.359-61). We have no evidence that Darwin sent the requested information (Colp 1985.360), nor does Darwin mention the "German Editor" again, so it seems unlikely that von Hesse-Warteg's letter was the main spur to Darwin's autobiographical efforts.

Darwin's statement that he has attempted to write "as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life" (*LL*1.27) has been widely quoted and elaborated upon.

> [...] if the *Autobiography* is in length quite unlike his scientific work [i.e., is far briefer], Darwin expressly intends to be as objective and as detached in the one

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[28] See for instance Francis Darwin's comment on the "somewhat severe strain" his father suffered in writing *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Francis quotes a letter written soon after *The Expression of Emotions* was finally completed, in which Charles Darwin tells Ernst Haeckel, "perhaps I shall never again attempt to discuss theoretical views. I am growing old and weak, and no man can tell when his intellectual powers begin to fail." (*LL*3.171)

> as in the other. As if he were a coral reef in the South Seas, Darwin deliberately looks at himself from without, studying a creature, presently not living, to whom a series of things happened in the past and over whom a series of changes came in sixty-seven years of life.
>
> (Olney 1972.183)

> Late in life, from the chilling perspective of a posthumous self, Charles Darwin wrote a brief account of his own origins [...] Darwin pushes the act of self-objectification to its theoretical limits: he gazes into the autobiographer's mirror and sees, staring back, not Charles Darwin but an aged instance of the species *Homo sapiens*. Writing of himself as a dead man is not at all difficult, he tells us, "for life is nearly over with me." The central activity of his life nad been the collecting and interpreting of natural phenomena. Now, believing himself to be at life's end, he collects himself, a specimen dispassionately impaled on the keen pin of his self-observation.
>
> (Rosenberg 1989.82)

Here, James Olney and John Rosenberg come close to echoing Mrs. Oliphant in *Blackwood's*: "In the three huge volumes which are put forth to embalm [Darwin's] name, he is observed like one of his own specimens under a microscope, and every peculiarity recorded, for all the world as if a philosopher were as important as a mollusc." However, Mrs. Oliphant is referring to *The Life and Letters* as a whole and complaining about what she perceives as an excess of minutiae; she does not mention Darwin's "dead man" stance or enlarge on her comment that "he is observed like one of his own specimens".

It is certainly tempting to view the "Autobiography" as an attempt by Darwin to examine himself scientifically, but Olney and Rosenberg have I think exaggerated the case. Colp suggests Darwin's "dead man" stance meant that,

> [...] although he viewed his past with interest and insight, he saw it in a more detached mood and with less emotion (and less interest in his past emotions) than

> in his 1838 recollections of himself.[29] Thus, a little before he wrote the *Autobiography*, he told his old friend and relative William Darwin Fox, "I feel as old as Methusalem [sic — Darwin's misspelling]; but not much in mind, except that I think one takes everything more quietly, as not signifying so much."
>
> (Colp 1985.361, my footnote. For Darwin's words to Fox, Colp refers us to a letter postmarked 11 May 1874, Darwin-Fox correspondence, Christ College, Cambridge.)

This is a more sensible, less ingenious, explanation of the "dead man" passage, and if we apply Ockham's Razor, it is not necessary to add Olney's explanation or Rosenberg's to it. We do not *need* to postulate that Darwin regarded himself as a "specimen". Nor does the text provide strong evidence that he approached himself scientifically. He does slip into a scientific mode when he says things like, "The passion for collecting [...] was very strong in me, and was clearly innate, as none of my sisters or brothers ever had this taste." (*LL*1.28) But, if we look at the "Autobiography" as a whole, we do not see anything approaching one of Darwin's scientific studies. When Darwin wrote as a scientist, he wrote exhaustively: every available scrap of evidence, both for and against, was taken into account. In his "Autobiography", however, he leaves out much that is important, such as "the richness, subtlety, and range of his evolutionary work" and his activities as a philanthropist and financial investor (Colp 1985.385-91). Also, while Darwin's scientific works are structured with great care, the "Autobiography" is — in Rosenberg's own words — "In no sense a full-scale self-portrait [but] a discontinuous narrative, by turns anecdotal and reflective [...]" (1989.82). One might put this more strongly: as an autobiographer, Darwin rambles. And he can be undisciplined and self-contradictory, as when — and this is but one of a number of examples — he declares:

> The instruction at Edinburgh was altogether by lectures, and these were

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[29] Darwin's brief "1838 recollections of himself" are reproduced as "An autobiographical fragment" in an appendix to the second volume of *The Correspondence* (Burkhardt and Smith, eds. 1986.438-42). Gillian Beer comments that, "At the time of writing [the autobiographical fragment of 1838, Darwin] was still only twenty-nine. The purpose of the fragment is to explore and fix recollection, and it implies no arc of public achievement as was commonly the case with published biography at that time. It is a wholly private work." (Beer 1985.558-59) The fragment is informally punctuated even by Darwin's standards, mostly with dashes; and this supports Beer's view that it is "wholly private".

> intolerably dull, with the exception of those on chemistry by Hope; *but to my mind there are no advantages and many disadvantages in lectures compared with reading.*
>
> (*LL*1.36, my italics)

only to say later that:

> I was so sickened with lectures at Edinburgh that [at Cambridge] I did not even attend Sedgwick's eloquent and interesting lectures. Had I done so I should probably have become a geologist earlier than I did. I attended, however, Henslow's lectures on Botany, and liked them much for their extreme clearness, and the admirable illustrations [...]
>
> (*LL*1.48)[30]

So — did Darwin, at the time he was writing his "Autobiography", approve of lectures, or did he not? The "Autobiography" raises the question, then blurs the answer.

R.C. Cowen, reviewing Barlow's edition of the "Autobiography", comments: "Darwin [...] notes at the outset that he has 'taken no pains about my style of writing' [...] The reader is the gainer, for his writing flows as freshly as conversation." (1959.7) There is another side to this: Darwin's autobiographical writing can also meander as carelessly as conversation.

Some modern critics of Darwin's "Autobiography" are struck by the air of "puzzlement" or "bewilderment" they sense in the work. They feel Darwin was to some extent writing "in search of himself", and that his search was not successful. (The phrase comes from the title of George Simpson's review, "Charles Darwin in search of himself". "With true humility, Darwin was evidently trying in much of his autobiography to understand how he became so eminent," says Simpson (1958.118).) This aspect of the "Autobiography" emerges particularly in the final part, which is subtitled "Mental Qualities". Here, Darwin casts around for the qualities that have made

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[30] For this example, I am indebted to Howard Gruber (1974.77). Gruber concludes, as I do, that Darwin's "Autobiography" "was neither very concerned with the examination of his inner life nor on that score very revealing." (223)

him a great scientist. He is mostly self-effacing, and sometimes self-demeaning. He declares that he lacks "great quickness of apprehension or wit [...] My power to follow a long and purely abstract train of thought is very limited [...] My memory is extensive yet hazy [...]" These weaknesses are balanced, he says, by his powers of observation, his industry in the collection of facts, and, above all, his "steady and ardent" love of natural science. (*LL* 1.102-03) He concludes that:

> [...] my success as a man of science, whatever this may have amounted to, has been determined, as far as I can judge, by complex and diversified mental qualities and conditions. Of these, the most important have been — the love of science — unbounded patience in long reflecting over any subject — industry in observing and collecting facts — and a fair share of invention as well as of common sense. With such moderate abilities as I possess, it is truly surprising that I should have influenced to a considerable extent the belief of scientific men on some important points.
>
> (*LL*1.107)

"With such moderate abilities as I possess, it is truly surprising [...]" — hence the puzzlement perceived by both Victorian and modern critics, and numerous comments to the effect that the "Autobiography" is "so ingenuous as to tempt one to call it naïve" (Krutch 1959.3).

However, the view that Darwin's "Autobiography" is "naïve" is mistaken, because it misses the overall playfulness of Darwin's tone. As F.B. Churchill stresses:

> Darwin wrote [his "Autobiography"] for his children who knew how to treat his self-effacing remarks and how to read between the lines. They were familiar with his exaggerations made with a twinkle in the eyes. Alas, many an historian has taken everything Darwin wrote here at face value and thereafter conjured up the most incredible fabrications about Darwin's lack of imagination and philosophical naïveté.
>
> (Churchill 1982.51 See also "Memories of Down House" by Darwin's fourth son, Leonard, 1929)

Churchill has hit on one of the contradictions to which the life-and-letters method is prone: material the subject intended for an intimate audience can easily be misread by others; and the biographer who presents such material to the public without an explicit explanation of its intimate aspects does not allow the life to "write itself", but rather, renders the subject a witness against himself.

Most of the sustained investigations of the "Autobiography" I have encountered — even Colp's, which is in many respects meticulous in questioning the accuracy of the work — bear out Churchill's point by failing to say, "Darwin was no fool. Did he honestly hold himself in such slight regard? If so, was this a consistent, enduring trait, or did he just feel that way at the time of writing?" These questions cannot be answered infallibly, for we cannot enter Darwin's mind, but they do alert us against making simplistic assertions about his character.

Personally, I suspect Darwin was not a naïvely modest man, "puzzled" or "bewildered" by his fame, as so many commentators on the "Autobiography" have concluded. Who are we to say he did not know the nature of his own genius? I further suspect the self-effacement we see in the "Autobiography" results from a quietly humorous mannerism Darwin adopted in his lifelong battle with pride — a mannerism honed by decades of willed effort to appear modest and indeed to *be* modest. I do not think Darwin's self-effacement has much to do with the "simplicity" so beloved of both Victorian and modern reviewers. But these are my own speculations, and I state them merely as plausible alternatives to a common critical view.

The idea that the "Autobiography" represents a failed quest ("Charles Darwin in search of himself", yet failing to "find himself") rests largely on its final section, the "puzzled", self-effacing discussion of the narrator's mental powers. This discussion in fact takes up a small part of the work — less than a twelfth of it, in Barlow's edition — and even this twelfth is made up partly of a long digression on scientific hoaxes. Moreover, the discussion can be read as an appendix; it is not an integrated conclusion of the sort that ties together narrative threads. Nor, indeed, is there any prior narrative thread that strongly suggests a quest for the self. For the most part, the "Autobiography" is about as revelatory as Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences": it is a series of charming but often inconsequential anecdotes. Rosenberg rightly contrasts it with "The great formative autobiographies of Western literature — the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and of

Rousseau, the *Prelude* of Wordsworth [... which] were written by men who were by nature self-obsessed." (1989.102) Darwin, in his "Autobiography", is so little self-obsessed that he fills a significant part of the work with descriptions of other people. As Frank Sulloway has suggested, the reverential discussion of Dr. Robert Darwin makes the work "almost a dual biography" (1991.29). Often, Darwin's descriptions of others barely reflect back on himself. When he tells of how Henslow rescued two body-snatchers from a mob in "almost as horrid a scene as could have been witnessed during the French Revolution", all he will say of his own part in the drama is that Henslow told him to get more policemen. (*LL*1.53)

The following is one of the relatively few passages in which Darwin follows the promise of his original title (*Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character*) and focusses on the *development* of his mind and character:

> Everything about which I thought or read was made to bear directly on what I had seen or was likely to see; and this habit of mind was continued during the five years of the voyage [of the *Beagle*]. I feel sure that it was this training which has enabled me to do whatever I have done in science.
>
> Looking backwards, I can now perceive how my love for science gradually preponderated over every other taste [...] gradually I gave up my gun [...] I discovered, though unconsciously and insensibly, that the pleasure of observing and reasoning was a much higher one than that of skill and sport. That my mind became developed through my pursuits during the voyage is rendered probable by a remark made by my father, who was the most acute observer whom I ever saw, of a sceptical disposition, and far from being a believer in phrenology; for on first seeing me after the voyage, he turned round to my sisters, and exclaimed, "Why, the shape of his head is quite altered."
>
> (*LL*1.63-64)

Even here, one finds no convincing attempt by the narrator to venture into past thoughts and emotions. The motivating factor, his love for science, is treated as no more than a dominant innate trait (as in "The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist [...] was very strong in me, and was clearly innate, as none of my sisters or brothers ever had this taste." (*LL*1.28)). He does not explore *why* he trained

his mind to observe intelligently, or why observing and reasoning became more pleasurable than shooting — the discovery is explained away as unconscious and insensible. That "the shape of his head is quite altered," is the final word on the matter; the account then returns immediately to the mechanics of the *Beagle* voyage. Here, the narrator's supposed search for himself is over almost as soon as it has begun. He is not even prepared to affirm strongly that his mind *did* develop; development is merely "rendered probable" by his father's shrewd observation. Though his use of "rendered probable" may be idiomatic to the extent that we can substitute "confirmed" for "rendered probable", the fact remains that he does not take upon himself the burden of a concluding judgement, but allows it to rest with his father.

A little later, our narrator tells us in a brief paragraph that he worked to the utmost during the voyage, not only "from the mere pleasure of investigation", but also because he was "ambitious to take a fair place among scientific men." He makes no more effort to examine his ambition than he does to examine his pleasure, stating only that "whether more ambitious or less so than most of my fellow-workers, I can form no opinion." (*LL*1,65) In short, he is not so much a failed self-searcher as he is a thoroughly uncommitted one.[31]

Darwin misrepresents himself, sometimes, in his "Autobiography", and these misrepresentations have given rise to some ingenious interpretations of his character — or, in Churchill's words, "incredible fabrications about Darwin's lack of imagination and philosophical naïveté." The "propagandist biography" I discussed in Chapter Two resurfaces here, for many of the commentators who take Darwin's self-criticisms at face

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[31] The notion that autobiographers are always enthusiastic about their task is sadly mistaken, as Frederic Maitland reveals in his *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*:

> Near the end of his life [Stephen] consented, under great pressure, to write some Reminiscences, or rather to report some "Early Impressions." [...] But even at this last moment when he might have claimed the rights which old age and abundant honours can confer, Sir Leslie could not be induced to say much about himself. He had met some interesting people — Carlyle and Ruskin, Tennyson and Arnold, Darwin and Huxley — and about them he would chat for a while, if anybody really cared to hear him; but as to himself — well, he was not interesting.
>
> Other "reminiscences" he had, but they were not *for the public* [...]
>
> (Maitland 1906.5)

Darwin too had met some interesting people, and in parts of his "Autobiography" seems to match Stephen's ability to deflect attention from himself by chatting about others.

value seem to do so with an eye to undermining his theory (with the fallacious reasoning that, "If a theorist is a flawed person, his theories must be flawed.") Other commentators, however, seem genuinely concerned about Darwin's mental health. One such is James Olney in his *Metaphors of Self: The meaning of autobiography* (1972). To discuss here every probable misreading of Darwin's "Autobiography" I have encountered would consume a disproportionate amount of space and of the reader's time, so I will focus on one prominent example — that supplied by Olney.

> Always conscious of the significance of external phenomena, Darwin was almost equally and oppositely un*self*-conscious; for the self does not present collectible and classifiable facts. Hence the brevity of the *Autobiography*. The scientific genius who could bring to synthetic expression a theory of the origin of species [...] — this same man is the very definition of naïveté when he comes to look within instead of without; then he seems quite incapable of conceiving that the essential self, out of which the embracing theory is produced, has in any sense a part to play in the shape and quality of that theory. By the time he wrote his *Autobiography* Darwin had become, on the one hand, "a kind of machine for grinding [out] general laws" and, on the other hand, a melancholy recluse who questioned little and understood less of his own place in the "dubious experiment" of life.
>
> (Olney 1972.196-97)[32]

If I have read Olney correctly, he is saying that Darwin (at the time he wrote his "Autobiography") was not only a poor analyst of his inner life; he did not even experience a normal inner life, for he had become machine-like, with "little or nothing in the way of perspective awareness on himself and his situation that would permit him

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[32] Though Rosenberg appears to have taken up Olney's theme, the criticisms which follow do not necessarily apply to him; because, unlike Olney, he does not make the classic mistake of believing Darwin to have been an "anaesthetic", narrowly scientific person. Rosenberg rightly qualifies his speculations about "a chilling element in [Darwin's self-detachment], a coldness popularly associated with the objectivity of science" by noting that "despite Darwin's own disclaimers, acuity of mind and intensity of feeling persisted to the end." (1989.103) Peterson, too, agrees with Olney on some points and differs strongly on others (see Peterson 1986.159-60).

to include his self in his observations."[33] Darwin was, Olney concludes, "a man of infinite patience and considerable tolerance, but a scientist possessed by the passion to observe everything and intuit nothing" (1972.198,202).

This may at first seem quite plausible; it may seem, even, to isolate the cause of the dissatisfaction felt by so many critics of the "Autobiography" and exemplified in Simpson's comment that "[Darwin] is not really explained, his inner adventures are not fully revealed in his own autobiography..." (1958.122). However, Olney's argument has at its core at least two serious mistakes: it assumes Darwin's statements about himself are correct; and it makes no allowance for the probability that Darwin was simply disinclined to describe his inner life (if one does not talk about one's inner life, or describes it poorly, that does not mean one's inner life is non-existent or poor).[34]

How might Darwin's statements about himself be incorrect?

The claim that Darwin became machine-like rests on the following passage from the "Autobiography":

> My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. A man with a mind more highly organised or better constituted than my own would not, I suppose, have thus suffered; and if I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.
>
> (*LL*1.101-02)

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[33] In fact, Olney goes a step further and states that Darwin's attempts at "self-effacement or self-destruction" resulted in "all the various, plainly psychosomatic illnesses [...] that he suffered from, and very intensely, his life long." (1972.196) This is a dubious assertion, and would remain so even if we had good evidence that Darwin's illnessess were primarily psychosomatic. Far better explanations for any psychosomatic complications Darwin suffered have been advanced by Colp, Bowlby and others.

[34] Another serious mistake, though it is rather tangential to my argument at this point, is the notion that Darwin was ever a "melancholy recluse". Darwin scholars have long known from his correspondence that he was a stimulating and stimulated person right up to his death, and that his life was always, in various ways, remarkably full.

Frederick Churchill supplies an excellent response to any reading that accepts this passage at face value:

> One of the most famous passages of the *Autobiography* starts out, "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine [...]" Many an historian has seized and reproduced the passage as triumphant proof that Darwin's poetic senses "atrophied" in later life. Little did they notice that the passage chosen made such good copy because it was itself poetic.
>
> (Churchill 1982.51)

Indeed, Darwin's *very regret* indicates he was no philistine. Moreover, in the sentence immediately prior to "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine [...]", Darwin declares that "books on history, biographies, and travels (*independently of any scientific facts which they may contain*), and essays on all sorts of subjects interest me as much as ever they did." (my italics) Thus, in lamenting a loss of "higher tastes", Darwin seems merely to have been following the notion (which was probably more acceptable in the nineteenth century than it is in these times of multi-disciplinary studies) that histories, biographies and so on belong to a lower aesthetic order than poetry and music.

Even if the contradictions within the text itself to Darwin's "machine-like" pose were not enough to refute that pose, the champions of Darwin's aesthetic powers have substantial outside evidence to call on. Darwin's son Leonard, in his essay "Memories of Down House" (1929), recalls an occasion when:

> My father, my sister and I were walking [in the countryside around Down House] on a beautiful sunny evening when the charm of the quiet scenery was, I am sure, affecting his mind. At all events, in reply to something which my sister had said, he declared that if he had to live his life over again he would make it a rule to let no day pass without reading a few lines of poetry. Then he quietly added that he wished he had "not let his mind go to rot so." I should not dare to quote these words if I had not an opportunity of also recording my firm conviction -- a conviction which certainly was shared by all my brothers and sisters — that not only did my father thus give a decidedly erroneous impression of the changes which had taken place in his mind, but that the passages in his

> autobiography dealing w... his subject have been constantly misunderstood and misinterpreted in the Press. I have known many other men who had entirely given up the habit of reading poetry; but I have no recollection of any other person who realised what he might have lost by so doing. The very strength of my father's expressions prove that he was longing for some outlet for his æsthetic emotions — an outlet which he was no doubt then obtaining to some extent through the quiet beauty of his surroundings. At any rate, it seemed to all of us onlookers that his appreciation of natural scenery remained quite undimmed to the end of his life.
>
> And here I wish I could paint in words a picture of my father lying quietly on the sofa in the drawing-room, whilst my mother was playing, and playing beautifully, some slow movement of Beethoven. Little was said, but I am sure that the music was not without effect on my father's mind. And if what he had thus gained had gone out of his mind when he was writing his autobiography, the explanation is to be found in the modesty of his nature, which led him to concentrate his attention on possible defects in his own character and to ignore probable merits.
>
> (Darwin, L. 1929.119-20)

Before and since Leonard Darwin's memoir, a number of monographs have sought to refute the notion that Darwin became "anaesthetic" (see Churchill 1982.66-67). The most outstanding of these appears to be "Darwin's Humane Reading: The anaesthetic man reconsidered" by L. Robert Stevens (1982). Stevens examines Darwin's reading lists and finds that "he may have been one of the most complete scientists of the nineteenth century" (59).

Stevens considers, among other things, another much-quoted passage from the "Autobiography". Darwin states in the passage that:

> [...] novels which are works of the imagination, though not of a very high order, have been for years a wonderful relief and pleasure to me, and I often bless all novelists. A surprising number have been read aloud to me, and I like all if moderately good, and if they do not end unhappily — against which a law ought to be passed. A novel, according to my taste, does not come into the first class

> unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love, and if a pretty woman all the better.
>
> (*LL*1,101)

Too often, this passage is used to mark Darwin as an amiable dunce in literary matters. Stevens comments:

> Without access to his reading lists, scholars have taken Darwin's disclaimer too literally, have supposed that he read only sentimental and popular novels. [...]
>
> Darwin's criteria for a good novel show, it is true, no special sophistication, as almost every biographer has made plain. [...] But such a novel as Darwin describes is not necessarily a poor one and might refer to Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (which Darwin read in 1855) or to Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Among the numerous novels Darwin read during the twenty years covered by the notebooks, the following works appear along with the purely sentimental ones: *Don Quixote*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Jane Eyre*, *Quentin Durward*, *Villette*, and perhaps *Barnaby Rudge* [...] He also read novels by Thackeray, Mrs. Oliphant, Fanney Burney [...] and possibly George Sand.
>
> (Stevens 1982.56-57)

Stevens goes on to point out that in Darwin's later scientific works, Dickens, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Goethe, Aristophanes and many other not specifically scientific thinkers are cited. "Without having read a luxuriance of imaginative literature," says Stevens, "[Darwin] would not have had such ready access to the concrete instances which rose to mind when needed; that is, the data arise from a life-long habit of reading both scientific books and books not specifically aimed at scientific uses." (57) Stevens goes on to argue that Darwin lost neither his taste for music nor his susceptibility to aesthetically-linked emotions, and concludes that:

> The legend which originated in Darwin's own statements about his life is

> incorrect. The history of ideas suffers a loss in thinking that so brilliant a theory emerged from so placid an intellect, in thinking of this great scientific figure as something less than he was: enormously well-read in the best traditions of our literature, patiently self-taught in two modern languages [German and French], fascinated by music even though it enlivened him to a state of nervous anxiety [...]
>
> [...] If the legend of a fragmentary and anaesthetic man is inaccurate, as it now seems to be, the misunderstanding which it fosters will end in an underestimation of the breadth and fullness of Darwin's experience and will distort any effort to use his experience in constructing a phenomenology of scientific creativity.
>
> (Stevens 1982.62-63)

Stevens has been cited widely, and perusal of the more recent Darwin biographies suggests that he and other thoughtful Darwin scholars have succeeded in undoing the popularity of "the legend of a fragmentary and anaesthetic man".

George Gaylord Simpson usefully divides the material Francis Darwin edited out of the "Autobiography" into three categories: "intimate remarks about the family, critical or (at the time) tactless statements about others, and views on religion." (1958.118) (There are a couple of minor exceptions to these categories; for example, the omission of an anecdote about stealing fruit as a child (see Barlow, ed. 1958.24).) Though I have already examined examples from each category, and do not wish to harp unduly on the matter of Francis's omissions, Charles Darwin's critical statements about others require a little more discussion. Many of his associates and acquaintances besides Butler are described in less than flattering terms: William Buckland was "a vulgar and almost coarse man"; Roderick Murchison valued rank to a "ludicrous" degree, and "displayed this feeling and his vanity with the simplicity of a child"; Richard Owen was (and here Darwin gives us Hugh Falconer's opinion, with evident agreement) "not only ambitious, very envious and arrogant, but untruthful and dishonest"; John Herschel was "very shy and he often had a distressed expression"; while Herbert Spencer was "extremely egotistical" (see Barlow, ed. 1958.102-08). These comments are all omitted from *The*

Life and Letters. So too are Darwin's passages on his "intimate" colleagues, Hooker and Huxley — which is something of a mixed blessing for them, because while we do not read of Hooker's "peppery" temper, we do not read either that he is "honourable to the back-bone"; and while we do not read of Huxley's aggressiveness, we do not read either that he "never writes and never says anything flat" (see Barlow, ed. 1958.105-06).

This is not to say the "Autobiography" as it appears in *The Life and Letters* is entirely devoid of "human interest". FitzRoy's "most unfortunate" temper is described, albeit that the description is edited severely (compare *LL*1.59-61 with Barlow, ed. 1958.72-76). We are also told of Robert Brown's "scientific penuriousness or jealousy" (*LL*1.73-74), and of how Carlyle "went on too long on the same subject" and "sneered at almost every one" (*LL*1.77). Carlyle seems not to have been liked by a section of the Darwin family, and Francis omitted nothing from his father's cutting impressions of the great historian.

Simpson points out that it is pleasant to note "there is no hitherto suppressed criticism of many others whom Darwin might well have resented, notably Louis Agassiz, one of Darwin's bitterest scientific opponents, and Wallace, who unwittingly came so near to depriving Darwin of well-deserved priority for the theory of natural selection." (1958.118) Agassiz is mentioned only once, and then in a technical, not a personal, context; while Wallace is described as "generous and noble" (*LL*1.69,85 / Barlow, ed. 1958.84,121). Were we without the restored edition of the "Autobiography", it would be less easy to credit Darwin with mildness towards Agassiz and Wallace.

If Darwin was not willing to snipe at Agassiz, others were willing to do so on Darwin's behalf. The *Quarterly* reviewer felt that:

> [Darwin] did not recognize the help he received from the writings of the late Professor Louis Agassiz, and especially the effect of the essay contributed a few years before [the appearance of *The Origin of Species*] by that highly-esteemed naturalist to Nott and Gliddon's "Types of Mankind." [...] almost wherever it was read [Agassiz's essay] excited a feeling of despairing astonishment that one who had so often shown such remarkably philosophical characteristics could have carried his views upon "Centres of Creation" to the very pitch of absurdity; and

> his readers, recoiling from the results of his ratiocination, were ready to adopt almost any adverse doctrine that was taught to them.
>
> (*The Quarterly Review* 1888.26-27)

Still, the policy of omitting Darwin's more trenchant remarks about fellow scientists fulfilled its purposes to the extent that T.G. Bonney could declare in *Nature* that:

> Unruffled by carping criticism and virulent abuse, in silent dignity Charles Darwin laboured on, in the quiet consciousness of strength and the conviction that truth would at last prevail. No one can read the life of Darwin without feeling as if some healthful air from a better world had braced his moral fibre and nerved him for more earnest and unselfish work.
>
> (Bonney 1888.75)

Modern scholars have shown that Darwin was in fact ruffled by criticism and abuse. Even so, Bonney's feeling that *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* carries "some healthful air from a better world" is valid, particularly in our own highly critical and abusive age.

Concluding remarks

The "history of biography", as it is contained in the available book-length studies, tends to dismiss the greater body of Victorian biography. To some extent, this dismissal seems unfair: a hangover from the early-twentieth-century backlash against Victorianism, and from the notion that Boswell "retarded" the art of biography by offering a model that was too good to be followed competently. On the other hand, one may argue plausibly that many Victorian biographies are of poor quality — over-deferential, ill-structured and boring.

The image of Darwin constructed by *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* conforms, for the most part, to the tastes and ideals of his contemporaries. This is the book's greatest weakness, yet also its greatest strength. In conforming to Victorian

ideals, it conceals Darwin's moments of ignobility. Yet it bears the stamp of his own era as no later biography can. Moreover, it treats him as a warmly alive person — a father, husband, friend — rather than as a mere passepartout to the labyrinths of controversy that surround his theory. If it is not always as factual as we might desire it to be — if it omits Darwin's unkind remarks about other scientists, or plays down the strength of his ambitions — it is at least "true" in a certain moral sense: loyal, affectionate, humane.

Unfortunately, but not entirely unforgiveably, the psychological questions that modern readers choose to ask about Darwin were not predicted by himself or his son. One can only suggest that the failure of *The Life and Letters* to plumb Darwin's innermost depths ought not to blind us to its virtues.

Given that the work provokes a wealth of ideas about Darwin and his milieu, one wonders what might be revealed if one were to probe other supposedly obsolete Victorian biographies, treating each with a good measure of respect instead of skimming all and compounding the skimmings into a survey. Might not Victorian biography present to the critic a world brimming with colour, rather than the dull landscape sketched by Strachey and Nicolson?[35] I reconsider this question in my appended chapter on the 1894 *Life of Richard Owen*.

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[35] For essays that focus sympathetically and profitably on individual Victorian biographies, see Cockshut 1974.87-207; Ditchfield 1993; and Ricks 1996.114-205

CHAPTER FOUR: BIOGRAPHY BETWEEN THE WARS AND *CHARLES DARWIN: THE FRAGMENTARY MAN* BY GEOFFREY WEST (1937)[1]

Lytton Strachey and the decline of the Victorian mode of biography

According to most historians of biography, life-and-letters biographies were superseded after the First World War by works that were shorter, more experimental, and in many cases more cynical. Of these, Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is the most prominent example. Strachey is often regarded as "the father of modern biography", and it is worth asking how — or, in what senses — this accolade might be true.

The following comments represent a fairly standard critical view of Strachey's influence on biography.

> From 1918 [the year of publication of *Eminent Victorians*] until his death in 1932 [Strachey] was without question the most influential biographer in the world. [...] his technique was widely imitated, and most of the popular biographers of his era acknowledged his influence on their work.
>
> (Garraty 1957.108)

> If Boswell's is the name always to be reckoned with by nineteenth century critics, Strachey's is the one which dominates the first half of the twentieth. [...] His *Eminent Victorians* in 1918 came as a shock and a tremendous impetus. In

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1 "Geoffrey West" is the pseudonym of Geoffrey Harry Wells. Wells wrote pseudonymously to avoid being confused with the famous science-fiction writer H.G. Wells.

E.B. Poulton writes in Nature that, "The most unfortunate feature of the book is the word 'fragmentary', given prominence in the title but only explained at the end, [...] Nothing in truth could be more unlike the Darwin of whom we know so much and feel that we love," (1938.807). Perhaps in deference to criticisms such as this, the American edition (Yale University Press, 1938) is titled *Charles Darwin: A portrait*.

> the tide of disillusionment of the 1920s, with a spirit of irreverence and idol-breaking in the air, Strachey provided an irresistible model.
>
> (Clifford 1962.xv)

> In this twilight of the Victorian gods, both the spirit and the technical brilliance of Strachey's performance aroused almost hysterical enthusiasm among the emancipated. [...]
>
> [...] Every biographer since 1918, from the producer of weighty "definitive" lives to the confector of romantic trifles, has necessarily written in the shadow of Strachey.
>
> [...] Strachey demolished the old notion that a biographer should be no more than an assembler of facts [...] he turned the biographer back into an artist.
>
> (Altick 1969.281-85)

Eminent Victorians was unquestionably a major event in British publishing. However, Strachey's long-term importance has been exaggerated. Victorian-type biographies, in both life-and-letters and pocket formats, were written and published well into the 1930s. In the field of political biography, where Strachey's cynicism would ideally have had its strongest effect, one finds a host of classically "Victorian" works that post-date *Eminent Victorians*. A brief sample of these works reveals: a two-volume *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith* by J.A. Spender and Cyril Asquith (1932), which ran to at least four impressions; a *Life of Joseph Chamberlain* in three heavy volumes by J.L. Garvin (1932); a two-volume *Arthur James Balfour* "by his niece" Blanche E.C. Dugdale (1936); and a two-volume *Life and Letters of The Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain* by Charles Petrie (1939), in which "Sir Austen has been allowed so far as possible to speak for himself." (v)

Strachey did not, moreover, single-handedly "introduce", or re-introduce, literary art into English biography. His comment, in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, that "we [the English] have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition; we have

had no Fontenelles and Condorcets, with their incomparable *éloges*,[2] compressing into a few shining pages the manifold existences of men" (22) is incorrect: English historians and essayists (Carlyle, Macaulay, Bagehot, Whibley and Trevelyan, among others) had also shown that one could capture lives in neat, distinctive prose. And a number of critics had already attacked the aesthetic weaknesses of the life-and-letters mode. Indeed, in Strachey's preface to *Eminent Victorians* — his supreme manifesto against Victorian biography — he seems to borrow directly from an article written by Edmund Gosse in 1901. It was Gosse, not Strachey, who first described the weighty commemorative biography as a morbid accessory to the funeral rites (see Novarr 1986.15).

Nor did Strachey introduce the investigative ethos that characterises much modern biography. He "exposed" the hypocrisies he perceived in his subjects, yet these exposures were not based on radically new information. All his sources were already in print.

Nor, again, was Strachey the prime introducer of European psychoanalytical ideas into English biography. As Robert Skidelsky has pointed out, "Strachey's methods were, in fact, amazingly pre-Freudian. His *Eminent Victorians* were certainly driven by demons, but sexual repression is barely hinted at, and he has no model of the economy of the psyche, with its balances of drives and sublimations." (1988.7) Michael Holroyd, who has made an astonishingly detailed study of Strachey's life, confirms that "None of Strachey's character sketches in *Eminent Victorians* were influenced in the slightest by Freud, nor was the portrait of Queen Victoria [published in 1921]." Only later, in the less successful *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), did Strachey draw deliberately on Freudian ideas (see Holroyd 1968.2.585-87).

Because Strachey distorts, and even invents, certain details of his subjects' lives, he is portrayed usually as a writer for whom truth is secondary to elegant contrivance. In Skidelsky's view, however, Strachey has a "truth-telling programme". This programme relies on the biographer's independence from the world he is describing. Strachey the aesthete, pacifist, man of letters, is independent from the world of politics and action inhabited by his eminent Victorians. His judgements about, say, Cardinal Manning, come from a perspective that is more detached, and perhaps more objective,

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[2] The *éloges* of Fontenelle and Condorcet describe members of the French Academy of Sciences, so one is not entirely surprised to learn that Strachey contemplated writing lives of scientists, including a life of Darwin (see Holroyd 1968.2.438). How convenient for this study, had he actually written it! Unfortunately, the project never materialised.

than the perspective of a specialist in the history of ecclesiastical politics (who, presumably, is already caught up in that political world, and to some extent endorses its values).

