

REVIEW

The Darwin Experience: The Story of the Man and His Theory of Evolution

by John van Wyhe

Washington (DC): National Geographic Press, 2008. 64 pages

reviewed by Michael D Barton

Scores of books about Charles Darwin and evolution were published in or near 2009 in celebration of two anniversaries: the 200th of Darwin's birth and the 150th of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. While some retold the story of the discovery of the theory of evolution by natural selection and the man behind it with a new spin, others examined the impact that Darwin's ideas had on realms of thought beyond biology, during his time and through the present. *The Darwin Experience* does both, and adds more. Most books are intended to be read, yet this one asks its readers not only to scour the detailed text throughout, but also to engage with additional material provided within its pages.

A beautifully-produced oversized book, *The Darwin Experience* is authored by historian of science and director of The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>) John van Wyhe, a senior lecturer in the Departments of Biology and History at the National University of Singapore. Referring to van Wyhe as curator of this book would be appropriate, for the additional material is a varied assortment of facsimiles of primary documents: illustrations, photographs, letters, pages from notebooks, maps, cards, and more. Each page conjures up a topical display that is part of a large exhibit about Darwin, although you as the reader get the entire gallery to yourself. From displays that set the scientific context before Darwin enters the stage through his legacy, one can explore "Edinburgh University," "Don Carlos: 'So much of a gaucho'," "Tierra del Fuego and the shock of the savage," "The Galápagos: The true story," "At home with the Darwins," "Putting the puzzle together," "Orchids," and "The Sage of Down and the study of worms" (there are 28 "displays" in all).

The book is ordered chronologically, and van Wyhe, well-suited to bringing to life Darwin's life and work, offers *The Darwin Experience* as "an experiment in communicating the history of science, Darwin, and evolution to a wider audience" (p 4). First and foremost, this book is for the non-specialist interested in gaining a better understanding of a much-misunderstood topic. Given that, van Wyhe states, "The true story of how evolution by natural selection was uncovered is quite different from that familiar to most people" (p 4). Anyone familiar with van Wyhe's work as a historian knows that he has given much effort to dispelling myths about Charles Darwin, notably in a piece for the UK newspaper *The Guardian* (van Wyne 2008). For example, he states that it is misleading to portray Darwin and the *Beagle's* cap-

tain Robert FitzRoy as antagonists for FitzRoy only became an evangelical Christian after the voyage; that Darwin did not “discover” evolution while at the Galápagos Islands (it is a legend that arose in the twentieth century) and mockingbirds rather than finches were more important; that Darwin was indeed the naturalist for the voyage and not simply a gentleman companion for FitzRoy; that there is no evidence the death of Darwin’s daughter Annie killed off his Christianity; that Darwin did not stall in publishing his transmutation theory (referred to as “Darwin’s delay”) by working on barnacles for eight years and moving on to experiments; that the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* did not sell out to the public on its first day (it did sell out to booksellers, however); that there was great scientific as well as religious debate following the publication of the *Origin*; that the Oxford debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley has been greatly exaggerated as a moment of science versus religion; and that Darwin neither renounced his theory nor converted to Christianity on his deathbed. Some of these myths or misrepresentations of history are actively being researched by van Wyhe for scholarly articles.

While we get plenty of myth-busting in *The Darwin Experience*, van Wyhe also shares a lot of interesting details about Darwin and his work that are usually not a part of shorter, introductory works on the topic. Darwin’s many years of work on barnacles stemmed from his not being able to publish a *Zoology of the Beagle* volume of invertebrates due to a lack of government funds. The astronomer John Herschel, whose 1831 work *Preliminary Discourse* was influential to Darwin in its presentation of correct methods of scientific investigation, referred to natural selection as the “law of higgledy-piggelty.” While many know about Darwin and his time at Cambridge University, less known is Darwin’s relationship with Robert Grant of Edinburgh University and a moment of scientific jealousy when Darwin presented his own research on an aspect of Grant’s area of research (marine invertebrates); Grant thought it unfair of Darwin to have published it. Perhaps such an instance pushed Darwin to be protective of his later work.

Perhaps one of the more interesting tidbits in this book concerns not Darwin but another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace (I do wish there was more on Wallace in this book, however). In the “display” about *On the Origin of Species*, we learn, expectedly, of Wallace’s sending Darwin his essay proposing a similar transmutation theory. The other, less expected, mention of Wallace is not from van Wyhe’s hand, but rather an anonymous one: on the facsimile document of the Order of Procession at the Funeral of Mr Darwin at Westminster Abbey in 1882, a diagram shows the ten pallbearers present. Along with Thomas Huxley, Joseph Hooker, John Lubbock, and several others, Wallace was chosen for the task. On one side of the casket, the diagram shows, Wallace was at the rear, and hand-written on the document is a clear demonstration of someone’s view that Wallace deserved more recognition for his contributions: “ARW ought to have been at other end.”