Most modern biographies, suggests Skidelsky, are written by specialists or insiders, not by morally-detached observers. Hence, "Although Strachey is much honoured as the father of modern biography, little... of the Stracheyan biographical programme has survived. What chiefly distinguishes the contemporary from the Victorian biography (apart from its greater professionalism) is its greater degree of explicitness about private life and its greater psychological penetration; neither of which... were important aspects of Strachey's original programme." (Skidelsky 1988.9)

A sensible alternative to presenting Strachey as "the introducer" of artistry, satire, psychoanalysis, and so on, into English biography, is to see his work as being particularly symptomatic of a new experimentalism in, not only biography, but all the arts. In this light, Strachey is a "father of modern biography" in much the same way that James Joyce is a "father of the modern novel". Joyce's *Ulysses* has not become a blueprint or "programme" followed by the majority of twentieth-century novelists: *Ulysses* is important, rather, because it extends the boundaries of the novel — helps writers to realise the plasticity of the form. The same is true for *Eminent Victorians*, and for the biographical works and theories of Strachey's fellow, Bloomsbury-linked experimentalists (of whom the most notable, in this context, appear to be Virginia Woolf, Harold Nicolson and André Maurois).

Still, one must be careful to distinguish between the history *of a genre* and the history of criticism and theory of that genre. Biographers do not automatically follow the recommendations of theorists of biography; indeed, biographers do not always follow their *own* theories of biography. The respective biographical manifestos of Strachey, Woolf *et al* — their ideas about what biography ought and ought not to be — are in parts fascinating, and certainly affected the way some other biographers wrote. So, these ideas have been given great prominence by many commentaries on the history of biography. However, they were not central to bringing about biography as we know it today. The ineffectiveness in the long term of, say, Strachey's call for brevity in biography, is evidenced by the numerous thousand-page biographies (including Holroyd's double-volumed study of Strachey himself) published in our own era. Similarly, Woolf's suggestion that biographers ought not to mix fact and invention too freely (1927.127-28) has not prevented a proliferation of "intuitive" methods for arriving

at otherwise unlocatable "truths".[3]

The causes of the decline of the Victorian mode of biography can of course be traced beyond Strachey and his fellow experimentalists. Victorian biography was moulded by the requirements of Victorian society, and, as the mould disintegrated, so did the biographical mode. The transformation of British values from "Victorian" to "modern" is too complex and contentious a subject to be contained accurately within a brief summary. However, it is safe to say that many people, after witnessing mass slaughter in the First World War, became disgusted with the old order, and unconcerned about upsetting its social and literary conventions. To the socially-minded critic, the bungling politicians and generals of 1914 are "fathers of modern English biography" in a more profound sense than that which attaches to Strachey. (The War seems, indeed, to hold a powerful explanation for the popularity of *Eminent Victorians*: the book appeared to mock the kind of mindset that had sent men to die in the trenches.)

Another major factor in the decline of deferential biography may have been the growth of mass-communications industries, and of gossip-hungry journalism whetted by competition within and between those industries.

> Following up his assumption that the things people talked about were news, and that they talked most about personages and personalities, [Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Daily Mail* till his death in 1922] advised: 'Get more names in the paper — the more aristocratic the better, if there is a news story round them.' [...]
>
> Even members of the aristocracy were induced to become gossip-writers and boldy sign their names instead of using pseudonyms. [...] Towards the end of the Twenties *The Times*, which employed no [gossip] columnist, sponsored an agitation against the practice of columnism; letters appeared signed by 'London Hostess', deploring this 'new and dangerous tendency in social life', and condemning the 'sneak-guest' as an unprincipled cad. But the columnist could not be suppressed. He was the most feared and courted member of Society and

[3] See for instance the "true conversation between imagined selves" — an imaginary literary seminar between Chatterton, Eliot, Wilde and Dickens — in Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1990.450-55). See also Schabert 1990.48-65

> was welcomed by head-waiters, masters of ceremonies, seaside mayors, golf-club secretaries and the like as if he were visiting royalty.
>
> (Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in *The Long Weekend: A social history of Great Britain 1918-1939* (1940.60-63))

A society that is being bombarded with information about the private lives of public figures is likely to be cynical about public figures in general. I am not suggesting that Victorian newspapers were uniformly optimistic about public figures; I am suggesting that the volume and intensity of criticism increased considerably in the early twentieth century.

One must consider too the expansion of book markets in the wake of movements towards democratising education. "Sensational" fiction of the kind produced by Edgar Wallace, Elinor Glyn and Edgar Rice Burroughs became extremely popular. Novelists found it profitable to appeal to the demand for light or leavened reading, and so did biographers. This trend is evidenced in many biographies written in the 1920s and '30s, and by no means all of these biographies are poor in quality or exploitative. For instance, Seton Dearden's well-researched study of Richard Burton (the Victorian orientalist and explorer, as opposed to the 1960s film star) is entitled *The Arabian Knight*, and includes passages worthy of Wallace himself.

> [Burton] lay thus for awhile [*sic*] with his eyes on the sky now darkening over India. Brooding, he let his mind run down over the crowded past. The lines of the mouth hardened and that sullen glare of the opaque eyes which spoke of the independent spirit within showed for a moment in the yellow, haggard face as he contemplated once more the events of his last few months of misery. Then the fires died, the face seemed to shrink again into sickness. A few stars sprang out; the air freshened, and then night closed down on the water, and with it the fever swept round him again like a blanket of fire.
>
> (Dearden 1936.14)

This particular illness struck Burton in 1849. Dearden was not, of course, standing beside Burton's bed. Rather, Dearden's broader knowledge of Burton and of the effects

of fever has given him a basis for describing Burton's state *as if* he had actually witnessed it, and been privy to Burton's thoughts.

Geoffrey West's *Charles Darwin*, which was published at much the same time, also offers some intuitively-derived material:

> Lamplight fell softly over walls and furniture, rapt in a spell of music's loveliness. The candles in the piano sconces threw their kindly luminance over Emma's mature comeliness. No word would be spoken, only the notes sounding as her capable fingers moved deliberately upon the keys. [Charles] liked Handel, but he liked Beethoven too — the struggle of great forces, the bugle cry of the indomitable spirit of man defying the universe of pain and death and night. Out of the battle, out of the chaos, an order, a harmony.
>
> (*CDFM*.205-06)[4]

We have no evidence that the music of Beethoven aroused these thoughts or feelings in Darwin. The passage is pure surmise. Here, and in other such passages, West's prose exudes an uncharacteristic "purpleness": he seems to be bowing, enthusiastically but not entirely comfortably, to a notion of what is fashionable in biography.

Post-Victorian biography, like so many other aspects of post-Victorian culture, reflects the influence of thinkers like Darwin, Marx and Freud (the reader will perhaps suggest others), each of whom has provided a new set of ideas for explaining why humans behave as they do. Both Darwinism and Marxism suggest that the human condition is a product of vast, impersonal forces. Thus they diminish the notion — a notion implicit in many Victorian biographies — that our world is shaped by the deeds of heroes; and diminish too our capacities for unabashed hero-worship. However, none of the histories of biography cited in this thesis considers closely the effects of Darwinism or of Marxism on biography. Historians of biography have tended to focus on Freud, perhaps because of the obviousness of a corpus of overtly Freudian biographies (a corpus which begins in 1910 with a study of Leonardo da Vinci by Freud

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[4] *CDFM* is my abbreviation for *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* by Geoffrey West (1937).

himself), and perhaps because the rise of psychology to medical and academic respectability has seen a corresponding rise in attempts by biographers to analyse their subjects' innermost drives. Yet one need not attribute the psychological explicitness of modern biographies entirely to Freud and other psychoanalysts. R.A. Gekoski, in his monograph "Freud and English literature 1900-30", points out that to speak as if Freud were the central influence on modern literature is to oversimplify a complex cultural phenomenom.

> It is one of the characteristics of what we may call modernism that it combines an acute interest in the nature of introspection with the apprehension that such an interest requires new forms to accommodate it. [...] And though connections can be made between Freudian theory and, say, *Sons and Lovers* or *Ulysses*, in neither case would it be accurate to regard the work as "Freudian"; it is enough to say that both — and the same is true of "The Waste Land", Pound's *Cantos*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, and a host of others — are moving, as Freud was moving, towards greater creative understanding of the nature of the unconscious.
>
> Let us accept, then, that "influence" — especially when we are dealing with complex ideas and complex minds — is by no means an unambiguous process, [...]
>
> (Gekoski 1980.206)

In other words, Freud's work, like Strachey's, was at least as much a symptom as it was a cause of broader emotional and intellectual currents.

Ruth Hoberman, in her *Modernizing Lives* (1987), describes the emergence between 1918 and 1939 of a "modernist" approach to biography. She sees Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Geoffrey Scott, A.J.A. Symons, and E.M. Forster, among others, as practitioners of this approach. What differentiates them from previous biographers, Hoberman argues convincingly, is that they set out to "answer the question, 'How would it feel to be X? rather than What did X do?'" (200). One of the most remarkable instances of this privileging of feeling occurs in Strachey's treatment of the death of Queen Victoria:

> She herself, as she lay blind and silent, seemed to those who watched her to be divested of all thinking — to have glided already, unawares, into oblivion. Yet, perhaps, in the secret chambers of consciousness, she had her thoughts, too. Perhaps her fading mind called up once more the shadows of the past to float before it, and retraced, for the last time, the vanished visions of that long history — passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories — to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of primroses for Lord Beaconsfield — to Lord Palmerston's queer clothes and high demeanour, and Albert's face under the green lamp, and Albert's first stag at Balmoral, and Albert in his blue and silver uniform, and the Baron coming in through the doorway, and Lord M. dreaming at Windsor with the rooks cawing in the elm-trees, and the Archbishop of Canterbury on his knees in the dawn, [...] and a great old repeater-watch of her father's in its tortoise-shell case, and a yellow rug, and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and the grass at Kensington.
>
> (Strachey 1921.269)

This scene has achieved a certain notoriety among historians of biography, for it is plainly and utterly fictitious. Yet, in its context, it succeeds. Throughout *Queen Victoria*, Strachey focusses more on Victoria's thoughts and feelings than on her actions. His stream-of-consciousness novelisation of her death is by no means out of keeping with the rest of his narrative.

Geoffrey West was a literary critic, and may have taken a conscientious interest in innovations in biography. In describing Darwin's death, he seems to be trying to outdo Strachey.

> Life, that had seemed endless, was over, no more than a brief flicker of bright memories before the darkness. Wheels white foaming water. His sisters in their gay dresses laughing in the sunshine before the tide came in. Maer on summer evenings, windows softly aglow, Charlotte singing in the stillness, the moon rising yellow over lake and garden. Crisp early mornings on the moor. Fishing boats along the Forth. The quiet beauty of Cambridge in spring. The high cool peak of Teneriffe, seen with the eye of fancy, then in fact. Blue waters of the

> South Atlantic. The sting of the salt spray, the crying gulls. Vista upon vista — the bay at Rio, the dark Horn, the incredible Andes. The whole world a memory now, yet in its beauty, its power, its glory a sustaining magic. The brightness blurred, like the snowflakes beating soundless upon the windows of Macaw cottage. A child crawled crowing across the carpet — William was it, Leonard, Horace... Bernard? The Down years had passed like a dream, [...]
>
> (*CDFM*.306-07)

West continues in this vein for several more lines. The description fails, not only because it is over-written, but also because it jars against the more sober, fact-filled prose which provides the main body of the work.

West experiments also with sudden bursts of italics:

> *Wedgewoods in Staffordshire again, Darwins at Shrewsbury — the scene was setting for the appearance of the hero!*
>
> (*CDFM*.34)

Presumably this device is supposed to revitalise the reader's interest; but one critic at least was annoyed by West's application of it to FitzRoy: "*A bathroom, a razor, a cut throat before breakfast.*" (*CDFM*.110) E.B. Poulton, in his review in *Nature*, expresses his hope that "the words in which FitzRoy's suicide is described on p.110 will be modified." (1938.808)

Efforts by biographers to inject a novelistic "readability" into their works (or, if we take a more generous view, to reach the innermost feelings of their subjects) may have contributed to a perceived "biography boom" in the 1920s and '30s. This "boom" is espoused by a number of historians of biography. Garraty, for instance, states that,

> Statistics bear out [several commentators' impressions that public interest was shifting towards biography]. In America alone about 4800 biographies were published between 1916 and 1930. And this rate was rapidly accelerating: in 1929, 667 new ones appeared, more than twice the annual average for the period. In 1932 the figure reached 699. Best-seller lists reinforce this evidence.

> According to one student of trends, J.C. Long, non-fiction had seldom reached the kinds of sales figures achieved by popular novels before World War I. In the 'twenties, led by Papini's *Life of Christ*, Strachey's *Queen Victoria*, André Maurois's lives of Shelley and Disraeli, and Emil Ludwig's *Napoleon*, biographies crowded the best-seller ratings, and many lives sold upwards of 50,000 copies.
>
> (Garraty 1957.110 — see also Kendall 1965.115 and Altick 1969.292)

However, one is inclined to wonder just how meaningful such figures really are. Were more biographies sold because biography had become more entertaining? Or had the reading public simply become larger, and books cheaper? The post-War period witnessed a tremendous increase in the production of *most forms* of reading matter. Perhaps in the 1920s and '30s public interest did in some sense shift towards biography; on the other hand, one could as readily contend that it shifted towards, say, detective fiction in the style of Agatha Christie.

Darwin and early psychopathology

Biography as it was written in the 1920s and '30s is often portrayed as being somewhat crackpot: an open field for over-enthusiastic "debunking" and crude psychoanalysis. In 1918, Darwin was subjected to analysis by Dr. Edward J. Kempf, an American clinical psychiatrist. Kempf took most of his data from Francis Darwin's *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, but discussed Charles Darwin in a way that would have been foreign, and even repellent, to Francis. Kempf's approach and style are epitomised in the following quotation from his paper "Charles Darwin: The affective sources of his inspiration and anxiety neurosis":

> It is of great value to know how [Darwin] succeeded in refining the autoerotic cravings inherently active in every individual, and in sublimating the father's repressive influence, thereby making it possible for the affective cravings to create a long series of original researches into the mechanisms of nature. It is quite probable that no individual can be capable of consistent original thinking

> who has not succeeded in freeing himself from the parent's resistant domination. As to how much Darwin's sexual life played a part in his scientific curiosity may be estimated from the fact that he has laid great emphasis upon the mechanism of *sexual selection* [...]
>
> (Kempf 1918.209)

Kempf goes on to provide a number of gems of psychoanalytical ingenuity. For instance, when the twenty-two year old Darwin, in a letter to his sister Susan, asks her to "Tell Edward my gun is dirty", Kempf assumes Darwin is referring subconsciously to "an autoerotic difficulty" (see Kempf 1918.224-25).

Darwin was extremely keen on bird-shooting and would have been anxious to ensure that his shotgun was in good order. Moreover, throughout the letter, Darwin is concerned with his needs for the forthcoming *Beagle* expedition: he also asks Susan to "Tell Edward to send me up in my carpet bag [...] my slippers, a pair of lightish walking shoes, my Spanish books, my new microscope [...]" and other such items (*LL*1.206). He stresses that the *Beagle*'s captain, Robert FitzRoy, "is all for economy, excepting on one point — viz., fire-arms. He recommends me strongly to get a case of pistols like his, which cost £60!! and never to go on shore anywhere without loaded ones" (*LL*1.206-07). Darwin, then, was thinking about the efficiency of his armoury in a very literal way. Kempf's zealously Freudian, phallic interpretation of his phrase "my gun is dirty" is mistaken — so badly mistaken that it reads like a caricature of Freudianism; yet Kempf is writing in absolute earnest.

Geoffrey West's portrayal of Darwin is far more sober than Kempf's. West does not attempt to make sexual revelations;[5] and argues on the grounds of common sense against Kempf's "psychopathology" of Darwin (for instance, West rightly points out that there is no strong evidence to support Kempf's suggestion that there was a sexual tension between Darwin and FitzRoy — see *CDFM*.107n2). Indeed, West appears at times to be an opponent of sensationalism: he even states in his preface that he "cannot believe that any secrets remain to be revealed. The Darwin the world [already] knows is the whole Darwin." (*CDFM*.xii) Here West appears to forfeit any claim to radically

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[5] Except the following: West notes that at Darwin's school, Shrewsbury Grammar, boys sometimes had to sleep two to a bed, and assumes from this that "Charles did not pass through his boarding-school days wholly unaware of 'wickedness'," (*CD*.50)

new knowledge about Darwin, be it knowledge derived from new material evidence or knowledge derived through new psychoanalytical techniques.

However, West is still seduced by the new-found authority of psychology. His use of the term "fragmentary" reveals his assimilation of the psychoanalytical view that the so-called "individual" is in fact a battleground of divisive impulses. Moreover, he goes on to apply to his "fragmentary" Darwin the concept of "the paranoiac thinker", as described in Ernst Kretschmer's *The Psychology of Men of Genius*. According to Kretschmer:

> Men of strong reasoning powers, who are nevertheless possessed of a fixed idea, are characterised so far as they are abnormal, by the term paranoiac. The paranoiac thinker is usually a man of tenacious and deep emotionality who, through some acute experience, is forced into a definite line of thought. He then pursues the line of thought relentlessly and with the greatest consistency, so that his spiritual life becomes more and more tyrannically and one-sidedly controlled by it.
>
> (Kretschmer 1931.138)

West quotes directly from this passage, claiming that it is "by no means wholly inapplicable" to Darwin (see *CDFM*.325-26). However, Kretschmer himself does not once mention Darwin. He refers in detail to Robert Mayer, a discoverer of the law of the conservation of energy. Mayer suffered from "violent attacks of madness", and was confined at intervals to a sanatorium for the mentally disturbed (see Kretschmer 1931.140-47). If "paranoic thinker" is an appropriate term for Mayer, it is less so for Darwin, who was thoroughly sane. In any case, West's application of the term to Darwin is unfounded. As I explained in my discussion of Darwin's "Autobiography", we have excellent evidence that Darwin's pursuit of scientific knowledge did *not* make him "one-sided", or humourless, or immune to humanity and the arts.

My further criticisms of West's "fragmenting" of Darwin will emerge as this chapter progresses.

A closer examination of *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man*

Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man is constructed along lines common to many twentieth-century biographies. West has examined a wide variety of sources, selected the information he believes is important and synthesised it mostly in his own words. He does not reproduce whole documents, and, although he quotes his sources often, he keeps the quotations brief. Hence a typical passage reads:

> Nearing Valparaiso again [Charles Darwin] began to feel unwell and reached Corfield's house only with difficulty on September 27th. He was several weeks in bed. His illness has never been defined; [Dr Robert Darwin, Charles's father], when the symptoms were described to him, could make nothing of them. Charles in later years was inclined to attribute all his subsequent bad health to it (not always: his view wavered), but then and there he only recorded: "It was a grievous loss of time, as I had hoped to have collected many animals."
>
> (*CDFM*.127)

This passage synthesises a number of sources. The quotation, "It was a grievous loss...", has been taken from Darwin's diary (see Barlow, ed. 1934.249) and is specific to September 27th, 1834; whereas Dr Robert Darwin's bafflement and Charles's "wavering views" belong to much later dates.

The synthesis of two or more sources was not, of course, beyond the grasp of Victorian writers. However, Victorian biographies appear to stand at extremes: they are either bulky compilations of letters, diary entries and so on (minimally synthesised), or pocket-sized exercises in précis (maximally synthesised).[6] Biographies like West's *Charles Darwin* seem to represent the triumph of the median.

The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin offers us a number of writers' perspectives on Darwin (albeit that each perspective is controlled ultimately by the

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[6] For a sample of "maximal synthesis" in Victorian biography, see Grant Allen's pocket *Darwin* (1885). Allen is able, in a single sentence, to dispose of a number of substantial aspects of Darwin's life: "Early to bed and early to rise, wandering unseen among the lanes and paths, or riding slowly on his favourite black cob, the great naturalist passed forty years happily and usefully at Down, where all the village knew and loved him." (65)

editor, Francis Darwin). West's *Charles Darwin* offers only the perspective of West himself, and a single birth-till-death narrative about Darwin. Whereas the variegated structure of *The Life and Letters* seems to suggest "here is a selection of impressions of Darwin — make of them what you will", West's structure cannot help but imply that Darwin's life is best defined as a fixed progression of significant events. The nature and the accuracy of this implied progression are the subject of my next few paragraphs.

No finite description can reconstruct all the countless actions, thoughts, emotions and sensations of a flesh-and-blood person. Nor do we demand any biography to achieve so absolute a reconstruction. Rather, we — and I believe I speak for most critical readers — accept the limitations of language, and attempt to evaluate accuracy in biography by applying common sense and humane judgement.

This is not to say that our criticisms must needs be entirely subjective. The accuracy of a biography can be evaluated at a number of different levels. At the simplest level, we can isolate and cross-check brief, basic statements of fact. "Charles Darwin was born in 1809," is an example of such a statement. Its accuracy can be cross-checked in a straightforward way, by examining parish records, family letters and suchlike. If a biography contains many errors in its basic statements of fact, there is nothing subjective about calling it inaccurate.

The accuracy of the narrative structures in a biography is far more difficult to establish. One is no longer dealing only with facts, but also with matters of interpretation and nuance. Take even this simple chronicle about Charles Darwin:

1809 Birth of Darwin

1831 Darwin sails from England aboard HMS *Beagle*

1859 Darwin's *On The Origin Of Species* is published

1882 Death of Darwin

There are four basic statements of fact here, and each in itself is correct. But the accuracy of the chronicle as a whole can still be questioned. The chronicle seems, for instance, to imply that the *Beagle* voyage and the publication of the *Origin* were the two central events of Darwin's life. Other chroniclers might disagree: they might be more

inclined to emphasise, say, Darwin's domestic world; in which case they might put Darwin's marriage, or the death of his favourite child Annie, at the centre of the chronicle. An accurate portrayal of a person is more than a sum of accurate parts, as this second chronicle illustrates still more firmly:

1809 Birth of Darwin

1831 Darwin sails from England aboard HMS *Beagle*

1839 Darwin hires a butler

1859 Darwin's *On The Origin Of Species* is published

1882 Death of Darwin

Darwin really did hire a butler in 1839; even so, the statement makes the chronicle ludicrous. A reader who knew little about Darwin would suppose that he was above all a snob — that hiring a butler was the central event of his life. In this there would be no truth whatsoever.

The superstructure of Geoffrey West's *H.G. Wells* (1930) implies that Wells's life was a sequence of fairly compartmentalised phases: the reader will proceed from "Book One: The Man in the Making, 1866-1895" to "Book Two: The Novelist, 1895-1914" to "Book Three: The Prophet of World Organization, 1914-1930". Each "Book" is subdivided into chapters with titles like "The Boy", "The Student", "The Scientific Romancer", "The Fabian", "The Patriot", and so on. This superstructure seems over-artificial: surely nobody's life, let alone H.G. Wells's, can have unfolded quite so neatly. West's *Charles Darwin* is structured similarly, but with less compartmentalisation of the protagonist's various "parts". "Book One: Family Overture" discusses Darwin's ancestry; "Book Two: The Making of the Man", his youth and his part in the *Beagle* expedition; "Book Three: The Man Making", his emergence as a leading naturalist.

Many commentators portray Darwin's life as a series of dramatic "turning points". (A "turning point", for our purposes, is a moment or period in which one comes to a vital realisation, or is offered an important opportunity.) This kind of portrayal is most evident in compact, chronologically-straightforward narratives such as

West's. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, with its direct reproduction of sources and its non-chronological arrangement, gives more weight to the undramatic, everyday elements in Darwin's life.

Different biographers may emphasise different turning points: for instance, while some earlier commentaries portray the *Beagle* expedition as the cause of Darwin's transformation from an "idle sporting man" into a committed scientist, later studies tend to assert that the transformation occurred during his time as a university student (see Thomson and Rachootin's 1982 monograph, "Turning points in Darwin's life").

West's selection of turning points relies in many instances on Darwin's "Autobiography". In 1831, in the period between his final examinations at Cambridge and his embarkation aboard the *Beagle*, Darwin undertook a geological tour of North Wales with Professor Adam Sedgwick. Darwin states in his "Autobiography" that, on the eve of the tour, he mentioned to Sedgwick that he had encountered evidence of a large tropical shell in a gravel-pit near Shrewsbury.

> [Sedgwick] at once said (no doubt truly) that it must have been thrown away by some one into the pit; but then added, if really embedded there it would be the greatest misfortune to geology, as it would overthrow all that we know about the superficial deposits of the Midland Counties. These gravel-beds belong in fact to the glacial period, and in after years I found in them broken arctic shells. But I was then utterly astonished at Sedgwick not being delighted at so wonderful a fact as a tropical shell being found near the surface in the middle of England. Nothing before had ever made me realise, though I had read various scientific books, that science consists in grouping facts so that general laws or conclusions may be drawn from them.
>
> (*LL*1.57)

This, according to West:

> [...] was a distinctive turning-point in Charles's mental development [...] It was a decisive moment, for instantaneously all Charles's earlier attitudes to science were stood upon their heads. [...] Hitherto he had been a collector only; now, on this August evening, Charles Darwin the scientist was truly born. (*CDFM*.79-80)

One might argue that, given Darwin's tendencies to exaggerate his own naïveté, the moment was probably not as decisive as either he or West makes it appear. Even so, West's treatment of the anecdote makes the distinction between Darwin-the-schoolboyish-collector and Darwin-the-scientist lucidly and entertainingly.

If Darwin had not accompanied the *Beagle*, would he still have contributed significantly to the development of Western thought? Historiographically, this question is about as valid as the question "What if Hitler had won the War?": it may generate some interesting opinions, but cannot be answered conclusively. Darwin himself does not ask it explicitly. However, he does state in his "Autobiography" that:

> The voyage of the *Beagle* has been by far the most important event in my life, and has determined my whole career; [...] I have always felt that I owe to the voyage the first real training or education of my mind; I was led to attend closely to several branches of natural history, and thus my powers of observation were improved, though they were always fairly developed.
>
> (*LL*1.61-62)

West takes this assertion somewhat farther:

> Had [Darwin] not sailed on the *Beagle*, he might have gone on sleeping — finished his theological studies and entered the Church. He would doubtless have continued his entomology, perhaps even have been drawn into definitely scientific study. But never in his "quiet parsonage" could he have had thrust on his virgin mind as in South America those vast and varied masses of material whose impact *forced* him, as he said, into comparison and generalization and ever more venturesome hypothesis... [...]
>
> (*CDFM*.327)

A similar view, based on a far more complete reading of Darwin's papers, is expressed by Janet Browne. Browne suggests that Darwin's cousin and close friend, William Fox:

> in effect, became the man that Darwin never was, for if Darwin, instead of

> seizing the chance of joining the *Beagle* expedition, had stuck to his father's new plan of entering the church, he would have become just like his cousin, both in his future responsibilities as a country-loving gentleman-parson and in the same open-hearted, inquiring personality that found fulfilment in hosts of children, relatives, and animals, keeping abreast with scientific journals, making a few experiments in the garden and poultry yard, and reminiscing about gallops through the Cambridgeshire countryside. [...] When we look at Fox, it is possible to see what Darwin could have been, what he at first intended for himself. The mirror image never fully faded.
>
> (Browne 1995.96)

The spectre of an alternative, cud-chewing "Parson Darwin" is amusing and, in itself, harmless. Unfortunately, West uses it as if it were hard evidence: he contributes it towards his argument that Darwin's intellect was really rather mediocre (see *CDFM*.326-29).

There is a revealing difference between West's interpretation of the *Beagle* opportunity and Browne's. In describing the circumstances that led to Darwin joining the expedition (circumstances such as FitzRoy's request for a naturalist-companion; the passing-on of this request by other naturalists; Dr Robert Darwin's objections and the placatory efforts of "Uncle Jos" Wedgewood), West writes:

> Extraordinarily tenuous are the threads drawing a man to his destiny! Beyond question the voyage of the *Beagle* was the making of the Charles Darwin the world was to know, and yet link after link of the chain of connecting events held so barely that the wonder is it did not break, one might say, almost before it came into being.
>
> (*CDFM*.87)

Although Browne does not deny Darwin's personal good fortune, she stresses that his opportunity to join the *Beagle* "was the result of a complex social procedure, far more intricately laced than a mere happy chain of coincidences. [...] The invitation, in truth, was a dramatic manifestation of the Cambridge intellectual network in action." (Browne

1995.149) Where Browne sees a substantial degree of inevitability, West sees mostly luck — and his view of Darwin as "lucky" will, as we shall see, skew his assessment of Darwin's achievement.

Darwin's "Autobiography" suggests two likely turning points in his struggles with his "species problem": his reading in 1838 of Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*,[7] and the "eureka moment"[8] in which he realises that the characteristics of a species may diverge as groups from that species colonise diverse habitats. West paraphrases the "Autobiography" faithfully — perhaps too faithfully, for the "Autobiography" does not clarify the relevant ideas, and neither does West. Although no biography of Darwin should be expected to substitute for *On The Origin Of Species*, West's failure to explain Darwin's ideas weakens nevertheless his eventual attack on "Darwinism": does West understand what he is attacking? — the critical reader will be inclined to ask.

In other instances, West's depictions of turning points in Darwin's life are more entirely West's own. After noting the importance to Darwin of the conception that related species could have branched from a single ancestral form, West adds that:

> The moment of [Darwin's] first complete realization we do not know — whether it came to him suddenly in a flash of insight subsequently verified, or he to it slowly through weeks and months of growing perception. But there must either way have been times when he saw clearly and trembled at what he saw, not in fear but in exultation, the exultation of the moment — perhaps the highest known to human experience — when chaos falls into order, and opposed patterns into a single harmonious scheme [...]
>
> (*CDFM*,156)

West incorporates into this part of his discussion a long quotation from the *Memoirs* of Kropotkin, and concludes by italicising Kropotkin's words: *"He who has once in his life experienced this joy of scientific creation will never forget it; he will be longing to*

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[7] Darwin read the sixth edition of Malthus's *Essay*. The first edition had been published anonymously in 1798.

[8] "I can remember the very spot in the road, whilst in my carriage, when to my joy the solution occured to me;" writes Darwin in his "Autobiography" (*LL*.I.84).

renew it." (see *CDFM*.157) Perhaps this is true in itself, and perhaps it explains admirably what compelled Darwin to keep working; however, West's discussion remains a piece of speculation. Darwin *might* have experienced a sublime "joy of scientific creation" around 1836 — but in none of West's sources for this period does Darwin himself rhapsodise to the extent that Kropotkin does. West has to some extent put Kropotkin's rhetoric into Darwin's mouth; and though this biographical ventriloquism may at first seem obvious, Kropotkin's rhetoric is so appealing that the reader is easily inveigled.

West speculates similarly about the effect on Darwin of the death of his father, Dr Robert Darwin:

> [Dr Darwin's death] may, in some degree, have acted as a release for Charles. The memory and influence of parental dominance do not easily die while the parent still lives, and, more than that, the passing of the older generation has its own psychological effect. Now one inherits the earth. No longer that elder rank stands between oneself and death, to take, as it were, responsibility for life. Now oneself must be responsible, give of one's best, admitting no longer any other holding the right to say one nay. The lapping shadow has engulfed all who went before. One's own turn comes next, whether it be near or far. One must act, for better or worse, now or never...
>
> (*CDFM*.201)

As with West's quoting of Kropotkin, rhetoric here overwhelms factuality. Beneath West's quasi-biblical cadences lies a simplistic deductive argument: men generally feel this way when their fathers die, therefore Charles Darwin felt this way when his father died. For the purposes of serious biography, this is about as useful as saying: people generally enjoy doughnuts, therefore Charles Darwin would have enjoyed doughnuts. The reader seeks an understanding of Darwin in particular, not platitudes about people in general. A sense of release *might* have been part of whatever complex of emotions Charles Darwin experienced on his father's death, but there is no hard evidence for it. We know only that his responses indicated deep and wholehearted grief (see for instance Bowlby 1990.282-84).

The book reviews of the 1930s, like the standard biographies of the 1930s, seem

generally to be briefer and more pointed than their Victorian counterparts. The reviewers of Geoffrey West's *Charles Darwin*, unlike many of the reviewers of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, do not devote page after page to their personal musings on Darwin's life, and in most cases concentrate firmly on the book at hand.[9] Still, one may detect a faintly Victorian condescension to the biographer in some of the reviews. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, tells us that "it is extremely interesting to see how an intelligent writer of a fairly young generation [Geoffrey West, in other words] reacts, upon a close acquaintance, to Darwin's personality and teaching." (1937)

Opinions of West's book ranged from the adulatory to the excoriating:

> Darwin the man, his family and friends, the trivial contingencies that shaped his life, the Victorian world and its beliefs, and finally the far-reaching consequences of his work, constitute a vast complex which assumes the proportions of a single "event" in time and space. The technique by which Geoffrey West in the book under review has reconstructed this event and imparted to it a sense of unity and immediacy is worthy of unrestrained praise. The writing is of such uniformly high quality that it repeatedly arouses enthusiasm. The reader forgets that the biographer stands between him and the past.
>
> (Homer W. Smith in the New York *Saturday Review of Literature* 1938.12)

> This is the life of a Victorian scientist written with a dislike of Victorians and without any understanding of the man's theory or scientific method. It is written in a fuzzy manner with an emphasis on everything unimportant in Darwin's life and almost everything unimportant in the lives of his uncles, cousins, aunts, and grandfathers. [...] Its function is to bore the reader into a condition in which he will accept a picture of Darwin as a typical self-satisfied middle-class Victorian and his theory as a rationalisation of the commercial ethics of his time.
>
> (Anthony West in *The New Statesman and Nation* 1937.1028)

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[9] The emergence in the early twentieth-century of university courses in contemporary literature probably played a part in sharpening reviewing styles.

Such differences of opinion are hardly surprising, for *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* is itself a fragmentary book — or rather, suffers from a split personality. In the first 300 or so pages of the book, West presents Darwin sympathetically. In the last 17 pages, he tries to reverse this sympathy. He is opposed to Darwin's theory, he tells us, because:

> Now, nearly eighty years [after the publication of *On The Origin Of Species*], every newspaper, any morning or evening, will cry out from its headlines what degree of brutality and degradation has come upon the world like a shadowing cloud. It is the type-activity of our civilization to prepare frantically in every continent and every country for the supreme brutality of modern war.
>
> [...] our Napoleons, from Bernhardi to Mussolini, [...] justify themselves by Darwinian appeals and in Darwinian terms. The cook's [that is, Darwin's] intentions may have been of the highest, but the proof of the pudding, for those who must perforce sit at the supper-table, is in the eating.
>
> (*CDFM*.317-18)

Sadly, in the political climate of the late 1930s,[10] many readers must have assumed that West's association of Darwin's theory with militarism was neatly relevant. Sadly, too, West attempts to link Darwin's character to what he perceives to be the evils of Darwinism.

Let us consider this aspect of the work more closely.

Darwinism and Armageddon

Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man opens with a 30-page discussion of the life of Erasmus Darwin. This discussion is so detailed that one may wonder whether one has mistaken the book's title — is one perhaps reading a life of *Erasmus* Darwin? And, indeed, West seems more drawn to Erasmus, the amorous versifier and eclectic inventor ("He devised [...] a talking machine which said 'mamma' and the like" — *CDFM*.14),

[10] *The New Statesman and Nation* review quoted above mentions, slightingly, "the B.U.F.". Readers in 1937 would have been more familiar than we are with the meaning of those initials: British Union of Fascists.

than ever he is to the more stolid Charles.

West begins by stating that:

> CHARLES DARWIN began to be born almost exactly one hundred years before the publication of *The Origin of Species*. The occasion was strictly masculine, the meeting, as doctor and patient, of Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgewood, who were to be, though neither would live to know it, Charles Darwin's grandfathers.
>
> (*CDFM*.3)

West does not explain quite what he means by "began to be born". Later, the reader will discover that Erasmus Darwin's son Robert married Josiah Wedgewood's daughter Susannah, and that Robert and Susannah begot Charles. More importantly, though, West will argue that *On The Origin Of Species* was the penultimate fruit of a world-view established by Erasmus and Josiah. Erasmus was a proto-evolutionist; Josiah, the founder of the Wedgewood chinaware firm, was an industrialist *par excellence*. When West says, "Charles Darwin began to be born almost exactly one hundred years before the publication of *The Origin of Species*", he is not referring only to Darwin's physical birth. He is also suggesting that Charles Darwin's *theory* "began to born" almost a century before it was published.

> [Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgewood] were [...] beings of the same — a new — kind, forward-looking men who sensed, if they did not consciously know, the changes which were to come upon the world. [Erasmus] Darwin in his theorizing, Wedgewood not a little in practice, were among the pioneers of that industrial process of which this eighteenth century saw the effective beginning, the nineteenth the maturity, the twentieth the culmination and crisis.
>
> (*CDFM*.3)

West is writing in or shortly before 1937. The crisis to which he refers is the impending Second World War. In his final chapter, he will argue that a major cause of this crisis is the symbiotic relationship between Darwinism and aggressive capitalism:

> In the machine age [Darwin] established a mechanical conception of organic life. He paralleled the human [industrial] struggle with a natural struggle. In an acquisitive hereditary society he stated acquisition and inheritance as the primary means of survival. [...]
>
> [...] he lived mentally entirely with [his times]. His whole life in fact was really extraordinarily limited. [...] Darwin grew up essentially accepting. He had as boy and young man [*sic*] little initiative or ability to grasp principles [...] Simply, he had no intellectual avidity.
>
> (*CDFM*.326-27)

West continues in this vein, and at last reveals the significance of his book's subtitle, "The fragmentary man":

> Werner Sombart has written of "the fragmentary man" who is the type of the capitalist executive, seeing all in acquisitive terms, subordinating the whole to the part, making the quantitative aspect his total consideration till "all else within him dries up" and "everything about him becomes a wilderness, all life dies, all values disappear." The resemblance of this fragmentary man to Darwin is evident. The business man lives for the acquisition of wealth; the Darwinian scientist for the acquisition of knowledge — each irrespective of human consequence. The scientist may be thought the better man. Nevertheless he in this case produced the perfect philosophy for the business man, and both are alike in recognizing, in the last resort, material survival as the only ultimately effective value.
>
> The fragmentary man can only manifest a fragmentary truth. Darwin was incomplete, and Darwinism accordingly inadequate as a philosophy by which men may live.
>
> (*CDFM*.329)

There are at least two serious mistakes in this attack. Firstly, as I attempted to show in the previous chapter, the notions that Darwin was a dull child and an idle youth, and that he later dehumanised himself by focussing too intently on his science, are based on

misreadings of his "Autobiography". In fact, he always had a lively mind, and was one of the most intellectually-rounded scientists of his time. Secondly, West misrepresents the nature of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. The theory, as it stands in *On The Origin Of Species*, is simply an explanation of the diversity of life-forms. It is certainly not presented as a social programme, a system of ethics or a substitute for religion.

The misrepresentation was pointed out by a number of reviewers. George Gray, for one, was to state in *The Yale Review* that, "it seems infantile to blame a scientific generalization for the misuse that prejudiced partisans mak[e] it" (1938.813). Another defence of Darwin came from *The Catholic World*, which in reviewing West's *Charles Darwin* reminded its readers to distinguish between the organic and the immortal. "Evolution", concludes the review, "is not at variance with the Christian theory of life. The Catholic Church condemns [the situation] when its monastic followers falsely maintain that [evolution] excludes the idea of a God Creator, and the idea of an immortal soul by Him created." (1938.502) Meanwhile, *The Christian Century* drew attention to the predicament in which West had placed himself:

> Judging from their reviews in other periodicals, the scientists do not like this biography. [...] Charles Darwin, Mr. West maintains, is the forefather of Adolf Hitler, and of all the rest of the booted and spurred seekers after power who are driving humanity toward the abyss. [...] Because Mr. West is writing with such an evangelical purpose, and so will draw such heavy fire from scientific quarters, it is to be feared that his book may not be sufficiently recognized for the fine piece of biographical writing which it is. Aside from its thesis as to the moral responsibility of Darwinism for the present state of society — and that is largely compressed into the final chapter — what we have here is a picture of the great scientist's life which makes him out an infinitely attractive person.
>
> (Paul Hutchinson in *The Christian Century* 1938)

(Hutchinson's fears of "heavy fire from scientific quarters" were in some instances needless. *Nature* and *Science* disagreed with West's conclusion that Darwin was a

"fragmentary man", but affirmed that the biography was useful and stimulating.)[11]

According to West, "Popular Darwinism may be a crude but it is scarcely an unfair or inaccurate presentation of the broad effect of Darwin's basic writings" (CD.319).[12] By "popular Darwinism" West means "social Darwinism": the credo that Darwin's ideas can be applied, actively, to the benefit of human society, or to the furtherance of economic and political aims. West has, I suspect, failed to make the basic distinction between stipulative theories and descriptive theories. Stipulative theories try to explain how things ought to be; descriptive theories try to explain how things are. Darwin's books offer descriptive, not stipulative, theories and observations. One must stress again that Darwin's theory as it stands in that most "basic" and popular of all his "writings", *On The Origin Of Species*, is not a stipulative social programme, but a descriptive explanation of the diversity of life-forms.

Whether Darwin himself was a "social Darwinist" has been much debated. Richard Weikart's monograph, "A Recently Discovered Darwin Letter on Social Darwinism", reproduces a hitherto unknown letter from Darwin to Heinrich Fick, "a law professor at the University of Zurich who believed that Darwin's theory could be fruitfully applied to legislation." (Weikart 1995.610) In the letter, Darwin brings to Fick's attention:

> [...] the rule insisted on by all our Trades-Unions, that all workmen, — the good and bad, the strong and weak, — sh[oul]d all work for the same number of hours and receive the same wages. The unions are also opposed to piece-work, — in short to all competition. I fear that Cooperative Societies, which many look at as the main hope for the future, likewise exclude competition. This seems to me a great evil for the future progress of mankind.
>
> (Darwin, C. 1872, as reproduced in Weikart 1995.611)

Weikart concludes that "Darwin's response to Fick demonstrates conclusively that

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[11] For the review in *Nature* refer to Poulton 1938; for that in *Science* to Cockerell 1939.

[12] This statement is tautological: "popular Darwinism" *is* "the broad effect of Darwin's basic writings"; so West is saying merely that "popular Darwinism is scarcely an unfair or inaccurate presentation of popular Darwinism". A more meaningful statement would be: "popular Darwinism is scarcely an unfair or inaccurate reflection of Darwin's basic writings" — and this, indeed, is the substance of West's argument.

Darwin was not averse to making social and economic applications of his theory. He clearly linked economic success with selective fitness and thought his theory supported individualist economic competition." (611)

Geoffrey West, working in the 1930s, would not have known about Darwin's letter to Fick. He would however have had access to other evidence that Darwin was a "social Darwinist". In a letter to the Irish philosopher William Graham, Darwin reminds Graham of:

> [...] what risk the nations of Europe ran, not so many centuries ago, of being overwhelmed by the Turks, and how ridiculous such an idea now is! The more civilised so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world.
>
> (Darwin, C. 1881, as reproduced in *LL*1.315-17)

Whether West has this particular passage in mind when he accuses Darwin of abetting Mussolini, one cannot be sure. The passage does appear in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, which is West's main source-work.

We should however distinguish between non-aversion and active promulgation. Darwin may not have been averse to aspects of social Darwinism, but neither did he promulgate any form of it. Unlike Marx, he did not write pamphlets recommending political action on his theory. Nor did he attempt to lobby influential acquaintances into such action. His letters to Fick and to Graham do not, for his part, represent a campaign. Rather, they reveal his tendency to engage enthusiastically with other people's interests. In both letters he is responding to, rather than initiating, a stance on social Darwinism.

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution credited to Erasmus Darwin

West also incorporates into his argument the charge that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was merely an extension of the work of Erasmus Darwin:

> [Charles] brought back [from the *Beagle* voyage] ideas, curiosities, living in his mind, but they had been there in essence before he went away. Evolution by transmutation of species, variation, the struggle for existence, sexual selection, survival of the fitter, the benefits of cross-fertilization, the oneness of organic life and man's relation to the monkey — Erasmus had declared them all.
>
> (*CDFM*.328)

This ties in neatly with West's initial intense focus on Erasmus Darwin, and with West's assertion that Charles was "limited", but misses the essential difference between Charles's *On The Origin Of Species* and Erasmus's "evolutionary" works, *Zoonomia* (1794-96) and a series of long, heavily annotated poems, *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) and *The Temple of Nature* (1803). Charles addresses his hypotheses through counter-hypotheses, active data-gathering and experiments; and every detail contributes towards a single, overarching argument. Erasmus, on the other hand, offers a pot-pourri of speculations, many of which are fantastical. For instance, he describes the upas tree (a Javanese tree with poisonous sap) as:

> [...] the Hydra-Tree of death.
> Lo; from one root, the envenom'd soil below,
> A thousand vegetative serpents grow;
> In shining rays the scaly monster spreads
> O'er ten square leagues his far-diverging heads;
> [...]
> Steep'd in fell poison, as his sharp teeth part,
> A thousand tongues in quick vibration dart;
> Snatch the proud Eagle towering o'er the heath,
> Or pounce the Lion, as he stalks beneath;
>
> (from Canto IV of *The Loves of the Plants*)[13]

[13] I am indebted to Henshaw Ward for this example. See Ward 1927.413-24 for a reasonably comprehensive collection of proto-evolutionary passages from the works of Erasmus Darwin.

If we are to take all of Erasmus's pronouncements seriously, and are then to credit him with the Darwinian theory of evolution, we might just as well credit the science of anaesthetics to the brothers Grimm and "Snow White". To speculate about the mutability of species is one thing; to explain it convincingly is another; and therein lies the difference between Erasmus and Charles Darwin.

Concluding remarks

Geoffrey West's conclusion that Darwin was "limited" and "fragmentary" reflects a last-minute attempt to make Darwin relevant to the political crises of the late 1930s. The rest of West's book generally portrays Darwin as humane, open and keenly intelligent. Indeed, West cannot help but portray Darwin thus, for Darwin's humaneness, openness and intelligence are in evidence throughout West's primary sources of information.

West's *Charles Darwin* stands as a landmark among Darwin biographies, because it provided a prominent modern alternative to *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. It offered a single authorial perspective — West's — and a tight synthesis of sources, as opposed to multiple authorial perspectives and a wholesale reproduction of sources. In size and informativeness, also, it was typical of ambitious mid-twentieth-century biographies: weightier than a mere pocket life; but not overloaded, as life-and-letters biographies now appeared to be.

This modernness was recognised by some of the work's reviewers. If I may repeat Homer W. Smith's assessment:

> Darwin the man, his family and friends, the trivial contingencies that shaped his life, the Victorian world and its beliefs, and finally the far-reaching consequences of his work, constitute a vast complex which assumes the proportions of a single "event" in time and space. The technique by which Geoffrey West in the book under review has reconstructed this event and imparted to it a sense of unity and immediacy is worthy of unrestrained praise.
>
> (Homer W. Smith in the New York *Saturday Review of Literature* 1938.12)

The telling phrase is "a sense of unity": the single authorial perspective of modern

biography unifies the "event" of the subject's life to an extent that the multiple authorial perspectives of Victorian biography do not (though whether our lives are in fact unified events is an open question — as I think Smith recognises when he places inverted commas around "event").

E.B. Poulton, in his review in *Nature*, refutes West's "fragmentary man" thesis, but concedes that West "has done valuable work which will bring comfort to many readers by giving them in a book of moderate size so complete an account of the life of Charles Darwin" (Poulton 1938.808). Poulton obviously recognised that *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, which was still the central source of information about Darwin's life, was too long for modern tastes.

Often the works of Lytton Strachey have been portrayed as the central influence on modern biography. West himself, in his "stream-of-consciousness" portrayal of Darwin's death, seems to borrow directly from Strachey's *Queen Victoria*. However, histories of biography have tended to exaggerate Strachey's importance. Modern biography was not formed by any one biographer so much as it was formed by broad political, social and intellectual developments: iconoclasm after the First World War, the growth of markets for light reading and gossip, and the rise of psychology; to name a few. West's *Charles Darwin* is not so much "Stracheyan" as it is, simply, a product of West's own times.

CHAPTER FIVE: *DARWIN AND THE BEAGLE* BY ALAN MOOREHEAD (1969)

Introductory notes:— background information on the *Beagle* voyage — the problem of how to evaluate *Darwin and the Beagle* fairly

In December 1831, at the age of twenty-two, Charles Darwin sailed from Plymouth aboard HMS *Beagle*. He and the *Beagle* returned to England almost five years afterwards, having encircled the world via South America, Australasia and South Africa. The voyage has often been regarded as the keystone of Darwin's life, thought and eventual fame. However, it is only in hindsight that Darwin stands at the centre of the *Beagle* expedition. The expedition's primary purpose was not the advancement of "natural philosophy", but the charting of areas of the South American coastline for British naval and commercial intelligence. Darwin held no official position on the *Beagle*; he was the civilian guest of her captain, Robert FitzRoy. FitzRoy knew that the social isolation imposed by his rank could become dangerously stressful,[1] and had requested that a *gentleman*-naturalist — someone of similar intellectual and social standing, with whom he could converse at ease — be found to accompany him.

Darwin and the Beagle by Alan Moorehead[2] (1969) deals only briefly with Darwin's life before and after the voyage; the book is biographical but not *a biography*. Nor does it fit into any other obvious genre. It can be read as an introduction to the young Darwin or simply as an adventure story.[3] It also offers an armchair tour through

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[1] FitzRoy had been a lieutenant aboard the *Beagle* on her previous attempt to survey the South American coast, so he had witnessed directly the effects of depression on her previous captain — who shot himself while they were in the Straits of Magellan. Also, FitzRoy feared that he himself had a hereditary disposition to suicide: in 1822 his uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, the Home Secretary, had taken his own life by slitting his throat. (FitzRoy was to use exactly the same method of suicide in 1865, when he was overwhelmed by frustration and disappointment.)

[2] Though Alan Moorehead alone is credited on the title-page of *Darwin and the Beagle*, he was, around the time of publication, unable physically to write or dictate. The book was completed by his wife Lucy and in fact represents a "collaboration" with her. (Pocock 1990.284 and *DB*.8)

[3] Because *Darwin and the Beagle* is fairly brief, and because the story it tells is streamlined at the expense of scholarly digression and debate, I am tempted to link it to the "Stracheyan revolution" in biography. However, given the gap of almost fifty years between the "Stracheyan revolution" and the publication of *Darwin and the Beagle*, any such link would be tenuous at best.

Moorehead had at some stage read and admired Strachey: his *Montgomery: A biography* (1946) opens (continued...)

the "local colour" and fauna of nineteenth-century South America and the Pacific. One reviewer describes the work as "what used to be called historical geography" (*The Economist* 1969).

Darwin and the Beagle is perhaps easier to categorise if we consider it as a publisher's product, for it provides a good example of a production style often used for historical and biographical works. This style, which seems to have had its heyday in the 1960s and '70s, is characterised by illustrations sourced from the art and artefacts of the relevant period.[4] Often these illustrations are so lavish that they are liable to overwhelm the text. However, *Darwin and the Beagle* met no such objection: reviewers praised its illustrations unreservedly and found much to admire in its text. It became the London *Sunday Times*'s "Critics' Choice of the Year".

Admittedly, no matter how many times I page through *Darwin and the Beagle*, I am still struck by the beauty and variety of its illustrations. Moreover, most of these illustrations are roughly contemporaneous with the events described (that is, date back to the early or mid nineteenth century) and a number are by the *Beagle*'s own artists.[5] Hence the reader has a sense of seeing scenes and incidents through nineteenth-century English eyes. *Darwin and the Beagle* "was developed from an original film treatment"

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[3](...continued)
with a quotation from Strachey's much-cited preface to *Eminent Victorians*.

> To preserve a becoming brevity — that, surely, is the first duty of the biographer. The second, no less surely, is to maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case as he understands them.
>
> (Moorehead 1946.6 — originally in Strachey 1918.22)

However, *Montgomery* does not somehow link *Darwin and the Beagle* to the "Stracheyan revolution", for *Montgomery* (which is a work of original, investigative scholarship) does not fit the irreverent Stracheyan mould at all, and is also very different from *Darwin and the Beagle*.

[4] Similarly-produced books on Darwin include Julian Huxley and H.B.D. Kettlewell's *Charles Darwin and his World* (1965) and John Chancellor's *Charles Darwin* (1973). Douglas Botting's *Humboldt and the Cosmos* (1973), another treatment of a great naturalist's life and travels, could have rolled off the same production line as *Darwin and the Beagle*. So too could Elspeth Huxley's *Livingstone and his African Journeys* (1974).

Clearly, the publishers in question did not supply glossy illustrations only to compensate for obscure authorship. Alan Moorehead, Julian Huxley, and Elspeth Huxley (author of *The Flame Trees of Thika*), were widely known, or even famous.

[5] The artist Augustus Earle was engaged by FitzRoy to accompany the *Beagle*. Earle was replaced in the later stages of the voyage by Conrad Martens. Sketches by FitzRoy, First Lieutenant John Wickham and Midshipman Phillip King are also included.

(*DB*.8)[6], and though the film was never made, the illustrations give the book something of the quality of a vivid cine-documentary.

Yet, if we consider *Darwin and the Beagle* in cinematic terms, it emerges more as an epic docu-*drama* than as a serious documentary. The authenticity of the illustrations is not paralleled by the accuracy of the text; there are serious incompatibilities between the compelling story Moorehead tells and some of the facts about Darwin's *Beagle* experience. (I will consider the factual errors in *Darwin and the Beagle* later, for to rush immediately into a litany of them might obscure a more objective view of the work.)

In Chapters One and Two, I argued that to evaluate a book fairly one must consider its original purposes and its intended readership. The immediate difficulty in evaluating *Darwin and the Beagle* fairly is that the book appears to be rather undirected. An anonymous review in the *Times Literary Supplement* captures this difficulty well:

> Everyone must be familiar with the brilliant writings of Mr. Alan Moorehead on the prowess of the Eighth Army in the Second World War, its commander, Africa, the Pacific, and other subjects; but here he is on new ground. Has he trodden it for the student? Hardly, for the price, while moderate for such a very beautifully produced book, is likely to be beyond his [the student's] purse. Has he written it for the biologist and historian of science? This requires careful consideration, for such readers have become hard to satisfy.
>
> (*Times Literary Supplement* 1969)

We could say *Darwin and the Beagle* is meant to grace coffee-tables, and leave it at that; yet one does not wish to dismiss a writer of Moorehead's stature so lightly. The *TLS*'s reviewer goes on to argue that, if *Darwin and the Beagle* is indeed intended for "critical readers", it fails — fails because it does not contribute to solving the "live problem" of how Darwin's mind developed during the years of the voyage. This argument is correct; as will be seen, *Darwin and the Beagle* does nothing to solve this problem and much to misinform us.

However, we have another option to consider: perhaps *Darwin and the Beagle* is

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[6] *DB* is my abbreviation of *Darwin and the Beagle* by Alan Moorehead (1969).

not intended for "critical readers". Perhaps Moorehead's purpose here is more to entertain us than to advance our knowledge. In which case, if one is to evaluate the work fairly, one will pay more attention to its entertaining, dramatic aspects than to its scholarship.

Still, while it is not necessarily fair to demand from *Darwin and the Beagle* a contribution to Darwin scholarship, the book does purport to be factual: its accuracy — its respect for accepted knowledge, for the work of serious Darwin-scholars — should be a major consideration.

My critical strategy, then, will be two-pronged: I will consider both how *Darwin and the Beagle* functions as an entertaining drama and how accurate it is.

To clarify the dramatic narrative — the story *as it is within Moorehead's text* — I will for the moment put aside factual considerations and examine *Darwin and the Beagle* as if it were a work of fiction. Here I am taking up and adapting an approach to biography suggested by William Dowling (1978). Dowling shows that we can enrich our understanding of a biography by reading it "with a controlling awareness of its self-contained nature as a work *of* art" and applying to it critical techniques that might normally be considered more appropriate for "imaginative literature". He shows too that reading a biography as we would an "imaginative" work does not prohibit us from recognising simultaneously that the biography is "a repository of facts".

Darwin and the Beagle as a dramatic narrative

The dramatic narrative in *Darwin and the Beagle* follows that tragic pattern in which two exceptional men are at first friends but with seeming inevitability become opponents. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* provides, in the figures of Caesar and Brutus, a good example of the pattern; further examples can be found in narrative media ranging from ancient myth to recent film.

Among the first illustrations in *Darwin and the Beagle* are four juxtaposed portraits of Darwin and FitzRoy; the two men are compared in quarter-page monochrome and then in full-page colour (*DB*.21,23,24). This direct visual comparison of their features and demeanours complements the text perfectly.

> [Darwin] was in fact remarkably fortunate. In the first place it was most

> unlikely that he and FitzRoy should have got on as well as they did; indeed, it would be hard to imagine two characters in England who by nature and training were more opposed. At almost every point they were in conflict. Whereas the Darwins were upper-class Whigs and Liberals, the FitzRoys were most decidedly aristocrats and Tories. Charles Darwin was the son of a country doctor — a very successful one, it must be said [...] The FitzRoys were descended from the illicit liaison between Charles II and Barbara Villiers, the Duchess of Cleveland, and Robert FitzRoy himself, the son of Lord Charles FitzRoy, was a grandson of the Duke of Grafton and a nephew of Castlereagh.
>
> (*DB*.20)[7]

FitzRoy, with his "proud and authoritarian" head and "disdainful" expression, at first takes a dislike to Darwin, "particularly [to] his nose; it was not the nose of a man who could endure the rigours of a journey around the world." Though Darwin's enthusiasm soon wins FitzRoy over, the question "Was he tough enough? [...] Would he crack up when they got to sea?" remains. Darwin senses FitzRoy's doubts and decides to "show this splendid man just what he could do. He would not let him down." (*DB*.20-22)

Darwin proves to be very tough indeed. Despite terrible bouts of sea-sickness, not to mention home-sickness, he sees the voyage through to its end. *En route*, while the *Beagle* surveys the Argentine coast, he rides with an escort of gauchos from El

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[7] Moorehead often uses a dual-biographical approach, and likes to compare characters explicitly. For example, *A Late Education* (1970) is in equal parts his autobiography and a memoir of his friendship with Alexander Clifford, and offers passages such as:

> Alex and I [...] were the most complete of opposites. If you found an epithet for Alex then its antithesis almost certainly applied to me. I was short, he was large. He was shy, precise and disillusioned. I was aggressive, erratic and full of enthusiasms.
>
> (Moorehead, 1970.40)

One of the most striking sections in Moorehead's much-acclaimed *The White Nile* (1960) contrasts the explorers Richard Burton and John Speke. Burton is dark and unorthodox, Speke fair and respectable; that Burton "should have adopted as his close companion a man who was so completely an opposite as John Hanning Speke is, surely, as ironic a phenomenom as anything Cervantes contrived with his Don Quixote and Sancho Panza." (34-35)

More of the same is apparent in other books by Moorehead. In *Cooper's Creek* (1963) William Wills finds himself following Robert Burke, "a leader who was in every possible way his opposite" (34), into the Australian desert. The appendix to *The Fatal Impact* (1966) opens with direct comparisons, first of Captain James Cook with Captain Louis Bougainville, then of Cook with the naturalist Joseph Banks. In *Montgomery* (1946), Montgomery is compared in some detail with Gordon of Khartoum (59), Stonewall Jackson (86,109-11), Eisenhower (211-12), Gandhi (238) and of course Rommel (155).

Carmen to Buenos Aires: the journey is some 600 miles through territory made dangerous by a war of extermination against "wild Indians".

On another overland excursion, when FitzRoy and others collapse from exhaustion, Darwin goes ahead in search of water.

Yet, in another sense, Darwin does let FitzRoy down — betrays him cruelly, even. (I refer to the Darwin and FitzRoy of Moorehead's text; not to the actual men.)

> The voyage, [FitzRoy] believed, would provide a grand opportunity to substantiate the Bible, especially the book of Genesis. As a naturalist, Darwin might easily find many evidences of the Flood and the first appearance of all created things upon the earth. He could perform a valuable service by interpreting his scientific discoveries in the light of the Bible. Darwin, the young clergyman-to-be, was very ready to agree. He too, did not in the least doubt the literal truth of every word in Bible at this time — it was part of the world he accepted and liked so well — and if he could be of use in this way, well then, that made the prospect of the voyage all the more exciting. Of course, other influences [including proto-evolutionary works] had already been at work upon him [...]
>
> (*DB*.37)

Hence the stage is set for a battle, not merely between two intellects, but between two great intellectual forces, scientific inquiry and religious dogma; for Darwin will go on to do the very opposite of substantiating the Bible (suggests *Darwin and the Beagle*, which portrays the Bible only as an instrument of narrow fundamentalism). FitzRoy has sown the seed of the destruction of his own world-view, and for this reason and others which I will come to, *Darwin and the Beagle* might appropriately be subtitled "The Tragedy of Robert FitzRoy".

As the voyage takes its course, Darwin begins to question, not the truth of the Bible, at first, but FitzRoy's fundamentalist interpretation of it. After discovering the fossilised remains of giant, long-extinct mammals, Darwin begins to suspect that "the present inhabitants of the world were very different to those that God had originally created; indeed, there could even be some doubt whether the Creation could have taken place within a single week; creation was a continuous process and it had been going on

for a long time." (*DB*.83)

> [...] it must have been about this time that he first began to argue with FitzRoy about the authenticity of the story of the Flood. How had such enormous creatures got aboard the Ark? FitzRoy had an answer. Not *all* the animals had managed to get aboard the Ark, he explained; for some divine reason these had been left outside and drowned. But, Darwin protested, *were* they drowned? There was much evidence — the seashells, for example — to prove that the coast here had risen above the sea [...] The land had *not* risen, FitzRoy contended; it was the sea that had risen and the bones of these drowned animals were additional proof of the Flood.
>
> (*DB*.86)

FitzRoy is a perfectionist, and finds himself strained by the failure of his attempt to establish an Anglican mission on Tierra del Fuego and by the difficulty of charting the stormy Patagonian coast. "One begins to notice a hardening, an increasing tension in FitzRoy's nature [...]" (*DB*.105)

FitzRoy buys, with his own money, an extra ship to help the *Beagle* complete the survey. He assumes that the Admiralty will refund him later. Then a letter arrives from London conveying the Admiralty's refusal to take on the expense of the extra ship:

> To any normal commander this would have been a severe rebuke; to FitzRoy it was an outrageous and unforgivable blow at his pride [...] He had been brooding on the many things that had gone wrong with the voyage [...] Probably his arguments with Darwin had also upset him, and now this last blow was too much. The over-rigid self-control collapsed, hatred and rage took over, and he allowed his mind to go plummeting downwards into complete despair. No doubt he thought of Captain Stokes, the previous captain of the *Beagle*, who had committed suicide in 1828, probably in the same cabin in which FitzRoy now passed so much of his time. He was going insane, he declared, there was nothing to be done; madness was in the family, his uncle Castlereagh had committed suicide and he was going the same way. He must resign [...]
> (*DB*.157)

Here we see the second edge to "the tragedy of FitzRoy": not only is his companionship with Darwin furthering the destruction of his world-view, but, like a classical tragic hero, he is weakened by his best qualities — his sense of duty, his perfectionism — and so made prey to his worst — "those manic-depressive tendencies that were to end in his suicide" (*DB*.21).

FitzRoy is persuaded to resume command, and gradually regains his better self. Darwin, meanwhile, continues to geologise, to collect all manner of specimens and to ponder the "larger question that was persistently at the back of his mind: the plants and living creatures of the earth. Where had they come from? How had different species been created?" (*DB*.185)

When the *Beagle* reaches the Galapagos islands, Darwin experiences his epiphany:

> The fame of the islands was founded upon one thing; they were infinitely strange, unlike any other islands in the world [...] For the *Beagle* this was just another port of call in a very long voyage, but for Darwin it was much more than that, for it was here, in the most unexpected way — just as a man might have a sudden inspiration while he is travelling in a car or a train — that he began to form a coherent view of the evolution of life on this planet.
>
> (*DB*.187)

The diversity of related species on the Galapagos astonishes Darwin, and he realises that he is "on the edge of a remarkable and disturbing discovery" (*DB*.202). (I must stress again that I refer only to the Darwin of Moorehead's text; not to the actual man. I shall argue later that Moorehead's interpretation of Darwin's experience on the Galapagos is inaccurate.)

The *Beagle* is now "a happy ship [...] homeward bound." (*DB*.211) She sails on to Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia... back to Bahia via Cape Town, and finally, home. Moorehead deals only briefly with this "homeward bound" phase of the voyage, and raises no further arguments between Darwin and FitzRoy.

Twenty-five years after the culmination of the voyage, Darwin and FitzRoy meet again in "bitter" circumstances (*DB*.208). The two men have drifted apart entirely, and Darwin has published *On the Origin of Species*:

> [...] man, far from being made in God's image, may have begun as something much more primitive. The story of Adam and Eve, in brief, was a myth.
>
> This was intolerable. People were furious at the idea that they might share a common lineage with animals [...]
>
> [...] By 1860, when Darwin's book had run through three editions, the clergy were thoroughly aroused, and they chose to come out and do battle at that famous meeting of the British Association which was held at Oxford in June that year, the meeting which was to bring together the great exponents of science and religion to debate the theory of the origin of species.
>
> (*DB*.262)

Darwin is ill and cannot attend the meeting, but he has "two ardent champions in T.H. Huxley and the botanist Hooker." On the clergy's side are Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, whose glibness has earned him the nickname "Soapy Sam", and the anatomist Richard Owen, a "rabid anti-Darwinist". By a coincidence, FitzRoy is at the meeting. He is there to read a paper on *British Storms*.

The meeting is a bizarre affair, painfully dull until:

> [...] a man with an odd accent began making diagrams on the blackboard. "Let this point A be the man", he declared, and "let that point B be the mawnkey". This was too much for the bored undergraduates [...] "Mawnkey, Mawnkey", they roared, and refused to allow the speaker to continue.
>
> (*DB*.263)

Wilberforce then enters and creates "something of a stir with his priestly clothes and his air of confident episcopal authority." He ridicules Darwin's theory and asks Huxley whether it is through his grandmother or grandfather that he claims to be descended from the apes. Huxley replies "that he would certainly prefer to be descended from an ape rather than from a cultivated man who prostituted the gifts of culture and eloquence to the service of prejudice and falsehood." (*DB*.263)

> One did not lightly insult the clergy in the 1860s. Uproar ensued [... Lady

Brewster] collapsed from shock and had to be carried out.

And now something intensely interesting intervened. Amid the hubbub a slight grey-haired man got to his feet. His thin aristocratic face was clouded with rage, and he waved a Bible aloft like an avenging prophet. Here was the truth, he cried, here and nowhere else. Long ago he had warned Darwin about his dangerous thoughts. Had he but known then that he was carrying in his ship such a... He was shouted down and the rest of his words were lost.

There were those in the audience who recognised Vice-Admiral FitzRoy, and it must have been a disturbing thing to hear him so passionately denouncing his old shipmate [...]

[...] Stage by stage as they had travelled around the world young Darwin had pitted his notions against the blank wall of FitzRoy's uncompromising faith — it had been like battering down the Church itself — and by that very opposition had been encouraged to persist in his enquiries, to embark on that other long, hard, speculative journey of the mind.

Now, thirty years later, it must have been a bitter experience for FitzRoy to stand up in this noisy crowded room and hear Darwin's name acclaimed. It was turning white into black. How had it happened? How had these satanic thoughts prevailed? Hurt, bewildered and furious, [FitzRoy] went out, and it was less than five years later that in a spasm of annihilating and righteous despair he committed suicide.

(*DB*.266)

Darwin, meanwhile, lives for another twenty-two years, and his reputation as a superb scientist grows steadily. He remains productive to the very end, and though "during his lifetime he received no official honour from the State [...] The Church was strong enough to see to that", he is buried in Westminster Abbey. (*DB*.270)

On one level, then, *Darwin and the Beagle* is a vivid human drama. Had the envisaged film been made, "Mutiny on the *Beagle*" would not have been an inappropriate title for it: see how Darwin tugs against the leash of FitzRoy's fundamentalism! — behold how FitzRoy thumps his bible! Certainly, in Darwin's refutation of "Genesis" — in his

reversal of the intellectual role FitzRoy has planned for him — the story possesses an ironic twist worthy of any storyteller's envy; and in the self-doomed FitzRoy we find a classically tragic co-protagonist.

This is not purely my own reading of *Darwin and the Beagle*; Moorehead's attention to "character, drama, and irony" is highlighted by a number of reviewers:

> Mr. Moorehead, who has the literary artist's eye for character, drama, and irony, does not overlook the fact that the captain of the ship, a devout fundamentalist in theology, looked upon Darwin's assignment as a splendid opportunity to confirm the Old Testament account of the earth's creation.
>
> (Carson 1970.112)

> Moorehead's book offers a contrast between two powerful personalities: young Darwin and the ship's commander, Captain Robert FitzRoy. While Darwin dominates the story, the book's real value comes from Moorehead's analysis of FitzRoy's personality. [FitzRoy] took Darwin along to find evidence to [support] Genesis. That the naturalist disproved the very thing the fundamentalist asked him to prove is the greatest irony of the 19th Century.
>
> (Simms 1969)

It seems reasonable to conclude that *Darwin and the Beagle* succeeds as a work of dramatic entertainment. Let me qualify this, however: *Darwin and the Beagle* does not deal plausibly with theoretical issues, and this makes the central characters themselves somewhat implausible; also, *Darwin and the Beagle* does not fulfil its dramatic potential in the sphere of ideas. The intellectual clash between Darwin and FitzRoy, as it appears in *Darwin and the Beagle*, is, for all its sound and fury, tame — tame because the intratextual FitzRoy's "passionate fundamentalism" is too superficial to make him a worthwhile opponent. FitzRoy's faith could have been depicted as a valid world-view

backed by powerful arguments;[8] instead, it is shown at its most ridiculous — as when FitzRoy explains to Darwin that "Not *all* the animals had managed to get aboard the Ark" (*DB*.86) — and the opportunity for demonstrating a genuinely exciting conflict of ideas is lost.

In fairness to Moorehead one must add that, on another level, the drama of *Darwin and the Beagle* is not centred around the Darwin-FitzRoy relationship; rather, it lies in the cultural and natural phenomena Darwin encounters. Fuegians, gauchos, earthquakes, condors, Benchuga bugs, and a host of other perils and points of fascination, are compellingly described. The passage on the marine lizards of the Galapagos — "'imps of darkness', Darwin called them" — is particularly good (see *DB*.191).

Implausibility in describing the development of Darwin's thought

Unfortunately, Moorehead provides no substantial link between Darwin's on-the-spot observations and experiments and the growth of Darwin's theoretical framework. While we witness Darwin testing revolutionary ideas against FitzRoy, we are given little inkling of how in the first place Darwin synthesised these ideas. Meanwhile, as I have already suggested, FitzRoy's fundamentalism (as it is portrayed within *Darwin and the Beagle*) is too superficial to convince us that Darwin's refutation of it involves profound thought. In emphasising and at the same time over-simplifying FitzRoy's influence, Moorehead's description of the development of Darwin's thought becomes implausible.

Moorehead's most sustained effort to come to grips with Darwin's ideas occurs in "The Galapagos Islands" chapter:

> But it was the number of different species of finch, and the variety of their beaks, that so amazed Darwin. On one island they had developed strong thick beaks for cracking nuts and seeds, on another the beak was smaller to enable the bird to catch insects, on another again the beak was adjusted to feeding on fruits and flowers [...]

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[8] "[Moorehead] makes too easy a target of traditional views on geology, biology and the Bible. The proponents of these orthodoxies were far from unsophisticated and included almost all the best thinkers of the period." (Young 1970)

> Clearly the birds had found different foods available on different islands, and through successive generations had adjusted themselves accordingly [...]
>
> Somewhere here a great principle was involved. Naturally Darwin did not grasp the full implications of it all at once; for instance, he makes little mention of the finches in the first published edition of his Journal, yet the subject of their diversity and modification later became one of the great arguments in his theory of natural selection. But by this time he must have realised that he was on the edge of a remarkable and disturbing discovery.
>
> (*DB*.202)

In fact, the adjustment of beaks over generations would only have been "clear" to someone who was already thinking in sophisticated evolutionary terms. Hence the text becomes illogical: Darwin cannot at one and the same time be *au fait* with a sophisticated evolutionary process yet still only on the edge of discovering that process. Moorehead seems to recognise this in his disclaimer that "Naturally Darwin did not grasp the full implications of it all at once [...]". What, then, did Darwin think initially, or grasp before he became a fully-fledged evolutionist? Moorehead does not tell us. Instead, he makes an unsupported claim that Darwin "must have" realised he was on the edge of a discovery.

Darwin and the Beagle as a work of fact

A fact is not necessarily an absolute truth. With the progress of Darwin scholarship, certain "facts" about Darwin that were once widely accepted may now be regarded rather as errors. *Darwin and the Beagle* was first published in 1969. So, when we examine it "as a work of fact", we should ask not only whether it is accurate by the standards of Darwin scholars today, but also whether it accords with what Darwin scholars were saying around 1969.

Many of the reviews of *Darwin and the Beagle* that appeared in 1969-1970 seem oblivious even to its most glaring errors, but this tells us more about the knowledge of the reviewers in question than it does about the state of Darwin scholarship at the time. The responses of the better-informed reviewers (for example, Robert Young in *New*

Statesman and Gavin de Beer in *Book World*) suggest that *Darwin and the Beagle* was not considered by serious Darwin scholars to be factually reliable:

> The level of exposition [...] is good (not excellent) but slides over complex intellectual issues: detailed passages tend to be concerned with charming vignettes.
>
> This is a pity, since there is an excellent and easily accessible secondary literature on Darwin [...] Since Darwin saved every scrap of paper, one can, in principle reconstruct the development of his ideas in great detail [...] There are numerous books and papers covering various aspects of Darwin and evolutionism. Except for the writings of Nora Barlow, however, none of the best scholarship on Darwin is mentioned in Moorehead's acknowledgements or bibliography.
>
> (Young 1970)

Darwin and the Beagle contains a number of isolated errors and ambiguities, some minor, others less so, which together invite a large question mark to hover over any compliment to the work's scholarship. Arthur Mellersh, not Philip King, was the midshipman who declared he had read Byron and didn't care a damn for anyone (*DB*.48). *Mylodon* was not an elephant (*DB*.83).[9] The cabin in which the *Beagle*'s previous captain had shot himself had in fact been converted into a storage area (*DB*.157; see Browne, 1995.169). Darwin did not consider the Galapagos finches to be "different forms of the same *species*" (*DB*.202, my italics) — he in fact divided them into families and subfamilies (Browne, 1995.304); nor did he spend eight years classifying a tiny species of barnacle (*DB*.252) — he spent eight years classifying every species of barnacle he could obtain. The variety of Christian sects and theological positions around 1860 was too great for there to have been any such thing as "the average Christian" (*DB*.260); and "Christianity" was neither as uniformly fundamentalist nor as uniformly opposed to evolutionary ideas as Moorehead implies. Even within the generally conservative Anglican church, some theologians (notably the Rev. Baden Powell, father of the founder of the Boy Scout movement, and the Rev. Charles

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[9] I am indebted to the *Times Literary Supplement* (1969) for these first two examples.

Kingsley) welcomed Darwin's theory as a step towards a truer understanding of divine operations. Moreover, Darwin did not attack the Bible head-on. In *On the Origin of Species* he did not suggest anything whatsoever about the "story of Adam and Eve" (*DB*.261); indeed, he withheld entirely from discussing human evolution.[10] Nor is his book on human evolution, *The Descent of Man* (which appeared in 1871, some twelve years after *On the Origin of Species*), his "pre-eminently important" work (*DB*.270): that pre-eminence belongs absolutely to *On the Origin of Species*.

Of more concern, however, are the errors embedded in the core of the narrative. These can be divided into two categories:

(1) unfounded or slanted statements about FitzRoy and his relationship with Darwin — in particular, statements based on anachronisms about FitzRoy's beliefs;

(2) further anachronisms about the development of Darwin's theory.

I will discuss each category in turn.

Unfounded or slanted statements about FitzRoy and his relationship with Darwin

The central irony of *Darwin and the Beagle* — that FitzRoy thought the voyage "would provide a grand opportunity to substantiate the Bible, especially the book of Genesis" (*DB*.37) — is based on the premise that FitzRoy was from the start a determined biblical fundamentalist. According to Moorehead, FitzRoy "believed every word in the Bible absolutely" (*DB*.21) and was unswerving in his belief.

This premise is false. In fact, during the period in question, FitzRoy was sceptical about the Old Testament. Here is his own account of his scepticism (published in 1839, by which time he *had* adopted a fundamentalist position):

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[10] In concluding *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin comments that, "In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches [...] Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history." (1859.458) The comment is positioned as if it were an afterthought, and neither follows from nor leads to any other words on "the origin of man". By projecting research on human origins into "the distant future", Darwin signals his own avoidance of the topic.

> I suffered much anxiety in former years from a disposition to doubt, if not disbelieve, the inspired History written by Moses. I knew so little of that record, or of the intimate manner in which the Old Testament is connected with the New, that I fancied some events there related might be mythological or fabulous, while I sincerely believed the truth of others [...]
>
> Much of my own uneasiness was caused by reading works written by men of Voltaire's school; and by those of geologists who contradict, by implication, if not in plain terms, the authenticity of the Scriptures; before I had any acquaintance with the volume which they so incautiously impugn [ie. with the Bible]. [...]
>
> While led away by sceptical ideas, and knowing extremely little of the Bible, one of my remarks to a friend [Darwin, in 1834], on crossing vast plains composed of rolled stones bedded in diluvial detritus some hundred feet in depth, was "this could never have been effected by a forty days' flood," — an expression plainly indicative of the turn of mind, and ignorance of Scripture. I was quite willing to disbelieve what I thought to be the Mosaic account [...]
>
> (from FitzRoy's essay "A very few remarks with reference to the Deluge". The essay is reproduced in full in Browne and Neve, eds. 1989.401-24)

Indeed, just before the *Beagle* sailed, FitzRoy presented Darwin with a copy of the first volume of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, a work which had annoyed fundamentalists because it refused to ascribe geological changes directly to divine causes.[11]

Given that Moorehead's continuous portrayal of FitzRoy as "intolerant of all speculation" (*DB*.20) is so badly mistaken, one is inclined to doubt that FitzRoy always argued with Darwin antagonistically and in absolute favour of the Bible. Moreover, Darwin, at this stage of his life, appears not to have been much troubled by religious doubts. "Whilst on board the *Beagle* I was quite orthodox," Darwin was to reminisce, "and I remember being heartily laughed at by several of the officers (though themselves orthodox) for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on some point of

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[11] See Thomson and Rachootin 1982, 9, and Browne 1995.272-73. Here, Janet Browne argues that in 1834 both FitzRoy and Darwin favoured Lyell's "revisionist anticlerical argument" about the nature of geological change. "Such amiable concurrence does not fit readily with the usual tale of conflict between Darwin and FitzRoy, particularly in relation to their religious beliefs," she notes.

morality." (Barlow, ed. 1958.85) This information makes the scenario of a series of theological disputes between Darwin and FitzRoy seem even less likely.

According to *Darwin and the Beagle*, Darwin, during the early stages of the expedition (1832-1833), considered the fossilised remains of the extinct giant mammals of the Pampas and asked:

> How had such enormous creatures got aboard the Ark? FitzRoy had an answer. Not *all* the animals had managed to get aboard the Ark, he explained; for some reason these had been left outside and drowned. But, Darwin protested, *were* they drowned? There was much evidence — the seashells, for example — to prove that the coast here had risen above the sea, and that these animals had roamed across the Pampas in much the same way as the guanacos did at the present time. The land had *not* risen, FitzRoy contended; it was the sea that had risen and the bones of these drowned animals were an additional proof of the Flood.
>
> (*DB.86*)

We have no evidence that any such conversation actually took place. Moorehead has put the speech about animals "left outside and drowned" in FitzRoy's mouth on the basis of statements FitzRoy made some five years later in "A very few remarks with reference to the Deluge": "As the creatures approached the ark, might it not have been easy to admit some, perhaps the young and the small, while the old and the large were excluded?" FitzRoy was to write. "The small number of enormous animals that have existed since the Deluge, may be a consequence of this shutting out of all but a very few." (Browne and Neve, eds. 1989.414-15n) As I have already indicated, FitzRoy's religious views as expressed in his "remarks with reference to the Deluge" were far more rigid than his religious views during the early stages of the *Beagle* expedition.

These criticisms of Moorehead's portrayal of FitzRoy extend to his portrayal of Darwin, for if — as Moorehead would have us believe — Darwin's ideas were honed through argument with FitzRoy, then a serious mistake in the portrayal of FitzRoy's ideas gives us reason to doubt the corresponding portrayal of Darwin's.

Given the differences in background and temperament between Darwin and FitzRoy, it may seem reasonable to assume that a constant tension underlay their

relationship — and may thus seem unreasonable to impugn Moorehead for inventing tension-laden dialogue between them. So, let us consider that relationship more closely.

Darwin states in his "Autobiography" that FitzRoy "was extremely kind to me, but was a man very difficult to live with on the intimate terms which necessarily followed from our messing by ourselves in the same cabin. We had several quarrels; for when out of temper he was utterly unreasonable." (Barlow, ed. 1958.73) Darwin then describes two occasions during the voyage when his relations with FitzRoy were strained severely. The first occasion arose from their different reactions to the slave-system they witnessed in Brazil (Darwin was horrified by the system; FitzRoy was not); the second from the following circumstances:

> At Conception in Chile, poor Fitz-Roy was sadly overworked and in very low spirits; he complained bitterly to me that he must give a great party to all the inhabitants of the place. I remonstrated and said that I could see no such necessity on his part under the circumstances. He then burst out into a fury, declaring that I was the sort of man who would receive any favours and make no return. I got up and left the cabin without saying a word [...]
>
> (Barlow, ed. 1958.75 When Darwin says "Conception", his memory is playing him false: the town in question was actually Valparaiso.)

On both occasions, Darwin and FitzRoy were soon reconciled. Darwin explains that FitzRoy tended to apologise candidly for his outbursts of temper, and concludes that, "His character was in several respects one of the most noble which I have ever known, though tarnished by grave blemishes." (76)

Darwin notes that FitzRoy was "very indignant with me for having published so unorthodox a book (for he became very religious) as the *Origin of Species*" (76); but makes no mention of any theological or scientific dispute with FitzRoy during the voyage. This argues against Moorehead's picture of Darwin and FitzRoy continually needling each other over the interplay between theology and science. Had Darwin and FitzRoy actually needled each other thus, Darwin would probably have mentioned it. His "Autobiography" shows he was not in the end shy to detail his complaints about FitzRoy.

Other evidence suggests that Darwin and FitzRoy's relationship was, all in all,

pleasant — remarkably pleasant, even, given their frequent confinement to each other's company. Janet Browne and Michael Neve point to FitzRoy and Darwin's joint letter in support of missionaries' activities in the Pacific, and argue that:

> The accord that Darwin and FitzRoy plainly shared on [the missionary] issue was more than simple accommodation between two men obliged to co-exist for a long time in one tiny cabin. FitzRoy was difficult, imperious and authoritarian: but he was also intelligent, fond of outdoor pursuits and natural philosophy, a good talker, thinker and companion. During the *Beagle* voyage the two men were friends, thrown upon each other's company to be sure, but nevertheless friends [...] As time went on, Darwin tended to remember only the worst aspects of the captain's temper, but the remaining correspondence from the *Beagle* period indicates a frank, cheerful trust in each other animated by a marked community of tastes and boyish camaraderie. The long discussions, dangerous journeys, dust, dirt and shared enthusiasm of these two young men, perhaps even the voyage itself, could well be summarized in FitzRoy's affectionate astonishment at the news reported by a mutual friend, just after the *Beagle* had docked, that Darwin had actually been seen in a "good hat!"
>
> (Browne and Neve 1989.25-26)

I find this interpretation of the relationship between Darwin and FitzRoy far more plausible than Moorehead's. Browne and Neve's immediate source for FitzRoy's "affectionate astonishment" is a letter from FitzRoy to Darwin, written a couple of weeks after the completion of the voyage:

> Dearest Philos [FitzRoy's nickname for Darwin]
>
> What you will say to me for not having written before I know not — but really I have *not* been idle or forgetful.
>
> [...] Fuller told me you looked very well and had on a *good hat*! [...]
>
> I was delighted by your letter. — The account of your family — & the joy tipsy style of the whole letter were *very* pleasing. Indeed Charles Darwin I have *also* been *very* happy — even at that horrid place Plymouth — for that horrid place contains a *treasure* to *me* which even *you* were ignorant of!! Now

> guess — and think & guess again. Believe it, or not, — the news is *true* — I am going to be *married*!!!!!!! [...]
>
> (Burkhardt *et al*, eds. 1985.1.508-09)

This was not written by a humourless man. The unsympathetic, "prosaic" FitzRoy of *Darwin and the Beagle* is a myth.

Moorehead's treatment of the man FitzRoy became in the years after the voyage is also skewed. Apart from FitzRoy's own *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of HMS "Adventure" and "Beagle" between 1826 and 1836* (1839), the only specialised treatment of FitzRoy listed in the bibliography of *Darwin and the Beagle* is H.E.L. Mellersh's *FitzRoy of the Beagle* (1968). Mellersh describes FitzRoy's behaviour at the Oxford meeting of 1860 thus:

> [Huxley...] was not ashamed to have a monkey for an ancestor, but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth! Pandemonium. A lady faints.
>
> Quiet is resumed and the climax has been passed. There are a few more speakers from the body of the hall. One is FitzRoy. FitzRoy "regretted", said the *Athenaeum*, "the publication of Mr Darwin's book and denied Professor Huxley's statement that it was a logical arrangement of facts". FitzRoy, states another account, "said he had often expostulated with his old comrade of the *Beagle* for entertaining views which were contradictory to the First Chapter of Genesis".
>
> (Mellersh 1968.274-75)

In *Darwin and the Beagle*, however:

> Amid the hubbub a slight grey-haired man got to his feet. His thin aristocratic face was clouded with rage, and he waved a Bible aloft like an avenging prophet. Here was the truth, he cried, here and nowhere else. Long ago he had warned Darwin about his dangerous thoughts. Had he but known that he was

> carrying in his ship such a... He was shouted down and the rest of his words were lost.
>
> (*DB*.266)

Moorehead is mythologising FitzRoy, and appears to be doing so without regard for the more dignified portrayal offered by Mellersh.

Because the various eyewitness accounts of the Oxford meeting contradict each other on some points, historians have found it difficult to form a single, exact account. One can say in Moorehead's defence that he may be justified in finding Mellersh's account too restrained. According to James Desmond and Adrian Moore (who, though scrupulous about matters of fact, do not easily miss dramatic opportunities in their *Darwin*):

> [...] "a grey haired Roman nosed elderly gentleman" then stood in the centre of the audience to protest at "Mr Darwin's book" and "Prof. Huxley's statement." It was FitzRoy, now head of the Government's Meteorological Department and at Oxford to read a paper on storms. With military bearing the Admiral, "lifting an immense Bible first with both and afterwards with one hand over his head, solemnly implored the audience to believe God rather than man." He admitted that the *Origin of Species* had given him "acutest pain." It was a sad sight as the crowd shouted him down.
>
> (Desmond and Moore 1991.495)

Yet even here, FitzRoy is far from the "avenging prophet" — his face "clouded with rage" — portrayed in *Darwin and the Beagle*.

On the subject of FitzRoy at the Oxford meeting, Moorehead continues:

> Now, thirty years [after the *Beagle* voyage], it must have been a bitter experience for FitzRoy to stand up in this noisy crowded room and hear Darwin's name acclaimed. It was turning white into black. How had it happened? How had these satanic thoughts prevailed? Hurt, bewildered and

> furious, he went out, and it was less than five years later that in a spasm of annihilating and righteous despair he committed suicide.
>
> (*DB*.266)

This is difficult to read as anything other than a conclusion that the success of Darwin's theory drove FitzRoy to suicide. It is Moorehead's final word on FitzRoy, and it is in poor taste; even if we were totally unacquainted with the circumstances, common sense and human sympathy would suggest that the true explanation for FitzRoy's suicide is infinitely more complex. As to the circumstances themselves: Mellersh foregoes any strong claims about the causes of FitzRoy's suicide by stating that "Reasons can only be guessed at" (Mellersh, 1968.281), but makes it clear that in the time leading up to FitzRoy's death, Fitzroy was much distressed by public criticisms of his weather forecasting system — a matter entirely beyond the sphere of Darwin's theory.

Earlier, I remarked that in Moorehead's "self-doomed FitzRoy we find a classically tragic co-protagonist". If I may now qualify this: yes, Moorehead's FitzRoy is tragic, but Mellersh's FitzRoy is equally so — and more compelling, because Mellersh treats FitzRoy sympathetically whereas in *Darwin and the Beagle* FitzRoy is often merely a cypher for religious dogma. Also, Mellersh's FitzRoy has more dignity than Moorehead's "avenging prophet", and is *classically* tragic in a stronger, more explicit sense: "He died by the equivalent of the Roman way, and perhaps he possessed something of the courage of the Romans: he had done what he could with life — let it go!" (Mellersh, 1968.281)

Further anachronisms about the development of Darwin's theory

I noted earlier that *Darwin and the Beagle* presents us with a Darwin who is at one and the same time *au fait* with a sophisticated evolutionary process yet still only on the edge of discovering that process. This illogicality would enable us to sense a mistake even if we had no evidence outside *Darwin and the Beagle* for how Darwin actually thought during the voyage. When we do refer to outside evidence, it confirms that Moorehead's treatment of Darwin's evolutionary thinking is anachronistic. For example, in *Darwin and the Beagle*, Darwin is quoted as speculating in 1832 that the "wonderful

relationship in the same continent between the dead [long-extinct species] and the living" would "throw more light on the appearance of organic beings on earth and their disappearance from it." (*DB*.82-83) Yet these words first appear in the second edition of Darwin's *Journal of Researches*, which he produced in 1845.[12] So too with Darwin's comment that in the Galapagos Islands "we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact — that mystery of mysteries — the first appearance of new beings on the earth" (*DB*.187): an unknowing reader of *Darwin and the Beagle* would assume Darwin wrote this in 1835, when the *Beagle* was among the Islands; in fact, the comment first appears in the 1845 edition of his *Journal of Researches*. Meanwhile, the term "survival of the fittest", which Moorehead puts into Darwin's thoughts as early as 1833 (*DB*.123,146), was only adopted by Darwin in 1866.

Robert Young states that:

> [...] lack of appreciation of the fine texture of the debate [around evolution] allows [Moorehead] to put thoughts into Darwin's mind which he either never had or had not formulated until after 1836. He did not return from the voyage with a theory but with a problem. [...] Although Darwin struggled with many ways of explaining the curious facts [he gleaned during the voyage], he did not focus clearly on the explanation of evolution by means of natural selection until late in 1838 and did not write out the theory until 1842.
>
> (Young 1970)

"Lack of appreciation of the fine texture of the debate around evolution" encapsulates the root cause of the failure of *Darwin and the Beagle* as a work of fact, and leaves us with a question: could a more "finely textured" work ever retain the readability and narrative drive that earned *Darwin and the Beagle* so much praise from less informed reviewers? Conceivably, yes; but then again, such a work is more easily mooted than written.

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[12] I am again indebted to the *Times Literary Supplement* (1969), for this example and for the two that follow it.

Concluding remarks

Darwin and the Beagle impresses upon the reader a picture of Darwin that has been designed to meet a demand for a compelling, cinematically-viable story. Moorehead's Darwin is a *Boy's Own* scientist, who carves a swath through tropical jungles and then through caricatures of dogma and ignorance.

As the chronological and cultural distances between Darwin and his biographers increase, he seems to become more vulnerable to such manipulation for narrative purposes. On the other hand, the Darwin industry has given today's readers and critics access to a vast array of hard facts about him. Modern biographers may not be under obligations as strict as those that bound their Victorian counterparts, but, as the more knowledgeable reviewers of *Darwin and the Beagle* prove, any writer on Darwin who neglects the facts will be censured.

CHAPTER SIX: *DARWIN* BY ADRIAN DESMOND AND JAMES MOORE (1991)

In concluding my previous Chapter, I suggested that *Darwin and the Beagle* "impresses upon the reader a picture of Darwin that has been designed to meet a demand for a compelling, cinematically-viable story." Desmond and Moore's *Darwin*, similarly, is designed as a compelling story; but it also has a scholarly purpose: the story embodies a serious argument about the nature of Darwin's science, and indeed about the nature of science in general.

I will consider *Darwin* firstly "as a compelling story", and secondly "as a work of fact and an argument about the nature of Darwin's science".

One of the purposes of this chapter is to present an overview of critics' responses to both recent biography in general and *Darwin* in particular, so I quote widely from sources ranging from the *Times Literary Supplement* to the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*.

Darwin as a compelling story

Like many other recent biographies, *Darwin* is structured along traditional rather than postmodernist lines. It follows the traditional practice of tracing the subject chronologically from ancestry and birth through to death, and does not break off to indulge in any patently postmodernist devices: it contains no experiments in time-travel (no imagined conversations between Darwin and, say, Aristotle), no self-reflexive asides from the authors, no raw scraps of period trivia (indeed, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, with its cut-and-pasted assortment of narratives, is more "postmodernist" than any other biography of Darwin mentioned in this thesis).

Jean Strouse has suggested that:

> Nineteenth-century novels — by George Eliot, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, George Meredith — provided readers with large

> slices of life in which questions of character, motivation, morality, social pressure, and internal conflict could be explored in great depth. People read, and still read, those books for the pleasure of imagining their way into other lives, other times, other locations — and for what comes back into their own lives from those journeys. Most modern novels — all bare bones and spare parts — do not provide that kind of satisfaction. Modern biographies often do.
>
> (Strouse 1983.37)

This view resurfaces in Eric Homberger and John Charmley's discussion of the "oft-noted comparison of biography to the Victorian triple-decker, with its vast range of characters, detailed social observation, and rich sense of place" (1988.xiii); and in David Sexton's opinion that biography "reliably feeds the appetite for story left unsatisfied by so much modern fiction." Sexton feels that biography "cannot help but address the whole human span, from beginnings to ends, in a way that few novels now dare to." (1995)

Some qualification is required here. Many modern novels do in fact provide "large slices of life"; and many modern biographies carry so much excess data that the story collapses. Indeed, the suggestion that the modern biography has inherited the narrative power of the Victorian novel can be countered by the suggestion that it has inherited the flabbiness of the Victorian compilation-biography. Compare for example the *North British Review* in 1850 on Cuthbert Southey's six-volume life of his father ("a washer woman's accounts and a tailor's day-books occupy pages upon pages" — see *LDEB*.64),[1] and *The New York Times Book Review* in 1991 on Peter Ackroyd's thousand-page-plus *Dickens*:

> Mr. Ackroyd is left with a dangerous amount of room in which to chat away. Into all this he pours a lot of invented nonsense — giving us nine full lines, for instance, of a song Dickens may have sung as a child (though there is no evidence he did), simply because Mr. Ackroyd has unearthed it. One often gets the feeling he has resolved that none of his quite commendable work will have been in vain and that whatever he has on hand he will give to us. Readers will

[1] The abbreviation *LDEB* refers back to this thesis, *Lives of Darwin in the Evolution of Biography*.

> start to recognize the file cards spilling out of the pigeonholes every time we come to a new key term. Let St. Paul's Cathedral be mentioned and here we go for a paragraph on what characters said about it in novels; mention water and we get all Dickens's reflections on it and the names of all his favorite rivers and seaside hotels.
>
> (James Kincaid in *The New York Times Book Review* — Kincaid 1991.24)

Similarly, Michael Kenward in *New Scientist* grumbles that *Darwin* "is one of those 'everything and the kitchen sink' biographies [...] The authors leave no laundry list unread." (1992.39) But Kenward's criticism here is not as fair as Kincaid's. It is true that in sheer mass of detail *Darwin* exceeds any previous biography of Darwin except *The Life and Letters*; yet *Darwin* is so fine-grained — the details therein are so well chosen and incorporated — that the narrative is enlivened, rather than trapped in "the kitchen sink".

In one of Desmond and Moore's finest passages, Darwin, some months before his death, is unable to avoid a visit by Ludwig Büchner, President of the International Federation of Freethinkers, and Richard Aveling.[2] These two "notorious atheists" are invited to family lunch. At Emma Darwin's insistence a local clergyman and friend, the Reverend Brodie Innes, is invited to the same meal. It becomes:

> [...] less a lunch, more a last supper; everybody [Darwin] had loved, everything he had feared, every paradox of his career had come together in a penultimate act. Here, his disapproving evangelical wife, his kindly Tory vicar [Innes], his genetically weak children, and his atheistic disciples, Büchner to his right and Aveling on the left, [Aveling] gloating in his physical repulsion, a malevolence emanating from his presence "as from a diabolical source of being." In the middle sat [Darwin] the parish naturalist, the failed ordinand, the Devil's Chaplain, damning and defying all expectations.
>
> Some explanation of the parson's presence was evidently required. Mindful of the mixed company, Charles put it masterfully: "B[rodie] I[nnes] & I have been fast friends for 30 years. We never thoroughly agreed on any subject

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[2] See *LDEB*.56-57 for Francis Darwin's comments on Aveling.

but once and then we looked hard at each other and thought one of us must be very ill." Nerves were jangled, the situation fraught. It would have been a nightmare, but for the funny turn.

Worms came up during the first course. Aveling expressed pious horror that the author of the *Origin* had stooped to a "subject so insignificant." The freethinking missionaries had the great Victorian social problems in mind. Neither expected to find their hero obsessed by the sods rather than sons of the soil. Turning gravely, Charles stated, "I have been studying their habits for forty years." For him the humble explained the great, but not in a way that Aveling — soon to be Marx's "son-in-law" — could appreciate.

(*D*.656-57)[3]

To other Darwin scholars, the "family lunch" described here might appear negligible. In Desmond and Moore's interpretation, it becomes deeply significant: a climactic, tragi-comic "last supper". And this interpretation is believable, not least because it is couched within a series of precise details. (Moreover, the passage contributes powerfully to one of Desmond and Moore's greater narrative themes: that Darwin lives in fascinated, near-Faustian horror at the radical implications of his science. Thus he is torn between the respectable Inneses and the "diabolical" Avelings... but let us return to this theme later in this chapter. My purpose here is simply to draw attention to Desmond and Moore's use of detail.)

An equally detailed discussion of Darwin's work on *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) recharges the central narrative by bringing us back to the event that has "destroyed Charles's tatters of belief in a moral, just universe" (*D*.387), the death of his most dearly loved child, Annie:

> Englishmen, he owned, "rarely cry, except under pressure of the acutest grief." Yet he had known this feeling, watched himself weep, and had learned to read strangers' faces.
>
> An old lady with a comfortable but absorbed expression sat nearby

[3] *D* is my abbreviation of *Darwin* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (1991).

> opposite me in a railway carriage. Whilst I was looking at her, I saw that her *depressores anguli oris* [muscles at the corner of the mouth] became very slightly, yet decidedly, contracted; but as her countenance remained as placid as ever, I reflected how meaningless was this contraction, and how easily one might be deceived. The thought had hardly occurred to me when I saw that her eyes suddenly became suffused with tears almost to overflowing, and her whole countenance fell. There could now be no doubt that some painful recollection, perhaps that of a long-lost child, was passing through her mind.
>
> [from Darwin, C. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 1872,305]

No detached observer, Darwin. He perceived with pathos, and the thought of his own long-lost child still moved him to tears. In death as in life, Annie opened his heart.

(*D*.593-94)[4]

Here, a summary of one of Darwin's scientific interests merges into a poignant drama. The excerpt Desmond and Moore have chosen from *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is extraordinarily apt; and again, the humble details justify themselves: the scientific precision of "*depressores anguli oris*" seems so unequal to describing great emotional pain that one's pity for Darwin doubles.

Darwin's efforts to read German are potentially a mundane topic, or, a topic that the biographer writing for a non-specialised readership would avoid (as does, say, John Bowlby). In *Darwin*, however:

> the two 500-page volumes of Haeckel's *Generelle Morphologie* thumped in Darwin's letterbox. They were designed to daunt, and Darwin was duly humbled. He struggled through the thicket, losing his way in the profusion of genealogical trees, sagging under the weight of neologisms. "The number of

[4] For a more specialised discussion of the effects of Annie's death on Darwin's world view, see Moore's essay "Of love and death: Why Darwin 'gave up Christianity'" (1989).

> new words, to a man like myself, weak in his Greek, is something dreadful:" "ontogeny" for the course of foetal growth, "phylogeny" for the evolutionary history of the race, and "ecology." Nor was his German much better. Word after word was extracted with the pain of pulled teeth, using a dictionary. He knew "no grammar whatever" and so read each sentence over and over until at last the meaning dawned. (The constructions infuriated him — he was convinced that the Germans "could write simply if they chose.")
>
> (*D*.541-42)

The passage is splendid: any biographer could tell us that Darwin found *Generelle Morphologie* difficult to read; as Desmond and Moore describe it, Haeckel's work becomes a journey of Wagnerian proportions, through which Darwin struggles partly as an earnest hero and partly as the comical Englishman abroad. The play on Haeckel's genealogical trees, such that in their profusion they become a thicket of despair, seems thoroughly successful.

Not only in the passages reproduced above, but throughout *Darwin*, Desmond and Moore use quotations with great skill. Almost every second sentence contains the actual words of Darwin or one of the other characters, meshed neatly into the fabric of Desmond and Moore's own writing. And, though one's eye moves easily across most of these quotations, one is reminded constantly of the richness of the Darwin archive, and remains confident that the authors are not inventing entirely the characters' thoughts and actions. (However, as with *The Life and Letters*, Darwin's life is by no means "writing itself".)

To many informed readers in 1991, *Darwin* represented something special: the first biography to make full use of modern scholarship on Darwin and his socio-political milieu, and thus the first genuinely "definitive" biography of Darwin. *Darwin* was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in Britain, the Comisso Prize in Italy and the Watson Davis Prize from the History of Science Society in America. It was also shortlisted for the Science Book Prize of the (British) Council for the Public Understanding of Science.

I have quoted Jean Strouse's comment that modern biographies often provide the kind of satisfaction that otherwise is to be found otherwise only in the great nineteenth-century novels. She might be gratified to learn that *Darwin* has drawn many similar

comments. Kenneth Bennett, in an entirely complimentary review in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, compares the book to "a best-selling Victorian novel" (Bennett 1993.261); and William Bynum writes in *New Scientist* that:

> Desmond and Moore have produced a *tour de force* which, like a good novel, invites the reader to press on from one chapter to the next. Pick it up and you are hooked, by the racy writing, the memorable turns of phrase, the historical insights and the sheer bravado of their performance.
>
> (Bynum 1991.54)

Another *New Scientist* reviewer, Roy Herbert, commenting on the appearance of *Darwin* in paperback, feels that Desmond and Moore describe "the teeming background of Victorian Britain [...] with the enthusiasm of Dickens":

> Of course, readers hoping to find romance and adventure in this work will be copiously rewarded [...] swept into and borne along by the narrative from the first page. Result — exhilaration. The book, on its own, is a justification of paperback publishing.
>
> (Herbert, R. 1993.45)

Not all *Darwin*'s reviewers were "borne along", however. According to Paul Smith in the *London Review of Books*, *Darwin* comprises:

> A psycho-drama [...] intercut with a social and intellectual upheaval, both at times so luridly splashed onto the canvas as to suggest that the work has been designed with half an eye to survival of the fittest on the airport book-stall (recommended flight time at least twelve hours) or even as a trailer for "Darwin: The Movie".
>
> This treatment gives us first of all a mind-ripper to compete with the bodice-rippers [...]
>
> (Smith, P. 1992.14)

Each of these reviewers is making a valid point, for *Darwin* is chequered with both "exhilarating" and irritating aspects.

Smith's description of the work as a lurid psycho-drama brings us to another point of contrast between Victorian and late-twentieth-century biography. Whereas the Victorians honoured their heroes, we, it seems, are driven to seek out the failings and insecurities of ours. As Homberger and Charmley put it:

> Few biographies last. Not only do certain subjects seem, over time, to be more or less interesting, but the frame of interpretation, the cultural luggage, can change so comprehensively that the important biographies in one age are the library discards of the next. Ours is a century distrustful of exemplary lives in the heroic sense: we must have T.E. Lawrence raped and tormented, and F. Scott Fitzgerald asking Hemingway to have a look and tell him if his penis was adequate for manly duties with Zelda. Such moments in biography bear the unmistakable brand of our culture. And how quickly one senses the possibility that concerns like this may seem derisory to a later age.
>
> (Homberger and Charmley, eds. 1988.xi)

The prurience of our biographies has been bemoaned by many commentators. Among the most incisive is John McCormick in his essay "Brutality in Biography":

> Recent works on W.H. Auden, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Lowell, Federico García Lorca, William Faulkner, Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, Eric Gill, to name only a few, are remarkable mainly either for documented material or surmise about the abberations of their subjects, material which, in more decorous times, would have been considered marginal. In Humphrey Carpenter's *W.H. Auden* the poet is not the absolute master of form and expression we might prefer to recall, but a voracious cruising homosexual whose tastes and practices are listed at such length and lubricity that the undoubted stature of Auden the artist is lost from view. So fine a writer and scholar as the late Richard Ellmann found it necessary to trace Wilde's seductions of man and boy in punctilious and repellent detail, even though Wilde's sexual preferences and habits have been known for decades. [...] Ian Gibson gives as much space

> and consideration to guesswork about García Lorca's male loves, their names and their positions in society, as to Lorca's verse, including details of Lorca's physical position in his alleged acts of sodomy. All this is ingeniously derived from words or lines of verse and from equally ingenious readings of scraps of correspondence; perhaps one-half of Gibson's biography is written in the conditional, a characteristic of the scurrilous genre.
>
> (McCormick 1991.174-75)

A powerful argument against excessive prurience in biography is provided by Victoria Glendinning in her paper "Lies and Silences":

> [...] just as there was a sort of lie in the concealing, idealising biographies of the past, so there can be a more subtle sort of lie, because of trivialisation and loss of proportion, in this concentration on the personal life. I feel that the wheel is turning again. Rupert Hart-Davis's biography of the novelist Hugh Walpole was published in 1956. Its author is a man of the world and a man of letters of the old school. He made no reference at all to Walpole's homosexuality. In 1956, this seemed like decent reticence, and the knowing could read between the lines if they chose. In the 1970s, when I first read the book, this discretion seemed to me like tiresome obfuscation, though I greatly admired the biography as a whole. It was reissued in 1985, and I re-read it. Now, the lack of explicitness seemed to me highly sophisticated. Walpole's sexual nature was self-evident. His Jamesian sexual recessiveness was reflected in Hart-Davis's decision. To have spelled out chapter and verse, and worse, would have distorted a delicate equilibrium. This is an extreme example, but I feel it is a pointer for the future.
>
> (Glendinning 1988.56)

However, any survey of recently-published biographies will reveal that Glendinning's suggestion that biography is re-entering a less prurient phase has yet to be realised.

Scientists escape neither biographical muck-raking nor the recycling of the muck through the news media. Einstein, once considered a secular saint, has been rendered all too human by Roger Highfield and Paul Carter's *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*

(1993). The news-value attached to this work by newspapers and magazines has accelerated his fall from popular grace. Freud's aura of benignity has been thoroughly tarnished (*"New biography reveals Sigmund Freud to have been an obsessive coke fiend for at least 40 years"* states a front-page headline in the *Sunday Dispatches*, 29 June 1997); and Darwin is no longer the figure in whom "Whatever is great and beautiful in human nature found [...] so luxuriant a development, that no place or chance was left for any other growth [...]" (Romanes in Huxley *et al* 1882.2). Janet Browne, in her 1995 biography of Darwin, suggests that he was a wheedling son and chauvinistic husband, and artful in making others serve his purposes. Roy Porter, reviewing a new biography of Louis Pasteur, notes the "vilification" of Darwin and Freud, and remarks with intentional irony that, "Pasteur has largely escaped the character assassins, and one of the reasons is plain to see: his manuscripts long remained inaccessible, in family hands." (1995.3)

Meanwhile, modern scientists do not always succeed in affirming the dignity of their profession. To take one example: the protagonists of James Watson's autobiographical *The Double Helix* (1968) were ridiculed by Erwin Chargaff as representing "a new kind of scientist, and one that could hardly have been thought of before science became a mass occupation, subject to, and forming part of, all the vulgarities of the communications media. [...] the modern version of King Midas [...] whatever he touches turns into a publicity release." (Chargaff 1968.1449) Today the "Midas" accusation can be levelled easily, though not necessarily justly, at any popularly-known scientist. Such is the nature of our age and culture.

Desmond and Moore's protagonist cuts an upright figure against the chorus of perverts, criminals and buffoons that leaps from the pages of so much modern biography. Though not without flaws, he is, beyond any reasonable doubt, a good person. And yet, he is prone to terrible insecurities:

> When Darwin did come out of the closet and bare his soul to a friend, he used a telling expression. He said it was "like confessing a murder." Nothing captures better the idea of evolution as a social crime in early Victorian Britain. Anglicans damned it as false, foul, French, atheistic, materialistic, and immoral. It was dangerous knowledge, and tempting. Darwin had known this for years, hence his ruminations were confined to secret notebooks. He cut himself off, ducked parties and declined engagements; he even installed a mirror outside his

> study window to spy on visitors as they came up his drive. Day after day, week after week, his stomach plagued him, and for years after reaching his rural retreat he refused to sleep anywhere else, unless it was a safe house, a close relative's home. This was a worried man.
>
> (*D*.xvi-xvii)

Here, and at intervals throughout the work, Darwin is sensationalised blatantly; hence Paul Smith's complaint of "a mind-ripper to compete with the bodice-rippers". (The justice of this complaint will become more apparent later in this Chapter, when *Darwin* is considered as a work of fact.)

When Desmond and Moore speak of Darwin coming "out of the closet", they are referring to his acceptance of the mutability of species. The introduction to *Darwin*, from which the passage above is taken, is titled "A Devil's Chaplain?". Opposite this title is set a quotation.

> What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature!
>
> Charles Darwin in 1856, about to start the *Origin of Species*
>
> (*D*.xiv)

"A Devil's Chaplain?", then, refers to Darwin himself (*D*.xvi), and is a motif which runs throughout the work. As we learn a little later, the original "Devil's Chaplain" was Robert Taylor, an apostate clergyman notorious for his rabble-rousing "sermons" against the Anglican establishment. Taylor brought his "infidel home missionary tour" to Cambridge while Darwin was a student there; Darwin witnessed four days of "moral mayhem", after which Taylor and Taylor's associate, the "fiery republican journalist" Richard Carlile, were hounded out of town. "In later years [Darwin] would remember Taylor as 'the Devil's Chaplain,' fearing that he himself might be similarly reviled, an outcast from respectable society, a terror to the innocent, an infidel in disguise." (*D*.70-73,84-85) And indeed, Desmond and Moore's Darwin takes on a Faustian aspect, at

times, as he is torn between his deeply-ingrained respectability and the radical implications of his science:

> His notebooks were now alive with the shocking metaphors wielded by the medical hellions. He equated all mental activity with brain states. [...] Every instinct, every desire could be located here, each an evolutionary inheritance — even the adoration of God: "love of the deity [is the] effect of organization. oh you Materialist!" he whispered. Such crudities were the stock-in-trade of the swelling ranks of secularists, slapping the faces of tithe-rich priests. [...]
>
> He approached the inflammatory subject with a mixture of dread and exhilaration. "Materialism" itself was a pejorative label. Technically it meant nothing but matter existing (and certainly no spirits), or thought being a function of the brain, but it was indiscriminately used to damn anyone looking for laws of the mind or the mutability of species.
>
> (*D*.250)

Darwin's "dread" makes him seriously unwell for the greater part of his life, yet, through his patience and his tactical skill in scientific politics, through the rise of a class of professional scientists, the receding of the spectre of a violent revolution in England, the triumph of Gladstonian Liberalism over Toryism — through a combination of these and many other factors — the theory of evolution by natural selection becomes the new orthodoxy. Ironically, Darwin's success is evidenced most strongly in the gradual appropriation of his public image by "the establishment"; an appropriation that culminates in his burial at Westminster Abbey:

> So Darwin's body had to be appropriated and buried with ecclesiastical pomp. The Abbey interment celebrated the vast, unfinished social transformation that England was undergoing. There were new colonies, new industries, new men to run them — not least, a "new Nature," as Huxley called it, speaking through new priests, promising progress to all who obeyed. Darwin's body was enshrined to the greater glory of the new professionals who had snatched it. The burial was their apotheosis, the last rite of a rising secularity. It marked the accession to power of the traders in nature's

> marketplace, the scientists and their minions in politics and religion. Such men, on the up-and-up, were paying their dues, for Darwin had naturalized Creation and delivered human nature and human destiny into their hands.
>
> Society would never be the same. The "Devil's Chaplain" had done his work.
>
> (*D*.677)

Darwin, then, is in part — and so long as one is not averse to a little sensationalism — a story of great depth and power; a first-class "blockbuster" in which the protagonist's personal tragedies and triumphs are interwoven with a panoramic interpretation of the history of British science.

On the adverse side, Desmond and Moore's prose can be painfully inelegant. Presumably in the interests of "readability" — or, as Paul Smith would put it, "survival of the fittest on the airport book-stall" — they use an excessive number of clichés and British colloquialisms,[5] and intersperse these with some badly misplaced Americanisms (as when they write of Darwin's "spring break in London" (615)).

One way to summarise the style of Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* is to compare their treatment of one of Darwin's childhood experiences against the treatments accorded that experience by Darwin himself and by John Bowlby.

Darwin states in his "Autobiography":

> I remember clearly only one other incident during this year whilst at Mr. Case's daily school, — namely, the burial of a dragoon soldier; and it is surprising how clearly I can still see the horse with the man's empty boots and carbine suspended to the saddle, and the firing over the grave. This scene deeply stirred whatever poetic fancy there was in me.
>
> (*LL*1.30 or see Barlow, ed. 1958.24)

---

[5] Desmond and Moore's Darwin has his ear talked off (*D*.47), kicks his heels (61), is trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea (274), becomes green with envy (290), wonders which mast Hooker will nail his colours to (344), suffers Hooker's short fuse (346), hears the patter of little feet (351), finds himself in the pink (405), wants to be genned up before he puts his money down (426), faces a kerfuffle (606), discovers his son William is a brick (611), and so on — the list seems inexhaustible. At one point, Darwin even goes back to "hunting with the urban gentry, rather than running with the radical hounds" (*D*.276). Radical hares or foxes, if no more elegant, might at least be more logical.

Bowlby suggests that the young Darwin's response to the burial *might* have been linked to his emotions about the recent death of his mother. (Susannah Darwin died from "a chronic gastro-intestinal condition, possibly a gastric ulcer but more probably a carcinoma". Her son Charles was eight at the time. — see Bowlby 1990.53-62)

> In view of Darwin's failure to recall much about his mother and nothing about her funeral, it may be relevant that the only other incident of his time at day school that he could recollect was the funeral of a dragoon soldier: "it is surprising", he writes, "how clearly I can still see the horse with the man's empty boots and carbine suspended to the saddle and the firing over the grave. This scene deeply stirred whatever poetic fancy there was in me." Since, however, it was a dramatic occasion, well calculated to impress itself on a small boy's memory, it may perhaps be of little consequence.
>
> (Bowlby 1990.62)

According to Desmond and Moore, however:

> When Charles returned to Case's school, his grief manifested itself in peculiar ways. One month after his mother's burial, he watched, transfixed, out of the classroom window, as a horse was led to an open grave in the churchyard. The saddle was empty, with a man's boots and carbine hanging at the side. So soon after his mother's interment, the effect overwhelmed him. The military cortège assembled and the clergyman read the service as the coffin was lowered. Then a cavalryman of the 15th Hussars stepped out, in full regimental attire, and raised his rifle. As the shots echoed across the Severn valley, pent-up emotion surged through the eight-year-old's body.
>
> (*D*.14)

In one sense, Desmond and Moore's account is the most accurate — for instance, the soldiers were indeed hussars, not dragoons (see Colp 1985.364). But at the point when *pent-up emotion surges*, we find ourselves reading pulp fiction.

Darwin's "blockbuster" format, its tendency to sensationalise its subject's life,

and its racy, idiomatic prose, all mark it as a product of the late twentieth century. In the Section which follows, the book's relationship to certain preoccupations of our biographical milieu is considered more closely.

Darwin in relation to certain preoccupations of our biographical milieu — acrimony, sex and "political correctness"

Darwin opens with a description of the freethinking views of Charles's grandfather, Erasmus. When Charles first appears, he is putting "the finishing touches to a sketch of old Erasmus's life." (*D*.6)

> He sent the biography in proof to his daughter Henrietta. She had long hovered at his elbow, an able critic, fussy about the family reputation [...] Henrietta had a nose for trouble. She sniffed through the proofs [...] old Josiah [Wedgewood] and her mother "falling Christians"! [...] And as for advertising Erasmus's debauchery, let alone his religious infidelity! It was permissible a hundred years ago, perhaps, but unbecoming a Darwin now. [...]
>
> Wielding a bright red pencil, Henrietta pitched in. The sex was cut back. Too much talk of illegitimacy, too much "wine, women, [and] warmth." A quotation from Erasmus with "damned" in it was lopped, and his lines about the "vast Unknown" sounded awfully agnostic. The paragraph on his unorthodoxy was plucked altogether. [...] Henrietta slashed scarlet down the page, marking the points where her father should cut and chop.
>
> (*D*.6-7)

Clearly, Desmond and Moore are aware of the expectations of propriety that faced Victorian biographers, and are glad not to have to submit their *Darwin* to some equivalent of Henrietta's red pencil. Yet the milieu of the late twentieth century may nevertheless impose on the biographer certain expectations, or preoccupations, of its own. Who dares, these days, to say that any person is utterly good? Who dares to write a biography that does *not* mention sex? Who dares to praise wholeheartedly the motives of a colonial adventurer? This section considers how *Darwin* may or may not

succumb to such preoccupations as acrimony, sex and political correctness.

Darwin is informed occasionally by our apparent taste for acrimony within biographical texts. Certain of Darwin's letters to his closest colleagues betray that he was not always kindly disposed towards others, just as the restorations to his "Autobiography" do. Where Desmond and Moore quote these letters, they are not above emphasising Darwin's least endearing side: in *Darwin*, he does not *write* to Huxley, "How you do smash [St George] Mivart's theology"; rather, he *crows* — "'How you do smash Mivart's theology,' Darwin crowed" (*D*.588). Similarly, Desmond and Moore's Darwin *coos* at and *relishes* Huxley's attacks on Richard Owen and *seethes* over Owen's autocracy (*D*.501,516,596 — my italics). While this crowing, cooing, relishing, seething, and so on, may put a certain "gutsiness" into the text, it detracts from Darwin's own words. A statement as charged as "I used to be ashamed of hating [Owen] so much, but now I will carefully cherish my hatred & contempt to the last day of my life" does not need to be prefaced with "Darwin seethed" (*D*.596).

Desmond and Moore devote much attention to the antipathy between Huxley and Owen, and wring from it various shades of drama and melodrama. This is one of their more purple passages:

> Huxley, that "Roundhead who had lost his faith," with his flashing eyes and lacerating wit, smeared Owen physically and mentally. A "queer fish" he called the vertebrate specialist, and "not referable to any [known] 'Archetype' of the human mind." Cronies sniped continuously at the "Autocrat of Zoology." Almost literally at times — when Owen hit back at Huxley's "blindness," Carpenter told Huxley "to put a bullet into some fleshy part" of his enemy to prove his eyesight. What the tyros lacked in respect they certainly made up for in bravado. Owen might have published more than all of them put together, but they wanted the Superintendent superintended. Make him answerable, Carpenter urged, "to a body of scientific men who are competent to estimate and criticize his proceedings." A body, of course, that would be Huxley-led, and responsible to no man.
>
> (*D*.432-33)

However, Desmond and Moore are not merely exploiting this antipathy for dramatic

purposes. An awareness that a new community of scientists, spearheaded by Huxley, was outmanoeuvring the "old order" championed by Owen, "the darling of Oxbridge divines and politicians" (*D*.432),[6] may be vital to our understanding of Victorian acceptance of Darwin's theory.

Huxley's belligerence sometimes contrasts sharply with Darwin's mildness, as in the passage which describes the death of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in a riding accident and Darwin and Huxley's respective reactions: "[For Darwin] there was no satisfaction in such an end. Huxley of course cried crocodile tears and wise-cracked to [the physicist John] Tyndall, 'For once, reality and his brain came into contact and the result was fatal.'" (*D*.601) (*The Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* — by his son Leonard Huxley, 1900 — is by Victorian standards a very forthright biography, but it never describes Huxley quite *this* rawly. The information comes rather from Huxley's unpublished letters.)

While *Darwin* may cater to modern expectations in the arena of antipathy, it is likely to disappoint in that of sex. As one reviewer puts it, the book seems to display:

> an almost Victorian reticence about sexuality in the life of a man who wrote hundreds of pages about breeding, cross-fertilization and sexual selection. Darwin clearly expended more professional and no doubt more private thought on sex than he did on politics. Desmond and Moore provide no consideration of Darwin's possible sexual encounters on the *Beagle* voyage, of the impact on his thought of the sexual relations in his marriage, or of the large number of children, including an unexpected one.
>
> (Turner 1992.420)[7]

Frank Turner's comment requires some qualification. To the best of my knowledge,

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[6] Owen was not as unambiguously conservative as Desmond and Moore imply here: see Rupke's analysis of Owen's place among "the upwardly mobile class of metropolitan naturalists to whose ambitions of social self-advancement the status quo was a constraint." (1994.60-69)

[7] See also Sandra Herbert: "On some scores the authors are reticent. The problematical nature of Harriet Martineau's sexuality is not alluded to, and she is presented simply as Erasmus's 'belle'." As Herbert admits, Desmond and Moore do raise the "possibility of Robert Grant's homosexuality" (Herbert, 1993.117); still, all they say is, "(tittle-tattle had [Grant] homosexual, though no one is sure)" (*D*.35). On this issue, Janet Browne seems more aware of modern readers' demands: she discusses the tittle-tattle in question and hints that Grant's students were placed under stress after proving "unresponsive to late-night suggestions" (Browne 1995.87).

there is no evidence that Darwin was anything other than celibate during the *Beagle* voyage. A consideration of Darwin's "possible sexual encounters" on the voyage would be entirely speculative, and would contrast poorly with the rest of the *Beagle*-related material, which stands on solid factual foundations. Moreover, Desmond and Moore do offer an instance in which Darwin's sexual relations have an impact on his thought.

> Nothing was sacrosanct in [Darwin's] notebooks, and analysing his own feelings set off new trains of thought. Courting Emma, he began considering sexual arousal, slobbering and kissing, tracing them to our animal ancestors. As he jotted, breathing heavily:
>
> > November 27th. — Sexual desire makes saliva flow[,] yes, *certainly* — curious association: I have seen Nina [the dog] licking her chops. — someone has described slovering teethless-jaws. as picture of disgusting lewd old man. ones tendency to kiss, & almost bite, that which one sexually loves is probably connected with flow of saliva, & hence the action of *mouth* & jaws. — Lascivious women are described as biting: so do stallions always.
>
> Blushing too must be sexual, because it intensifies when men and women interact. Perhaps thinking of "one's appearance" drives "blood to surface exposed, face of man... bosom in woman: like erection."
>
> (*D*,273)

Still, this "jotting", and the information that Darwin "breathed heavily" over it, hardly fill the gap perceived by Turner.

Darwin does a little heavy breathing, too, over its protagonist's youthful friendship or romance with Fanny Owen, the daughter of a neighbouring squire:

> She endured painting lessons for her father's sake, but preferred to play at billiards with the boys and to ride with the hunt. This sent her hot blood racing — and Charles noticed. He took her in tow and together they galloped off into the forest. Fanny would not hear of standing by while he enjoyed the action, a

"housemaid" to his "postillion" as she put it in her quaint, coded language. She insisted on shooting too, and he helped her point the gun. The kick was fierce and left her slim shoulder black and blue, as she proved. But she did not wince. She was dreaming about the future, and bigger game.

(*D*.46)[8]

Desmond and Moore seem less gauche in their discussion of the approach of Adam Sedgwick, Cambridge's Woodwardian Professor of Geology, to his proctorial duties:

> Sedgwick penetrated the Cambridge underworld: layer upon layer of laxity, just beneath the surface, with suggestive outcrops everywhere. In the all-male collegiate community who could miss them? Old bachelors and young bucks alike knew where to take their pleasure. The geological Proctor's job was to study the terrain minutely, map it and make it his own. He knew from personal experience that temptation was rife (siring "bastards" was all too common among students, as court cases showed). The blasted girls flocked to town from across East Anglia and Lincolnshire, endless Janes and Sarahs and Elizas and Mary Anns. They were young, usually in their teens, labourers' daughters and sisters, or sad orphans. All of them were hungry, especially the pregnant ones and the mothers. There were rich pickings in Cambridge: tables to be cleared, laundry to be done, young sirs eager to spend. [...]
>
> [...] No wandering woman was safe with the Revd Sedgwick on the prowl. In the market-place, along the Cam, on the Barnwell footpath that led from the rear of Darwin's college, he was ready to arrest her and swear in court that she had been "streetwalking".
>
> (*D*.54)

The play on Sedgwick's geological interests — "layer upon layer of laxity, just beneath the surface, with suggestive outcrops everywhere" — is skilful and, to my mind,

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[8] For a more thoughtful and, indeed, a highly convincing, treatment of Darwin's relationship with Fanny Owen, see Browne 1995.112-16.

genuinely humorous.

Even so, the reader may have detected something unsavoury about the way women are portrayed in the passage. I would disagree initially with such a reading: "The blasted girls [...] endless Janes and Sarahs and [...]" describes Sedgwick's pedantry; this is what the authors are mocking, primarily. And secondarily? Are they not mocking the women in question as well? Certainly, "the pregnant ones" is a rather dehumanising phrase. Can it be ascribed to Sedgwick, or is it a slip on the authors' part? Who is to say...?

Late twentieth-century biographers and critics of biography are inclined or compelled to keep in mind a force described by some as "culture and gender sensitivity", by others as "political correctness". An example of gender-sensitive criticism is provided by Harriet Ritvo's review of John Bowlby's *Charles Darwin*:

> Finally, there is something odd about Bowlby's discussion of women. A genealogical chart of Darwin's grandchildren gives the names of all the grandsons, but only those of granddaughters who have achieved something in Bowlby's estimation — the others get only numbers. When he discusses the burdens that might have led to depression and ill-health among the wives of successful men in the late 18th century, he mentions the frequency of child death, but not the much greater frequency of child-bearing. Reporting the birth of Darwin's first grandchild, to his son Francis and his daughter-in-law Amy, he writes: "This happy event was marred by tragedy, however: Amy died."
>
> (Ritvo 1990.10)

Bowlby, too, has passed on. He belonged to an older, blunter generation of intellectuals.

How sensitive or politically correct is Desmond and Moore's *Darwin*? I cannot locate in it anything as sexist as a genealogical chart giving the names of all grandsons but not of all granddaughters. The authors do not attempt to disguise Darwin's inability to transcend standard Victorian male attitudes to women. The rôle of Darwin's wife Emma, née Emma Wedgewood, is described as:

> narrowly circumscribed — the solitary beast did not want an intellectual soul-

> mate. She tried to dip into Lyell's *Elements of Geology* only to be told not to bother. Lyell's treatment of his long-suffering wife was a paradigm. Charles sent an account of the couple's visit: "we talked for half an hour, unsophisticated geology, with poor M^rs^ Lyell sitting by, a monument of patience. — I want *practice* in illtreating the female sex." Another joke of course, but women were spectators in the male preserve of science, as unwanted here as at the Athenaeum.
>
> (*D*.278)

Desmond and Moore show that, despite such attitudes, Emma was an exceptionally strong individual:

> Amid [a] backdrop of painful thoughts, lost children, lost friends, Emma poured her heart out in another touching letter to Charles, reminiscent of the one she had written after their marriage. The strength of her pleading reflected her own painful experience: the "only relief" was to take affliction "as from God's hand" and "try to believe that all suffering & illness is meant to help us to exalt our minds & to look forward with hope to a future state." [...] Charles had done with Christianity, damned hell's torments, but Emma was now urging prayer for his present happiness, not as insurance against future suffering. She wished him to find the meaning of his pain in an after-life, where their love would go on for ever. But the hope of heaven was dim. He only scrawled "God Bless you" on the bottom of the note. In the end all that stood between his grief and thoughts of oblivion was Emma's unshakeable faith. He became twitchy whenever she left him alone.
>
> (*D*.507)

In a reading alternative to mine, Frank Turner suggests that:

> there is little discussion of the relationship with Emma Wedgewood Darwin save ongoing regret over her religious orthodoxy. The latter was hardly unusual, nor is there any indication that it was extreme. Emma was the most constant figure

> in Charles Darwin's life. The marriage seems to have been happy. She deserves more attention.
>
> (Turner 1992.420)

One possible response to this is that a number of passages from *Darwin* — including the two I have just quoted — evidence a portrayal of Emma that is far subtler than Turner's criticism implies. Another possible response is that an entirely satisfactory treatment of Emma can only be achieved by devoting a biography to her in her own right. *Darwin* makes no pretensions to be a dual biography or "portrait of a marriage"; to judge it as if it did is unfair.

Darwin includes "imperialism" in its index, and offers passages such as:

> [...] the flow of new animal species to the imperial capital [London] was unabated; the natural world lay at John Bull's feet. Darwin, well connected through the Zoological and Geological Societies and with time to spare, was perfectly placed to carry out the definitive study: to name and describe every species of one sub-class.
>
> Even this had its imperial ramifications. Naming is possessing, said the old insect specialist William Kirby. Science was a sort of metaphoric appropriation: when an animal "is named and described, it becomes... a possession for ever, and the value of every individual specimen of it, even in a mercantile view, is enhanced." Hence the glory [illegible] g, as describers rushed into print.
>
> (*D*.343)

While this sardonic view of Victorian scientific enterprise would doubtless have appealed to Strachey, it represents a much more recent mode of historical thinking, wherein the moral validity of the "triumph" of Western military, commercial and cultural institutions is automatically questioned.

Shifts in the degree of ideological and cultural sensitivity displayed by Darwin biographies can be gauged by comparing how different biographers treat the question of FitzRoy's Fuegian guests/captives.

In *Charles Darwin: the fragmentary man*, Geoffrey West writes that, during the initial *Beagle* survey of the South American coast,[9] four Fuegians were:

> taken on board, some as hostages for a stolen whale-boat, another bought from his parents for a button. The intention was to return them ashore, but difficulties appeared, and characteristically FitzRoy was soon so seized by the idea of "the various advantages which might result to them and their countrymen, as well as to us, by taking them to England, educating them there as far as might be practicable, and then bringing them back to Tierra del Fuego," that he resolved to do so on his own responsibility and if necessary at his own expense. One of the men died of smallpox soon after arrival in England in 1830, but the others were cared for, received by the King and Queen, and given instruction in the simpler benefits of Christian civilization.
>
> FitzRoy had presumed that the uncompleted survey was to continue after the briefest pause, and that the restoration of the natives would thus be easy; he was accordingly much perturbed to learn that the plan had been abandoned. His word was his bond, however, to whomsoever given, and he was actually in the process of privately fitting out a 200-ton brig when "a kind uncle" spoke for him at the Admiralty with such effect that he was, after the briefest delay, reappointed to the *Beagle* for a second South American voyage.
>
> The first intention seemed little more than the return of the natives, with a minimum of survey work to put a face on the matter, [...]
>
> (West 1937.88-89)

In today's intellectual climate, anyone who referred to native South Americans and "the simpler benefits of Christian civilization" in the same breath would be taken to be speaking ironically. But West is not a writer who uses irony. He is portraying the shanghaiing of the Fuegians as an act of charity and honour. His emphasis is on FitzRoy's good intentions: "His word was his bond, to whomsoever given". For "to whomsoever given", one might read "even to savages".

Alan Moorehead, with his penchant for colonial adventurers, has never been the

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[9] This initial surveying expedition took place between 1826 and 1830, and did not involve Darwin.

most politically correct of writers. *Darwin and the Beagle* does nothing to improve his status in this regard. According to Moorehead:

> there were three passengers [aboard the *Beagle*], York Minster, Jemmy Button and a young girl, Fuegia Basket. These were three natives from Tierra del Fuego [...] FitzRoy had picked them up on the previous voyage, had bestowed their whimsical names upon them (Jemmy had been bought for a few buttons), and for a year had had them educated at his own expense in England. He had showed them off to King William and Queen Adelaide; the Queen put one of her bonnets on Fuegia's head and a ring on her finger, and gave her a purse of money to buy clothes. Now, with a smattering of English, their European clothes and a stock of European goods and chattels, they were to be returned to their homes on the other side of the world to spread Christianity and civilisation among their countrymen.
>
> (Moorehead 1969,38-39)

Here, the Fuegians are *passengers* who were simply *picked up* (as opposed to shanghaied), and the ridiculous names *bestowed* upon them are *whimsical*.

In John Bowlby's *Charles Darwin* (1990), we are told that, "It would be a great advantage, [FitzRoy] thought, if some of the Fuegians could be taught English and the ways of civilisation and then returned to their native islands, where they could provide friendly contact with such other ships as might in future sail in those parts. The plan decided upon, FitzRoy managed to persuade three older Fuegians to accompany him" (117). Bowlby goes on to note that, had the Admiralty failed to commission a second voyage to South American waters, FitzRoy, "ever generous with his own money", would have chartered a private vessel to return the Fuegians home, and would have accompanied them himself. Bowlby's emphasis, like West's, is on FitzRoy's good intentions rather than the Fuegians' predicament.

Desmond and Moore are more condemnatory than Bowlby. In *Darwin*, there is no mention of FitzRoy "persuading" any Fuegians to accompany him: they are all hostages.

> Most escaped, a few were released, and one was killed in a scuffle (his body was

> duly skeletonized "for further study"). Eventually FitzRoy held two men, a boy, and a girl, none of whom could be put ashore conveniently. So he decided to try an evangelical experiment [...]
>
> (*D*.106)

Desmond and Moore conclude on a sarcastic note:

> The Fuegians, civilized enough to be presented at Court during the summer, were joining the ship with their minder Richard Matthews, a trainee missionary himself. Such was providence. The survey would be completed because the savages had been converted — the Lord was delivering native South America into English hands.
>
> (*D*.106)

Even so, Desmond and Moore may appear positively reactionary beside Janet Browne, who writes that:

> To all intents and purposes, the three Fuegians travelling on board the *Beagle* were the expedition's prize specimens. Like some rare form of animal they had been collected by FitzRoy [...] he did indeed consider the Fuegians as material to be assessed and discussed, trained and repatriated almost as a new and improved kind of domestic animal.
>
> [...] As they might have made a trip to the new zoological gardens in nearby Regent's Park, FitzRoy's aristocratic friends and relations came to look at the Fuegians working on their infant primers in the schoolmaster's house in Walthamstow. [...] The Fuegians furthermore bowed and curtsied to King William and Queen Adelaide just like the other human curios and circus turns that the royal couple loved to see in private performance.
>
> Having been displayed, the Fuegians were also examined. FitzRoy at one stage took them to a phrenologist [...] At the same time, as if to emphasise a growing gulf between observer and observed — between collector and specimen, aristocrat and savage — the solitary pickled corpse [of a Fuegian] brought home

in a barrel from the first *Beagle* voyage was dissected at the Royal College of Surgeons.

Even the names give to the three captives — Fuegia Basket, Jemmy Button, and York Minster — were nonhuman in their terms of reference. Baskets, buttons, and architectural features were more appropriate to dogs than people. Their real names, as recorded in FitzRoy's *Narrative* of the first *Beagle* voyage, were Yokcushlu (Fuegia), Orundellico (Jemmy), and El'leparu (York).

Through all this the Fuegians accepted FitzRoy's wishes with placid indifference. If they were regarded as biological specimens they did not appear to notice or care. But it was still a deeply exploitive moment in the relations between north and south.

(Browne 1995.234-35)

While one agrees with Browne's sentiments, one may be irritated by the didacticism of her tone. She does not have to spell out for us that the names given to the three captives are an insult to their dignity. Also, to refer to FitzRoy's use of the Fuegians as "a deeply exploitative moment in the relations between north and south" trivialises the matter by putting it into an anachronistic frame: the concept of "north-south relations" belongs to modern political jargon; it is not appropriate to the nineteenth century.

Darwin as a work of fact: style versus substance

The unremitting pace of Desmond and Moore's prose sometimes puts a false slant on the factual content of their book. For instance, they present one of Darwin's experiments as follows:

> While in town he took the opportunity to test another of his grisly dispersal ideas at the zoo. He had brought some dead sparrows, their crops stuffed with oats, and fed them to a bateleur eagle and snowy owl, whose regurgitated pellets he then took home. "The Hawks behaved like gentlemen," he reported to Hooker, and a few seeds survived the eagle's gastric juices. "Hurrah!," he shouted after planting a whole owl's pellet, "a seed has just germinated after 21½ hours" in its

> stomach. This, he announced, with a mite less than his usual precision, "w[d] carry it, God knows how many miles." Here, then, was "an effective means of distribution of any seed eaten by any Birds." Seeds did not have to blow across a mythical land mass; they could hitch a macabre lift.
>
> (*D*.445)

While phrases like "grisly dispersal ideas" and "hitch a macabre lift" may hold the reader's attention, they suggest something too eccentric about an experiment which Darwin in fact conducted seriously. The passage does perhaps convey the "lateral" quality of much of Darwin's thought, but has glossed over the intricacy and power of his reasoning. The "grisly dispersal idea" fits perfectly within his arguments about the geographical distribution of species.

> [...] the crops of birds do not secrete gastric juice, and do not in the least injure, as I know by trial, the germination of seeds; now after a bird has found and devoured a large supply of food, it is positively asserted that all the grains do not pass into the gizzard for 12 or even 18 hours. A bird in this interval might easily be blown to the distance of 500 miles, and hawks are known to look for tired birds, and the contents of their torn crops might thus readily get scattered [...] Some hawks and owls bolt their prey whole, and after an interval of from twelve to twenty hours, disgorge pellets, which, as I know from experiments made in the Zoological Gardens, include seeds capable of germination. Some seeds of the oat, wheat, millet, canary, hemp, clover, and beet germinated after having been from twelve to twenty-one hours in the stomachs of different birds of prey; and two seeds of beet grew after having been thus retained for two days and fourteen hours.
>
> (From *On the Origin of Species* — Darwin, C. 1859.356-57)

Clearly there was more to the experiment than simply buying some overfed, dead sparrows, feeding them to raptors at the zoo and shouting "Hurrah!" when a seed from a pellet germinated.

Roy Porter isolates the root of the problem in his review of Desmond's more

recent biography of Huxley (*Huxley: The Devil's Disciple*,[10] 1994):

> As in *Darwin*, [Desmond] employs the "ciné theory" of narration (a mean critic would call it journalistic), privileging action over analysis. [...]
>
> The "ciné theory" leads Desmond to write sentences like "He moved through the great Babylon with the air of a moral assassin". The trouble with such melodramatization is that it displaces the subtler, evaluative arts of the biographer. It is symptomatic that nowhere in the text or footnotes does Desmond engage in discussion with any other historian. Nowhere is distance achieved or in-depth analysis offered. [...] the historian who writes in headlines drastically limits his options and denies his readers rounded interpretation.
>
> (Porter 1994.3-4)[11]

As Porter indicates, these criticisms apply equally to *Darwin*. But one must add that Desmond and Moore have proven themselves, in their other, respective writings, to be entirely willing to engage with fellow historians. Perhaps they felt that to enter into such engagements in *Darwin* would slacken the pace of their narrative and discourage "non-academic" readers.

Darwin's lack of distanced perspectives diminishes its scholarly credibility in two of the most contentious areas of Darwin biography: that of Darwin's ill-health, and that of his science.

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[10] The subtitle "The Devil's Disciple" suggests an association with the "Devil's Chaplain" theme in *Darwin*. One is reminded too that the American edition of *Darwin* is subtitled "The life of a tormented evolutionist". A hint of the satanic presumably does nothing to hinder a biography's sales.

[11] Desmond himself, in his introduction to *Huxley*, has this to say about his "ciné theory": "*Huxley* uses a 'ciné theory' of narration, with its historiography hidden, to conjure up a flesh-and-blood picture of Huxley. It is an unashamedly *social* portrait, which pans across London's splashy streets to catch him in action — and it locates him firmly in a reforming, industrializing, urbanizing, Dickensian context, with its slums, its trade unions and its great debates on evolution, emancipation and moral authority." (1994.xiv) Desmond's historiography is not, in fact, hidden — he has just explained it; and besides, it is self-evident in the main text. What is hidden, rather, is the extent to which Desmond's interpretation of Huxley's life might be debated by other scholars.

Darwin as a work of fact: its portrayal of Darwin's ill-health

Desmond and Moore place much emphasis on a psychosomatic explanation of Darwin's ill-health:

> The work and the worry were compounding. [Darwin] had performed prodigious mental and manual feats during the voyage [of the *Beagle*] with no obvious ill effects. But now, deep into his clandestine work, compiling notes that would shock his geological compatriots, his health was breaking. He was living a double life with double standards, unable to broach his species work with anyone except Eras [his brother Erasmus], for fear he be branded irresponsible, irreligious, or worse. It began to tell in the pit of his stomach. On 20 September he suffered an "uncomfortable palpitation of the h[illegible] and his doctors urged him "*strongly* to knock off all work" and leave for the country.
>
> (*D*.233)

Thus Darwin's mental torment — his fear of being "branded" a "Devil's Chaplain" — doubles into physical torment.

If we choose to read *Darwin* as a Faustian tragedy, such passages are highly effective. However, if we demand that biography attend to truthfulness before dramatic effect, Desmond and Moore's portrayal of Darwin's ill-health is unsatisfactory. The problem lies not with what the authors say, but with what they do not say. It is more than likely that Darwin's illness or illnesses had a psychosomatic component, or were at least exacerbated by mental stress. Desmond and Moore rightly go on to link Darwin's health problems to other anxieties besides his fear of becoming a "Devil's Chaplain": anxieties about completing his books, about travelling to London, about confronting his critics, and about portending deaths — including his own. Yet it is by no means certain that Darwin's ill-health was caused primarily by anxiety. Many people who suffer from anxiety do not thereby suffer as Darwin did, from dyspepsia, vomiting, continual flatulence, heart palpitations, faintness, numbness of the fingertips, eczema, mouth sores... the list of physical symptoms is horrifying. Desmond and Moore give no recognition, even in a footnote, to any of the alternative, physically-based explanations (which cover possibilities ranging from

arsenic poisoning to multiple allergy syndrome). Extensive debates have surrounded the puzzle of Darwin's ill-health, but the uninitiated reader will finish *Darwin* and still know nothing of them.[12]

To take one example: in describing Darwin's crossing of the Andes in March 1835, Desmond and Moore recount that he was plagued by bloodsucking "Giant Vinchuca bugs" (*D*.164). What they fail to mention is that the "Vinchuca bug" (*Triatoma infestans*) often carries the trypanosome that causes Chagas' disease. Symptoms of the disease include cardiac and intestinal disorders. The theory that Darwin's ill-health was caused by Chagas' disease was advanced in 1959 by Professor Saul Adler, an internationally renowned parasitologist. This theory was for several years predominant, and despite some powerful adverse criticisms it remains popular. The absence of any reference to it in *Darwin* is telling: had Desmond and Moore acknowledged any probability that Darwin's ill-health was caused by a physical disease rather than by his doubts and fears, the Faustian aspect of their narrative might have been weakened. A Darwin sickened by terror at his own intellectual daring is more convenient, dramatically, than a Darwin with some mundanely physical ailment.

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[12] For insights into "the puzzle of Darwin's ill-health", see among others Medawar 1964; Colp 1977; Bowlby 1990 (particularly 3-14 and 457-66); and Smith, F. 1990 and 1992.

Darwin as a work of fact:— some methodological problems in scientific biography — Desmond and Moore's portrayal of Darwin's science

The growth of "History of Science" as a specialised academic discipline has brought to scientific biography[13] a new sophistication — or at least, a variety of methodological problems that biographers of scientists cannot afford to ignore if they wish to be taken seriously.

Let us approach these problems by consid ing, firstly, a problem common to most biographies: how are unusual achievements — achievements of the kind that make a person seem "worthy" of a biography — to be explained without resorting to laborious technical explanations? Ought a biography of Edmund Hillary to incorporate a treatise on climbing techniques? Ought a biography of Yeats to provide in-depth analyses of his most moving poems?

In depictions of scientists this problem becomes particularly awkward, because immense intellectual barriers may loom between the general reader and the specialised science. A figure like Stephen Hawking may be a "media star", but how many of the *Newsweek* readers who turned to the cover story about him — "Master of the Universe: one scientist's courageous voyage to the frontiers of the cosmos" (Adler *et al*, 1988) — are in a position to understand his contribution to theoretical physics, let alone to judge it independently of the journalistic "hype"?

Some biographers might opt to ignore technicalities altogether; others might opt to split the biography into two distinct parts, the one part dealing with the scientist's "personal life", the other with the details of his scientific achievements.[14] Neither of these options can be satisfactory to the reader who suspects a strong connection between the development of the scientist's technical ideas and the development of that scientist as a person. Yet the kind of approach that integrates the personal and the technical is not without pitfalls. Scientists' personal quirks do not necessarily affect the quality of their work. Archimedes may have been a "streaker", but that does not alter the usefulness of Archimedes's Principle: when we describe him as "Archimedes the streaker", we are

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[13] By "scientific biography" I mean simply the biographical portrayal of scientists. I do not mean to imply that the biographies in question are scientifically composed or scientifically accurate.

[14] See for example Ronald W. Clark's *The Survival of Charles Darwin: A biography of a man and an idea* (1984); this work is, as its title suggests, something of a "dual" biography — of Darwin, and of Darwin*ism*.

perhaps obscuring Archimedes the serious physicist.

The balance between personal and technical elements in a scientific biography may be determined by the biographer's vision of his readership, his sales and his status. *Archimedes the Streaker* would probably sell better than *Archimedes: Serious Physicist*, but would command less respect in academic circles. However, such considerations need not be the only determinants of that balance. Something of more profound importance is also at stake: the biography's integrity and accuracy about the very nature of science.

To speak of the nature of science is to enter an area of deep academic controversy. At the centre of this controversy lie some of the great questions of analytical philosophy: is there an "objective world" beyond my mind? If so, to what extent do my sensations and ideas correspond to it? And how accurately can language describe it?

Traditionally, scientists have assumed that there is a single objective world, and that its workings can be discovered, described and even predicted, with a high degree of accuracy. They have assumed too that science can be a "pure", self-contained discipline; a set of rational procedures untainted by the biases of the scientist and his community. Such biases do occur, of course, but in the traditional view they are peripheral to science proper: biased, inaccurate results can always be dismissed by the work of better scientists. Hence science would appear to provide the best means for accumulating knowledge about the objective world.

Increasingly, studies in the philosophy, history and sociology of science have modified such assumptions (which is not to say that the traditional view is indefensible, or without defenders). Among historians of science, debates on the nature of science have often been subsumed under the "internalism-versus-externalism" debate. The terms "internalism" and "externalism" are open to a variety of definitions (much as, say, "liberalism" and "socialism" are). Here, for the sake of simplicity, I will caricature the two positions.

Internalist historians of science favour the traditional view of science, so they focus on the "internal" procedures of science: observations, hypotheses and experiments made in relation to "the objective world". Externalist historians of science, on the other hand, think that "scientific objectivity" is a myth: that scientific results are determined primarily by cultural, societal and ideological circumstances: that bodies of scientific "knowledge" and procedure form self-propagating paradigms: that science, like any

other "knowledge system" — theosophy, say, or Cornish folklore — is a social construct. Externalist historians, then, focus on factors that would traditionally be considered external to science.[15]

Before we consider how all this affects Desmond and Moore's *Darwin*, let us turn to my other primary texts. Mostly, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* gives us a day-to-day, "Darwin's-eye view" of Darwin's science: his descriptions, in letters to colleagues, of the progress of his ideas and experiments. Darwin has posed himself certain questions about natural phenomena — above all, the question "How and why do species arise?" — and he believes he can answer them objectively. Huxley's contribution to *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (his essay "On the Reception of the 'Origin of Species'") expresses more explicitly the traditional view of the scientist's role:

> The known is finite, [writes Huxley,] the unknown infinite; intellectually we stand on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability. Our business in every generation is to reclaim a little more land, to add something to the extent and the solidity of our possessions. And even a cursory glance at the history of the biological sciences during the last quarter of a century is sufficient to justify the assertion, that the most potent instrument for the extension of the realm of natural knowledge which has come into men's hands, since the publication of Newton's "Principia," is Darwin's "Origin of Species."
>
> (*LL*2.204)

Geoffrey West, in his *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man*, takes an opposite view. For West, who is writing in the troubled 1930s, Darwin's theory is not at all part of a fixed "islet" of knowledge. Rather, it is part of the process of history: born of nineteenth-century capitalism and militarism, fancied now by the likes of Mussolini, and replaceable, hopefully (and if the dictators it has inspired do not destroy us all first), with something more morally-inspiring.

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[15] For a background to debates along internalist-versus-externalist lines, see among other monographs Steven Shapin's "Discipline and Bounding: The history and sociology of science as seen through the externalism-internalism debate" (1992) and Alan Nelson's "How *Could* Scientific Facts be Socially Constructed?" (1994).

Moreover, declares West:

> it is incumbent upon us to realize the subjective, selective nature of perception and still more of all statement whatsoever, scientific perception and statement as much as any. Herman Melville somewhere remarks that all classifications, all systems of thought, are arbitrary, have a conventional basis; change the convention and you change your conclusions [...] Even the seemingly solid world we see about us, Gerald Heard would say, is in large degree not objective reality but subjective creation, shaped for us mainly by our dominant emotions (too often those of greed and fear) [...]
>
> (West 1937.323)

West attempts to avoid allying himself with any one ideology. Nevertheless, many of his sentiments are decidedly Marxian (if not quite firm enough to be Marx*ist*). Marxian views on any number of topics, including science, appear to have enjoyed a vogue among British intellectuals in the 1930s. One may point to, say, the influence of the Soviet physicist Boris Hessen, who, at a symposium in London in 1931, delivered a "famous" lecture on the apparent symbiosis between Newtonian physics and capitalism (see Richards, S. 1983.184-86). Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, in their social history of Britain between the Wars, suggest that "towards the close of the Thirties", some scientists "were positive that science had no significance unless considered in Marxist terms [...] A great deal of propaganda was published about the success of proletarian Russian scientists, and even the Conservative Press occasionally printed news stories of their remarkable experiments" (1940.393).

Alan Moorehead includes West's *Charles Darwin* in the bibliography of *Darwin and the Beagle*, but appears to fall into Huxley's camp. In concluding *Darwin and The Beagle*, Moorehead quotes the opinion of Huxley's grandson and admirer, Julian Huxley, that Charles Darwin "provided a foundation for the entire structure of modern biology" (*DB*.270). Presumably, Moorehead regards this "foundation" as solid. Nowhere in *Darwin and The Beagle* does he question the objectivity of science.

Desmond and Moore assert in their introduction that:

> The full enigma of Darwin's life has never been grasped. Indeed, previous

> biographies have been curiously bloodless affairs. They have broken little new ground and made no contact with the inflammatory issues and events of his day.
>
> Our *Darwin* sets out to be different — to pose the awkward questions, to probe interests and motivations, to portray the scientific expert as the product of his time; to depict a man grappling with immensities in a society undergoing reform.
>
> (*D*.xvi)

While Desmond and Moore's offhand dismissal of previous biographies was considered by many reviewers to be in poor taste, none denied that *Darwin* was indeed "different". Desmond and Moore's vision of an interplay between scientific and socio-political factors, their firm grounding in the political, social, and theological histories of nineteenth-century Britain, and their intimate knowledge of the Darwin archive, combine to make their treatment of Darwin's science seem a quantum-leap in advance of that in any previous biography.

The intention "to portray the scientific expert as the product of his time" will already have unsettled those readers who prefer to think of science as a self-contained discipline, and indeed, Desmond and Moore go on to suggest that their stance is militantly externalistic.

> We can trace the political roots of [Darwin's] key ideas, following his reading on population, the poor laws and charity. But we cannot stop at mere reading of books. We have to see him as part of an active Whig circle, in an age when the Whig government was building the workhouses and the poor were burning them down. Appreciate Darwin's attitude to the workhouse culture, and his science acquires a new political meaning.
>
> So far this wider context has been largely ignored. The textual analysts and historians of disembodied ideas — of intellectual ghosts — have carried the day. Social historians have consistently failed to follow up, to re-locate Darwin in his age. As a result we have lost sight of the larger world that made Darwin's evolution possible.
>
> Any new biography must take account of the recent upheaval in the history of science, and its new emphasis on the cultural conditioning of

knowledge. Gone is the day when Darwin could be depicted as a seer, a genius out of time. Ours is a defiantly social portrait.

(*D*.xviii)

How confident this passage is; yet it invites a string of questions: *do* Darwin's key ideas have "political roots"? — is knowledge necessarily dependent on "cultural conditioning"? — are insights into Victorian society really the foremost requirement for understanding the development of Darwin's ideas? — would a study that focussed more directly on his scientific methods, and on those ideas *per se*, not serve us more efficiently? For Desmond and Moore do not tell us much about the contents of Darwin's books, which are the ultimate repositories of his ideas. Nor do they provide a synopsis of Darwin's theory of evolution. Someone who had no prior understanding of the theory would probably be confused rather than enlightened about it after reading *Darwin*.

Curiously, *Darwin* turns out to be less "defiantly social" than its introduction would have us believe. The descriptions of Darwin's scientific work tend to be more convincing when they are *not* linked to socio-political phenomena. Indeed, one feels that Desmond and Moore undermine their own mission: their concern to relate the details of Darwin's life accurately allows a rather homely, politically-apathetic Darwin to run off with the book, leaving his politicised *doppelgänger* puffing behind him.

Consider for instance the passage where Desmond and Moore urge a connection between Darwin's scientific thinking and the Crimean War: "While the fleet were besieging Sebastopol, Darwin kept worrying at the sea-borne dispersal of species: how they migrated, whether they could compete successfully with occupying plants when they beached." (*D*.422) This sentence is ingenious — so ingenious that one is not convinced of the truth of the connection. On the other hand, Desmond and Moore's "internalist" description of the relevant experiments is not at all ingenious — and is entirely convincing.

The trouble was, everybody — Hooker included — assumed that seeds were killed by sea-water. But were they?

Late in March 1855 Darwin resolved to find out. Like a country vicar, with the time and patience and a love of pottering, he set up a series of

> experiments brilliant in their mundanity. He bought sea-salt from a chemist. Seeds from the kitchen garden — cress, radish, cabbages, lettuces, carrots and celery — were placed in small bottles of brine. Some he left in the garden, others in a tank of snow in the cellar, to check whether the cold would make any difference. He took a few from each bottle at intervals and planted them in glass dishes on the study mantelpiece, where he could watch for signs of life. It worked. Almost everything came up after a week in sea-water, a fact he delighted in telling Hooker.
>
> (*D*.423)

Whereas Darwin's papers leave the historian in no doubt about the details of experiments such as those described above (we can for instance be confident that he used the seeds of "cress, radish, cabbages [...]" and not some other selection of seeds — see *LL*2.54), his responses to political events seem in many instances either uncertain or non-existent. As William Bynum remarks, Darwin was "not a very political animal":

> Desmond and Moore treat us to wonderfully vivid descriptions of Chartist riots and European revolutions during the 1840s, and the Crimean War of the 1850s. Darwin lived through these events and would obviously have been aware of them. But just how these events "explain" him is not so clear. He never once mentioned the Chartists in his correspondence or other private writings, for example. Should my biographer passionately describe the Gulf War, the riots in Newcastle, or football disturbances at the Arsenal?
>
> In truth, Darwin was not a very political animal. What mattered above all to him were his work and his family. On these, Desmond and Moore are more illuminating than any previous biographer. But it is just possible that Darwin would have felt more at home as a character in a novel by Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope or John Gallsworthy than one by Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoevsky or Arnold Bennett.
>
> (Bynum 1991)[16]

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[16] Bynum might approve of the opening lines of Janet Browne's *Charles Darwin*: "He was born into Jane Austen's England. Indeed, the Darwins could have stepped straight out of the pages of *Emma*, [...]" (Browne 1995.3)

Similar reservations are expressed by Michael Neve:

> There is a strong sense of wish fulfilment in the Desmond and Moore view of England tottering towards revolution in the 1840s. As often in this study, the internal world of personal effort and psychological self-maiming is more convincing than the authors' allegations of the political dangers surrounding a sleepy Kent village.
>
> (Neve 1991.4)

Neve goes on to suggest that in the later stage of Darwin's life, Darwin embarked on an "extraordinary dreamlike journey to the world of things on the edge of the frame: climbing plants; the digestive apparatus of the Venus fly-trap; the nature of the human blush; the archaeological labours of the earthworm. [...] the voyage of the *Beagle* turned into a visit to his garden shed, among the low, the inert, the unexamined." (1991.4)

> Alone in the Brazilian forest, [Darwin] had felt the seething life, vines twisting, palms aquiver, snagging barbs dangling. In his study too the plants lassoed and grappled, but here he and [Francis] could catch them at it.
>
> (*D*.631 — my example)

Neve concludes — correctly, one feels — that this miniaturisation of the protagonist's world makes "the reiteration of the political analysis increasingly ineffective." (1991.4)

Desmond and Moore's failure to convince us that Darwin was much influenced by riots, European revolutions and wars would not be so serious if it did not unsettle our confidence in their central introductory claim that:

> We can trace the political roots of [Darwin's] key ideas, following his reading on population, the poor laws, and charity. But we cannot stop at mere reading of books. We have to see him as part of an active Whig circle, in an age when the Whig government was building the workhouses and the poor were burning them down.
> (*D*.xviii)

This claim resurfaces in the main text in passages such as:

> Darwin's biological initiative matched advanced Whig social thinking. This is what made it compelling. At last he had a mechanism that was compatible with the competitive, free-trading ideals of the ultra-Whigs. [...] an open struggle with no hand-outs for the losers was the Whig way, and no poor-law commissioner could have bettered Darwin's view.
>
> (*D*.276)

Again, Desmond and Moore lack hard evidence. Among all Darwin's books and papers, there seems to be no prominent, explicit statement of his attitude towards the poor laws and the workhouses. (Cohen 1992) If there is, Desmond and Moore do not quote it. Rather, they let slip that:

> Charles's sisters saw the Poor Law as "the great topic of interest," and the Doctor [Charles's father] argued its merits with the local Tories. But Charles was too distant [he was aboard the *Beagle*] and kept his own counsel [...]
>
> (*D*.154)

Darwin appears to have consistently "kept his own counsel" on the "competitive ideals of the ultra-Whigs". Moreover, everything we know about his character suggests that he was drawn to the humane, rather than to the competitive, aspects of Whiggism. The one Whig policy that he did praise outspokenly was the least *laissez-faire*: abolition of the slave-trade.

To what extent, really, was Charles Darwin "part of an active Whig circle"? The Darwin and Wedgewood families were, by tradition and temperament, Whigs; Charles's uncle Josiah Wedgewood had been a Whig member of parliament; Charles's brother Erasmus was a close friend of Harriet Martineau, the popular didactic author and "darling of the Whigs" (*D*.153); and, unsurprisingly, many of Charles's friends and colleagues were Whigs. This may add up to "an active Whig circle", but it does not make Darwin a Whig activist. His participation in British politics was rather like his participation in religious observances: passive.

The Whig anti-welfare "reforms" were inspired by the theories of Thomas Malthus (who argued that agricultural production cannot keep pace with an unchecked, exponential growth in human population). Darwin, too, was inspired by Malthus:

> I happened to read for amusement "Malthus on Population," and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then I had at last got a theory by which to work; [...]
>
> (*LL*1.83)

In describing Darwin's theory as "Malthusian", Desmond and Moore ally its development with "Whig social thinking" (*D*.267). But Darwin himself attributes his immediate assimilation of Malthus's ideas, not to any socio-political awareness on his own part, but to *long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants*. Nor did Darwin ever record "what he might have thought about Malthusianism as it applied to human society" (see Browne 1995.387). Malthus's ideas helped Darwin to arrive at his theory, but that does not necessarily mean that "Whig social thinking" helped Darwin to arrive at his theory.

Darwin's theory has, at its core, outlived the era in which it was conceived. Indeed, it has been validated powerfully by modern studies in genetics — studies which are plainly independent from socio-political circumstances in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Such validation suggests that Darwin observed nature with some clarity, rather than through a thick filter of Whig ideals; and places a heavy onus of proof on Desmond and Moore. This, they do not meet.

A little earlier, I referred to Michael Neve's comment that in the later stage of Darwin's life, Darwin made an "extraordinary dreamlike journey to the world of things on the edge of the frame", a journey wherein "the voyage of the *Beagle* turned into a visit to his garden shed, among the low, the inert, the unexamined." Desmond and Moore describe this miniaturisation of Darwin's world so well, suggests Neve, that they render their own political analysis of Darwin's scientific activity "increasingly

ineffective" (1991.4). If I may add to this: throughout *Darwin*, Desmond and Moore convey well the delights of "small science" — and by "small science", I mean observations and experiments made by the lone enthusiast, away from the political pressures that gather within and around large scientific institutions. Indeed, Desmond and Moore seem to share Darwin's particular fondness for the lilliputian quirks of nature. They write lyrically, for instance, of how Darwin:

> became lost in floral intricacies, delighting in the outrageous. The orchid *Catasetum*, peculiar enough for having three flowers — male, female and hermaphrodite (themselves thought to have been three species until his study) — was actually sensitive to insects and fired arrows with a sticky pollen head as they brushed past. He described the preposterous mechanism to Huxley, to be greeted by, "Do you really think that I can believe all that!"
>
> (*D*.510)

Here and elsewhere, Desmond and Moore show that Darwin was an amateur in the best sense, and that this was linked to his innovativeness as a scientist. Consider the following passage, which describes an aspect of Darwin's progress towards his theory of evolution:

> Most naturalists disdained pigeons and poultry. Science was not done in the farmyard. [..] no one expected pigs and pigeons to hold the key to the mystery of mysteries.
>
> But unconventional science required unconventional support, and Darwin strayed far beyond the normal bounds. He looked anew at the gamekeepers' familiar fare; agricultural shows, animal husbandry, farmhouse lore, and the *Poultry Chronicle*. And he began quizzing those who knew most about breeding and ...ritance: fanciers and nurserymen.
>
> (*D*.426)

This and other such passages in *Darwin*, when read in isolation from Desmond and Moore's political thesis, return us to a traditional, even "heroic", view of science: great

scientific discoveries result primarily from innovative investigations — investigations that run beyond the norms prescribed by the surrounding scientific, social or political establishments: the scientific hero who dares to defy convention is rewarded with "the key to the mystery".

The majority of Darwin's colleagues depended on patronage for their funds. Darwin, as a self-funded amateur, could follow his own scientific inclinations to an extent that they could not. And it was Darwin — the naturalist least fettered by the politics of patronage — who made the most powerful contribution to natural philosophy. Desmond and Moore cannot help but demonstrate all this; so they undermine their own political analysis even when describing Darwin's progress towards his "politically-rooted", "Malthusian" theory of evolution.

Concluding remarks

Darwin combines both popular and scholarly approaches to biography: on the one hand, it is a racily-written "blockbuster" about a troubled genius; on the other, it weaves strands of social, political, religious and scientific history into an intricate argument about the nature of Darwin's science. The result is a highly "readable" work which contains much stimulating scholarship. However, *Darwin* has certain weaknesses. It crosses the line between "readable" prose and vulgar prose too often to qualify as fine literature. More seriously, the authors, apparently out of concern to maintain the pace of the narrative, neither indicate areas of factual uncertainty nor engage with other Darwin scholars. Their contention that Darwin's ideas ran parallel to social and political forces is expressed overbearingly, and is, in places, too forced to be convincing. And, while they describe Darwin's work-habits and experiments in meticulous detail, they do little to explain the contents of his scientific books, which are the ultimate repositories of his ideas.

The near-certain absence of sexual peccadilloes from Darwin's life means that no biography of him is likely to harmonise entirely with the expectations of the late-twentieth-century readers. Nevertheless, the modern biographical urge to make heroes fallible finds expression in Desmond and Moore's protagonist. Sometimes he appears in Faustian guise, torn between his desire for knowledge and his fear that the knowledge he seeks will ruin him. He can be petulant, and even spiteful. And the authors attempt

— not always consistently — to show that he is no "seer", no "genius out of time", but rather "a product of his time", a man who is often more influenced than influential.

One cannot wholeheartedly pay *Darwin* the compliment a Victorian reviewer paid *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*: that the work puts us "on easy terms with Darwin, so that we feel we know what manner of man he was" (Clodd 1888.65). Desmond and Moore's protagonist is a little more and a little less than human, for often he is not Darwin *per se*, but a cypher in their socio-political interpretation of nineteenth-century science. When reading *Darwin*, one feels close to the living, breathing man only in those instances where sharpness of detail severs his personal life and personal science from the authors' politicisation of him.[17]

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[17] For an astute discussion of the tension between personal and political factors in recent biographies of scientists, see Jane Camerini's joint review of Desmond's biography of Huxley and Nicolaas Rupke's biography of Richard Owen. Camerini concludes that:

> Among other works of the 1980s and 1990s, Desmond's and Rupke's biographies stand as correctives to more than one generation of historians for whom the psychological idiom and individual genius loomed too large and the local culture, its social and political conditions, was unduly neglected. Yet in their defiance of overvaluating individual knowledge makers, these recent historians have not quite figured out what to do with their subjects' characters. [...] we need not assume we cannot bring "the personal" into the history of science. Perhaps existing categories of psychology are inadequate; does that mean we should stop asking how and why certain individuals act and feel as they do? Why are historians of science averse to studying inner worlds? Biography is, after all, about a life. Both Desmond's and Rupke's are strong and important works in the history of science, embedding their subjects in the real, socially and politically contingent world. But a life, whether it be in science, politics, art, whether lived in privileged circumstances or poverty, is also contingent on character and on how life is experienced, and we look to biography to teach us something about that too.
>
> (Camerini 1997.311)

CONCLUSION

The end: the "deathbed scene"

For a final illustration of the kind of change that has occurred in biographical modes since Victorian times, let us consider the ways in which three of my primary texts — the first published in 1887, the second in 1937, and the third in 1991 — describe Darwin's death.

According to the 1887 *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*:

> During the night of April 18th, about a quarter to twelve, he had a severe attack and passed into a faint, from which he was brought back to consciousness with great difficulty. He seemed to recognise the approach of death, and said, "I am not the least afraid to die." All the next morning he suffered from terrible nausea and faintness, and hardly rallied before the end came.
>
> He died at about four o'clock on Wednesday, April 19th, 1882.

(*LL*3.358)

Here is no gush of emotions, no outpouring of vivid adjectives; only a bare statement of facts and a few dignified words. Yet, paradoxically, these words have a powerful sentimental appeal: like Caesar's "*Et tu, Brute?*" and Nelson's "Kiss me, Hardy", Darwin's "I am not the least afraid to die" features regularly in compilations of legendary "famous last words".

Geoffrey West's 1937 *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* offers a more lavish portrayal of Darwin's death. West has apparently been inspired by Lytton Strachey's stream-of-consciousness fictionalisation of the death of Queen Victoria. Just as Strachey's Victoria passes, on her deathbed, "back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories — to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of primroses [...]", West's Darwin has "bright memories before the darkness. Wheels white foaming water. His sisters in their gay dresses laughing in the sunshine [...]" (see *LDEB*.116-17 for a fuller comparison). In these passages, we are witnessing what Ruth Hoberman, in her *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English biography, 1918-1939*

(1987), describes as a "modernist" approach to biography: the biographer asks "How would it *feel* to be (say) Darwin?", rather than, "What did Darwin do?" (see *LDEB*.115); and attempts to penetrate and convey Darwin's feelings through techniques pioneered by novelists.

Adrian Desmond and James Moore, in their 1991 *Darwin*, subscribe to yet another style of portraying death:

> Immediately Charles started vomiting. It was violent and prolonged. When there was nothing left the nausea kept on in waves, overpowering him. His body heaved and shuddered, as if possessed by an outside force. An hour passed, then two. Still he gagged and retched. "If I could but die," he gasped repeatedly, "if I could but die." Emma clung to him, trembling, as another spasm started. He was cold, clammy, his skin grey and ghostlike. Blood spewed out, running down his beard. She had never seen such suffering.
>
> (*D*.662)

Again, the passage tells as much about a certain biographical mode as it does about Darwin himself. So forceful is its realism, so protracted its focus on the visceral, that one is reminded of the "ultra-violence" we witness in today's trendier films. It brings the reader to the verge of sheer voyeurism. However, Desmond and Moore's account of Darwin's death also demonstrates the finest characteristic of late-twentieth-century biography: indefatigable research. Whereas West's "stream-of-consciousness" experiment lifts Darwin's death into the realm of purest fiction, Desmond and Moore's "brutalism" is factual. Their account relies on letters such as that which Francis Darwin wrote to Brodie Innes, the former Vicar of Down and a close family friend. Francis tells Innes that Darwin, while dying, "suffered from terribly distressing nausea & occasional exhausting retching. He became gradually very cold & pulseless but remained conscious up to within a quarter of an hour of his death which took place at 4 in the afternoon of 19th [sic] He seemed to know he was dying from the first and was not afraid to die, & indeed in his suffering he wished to die." The details here are rawer than those provided in *The Life and Letters*, and the information that "in his suffering he wished to die" seems to confirm what common sense already tells us: that Darwin's actual last words were agonised — and not the beautifully-phrased "famous

last words" posited in *The Life and Letters*.[1] Where the Victorian biographer creates a dignified legend, the late-twentieth-century biographer emphasises reality through blood, vomit and copious footnotes.

Summation: on the difficulty of discerning patterns in "this great mosaic of biography"

I stated in my Introduction th , "It is for instance a truism among historians of biography that whereas the typical Victorian biographer assumed a duty to commemorate his subject's best qualities, the typical modern biographer assumes a duty to expose at least some his subject's worst. My intention is not to reassert such truisms, but to investigate them; to explore the interplay between a general mode of biography and an individual work that has arisen from that mode." I have attempted, then, to make highly specific observations of the kind that help to refine more general views.

Take, for example, Alan Shelston's view that in Victorian commemorative biography, "the most obvious taboos were not the only ones [...] the closer the family tie the more securely the curtain of discretion was likely to be drawn." This is evidenced subtly in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, where "the curtain of discretion" has been drawn even over certain *positive* aspects of Darwin's life: his wife's "life-long devotion", and his father's considerable wealth (see *LDEB*.??). I do not mean to imply that Shelston's view is invariably true. What interests me is the nature of its truth in this particular instance.

For another example, consider Ruth Hoberman's view that a "modernist" approach to biogr hy emerged in the 1920s and '30s. My examination of Geoffrey West's stream-of-consciousness fictionalisation of Darwin's death both supports and questions Hoberman's view — supports it because the stream-of-consciousness technique is a hallmark of modernism, and questions it because West is writing, not innovatively, as a good modernist should, but in obvious imitation of Strachey (see *LDEB*.116-17). Again, my concern has been with the tension between the general view and the particular instance.

I also stated in my Introduction that, instead of surveying a broad selection of

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[1] The letter in question was first published in 1959. For the entire letter, see Miller 1959. For further references and confirmation of the factuality of Desmond and Moore's account, see Colp 1977.95-96.

influential-seeming biographies, I would focus on biographical treatments of a single outstanding figure, Charles Darwin. This singular focus would show how changes in the general nature of biography can change our view of a specific person. These changes now appear more random than I anticipated they would. The images of Darwin constructed by *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, West's *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man*, Moorehead's *Darwin and the Beagle*, Desmond and Moore's *Darwin*, and the other biographies I have touched on, are more striking in their differences than in their similarities. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* and Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* are both "definitive" works, in the sense that each was once hailed widely as the best and most comprehensive biography of Darwin. Yet they seem at core to have little in common:—

The Life and Letters presents Darwin as an ingenuous naturalist and a family man; a person who is, essentially, contented, though frequently in poor health. The work is largely a dossier of edited source-materials. While it contains many narrative sections written from different points of view, it has no strong, overarching narrative frame — it is not, in other words, a fully synthesised narrative.

Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* is both a powerful, fully synthesised narrative and an argument about the nature of Darwin's science. The protagonist operates in accord with certain of the political movements and events of his time, and emerges as a great, if unwilling, revolutionary. He is, in his chief persona, "a Devil's chaplain": a Victorian Faust, tormented mentally and physically by his desire for forbidden knowledge.

Even if we take into account the various intermediate biographies listed at the end of Chapter Two, it is difficult to view Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* as an extension of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. Nor can Desmond and Moore's *Darwin* be represented entirely as a reaction against previous biographies of Darwin, for to represent it thus would be to exaggerate the influence those previous biographies have had on it. *Darwin* is the dutiful child of certain recent developments in Darwin scholarship and the historiography of science; it is not the aberrant child of previous biographies of Darwin.

Meanwhile, Geoffrey West, writing just before the Second World War, perceives Darwin's theory as an incitement to militarism; and tries to attack the theory by attacking the character of the theorist. He concludes that Darwin was a "fragmentary man", "extraordinarily limited". Alan Moorehead, on the other hand, portrays Darwin as an unambiguous hero, a *Boy's Own* scientist hacking his way through jungles of

superstitious dogma. Yet West's *Charles Darwin: The fragmentary man* is one of the few biographies of Darwin included in Moorehead's bibliography.

All in all, then, new Darwin biographies seem to be inspired less by old Darwin biographies than by new perspectives on Darwin and Darwinism. They seem also to be slanted heavily by their authors' predilections. Darwin's biographical image changes in fits and starts, not coherently, as it might if each new biographer took up from where the previous biographer left off. Hence it appears that the evolution of biographies of Darwin does not follow an internally-generated pattern.

In the final chapter of his admirable *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, Donald Stauffer concedes that:

> To reduce to simplicity the multiplicity of biographies mentioned in this book requires a departure from the truth. Any generalization which is here made could be refuted by judicious selection of materials from the bibliography. Although generalizations can do no more than approach the truth, it may be of some use to fit together these hundreds of pieces into a rough pattern; for the colours in this great mosaic of biography are not the same in all its parts, and many of the tones are caught up and reflected by other pieces in the design.
>
> (Stauffer 1941.1.456)

To reduce to simplicity the biographies mentioned in this thesis would also be to depart from the truth; and I will not follow Stauffeur in attempting to perceive a pattern in the "great mosaic of biography". Perhaps we are looking, rather, at an *absence* of patterns. (Unless one counts as a "pattern" the truism that every biography is to some extent a product of its time. My thesis, like any other survey of biographies, cannot help but contribute towards illustrating this truism.)

In particular, I see no straightforward pattern of *progress* among biographies of Darwin: no certainty that each new work captures him more truly than its predecessors do. With the passing of Victorian proprieties, Darwin has become fair game for any number of myth-brokers, revisionists and academic speculators — including, at intervals throughout this thesis, myself. Many modern writers on Darwin offer "progress" in one area or another: Geoffrey West's vision is less rose-tinted than Francis Darwin's; Alan Moorehead tells a more gripping story than either; and Adrian Desmond and James

Moore tell us things about Darwin's scientific activities that he himself never knew. Yet one is reminded, ultimately, of Francis Darwin's suggestion that the "impression of [Charles Darwin's] personality which remains on the minds of those who knew and loved him" is "at once so vivid and so untranslatable into words" (see *LDEB*.85). An ideal "translation" of Charles Darwin's vitality "into words" seems to remain as elusive as ever.

I argued in my Introduction that the evolution of biography should not be perceived as a march-of-progress towards a modern ideal; and wonder now whether it is correct even to speak of biography as an "evolving" entity. Evolving entities retain their temporal integrity, their continuity through time. Is biography a continuous, evolving family of texts? Or is it, rather, a discontinuous conglomeration of approaches to life-writing — approaches which critics have grouped into a single genre much as the ancients grouped whales with fishes, on the basis that "because certain of their structural features are analogous, they must be generically-related"?

The findings of this thesis prompt these questions, but do not supply firm answers. Perhaps biography can be said to be continuous at some levels and discontinuous at others. For instance, my analysis of biographical treatments of Charles Darwin suggests that the image-of-the-subject constructed by a biography may be determined largely by the era and culture from which that biography has emerged, and only minimally by previous biographies of the same subject. At this level, biography may appear to possess little continuity. At another level, opposing modes of biography — say, traditional life-and-letters biographies versus Stracheyan novelettish biographies — may ' conjoined by the very fact of their opposition. Revolutionaries require something to revolt against; reactionaries, something to react against.

Amid these uncertainties, one conclusion does seem inescapable: we need to clarify concepts like "the evo.'tion of biography", "the development of biography" and "the history of biography".

How might one begin the process of clarification? An immediate difficulty lies in the disparateness of the works that can be categorised as biography. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is "a biography", but so too is the latest defamatory exposé of the life of some Hollywood star, and so too is the Ladybird Book on, say, Alexander the Great (an admirable work, but appreciated best when one is ten years old). When we speak broadly of "the history of biography" we imply that such disparate works are linked by some historical process. But, what is that process? Are the *Life of Johnson*, the

Hollywood exposé and the Ladybird Book linked in a definite way? Or do the links exist merely in that grand conception that all cultural activities, throughout history and across the world, are somehow linked?

This question of linkage brings us to another difficulty: if biography can be said to "evolve" or "develop", by what mechanisms does evolution or development occur? By what causes is the nature of biography changed? Where do the causal links occur? Our perceptions of causation in biography often depend on the concept of "influence": "Strachey was influenced by Fontenelle," we might claim; or, "James Aubrey's *'Brief Lives'* were influenced by the emergence of coffee houses and a culture of witty gossip." We also draw on concepts like "inspiration" and "reaction", as in, "Boswell was inspired by Johnson," or, "Strachey was reacting against the mentality that had sent an entire generation to die in the trenches." Vital as such concepts are, they lend themselves to imprecision. When we say, "Strachey was influenced by Fontenelle," we do not mean that Fontenelle in person advised Strachey on biographical techniques, but that Strachey was familiar with Fontenelle's *Éloges*, liked certain of their aspects, and incorporated those aspects into his own approach. So — what, *exactly*, are the aspects in question, and how, *exactly*, has Strachey incorporated them? This is a complex question, and we can paper over the incompleteness of our knowledge by resorting to broad statements such as "Strachey was influenced by Fontenelle." Such statements also paper over how difficult it is to fix accurately on a single cause for a biographical development. When Aubrey wrote his *"Brief Lives"*, was he influenced by, inspired by, or reacting to, the new coffee-house culture? What are the boundaries between concepts like influence, inspiration and reaction? And what other factors, besides the new culture, might have led Aubrey to write as he did? An accurate portrayal of the causal relationship between seventeenth-century coffee-house culture and Aubrey's *"Brief Lives"* demands a very precise explanation. The statement that "Aubrey's *'Brief Lives'* were influenced by the emergence of coffee houses and a culture of witty gossip" is only a starting point.

If we narrow our focus to certain kinds of biography, or to certain aspects of certain kinds of biography, definite links between biographies may become clear. Victorian life-and-letters biographies, for example, have an obvious cultural coherence. It might be possible to trace precisely where and how one Victorian biographer influenced another, and he in turn another, and so on, until a kind of "evolutionary tree" is established for the relevant aspects of the relevant biographies. One might even

model such an "evolutionary tree" using questions analogous to those asked by evolutionary biologists: "Why did this species of biographical technique begin to diverge? When did it die out? What replaced it?" and so on. Hence it might be perfectly appropriate to speak of "the evolution" or "the history" of a particular body or aspect of Victorian biography.

Similarly, where other factors — other genres, other expressions of culture — have impacted on biographies, the historian of biography needs to state exactly what body or aspect of biography is involved. It is easier to be accurate in tracing the impact of, say, modernist novels on *modernist* biography, than it is to be accurate in tracing the impact of modernist novels on biography in its broadest sense. Conclusions drawn about a small, coherent pool of biographies ought not to be projected immediately onto biography in its broadest sense.

All in all, then, we might begin to clarify concepts like "the evolution of biography" by demanding of ourselves a greater precision: to what body of biographies, and what aspects of that body, *exactly*, are we attributing a process of evolution, and of what mechanisms, *exactly*, does that process consist?

APPENDIX: VICTORIAN BIOGRAPHY AND *THE LIFE OF RICHARD OWEN* BY HIS GRANDSON THE REV. R.S. OWEN (1894)

In my third chapter, I describe the dismissal of Victorian commemorative biography by Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson and others who have followed their lead. The typical Victorian biography, they would have us believe, is a "tedious panegyric", best ignored (see *LDEB*.44-47). I suggest to the contrary that, given the qualities of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, which is not an altogether untypical Victorian biography, Victorian biography on the whole might prove to be interesting: "one wonders what might be revealed if one were to probe other supposedly obsolete Victorian biographies, treating each with a good measure of respect instead of skimming all and compounding the skimmings into a survey. Might not Victorian biography present to the critic a world brimming with colour, rather than the dull landscape sketched by Strachey and Nicolson?"

The purpose of this appendix is to put my rosier view of Victorian biography to something of a test. The test comprises examining the work that commemorates the most eminent naturalist among Darwin's Victorian critics, Richard Owen. Is *The Life of Richard Owen* (1894) "brimming with colour"? Is it, at least, interesting?

Before we focus on *The Life of Richard Owen*, let us reconsider the criteria we might use to judge whether a Victorian biography — any Victorian biography — is "interesting".

Firstly, Victorian biographies may possess a certain antiquarian charm: even if we think their covers plain and their content worthless, we may treasure them, still, because we feel that the past is precious in its own right. The antiquarian charm of Victorian biographies is not disputed by Strachey or Nicolson, and need not concern us greatly here. I mention it to remind myself that one should not allow one's antiquarian predilections to mislead one's critical faculties: one should not mistake antiquarian value for literary value.

Secondly, Victorian biographies may interest historians through the facts they display (or omit). At one level, this attribute need not have anything to do with literary quality: non-literary texts — registers, bills, advertisements, dinner menus — also display facts. However, a biography does not only display facts; it also interprets them. To establish a biography's accuracy and truthfulness, the historian must do more than

simply corroborate its individual statements of fact; he must also investigate the selection and arrangement of those facts. (A text wherein each individual statement is accurate can still present an inaccurate, untruthful overall picture: imagine a biography of wife-beheading Henry VIII composed of accurate statements about his better deeds *only*. A series of accurate statements is not quite the same thing as an accurate series of statements.) Questions of selection and arrangement place us in an overlap between disciplinary boundaries, the terrain where historiography meets ethics and literary aesthetics. The absence of certain historical events from, say, a newly-discovered diary of Samuel Pepys, does not necessarily put the actuality of those events in doubt. Their absence may be attributable to ethical considerations (as in, "even Pepys would have thought it immoral to describe those events") or to aesthetic considerations (as in, "Pepys thought that descriptions of those events would hamper the flow of his narrative"). The historian has to become a literary critic, and vice versa.

Thirdly, we may ask whether a given Victorian biography has any enduring literary interest. The kind of interest I have in mind is to be found in, for instance, Chaucer's tales. We can glean some facts about the medieval world from Chaucer, but that need not be our primary reason for reading him. He would hold our attention even if his England was no more factual than Tolkien's Middle Earth, for he seems to elucidate human nature itself. Moreover, his choice of words, and the structuring of his narratives, possess a time-transcending artistry — an aesthetic rightness that extends far beyond mere antiquarian charm. Certain "canonised" biographical works (Plutarch's "Parallel Lives", for example) also possess such qualities. Does the given Victorian biography possess them too, even if only fractionally?

Fourthly, one may note that the impact of some kinds of memoir — obituaries and society columns, for instance — depends on immediacy. Obituaries of the recently-deceased Lord X will be wasted if they are only published in a year's time; and by July the guest list for Lady Y's June soirée will be very old news indeed. There is nothing wrong with this — a limited period of impact is part of the very nature of obituaries and society columns. Possibly, many Victorian commemorative biographers perceived their task as being simply to produce a grander and more durable obituary *cum* society column. Perhaps, then, we ought to judge the impact and interest of Victorian biographies primarily on that basis: perhaps our central question ought to be, not "Does this Victorian *Life of Sir Q* interest *us, now*?", but, "Did this *Life of Sir Q* interest readers from Q's social milieu in the years immediately after his death?"

Finally, the critic should distinguish between those areas of text that are positively interesting (interesting because the author has succeeded in imbuing them with interest) and areas that are negatively interesting (interesting to question and criticise, merely). For example, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, the reference to Dr. Robert Darwin's financial skills is not, to any great extent, positively interesting — we are told only that the good doctor was not given to losing money (*LL*1.19). The reference becomes more interesting negatively, when we learn from other sources that Robert Darwin was in fact a powerful financier. Why, we are interested to know, is *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* so neglectful of Robert Darwin's financial powers?

The standard charges against Victorian biography are — and I phrase them now in the context of the criteria listed above — that Victorian biography lacks enduring literary value, positive interest and truthfulness. To test *The Life of Richard Owen* against these charges, I will consider them as questions. Does *The Life of Richard Owen* have enduring literary value? Is it positively interesting today? Would it, at least, have been positively interesting to late-Victorian readers? And is it truthful?

Before we attend to these questions, however, let us consider briefly some modern images of Richard Owen.

Modern Images of Richard Owen

In Adrian Desmond and James Moore's *Darwin*, Richard Owen's main part is to feature in passages such as the following:

> "What a demon on earth Owen is. I do hate him," Darwin ranted to Hooker after hearing the latest shenanigans. A conspiracy to oust the superannuated Darwinian President of the Linnean Society, the botanist George Bentham, was supposedly masterminded by the botany keeper at the British Museum, spurred on by Owen. [...] it looked like spite [on Owen's part] for Owen's failure to control the Kew collections. [Owen's] old wounds, left festering after Huxley's slashes, had not healed in a decade.
>
> (*D*.609)

If Owen can be said to have a public image in the twentieth century, the passage contains many of its keywords: conspiracy, spite, failure, fester... Often he has often been portrayed as a twisted Salieri to Darwin's Mozart; a court-favourite talented enough to appreciate Darwin's supreme genius, but driven by envy to abet the anti-Darwinian orthodoxy. Yet even his supposed villainy has not earned him much attention in his own right. Against the bulging shelf of biographies of Darwin, one can set only two substantial published biographies of Owen: the 1894 *Life of Richard Owen* and Nicolaas Rupke's 1994 *Richard Owen: Victorian naturalist*.

Owen (who was born in 1804 and lived till 1892) did not appear villainous to most of his contemporaries. He was befriended by princes and prime-ministers, was honoured with membership or medals by some ninety academies around the world, and stood in the public eye as an authority on the marvels of nature (he coined the order of the dinosaurs, for instance) and a champion of truth against myth (as when he argued, in a much-noticed letter to *The Times*, against the likelihood of the great sea serpent.)

Questions of villainy aside, Owen's standing as a naturalist had, by the time of his death, declined. This decline is evidenced — unwittingly and thus all the more poignantly — in the 1894 *Life of Richard Owen*: the last two pages are devoted to advertisements for 14 other scientific books published by John Murray, and every one of those books happens to be by... Charles Darwin. No advertisement for Owen's books is attached to Owen's own biography.

Today, encyclopaedists generally give preference to other Owens — the social reformer Robert Owen, the war poet Wilfrid Owen, and the athlete "Jesse" Owens. Still, as the history of science has grown into a sophisticated academic discipline, Richard Owen's place in it has been reappraised.[1] The case for defending him rests on two pillars.

The first is that Owen has been the victim of a "Darwinian historiography" which assumes that explaining the origins of species was the main objective of Victorian natural science. In "Darwinian historiography", Owen, by dint of his opposition to Darwin's theory, cannot help but stand as an abject failure (or — I quote Rupke — stands merely as "black counter-shading, to enhance the shiny white of Darwin and the Darwinians" (1994.3)). However, explaining the origins of species was not in fact Owen's main objective. If he can be said to have had a single main objective, argues

[1] For a listing of contributors to the reappraisal of Owen, see Rupke 1994.10

Rupke, it was to establish a separate British museum for natural history. The Natural History Museum at Kensington, which opened in 1881, bears witness to his success.

The second pillar of Owen's defense is that even if we do focus on "the species question", Owen can be seen to have played a useful part. His anatomical work, and in particular his concepts of homology and "the vertebrate archetype", were helpful both to Darwin himself and to the promulgation of Darwinism.

Owen was not the first naturalist to conceive of anatomical homology or a vertebrate archetype; however, he did refine and popularise these concepts to an unprecedented extent (Rupke 1994.183). Homology, in Owen's sense of the term, occurs where different types of organism share an underlying structure. For example, a trout's pectoral fin and a bat's wing are homologous: the bone-structure of the fin and bone-structure of the wing correspond to the same pattern, even though the fin and the wing serve different functions (the fin, stability in water; the wing, flight).[2] This concept of homology is valuable to evolutionary theory because it points to a relatedness between superficially unrelated organisms.

Theories of a "vertebrate archetype" suggest that all actual vertebrate skeletons, from those of fish to those of mammals, correspond to a basic skeletal pattern, the vertebrate archetype. Owen seems to have regarded his archetype as an entirely metaphysical entity;[3] nevertheless, it suited Darwin's theory almost perfectly: Darwin had simply to postulate that the archetype was not metaphysical, but the flesh-and-blood ancestor of today's vertebrates.

> What can be more curious than that the hand of a man, formed for grasping, that of a mole for digging, the leg of the horse, the paddle of the porpoise, and the wing of the bat, should all be constructed on the same pattern, and should include the same bones, in the same relative positions? [...]
>
> The explanation is manifest on the theory of the natural selection of successive slight modifications, [...] The bones of a limb might be shortened and widened to any extent, and become gradually enveloped in a thick membrane, so as to serve as a fin; or a webbed foot might have all its bones, or certain bones,

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[2] In this context homology is counterpointed by analogy, which occurs where anatomically disparate structures perform the same function. A bat's wing and a beetle's, for instance, are analogous: in structure and substance they are not related at all, but both serve the function of flight.

[3] For a full discussion of the ambiguities surrounding Owen's vertebrate archetype, see Rupke 1994.161-219

> lengthened to any extent, and the membrane connecting them increased to any extent, to serve as a wing: yet in all this great amount of modification there will be no tendency to alter the framework of bones or the relative connexion of the several parts. If we suppose that the ancient progenitor, the archetype as it may be called, of all mammals, had its limbs constructed on the existing general pattern, for whatever purpose they served, we can at once perceive the plain signification of the homologous construction of the limbs throughout the whole class.
>
> (Darwin, C. 1859.415-16)

Though Darwin came to "hate" Owen, they did not quarrel openly. The relationship between Owen and Huxley was more mutually vituperative, and more public: their disputes were satirised in publications ranging from *Punch* to Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. The rights and wrongs within the Owen-Huxley clash can be debated endlessly, but it is safe to say that neither man behaved well. All the same, posterity has generally perceived Huxley as the hero — "Darwin's bulldog", with all the sterling British qualities that "bulldog" implies — and Owen as the villain. According to Rupke, this perception of Owen results mostly from Owen's failure to display largesse towards the fellow naturalists who mattered most: those who happened to have talents and ambitions to match his own, and who happened also to determine how history would be written. Owen could in fact be charming and generous, but was only so to people whom he did not consider to be potential rivals. (see Rupke 1994.3-10)

Revisionist history is frequently open to accusations that it exaggerates the obverse of the old, standard history. Rupke's revision of Owen's image is no exception. One reviewer states, not entirely unjustly, that "Rupke ends up depicting Huxley and Darwin as scheming and devious characters — in fact almost [produces] a parody which makes them look like villainous characters plotting against Roger Rabbit." (di Gregorio 1995.476) Owen's magnetism for controversy has evidently extended beyond his grave.

Sherrie Lyons, in another review of Rupke's book, reminds us that Owen *was* a major contributor to the debates that followed the publication of *On The Origin of Species*. If we accept Darwin's theory, we must accept also that Owen's opposing views were incorrect. Lyons concludes that Rupke "does not fundamentally alter the

basic conclusions made by the 'Darwinians'" about Owen (Lyons 1995). I believe Lyons is correct. Rupke frequently describes how Owen altered his scientific claims to suit one or another ideology, and attempts to clarify Owen's actual, private scientific beliefs. This Rupke does brilliantly (see for instance Rupke's discussion of how Owen complied in the "Platonist Christianisation" of his initially "pantheist" vertebrate archetype — Rupke 1994.199-204). However, in explaining the complexity of the political pressures under which Owen had to operate, Rupke sometimes loses sight of the obvious: that Owen, when faced with the great questions of natural philosophy, had little intellectual courage. He subjugated his convictions to expediency. If Owen has been neglected by historians of science, the cause lies more in himself than in any Darwinian plot.[4]

The 1894 *Life of Richard Owen*

The title page announces that *The Life of Richard Owen* is:

BY HIS GRANDSON

THE REV. RICHARD OWEN, M.A.

WITH THE SCIENTIFIC PORTIONS REVISED

BY C. DAVIES SHERBORN

ALSO AN ESSAY ON OWEN'S POSITION IN ANATOMICAL SCIENCE

BY THE

RIGHT HON. T.H. HUXLEY, F.R.S.

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[4] Rupke states at one point that "Darwin quietly expropriated Owen's extensive labour on the archetype and homologies of the skeleton of vertebrates." (1994.209) However, in the relevant passages in *On The Origin Of Species* (Darwin, C. 1859.416-18), Darwin refers to "Owen['s] most interesting work on the 'Nature of Limbs'" and uses phrases like "as Owen has observed". Perhaps Darwin's acknowledgement of Owen ought to be still more fulsome; even so, such phrases serve to moderate Rupke's view.

Darwin's indebtedness to Owen was also acknowledged by the pro-Darwinian journal, *Nature*, in its obituary of Owen: "He was unable to adopt the theory of evolution as presented by Darwin, but his researches did much to prepare the way for the general and rapid acceptance of Darwin's hypothesis, since it was felt that there must be some strictly scientific explanation of the affinities by which he had shown vast groups of animal forms to be allied to one another." (*Nature* 1892.182) Admittedly, the compliment is somewhat backhanded: it implies that Owen's own explanation was *not* "strictly scientific".

One's immediate reaction is to rub one's eyes and re-read the last line: Huxley a contributor to a commemorative life of Owen! How did this come to pass?

But let us for the moment overcome our surprise. Huxley's essay appears at the very end of *The Life of Richard Owen*, and does not refer back to the main text. It seems wiser to consider the main text first, and to return to Huxley's essay in due course.

To avoid confusing the two Richard Owens, I will refer to the grandson, the Reverend Richard Owen, by his middle name, Starton: "Starton Owen" denotes the grandson and plain "Owen" denotes the grandfather.

Starton Owen uses the standard method of the Victorian commemorative biographer: he presents a selection of extracts from letters and diaries, and generally limits his own commentary to linking and contextualising these extracts. Save for a special chapter devoted to Owen's efforts to establish a separate museum of natural history (efforts which spanned some three decades), the work follows a linear, birth-till-death chronology. By Victorian standards the work is of moderate, or even modest, size: it comprises two volumes of about 400 pages each, and is set in fairly large type.

Let us return now to our initial set of questions. Does *The Life of Richard Owen* have enduring literary value? Is it positively interesting today? Would it, at least, have been positively interesting to late-Victorian readers? And is it truthful?

The Life of Richard Owen is not an example of great literature, nor, by all appearances, does it have strong literary pretensions. As a biographer, Starton Owen is more dutiful than inventive. He states in his introduction that "from our relative ages it is impossible that I could have personal knowledge of [Owen's] private life until his later years" (*LRO*1.viii);[5] and, indeed, he volunteers no more about his personal experience of Owen than a few unsurprising extracts from Owen's grandfatherly letters to him (see *LRO*2.265-67). The contrast between this disclaiming of personal knowledge and Francis Darwin's "Reminiscences Of My Father's Everyday Life" is immense. Whereas Francis Darwin seems determined to tackle his own vision of his subject, Starton Owen steps daintily to the sidelines. Moreover, even as compiler of biographical sources, Starton Owen seems in places to be disengaged from his subject. *The Life of Richard Owen* is full of passages like the following:

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[5] *LRO* is my abbreviation for *The Life of Richard Owen* by the Rev. R.S. Owen (1894).

> The Christmas of [1832] Owen spent in Lancaster, and in a letter dated December 24, written to Mrs. Clift to announce his safe arrival, he says: "Everything shows how little change Lancaster has undergone since the days of my childhood. ... I sent for the barber this morning to hear all the current scandal, &c." He also mentions a delay of three hours in getting to Manchester "in consequence of the coach taking in, I should think, near a ton of oysters at Islington."
>
> (*LRO*1.68)

Information of this kind from 1832 must have seemed as trivial to late-Victorian readers as it does to ourselves today. As a review in an 1894 issue of *Nature* points out, "we could, in some measure, have dispensed with many of the trifling details of [Owen's] every-day life, which have, if any, but a passing interest." (169)

In short, Starton Owen's approach is hardly that of a literary author working on his *magnum opus*.

Is it, then, unfair to evaluate *The Life of Richard Owen* as if it were intended as a serious work of literature? Should we lower our critical demands and evaluate it as if it were simply "a grander and more durable obituary *cum* society column"? Some readers in 1894-95 would not have thought so. An anonymous review in *The Church Quarterly* describes Owen as "the member for biological science in the parliament of letters for nearly half a century", then states that:

> It is much to be regretted that such a man should not have found a biographer who would have done him justice. We have read *The Life of Richard Owen* with great care, and are reluctantly compelled to state that it is, without exception, the very worst account of a remarkable man that has come under our notice. What a chance have the writers thrown away! How valuable, how picturesque a narrative might have been composed, if only the task had fallen into competent hands! As it is we have to content ourselves with a curious collection of odds and ends [...] all flung together without method and without

> accuracy — not as part of an historic record, but apparently with the frivolous intention of enumerating the number of titled persons whom the subject of it had met and the diverse societies he was thrown into.
>
> (*The Church Quarterly* 1895.346-47)

In other words, Owen ought to be commemorated by a work of enduring value. A grand obituary *cum* society column is not enough — according to *The Church Quarterly*, at least.

Whereas *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* had received over twenty reviews in British and American periodicals, *The Life of Richard Owen* received a poor several.[6] Perhaps this is another mark of the decline of Owen's status; perhaps, also, it reflects the poorer literary quality of *The Life of Richard Owen*. I have been able to obtain only Alfred W. Benn's review in *The Academy* (1895), Sara A. Hubbard's in *The Dial* (1895), and the aforementioned anonymous reviews in *The Church Quarterly* and *Nature*. Hubbard in *The Dial*, an American publication, appears to have no knowledge of Owen beyond what she has read in *The Life of Richard Owen*. Owen, she writes, "bore himself through [his career] with the quiet, simple grace of one born to the purple, or, better still, of one unconscious of worldly honours and successes, intent solely upon the accomplishment of the work he was given to do." (Hubbard 1895.171) Each of the three other reviews expresses reservations about *The Life of Richard Owen*, and remarks particularly on its avoidance of Owen's difficult side. According to Alfred Benn, for instance:

> The Richard Owen presented to us in this somewhat courtly biography, many pages of which read like a hash of palaeontology and the *Morning Post*, is an amiable, high-minded Christian gentleman, whose manners have the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere, who apparently never makes an enemy, and who is as incapable of hatred as Sir Joshua himself. The perfection of such a picture, of course, necessitated some important omissions.
>
> (Benn 1895.74)

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[6] Judging by the references supplied in *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*. I have given approximate figures because *Poole's Index*, though thorough, is not always exhaustive.

Informed readers would have been well aware of these "important omissions", which one might describe more accurately as immense gaps. Both Benn and *Nature*'s reviewer remark authoritatively on these gaps. Benn gives some precise details about Owen's "estrangement" from Darwin (a topic to which I will return); and *Nature*'s reviewer points out that:

> [...] indeed, even when noticing the publication of [Owen's] memoir on the Aye-Aye in 1863, no reference is made to the remarkable paper read at the Cambridge meeting on the characters of this mammal as a test of the Lamarckian and Darwinian hypotheses of the transmutation and origin of species, nor is there any allusion to the "two pitched battles about the origin of species at Oxford," nor to Charles Kingsley's well-meaning little squib, published during the Cambridge meeting by Macmillan and Co., "On the great Hippocampus Question."
>
> (*Nature* 1894.171 Owen's debates with Huxley over the anatomical differences — or, from Huxley's point of view, similarities — between humans and apes involved a cerebral structure which Owen had termed the "hippocampus minor".)

The reputation today of *The Life of Richard Owen* is, if anything, worse. Adrian Desmond, in the second volume of his biography of Huxley (1997), shows that Huxley and Huxley's circle considered Starton Owen to be, as Joseph Hooker put it, "incompetent to deal with his Grandsire's character under any aspect". Desmond assumes this assessment is correct, describes *The Life of Richard Owen* as an embarrassment to all concerned (including Huxley), and refers to Starton Owen as "the simple curate" and "the hapless curate" (see Desmond 1997.219-21).

Yet the "curate" was neither "simple" nor "hapless". He had an M.A. from Cambridge; and if in the 1890s this was no guarantee of intelligence, it did at least guarantee the mental discipline required to cope with the classical languages. More significantly, while compiling *The Life of Richard Owen*, Starton Owen received "assistance throughout" from C. Davies Sherborn (see *LRO*I.viii).[7] Sherborn had

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[7] Charles Davies Sherborn (1861-1942) is best known for his *Index Animalium*, a massive reference work that forms part of the bedrock of biological nomenclature. He spent most of his working life in the Natural History Museum established by Owen, and played a major part in building the Museum's collection of rare books. In a touching biographical sketch of Sherborn by his colleague Francis Griffin, Sherborn is described as someone who "did a great deal of good in a very unspectacular manner." (Griffin 1953.4)

written an obituary of Owen for *Natural Science*, and had admitted in it that Owen "was not free from the errors of the early investigators, and was very jealous of his contemporaries" (Sherborn 1893.18). Given the exquisite politeness of the average Victorian obituary, the admission seems stunning. If Sherborn could be so blunt, Starton Owen — with Sherborn as an ally — was hardly in a position of "hapless" naïveté.

Still, a Cambridge education and Sherborn's assistance do not by themselves prove Starton's Owen's competence as a biographer. The proof or disproof lies rather in *The Life of Richard Owen* itself. We have established already that *The Life of Richard Owen* is far from perfect. Yet the work contains evidence, too, that Hooker was mistaken in describing Starton Owen as "incompetent to deal with his Grandsire's character under any aspect". Under *any* aspect? No, as we shall see.

The method of compiling biographies from primary sources has the advantage — a mixed advantage, admittedly — that the biographer himself need not be a remarkably good writer, provided he selects those sources well. When it comes to illustrating Owen's more likeable self, Starton Owen often selects very well indeed. Even the scathing *Church Quarterly* review admits of Owen that, "No man could tell a story better, and his general conversation was brilliant and original. He had the happy art of dilating on his own pursuits without being either a pedant or a bore." (1895.362) Starton Owen capitalises on this "happy art". Though *The Life of Richard Owen* is certainly full of trivia, many of those trivia are entertaining, not least because it contains elements of the exotic and the grotesque. Owen's anecdotal style is epitomised in the following:

> One evening, [a widow and her daughter] were talking about the slave trade, in which occupation it appeared that the unfortunate husband and father had spent a large part of his active life. [...] The mother was feebly attempting to make a case in defence of the traffic, when, on a sudden, the attention of both was aroused by a sound as of footsteps rapidly approaching the door, which was immediately burst open by a heavy blow. A piercing shriek came from the mother, who rushed into the adjoining bedroom; the daughter started, and turned

> towards the cause of the noise and her mother's fright, and saw what she afterwards described as the phantom of a negro slave lying on the floor, which turned its ghastly head and glared for a moment upon her with white protruding eyeballs. A figure in black entered and she fled screaming after her mother. [...] What could this be except an apparition of the captain with his negro slave, and the old gentleman himself in black pursuing them?
>
> (*LRO*1.21-22)

The explanation of this mystery, concludes Owen, was known to himself alone. He was then in his late teens, and apprenticed to the surgeon of Lancaster Gaol. The head belonged to a deceased "negro patient in the gaol hospital", and had been amputated surreptitiously by Owen, who was curious about the "craniology" of "the Ethiopian race". As Owen hurried from the gaol, carrying the head in "a strong brown-paper bag", he slipped:

> and fell forward with a shock which jerked the negro's head out of the bag, and sent it bounding down the slippery surface of the steep descent. As soon as I recovered my legs I raced desperately after it, but was too late to arrest its progress. I saw it bounce against the door of a cottage facing the descent, which flew open and received me at the same time, as I was unable to stop my downwards career. I heard shrieks, and saw the whisk of the garment of a female, who had rushed through an inner door; the room was empty; the ghastly head at my feet. I seized it and retreated, wrapping it in my cloak. I suppose I must have closed the door after me, but I never stopped till I reached the surgery.
>
> (*LRO*1.24-25)

This blend of gothicism and rationalism recurs throughout *The Life of Richard Owen*. To mention a few other examples: Owen tells of his "freezing horror" as he himself beholds a "ghost" (actually, a sheet hanging in the moonlight) in the same gaol hospital (*LRO*1.12-21); keeps cigars in "the Australian skull — the one which the natives used for carrying water, and has a band of dried grass attached to it for that purpose"

(*LRO*1.244); goes out to examine "an extraordinary case of a man's tooth growing right through his cheek, and curving up like a walrus's tusk" (*LRO*1.282); dines in a full-scale model of an iguanadon (*LRO*1.399); describes "the black shrivelled remains of the 'Hon. Lady ___.' [encrusted] by a mass of the chrysalises of the *Dermestes*, or darkling beetles, an inch thick. Faugh!" (*LRO*2.79); reveals the fraudulence of an Egyptian "serpent-charmer" (*LRO*2.211-15); and uses his expertise with a microscope to compare the bullet from a murdered policeman's body against bullets fired from the suspect's revolver (*LRO*2.240). Such material hardly fits the Stracheyan or Nicolsonian image of Victorian biography as an exercise in staidness.

I have already quoted the comment in *The Church Quarterly* that *The Life of Richard Owen* is "all flung together [...] apparently with the frivolous intention of enumerating the number of titled persons whom the subject of it had met and the diverse societies he was thrown into." The reviewer adds a further sting:

> [Owen's] bows were not easily forgotten. His enemies said, and his friends could not deny, that they varied with the rank of the person to whom he was presented. In fact Owen might have said, with Sir Pertinax Macsycophant, "I naver in my life could stond straight i'th' presence of a great man; but awways boowed, and boowed, and boowed, as it were by instinct."
>
> (*The Church Quarterly* 1895.361)

Owen's "courtier-like style of manner" and talent for ingratiating himself with the powerful are also mentioned in the reviews in *Nature* and *The Academy* (see *Nature* 1894.169 and Benn 1895.74). Unkind as all this is, Owen's letters do list scrupulously and sometimes *ad nauseam* the names of those aristocrats and celebrities with whom he mingled. Yet the name-dropping and gossip in *The Life of Richard Owen* are not entirely dull, even today. One need not be a specialist in Victorian studies to be stirred by the mention of, say, Charles Dickens (with whom Owen and his wife Caroline were friendly enough for Caroline to disapprove of Dickens's "scanty" new beard, *LRO*2.131), or the Livingstones.

> It was a dress assembly in the grand hall. Mrs. L. [i.e., Mrs. Livingstone], with a straw-bonnet of 1846, and attired to match, made a most singular exception to

all the brilliant costumes. Who can that odd woman be that Professor O. is taking round the room and paying so much attention to? [...] The extraordinary scrutinies of many fine ladies as they shrank, at first, from contact, as far as the crowd permitted! But when the rumour began to buzz abroad that it was Dr. and Mrs. Livingstone — then at the acme of their lion-hood [...] — what a change came over the scene! It was which of the scornful dames could first get introduced to Professor C. to be introduced to Mrs. L. [...]

(*LRO*2 25-26)

The liveliness of this passage belies the supposition that name-dropping invariably makes boring reading. Owen has transformed Mrs. Livingstone into a Cinderella-at-The-Ball for the Evangelical Age.

A similar example is provided by the account of Owen's visit to the great landscape painter Joseph Turner.

> [Owen] tells how, on a very bright August day, Broderip and he walked together to Turner's residence, which was slightly dingy in outward appearance. When they arrived at the door, they waited some time before their ring at the bell was answered. At last an elderly person opened the door a few inches, and asked them suspiciously what they wanted. They replied that they wished to see Mr. Turner. The door was immediately shut in their faces; but after a time the person came back to say that they might enter. When they got into the hall she showed them into a room, and forwith shut the door on them. They then discovered with some dismay that this apartment was in total darkness, with the blinds down and the shutters up. After a prolonged interval, they were told they might go upstairs. Upon arriving at the topmost storey they perceived Turner standing before several easels [...]
>
> After showing them all that there was to be seen, Turner vouchsafed the explanation of the treatment which they experienced upon entering the house. He said that the bright light outside would have spoilt their eyes for properly appreciating the pictures, and that to see them to advantage an interval of darkness was necessary. (*LL*1.262-63 Owen's friend William Broderip was a magistrate, conchologist and "great connoisseur of pictures".)

This anecdote is remarkable not only for the information it conveys about Turner and his preoccupation with light, but also for its gentle handling of Turner's eccentricity. Why did Turner or Turner's housekeeper not explain immediately the purpose of the "interval of darkness"? The question is not asked; Turner's manner of receiving guests is simply accepted — even enjoyed — for what it is, rather as if he were a character invented by Dickens.

In its treatment of Turner, *The Life of Richard Owen* takes on a quality that is more than merely anecdotal. This higher quality recurs in certain other passages. Consider the following "instance of the imaginative faculty which is essential to any great exponent of science":

> One day when Professor Owen was passing through the room of Greek and Roman bronzes [... he] observed close beside him the well-known bronze head of Hypnos with the wing still springing from one of its temples. The form of the wing caught Professor Owen's eye, and he asked, "Have you observed that this is the wing of a night-bird which flies noiselessly?" and then added: "It was a beautiful idea of the Greeks to give the God of Sleep wings which would enable him to visit his patients without a murmur of sound." [...] I was greatly struck by the observation, not so much because of the identification of the wing of the night-bird — that must have been easy for a naturalist, and had indeed been once remarked before, as I learned afterwards — but because of what appeared to me the singularly poetic insight which had led Professor Owen to note the noiselessness of the night-bird's wing and its beautiful appropriateness to the God of Sleep. These were two points which no archæologist had dreamt of [...]
>
> (As told by "Dr. A.S. Murray, of the British Museum" — *LRO*2.256-57)

The intelligence of this passage speaks well not only for A.S. Murray and for Owen himself, but also for Starton Owen, who adds a footnote that, "It is curious to contrast with [silent Hypnos] the practice of modern painters to represent angels with the wings of a swan, one of the most noisy of birds."

Starton Owen brings such thoughtfulness, also, to his approach to Owen's death.

> In the early morning of [Owen's] last birthday (July 20, 1892), the tree which he

admired more than any other in the garden — the Gleditschia — fell down with a crash, leaving only part of the trunk and a few branches, although there was little or no wind at the time.

By a curious coincidence, on that day Sir Richard showed marked symptoms of failing strength. [...]

(*LRO*2.270)

So, while *The Life of Richard Owen* as a whole is not a work of literary art, certain parts of it do possess a literary intelligence, and it contains much that is of positive interest.

Caroline Owen

To modern readers with feminist sensibilities, Owen's wife Caroline would be the strongest, or at least the most intriguing, presence in the text. Her diary was more continuous than his (*LRO*1.vii), and provides the backbone of the first volume. Caroline Owen, *née* Clift, was raised among "museum men": her father was Conservator of the museum of The Royal College of Surgeons, and her brother was his assistant there. (She met Owen some months after Owen was employed at the same museum as a second assistant.) She was far more knowledgeable about the nature of her husband's work than Emma Darwin was about the nature of Charles's, and seems not to have affected the squeamishness that many male Victorian naturalists expected from women. Her level-headedness is evidenced in most of her diary entries, and exemplified in the following.

July 7. [1841] — A sister-in-law of Sir John Franklin came to see me, bringing with her a thing which she had been told was an unborn kangaroo. She was hesitating about bringing such an "indelicate" subject to a gentleman, &c., &c., when I set her mind at rest by assuring her that the kangaroo had not only been born live, but had certainly lived for some time, as I soon saw.

(*LRO*1.184)

I suggested earlier that "the critic should distinguish between those areas of text which are positively interesting (interesting because the author has succeeded in imbuing them with interest) and those which are negatively interesting (interesting to question and criticise, merely)." This distinction can be drawn between the interest that a questioning, feminist-influenced reading brings to Caroline Owen, and the interest imbued in her by Starton Owen — which is, very little. Nowhere does he provide an in-depth discussion of Caroline as a person in her own right. When Caroline first appears in the text, we are not even told her first name. Starton Owen introduces her as "Miss Clift" (*LRO*1.34), and "Miss Clift" she remains till we encounter a letter from Owen to "Dear Caroline" (*LRO*1.39). On the other hand, we witness again the advantage of the compilation method of biography: deficient as Starton Owen's commentary on Caroline is, he cannot help but reproduce colourful items from her diary.

> A piece of stratified coal [was] sent [to Richard] from Yorkshire, together with a black-coloured toad, and the story is that this lump of coal was split open accidentally, and in an oval-shaped hole a toad was found alive and well. How long, then, was the toad living in that lump of coal?
>
> [Richard] was extremely busy, and asked me to investigate and report on it. After looking at the two pieces of coal I began to wonder whether the two edges of the hole coincided exactly, which of course they ought to do, as the lump of coal was split right in the middle. After carefully taking an impression of the edges on some paper by inking them and then placing them in juxtaposition, I ceased to wonder. It was quite plain the whole thing was a fraud. Yet there must have been much trouble spent on it, for the hole was carefully coloured with the same stuff as the toad was, and *tout ensemble* was most plausible.
>
> (*LRO*1.325-26)

In this and other such passages Caroline Owen's personality sparkles; and we see again that Victorian biography need not, after all, be dull.

The truthfulness of *The Life of Richard Owen*

Although *The Life of Richard Owen* never places Owen under a strongly unfavourable light, it does not pretend that he was perfect. His vanity at finding himself, the son of a merchant, among the élite of Victorian society, is revealed by passages such as the following:

> Finding, after my invitation to the Prince's Council at Buckingham Palace, that I could no longer postpone paying my humble duty in form, I sent for a Court tailor, and Carry [Caroline] and I devised a very handsome and elegant attire, I think quite as good as any Court dress I saw. A rich sort of dahlia-brown cloth, with bright steel buttons, buckles, sword, &c., and a white satin waistcoat with rich flowers embroidered. Lace cravat full and long, and the same for the cuffs. All *very fine*, as Pepys would say, [...]
>
> (part of a letter from Owen to his sister Maria — *LRO*1.355)

This kind of vanity is rather endearing; and, given the flashes of irreverence we find in many of Owen's letters,[8] one should grant that he is not being *entirely* reverent about himself here.

The Life of Richard Owen seems honest, too, in its account of Owen's financial anxieties. It gives precise details of his salary as an assistant to William Clift (*LRO*1.68), and later quotes his pleased response to being offered a house by the Queen: the house he sees as "solid pudding" — which his various medals and "*foreign orders of knighthood*" are not (*LRO*1.378). The *Life* also notes Owen's "disappointment with regard to the sale of his numerous scientific works", and reproduces a letter written to him by "the poet Horne", who felt Owen was a fellow-sufferer from "public neglect" (*LRO*1.386-87).

Owen's attempts to establish a separate British Museum of Natural History are dealt with in a special chapter. These attempts were eventually successful, but *The Life of Richard Owen* does not attempt to disguise that they had once been highly

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[8] For instance, on the back of one of his letters he sketches the popular didactic author Harriet Martineau "holding up a huge ear-trumpet" (*LRO*1.124). In another letter he describes how, while dressing his infant son, his bafflement at the "complexity" of children's clothing led him to pull the infant's drawers over its arms " — as the Highlander served his first pair of breeches." (*LRO*1.196-97)

controversial. When, in 1859, Owen had submitted a "Report with Plan" for a new museum to the Trustees of the British Museum and thence to Paliament:

> One or two of [Owen's] intimate and confidential friends dissuaded [or rather, tried to dissuade] him from sending his report. They urged that it might be misconstrued, or "interpreted as exemplifying a character prone to inconsiderate and extravagant views," and might even lead to disagreeable personal consequences. [...] Still, Owen considered that if the details and aims and grounds of his report were known and comprehended, no strong opposition on the part of Parliament could be expected. In this he was disappointed. [Mr. Gregory, the Member for Galway] made [Owen's report] the ground of a motion for a committee of inquiry, which was carried.
>
> (*LRO*2.34-35)

Starton Owen lets us know that Gregory created "a very unfavourable impression" of Owen (*LRO*2.36); and presents detailed material on the obstructions Owen met. (One such obstruction was that, in 1862, the proposed museum became the focus of a trial of strength between Gladstone and Disraeli. Gladstone, who was in favour of the museum, lost — see *LRO*2.41-44.)

However, the honest-seeming features described above are merely redeeming features. On certain other, more important counts *The Life of Richard Owen* is silent, sometimes to the point of falsehood.

Owen's only son, William, committed suicide at the age of 48. He jumped into the Thames, "leaving his hat with purse, watch and address card inside it on the bank" (Rupke 1994.6). *The Life of Richard Owen* mentions none of this; indeed, it gives William's death no more than a single, passing phrase: "After the death of [Owen's] only son in 1886, shortly followed by that of his sole remaining sister, his eldest grandson lived with him at Sheen Lodge [...]" (*LRO*2.260). A suicide in the family is not spoken of — is not even hinted at — anywhere in the *Life*. Starton Owen, who was after all William's son and a clergyman to boot, obviously could not bring himself to discuss the matter publicly. Nor, in an age which had no ethos of "letting it all hang out", may his reluctance have appeared unusual, let alone dishonest. The sharper Victorian reviewers of *The Life of Richard Owen* appear to be well enough acquainted

with Owen to know of the suicide, but none mentions it. Though they suggest that the *Life* ought to discuss certain of Owen's troubles with his colleagues, they stop well short of demanding the exposure of (and thereby exposing) so painful a bereavement.

Even so, one wonders whether the weight of trivia in *The Life of Richard Owen* evidences distraction on Starton Owen's part — distraction of the kind that would be caused by an awareness that something terrible broods beyond the pleasantries in which he must deal.

Starton Owen's silence about William Owen seems entirely forgiveable. The same cannot be said of his silence about Owen's disputes with Huxley, Darwin and others. Letters relevant to certain of these disputes are absent from the otherwise comprehensive collections of Owen's correspondence — though whether the letters were suppressed by Owen himself, by Starton Owen, or by both men at different times, is uncertain (see Gruber and Thackray 1992.16). Whatever the case, Starton Owen (especially with Sherborn as an assistant) could not have been entirely ignorant of the more vehement disputes — disputes which shaped Owen's reputation strongly, and mostly for the worse. The Owen-Huxley feud, in particular, was so very public that its absence from the main text of *The Life of Richard Owen* is both blatant and ludicrous.

To describe fully Owen's relationships with Huxley and Darwin, a separate thesis would be required. The discussion that follows merely serves to indicate how *The Life of Richard Owen* obfuscates these relationships. Owen was seen as an enemy by a number of scientists besides Huxley and Darwin, and *The Life of Richard Owen* obfuscates this too. I will not, however, go on to discuss those other enmities, for the least truthful aspect of *The Life of Richard Owen* is demonstrated amply by the cases of Huxley and Darwin. I consider "Owen and Huxley" first, then "Owen and Darwin".

Owen and Huxley

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95) was Owen's junior by twenty-one years. Like Owen, he came from a middle-class family that had suffered some degree of impoverishment. By the 1850s, Huxley's intelligence, charisma and ambition had begun to establish him as a leading British naturalist.

In the earlier stages of Huxley's career, Owen exerted some influence on Huxley's behalf; yet Huxley appears to have felt uneasy about Owen throughout their

acquaintanceship. This unease is captured in a letter to Eliza Scott (*née* Huxley), his sister and confidante:

> ... Owen has been amazingly civil to me, and it was through his writing to the First Lord [of the Admiralty] that I got my present appointment. He is a queer fish, more odd in appearance than ever... and more bland in manner. He is so frightfully polite that I never feel thoroughly at home with him.
>
> (In *The Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* by his son Leonard Huxley, 1900.1.95. The "appointment" to which Huxley refers is an appointment from the Admiralty to write up the zoological research he had done during his four years as an assistant surgeon attached to the survey ship HMS *Rattlesnake*.)

The letter is dated May 1851. By March 1852, Huxley was writing that:

> [Owen] has come to look upon the Natural World as his special preserve, and "no poachers allowed." So I must manœuvre a little to get my poor memoir ["On the Morphology of the Cephalous Mollusca"] kept out of his hands.
>
> The necessity for these little stratagems utterly disgusts me. [...] but [Owen] I see is determined not to let either me or any one else rise if he can help it. Let him beware. On my own subjects I am his master, and am quite ready to fight half a dozen dragons. And although he has a bitter pen, I flatter myself that on occasions I can match him in that department also.
>
> (Huxley, L. 1900.1.97-98)

Huxley, at this stage of his career, seems to have needed Owen in the way that a mountaineer needs a mountain — as a force against which to pit himself. Owen surely loomed far larger in Huxley's life than Huxley did in Owen's. If Huxley does not feature in the parts of *The Life of Richard Owen* that are relevant to 1852, that is no indictment on *The Life of Richard Owen*.

In 1854, Huxley obtained the post of Professor of General Natural History (which included Palaeontology) at the Government School of Mines at Jermyn Street, London. A couple of years later:

> the growing antagonism between him and Owen had come to a head [...] when the latter, taking advantage of the permission to use the lecture-theatre at Jermyn Street for the delivery of a paleontological [*sic*] course, unwarrantably assumed the title of Professor of Paleontology at the School of Mines, to the obvious detriment of Huxley's position there. His explanations not satisfying the council of the School of Mines, Huxley broke off all personal intercourse with him.
>
> (Huxley, L. 1900.1.142 — see also Rupke 1994.295)

As Rupke demonstrates, "the growing antagonism" between Huxley and Owen had been initiated by Huxley. "From [1851] on it became something of an annual ritual for Huxley to involve himself with one of the subjects to which Owen's name was prominently connected, and focus on any real or imagined mistakes in Owen's work." (Rupke 1994.294) In 1862, Owen was to comment: "Do you remember the story of the clever young Athenian who had the itch of notoriety? He sought the Oracle, and asked 'What shall I do to become a great man?' Answer: 'Slay one'!" (see Rupke 1994.295)

In 1857, Owen delivered to the Linnaean Society a paper in which he argued that the anatomy of the human brain was so unique that it gave reason to classify humans as an altogether higher sub-class of mammal, distinct even — and most particularly — from apes. Huxley disagreed (privately, at this stage) and set out to investigate the question for himself. At the famous Oxford meeting of the British Association in June 1860, Owen reiterated his position on the anatomical differences between the human brain and the brains of apes. He was mistaken. The human brain is not, in fact, so very different anatomically to the brains of the various apes; and Huxley publicised this in a series of academic papers and popular lectures. Nevertheless, in March 1861, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, Owen again reiterated his position. *The Athenæum* reported on the lecture, Huxley wrote to the editor to refute Owen yet again, and an exchange of letters between Owen and Huxley followed. According to Leonard Huxley, "The controversy which raged had some resemblance to a duel over a point of honour and credit. Scientific technicalities became the catchwords of society [...]" (1990.1.191) The "duel" was spoofed in the popular press, and Owen in particular lost face. He, as the senior party, had been expected to maintain more *gravitas*.

Starton Owen purports to describe Owen's ideas about classification (*LRO*2.118-123), but mentions neither Owen's attempt to make a special case for humans nor the

ribbing Owen received in the press. Nor does Starton Owen mention any other moment of contention between Owen and Huxley. *Indeed, there is no discussion of Huxley anywhere in the entire main text.* (Where is Sherborn's guiding hand? one wonders.)

Starton Owen's avoidance of the feud between Owen and Huxley takes on a slight edge of hypocrisy when we find that he is not above mentioning other scientific scandals. He charges Oliver Goldsmith with plagiarism ("Goldsmith obtained his place [in the famously exclusive Club founded by Samuel Johnson] on the score of his supposed scientific attainments, as being the author of a book, 'Animated Nature,' which was merely a translation of Buffon's 'Natural History.'" — *LRO*1.261); and later narrates that John Hunter's executor, Sir Everard Home, plagiarised Hunter's unpublished scientific papers and then burned them (*LRO*2.110). For Starton Owen, these scandals were safely in the past. Goldsmith had died in 1774, Home in 1832.

Why was Huxley, of all people, invited to contribute an assessment of "Owen's position in anatomical science" to *The Life of Richard Owen*? After Owen's death, writes Leonard Huxley, a meeting was held to decide on "some memorial to the great anatomist." Huxley seconded the proposal for a statue to Owen: "I chose the office of seconder," Huxley told Hooker afterwards, "in order that I might clearly define my position and stop the mouths of blasphemers — who would have ascribed silence or absence to all sorts of bad motives." Leonard Huxley adds that Huxley's speech as seconder "had an unexpected sequel. Owen's grandson was so much struck by it that he wrote asking Huxley to undertake a critical account of [Owen's] anatomical work [...]" (Huxley, L. 1900.2.340-42).

Rupke describes Starton Owen's invitation to Huxley as "a bizarre instance of bowing down to the [Darwinian] victors" (1994.3), and so perhaps it is. It may however represent something nobler. Had Huxley's speech on Owen not evidenced some measure of generosity, Starton Owen would surely not have issued the invitation. Did Starton Owen feel that Huxley, now in his late sixties, ought to be given a fuller opportunity to make his peace with Owen, or at least with Owen's spirit? Starton Owen was, as Desmond has emphasised, a clergyman; and it is not implausible that he felt this way — indeed, his feeling this way might explain his avoidance of Huxley throughout the main text. For, by avoiding Huxley throughout the main text, Starton Owen gives him a clean slate on which to review his relationship with Owen, and sole responsibility for the reader's final impression of that relationship.

Huxley's essay on Owen carries some appearances of contrition. He begins by stating that:

> The attempt to form a just conception of the value of work done in any department of human knowledge [...] may easily end in making the limitations of the appraiser more obvious than the true worth of that which he appraises. For the judgement of a contemporary is liable to be obscured by intellectual incompatibilities and warped by personal antagonisms; [...]
>
> In view of these considerations, it was not altogether with a light heart that I assented to the proposal Sir Richard Owen's biographer did me the honour to make, [...] For I have to reckon, more than most, with those causes of imperfect or distorted vision [...]
>
> (*LRO*2.273-74)

Huxley goes on to say that his task of assessing "Owen's Position In The History Of Anatomical Science" is made all the more difficult because it "must be addressed not to experts, but to the general public, to the great majority of whom anatomy is as much a sealed book as the higher mathematics." (*LRO*2.274) He provides for these non-anatomists a 30-page "sketch of the history of anatomical science" up till 1830, the time when "Owen turned from practical medicine to natural science" (*LRO*2.305); then discusses Owen's "monographic work". This, he believes, "occupies a unique position, if one considers, not merely its general high standard of excellence, but the way in which so many of [Owen's] memoirs have opened up new regions of investigation." (*LRO*2.307) Huxley notes, too, the value of Owen's palaeontological work, and Darwin's indebtedness to it: "It is with reference to Owen's report upon the remains of Toxodon [an extinct, hippopotamus-sized rodent from South America] that Darwin remarks in his journal [...] 'How wonderfully are the different orders, at the present time so well separated, blended together in different points of the structure of the Toxodon!'" (*LRO*2.310).

Huxley is less complimentary when he comes to "Owen's contributions to 'philosophical anatomy'" (*LRO*2.312). He argues that, in contrast to the aforementioned lucidity of Owen's descriptions of organic structures, Owen's attempts to explain how such structures came about descend into nonsensical mysticism. To prove his point, he

quotes some of Owen's woolliest pronouncements, such as:

> [...] the Divine mind which planned the Archetype also foreknew all its modifications.
>
> The Archetypal idea was manifested in the flesh, under divers such modifications, upon this planet, long prior to the existence of those animal species that actually exemplify it.
>
> (from Owen's book *On the Nature of Limbs*, 1849, as quoted by Huxley in *LRO*2.317)

Huxley then states that:

> [...] the theory of the vertebrate skeleton had been so elaborately worked out by Spix (1815), Carus (1828), and others, that the vein might well seem to be exhausted. [...] when Owen took up the subject many years after Carus, there really was nothing new in principle to be done [...] All that could be hoped from renewed investigation, along the same lines, was the rectification of erroneous, and the suggestion of unexpected, homologies. And this is what we find; new homologies for the cranial bones; original speculations respecting the nature of the bony walls of the inferior cavities of the skull; as to the proper connections and homology of the pectoral arch; and so on.
>
> I believe I am right in saying that hardly any of these speculations and determinations have stood the test of investigation, or, indeed, that any of them were ever widely accepted.
>
> (*LRO*2.319)

Rupke presents overwhelming evidence that, "This was an inaccurate assessment. The appearance of Owen's homological work met with considerable enthusiasm, and 'homologising' was all the rage for a decade or so following Owen's report [on the vertebrate archetype for the British Association for the Advancement of Science]." (1994.183) However, Rupke is inaccurate in his intimation that Huxley's essay dismisses Owen's homological work completely. Huxley has gone on to note that:

> It would be a great mistake [...] to conclude that Owen's labours in the field of morphology were lost [...] On the contrary, they not only did a great deal of good by awakening attention to the higher problems of morphology in this country; but they were of much service in clarifying and improving anatomical nomenclature, especially in respect of the vertebral region.
>
> (*LRO*2.320-21)

Huxley then gives a rather rambling critique of Owen's attempts to explain the histology of "sexless proliferation" (asexual reproduction), and concludes that Owen "in fact, got no further towards the solution of this wonderful and difficult problem" than previous investigators had (*LRO*2.328). Owen's ideas on asexual reproduction had seemed weak even in 1849, when they were first published. However, although Huxley places "Parthenogenesis", the term Owen coined for reproduction from unfertilised ova, in inverted commas, the term has survived: it is listed, with neither inverted commas nor a capital P, in modern English dictionaries.

On the anatomical comparisons between apes and humans that led to his cruellest battle with Owen, Huxley is no more forthcoming than Starton Owen. Huxley concludes:

> It does not appear to me that anything need be said here about the many scientific controversies in which Owen was engaged. I should be of this opinion if I had not been concerned in any of them; for I do not see what good is to result from the revival of the memory of such conflicts. And whether I am right or wrong in this opinion, I am well assured that, if anything is to be said upon this topic, I am not the proper person to say it.
>
> But not withstanding my determination to ignore controversies, and a strong desire to appreciate rather than to criticise, I am sensible that the discussion of the "Archetype" and of "Parthenogenesis" not merely allows the wide differences of opinion, which unhappily obtained between Sir R. Owen and myself, to appear, but occupies an amount of space which may be thought excessive, in relation to that filled by my endeavour to do justice to the great and solid achievements in Comparative Anatomy and Palæontology which I have recounted.

> But this really lay in the nature of things. Obvious as are the merits of Owen's anatomical and palæontological work to every expert, it is necessary to be an expert to discern them; and endless pages of analysis of his memoirs would not have made the general reader any wiser than he was at first. On the other hand, the nature of the broad problems of the 'Archetype' and of 'Parthenogenesis' may easily be stated in such a way as to be generally intelligible; [...] I have, therefore, permitted myself to dwell upon these topics at some length; but the reader must bear in mind that, whatever view is taken of Sir Richard Owen's speculations on these subjects, his claims to a high place among those who have made great and permanently valuable contributions to knowledge remain unassailable.
>
> (*LRO*2.331-32 When Huxley speaks here of Owen's "memoirs" he means scientific monographs, not personal memoirs.)

Huxley seems to have assumed that his task is to write only about Owen's researches and theories. Nowhere does he refer to Owen's greatest legacy, the Natural History Museum at Kensington.

Owen and Darwin

Both Starton Owen's commentary and the sources he reproduces in *The Life of Richard Owen* describe Darwin in gentlemanly terms. A reader who had no prior knowledge of Owen and Darwin would suppose from *The Life of Richard Owen* that their relationship was friendly. Owen, we learn, announced in 1859 that:

> The whole intellectual world this year has been excited by a book on the origin of species; and what is the consequence? Visitors come to the British Museum, and they say, "Let us see all these varieties of pigeons [the varieties discussed by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*]: where is the tumbler, where is the pouter?" and I am obliged with shame to say, "I can show you none of them;" [...] As to showing you the varieties of those species, or any of those phenomena that would aid one in getting at that mystery of mysteries, the origin of species, our

> space does not permit it; but surely there ought to be space somewhere, and, if not in the British Museum, where is it to be obtained? [...] the number of intellectual individuals interested in that great question which is mooted in Mr. Darwin's book is far beyond the small class expressly concerned in scientific research.
>
> (*LRO*2.39-40)

Owen's desire for "space" was not disinterested; even so, the suggestion remains that he was open to Darwin's ideas.

Starton Owen goes on to claim that Owen "never, so far as can be ascertained, expressed a definite opinion on Darwinism" (*LRO*2.91); and follows this claim with quotations about Owen from both pro and anti Darwinian perspectives. Darwin himself is quoted; so too — on the anti Darwinian side — are St. George Mivart and Adam Sedgwick. The sum of these quotations is that Owen's stance on evolution was too vague or lofty to be brought into contention (see *LRO*2.91-96). Here, Starton Owen is not necessarily engaging in deliberate concealment of Owen's opinion of Darwin's theory. Owen's views on evolution do appear to have been so shifting that they could not be marshalled *en masse* either to support Darwin's theory or to oppose it. As Rupke's biography demonstrates, scholars of Owen still find it extraordinarily difficult to pin on him any conclusive belief about evolution.

In April 1860, an anonymous attack against *On the Origin of Species* appeared in *The Edinburgh Review*. Darwin's reaction is documented in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*:

> [Darwin writes to Charles Lyell:] I have just read the "Edinburgh," which without doubt is by ___. It is extremely malignant, clever, and I fear will be very damaging. He is atrociously severe on Huxley's lecture, and very bitter against Hooker. So we three *enjoyed* it together. Not that I really enjoyed it, for it made me uncomfortable for one night; [...] It requires much study to appreciate all the bitter spite of many of the remarks against me [...]
>
> It is painful to be hated in the intense degree with which ___ hates me.
>
> (*LL*2.300-01)

The Life of Richard Owen carries an oblique reference to the attack, in part of a letter from Sedgwick to Owen:

> Do you know who was the author of the article in the "Edinburgh" on the subject of Darwin's theory? [asks Sedgwick.] On the whole, I think it very good. I once suspected that you must have had a hand in it, and I then abandoned that thought.
>
> (*LRO*2.95-96)

Owen was in fact the author,[9] but he never admitted it publicly; nor does Starton Owen clarify the matter — he leaves Sedgwick's words floating, without comment. This did not go unnoticed. Alfred Benn concludes his review of *The Life of Richard Owen* by answering Sedgwick's question, "who was the author of the article in the 'Edinburgh'?". Benn quotes the above passage from *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* and notes that:

> Apparently the incriminated party was still living when Darwin's correspondence appeared in print, for in each instance the name is replaced by a blank. [...] Sedgwick, in a letter to Owen, inquires about the authorship of [the *Edinburgh*] article [...] The answer is not recorded, nor does the article figure in the bibliography appended to [*The Life of Richard Owen*]. But the only name that otherwise answers the conditions of the problem is [...] the "great name" of Owen himself.
>
> (Benn 1895.74)

Possibly — just possibly — Starton Owen really did not know whether his grandfather had written the *Edinburgh* article. Darwin, unlike Huxley, never "duelled" with Owen face-to-face before the wider public; so Starton Owen may have had no inkling of how deeply the animosity between Darwin and Owen ran. Starton Owen may not, for instance, have been aware that Owen was "outraged" by *On the Origin of Species*

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[9] See Rupke 1994.238-42 for a highly perceptive interpretation of Owen's *Edinburgh* article.

because it cast him as "a leading advocate of the immutability of species" when he was in fact actively sympathetic to theories of mutability (see Rupke 1994.235-42).[10] And Starton Owen would certainly not have known that Darwin once wrote, "What a demon on earth Owen is. I do hate him." (see *D*.609) For, unlike modern scholars, Starton Owen did not have access to the least pleasant elements of Darwin's correspondence.

If Starton Owen possessed no firm information about the animosity between Owen and Darwin, can we describe his treatment of the Owen-Darwin relationship as untruthful? If by "untruthful" we mean "deliberately lying", then no, we cannot. But a more determined biographer would have investigated that relationship more closely — by, say, interviewing Owen's and Darwin's surviving colleagues — and would have discovered its true aspect.

Concluding remarks

In this appendix, I have tried to test "my rosier view of Victorian biography" against the view that Victorian biography lacks enduring literary value, positive interest and truthfulness. According to my third chapter, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* does not altogether lack these qualities. Can the same be said of the life-and-letters biography of Darwin's colleague and sometime enemy Richard Owen?

On the question of literary value and positive interest: *The Life of Richard Owen* is not a good biography. It says far too much about the trivial aspects of Owen's life, and far too little about the important ones. Knowledgeable ..'s — both Victorian and modern — have portrayed it as a literary disaster. *The Ch.. ch Quarterly* described it as, "without exception, the very worst account of a remarkable man that has come under our notice." (1895.346)

Yet *The Life of Richard Owen* has some redeeming features. Although its author is no Boswell, the sources he relies on are often lively. Caroline Owen, whose diary

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[10] Darwin states in the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* that "all the most eminent palaeontologists, namely Cuvier, Owen, Agassiz, Barrande, Falconer, E. Forbes, &c., and all our greatest geologists, as Lyell, Murchison, Sedgwick, &c., have unanimously, often vehemently, maintained the immutability of species." (315-16) In the "Historical Sketch" that prefaces later editions, Darwin describes his inclusion of Owen among those "convinced of the immutability of species" as "a preposterous error"; but the apology seems sarcastic, for Darwin goes on to suggest that Owen's position on natural selection has vacillated incomprehensibly, and concludes: "It is consolatory to me that others find Professor Owen's controversial writings as difficult to understand and to reconcile with each other, as I do." (59 — all page references in this footnote apply to the 1985 Penguin Classics edition)

supplies much of the text, is one such source, and an intriguing presence in her own right. Owen himself is another: as *The Church Quarterly* review admits, "No man could tell a story better." (1895,362) Many of the anecdotes reproduced in the work (Owen's "ghostly experiences", for instance) are entertaining. And a few are told with such literary intelligence (as in the account of Owen's visit to Joseph Turner) that they become more than merely anecdotal.

On the question of truthfulness: *The Life of Richard Owen* reveals almost nothing beyond Owen's minor weaknesses (such as his vanity over his "Court dress"). It avoids the great tragedy of Owen's career — his clashes with Huxley, Darwin and their allies. The main text barely mentions Huxley, who conducted against Owen one of the most highly publicised scientific feuds of the Victorian era. And even if we take Huxley's appended essay on "Owen's Position in the History of Anatomical Science" into account, *The Life of Richard Owen* still reduces Owen's relationships with Huxley and Darwin to a hotch-potch of evasions and gentlemen's agreements. Hence *The Life of Richard Owen* is *not* truthful; and tends here to vindicate the negative view of Victorian commemorative biography. One could suggest that the charge of untruthfulness misses the point — that *The Life of Richard Owen* is a masterpiece of diplomacy and conciliation. But what sort of conciliation is achieved when the most painful issues are obfuscated?

The frothy entertainment of, say, Owen's ghost stories, is poor compensation for the absence of his tragedy. I must concede now that the better features of *The Life of Richard Owen* are outweighed by the worst: *The Life of Richard Owen* tips us more towards than away from the negative view of Victorian biography.

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Incidentally, this Penguin edition follows the 1859 edition word for word. It differs only in having new addenda and correspondingly new page numbering.

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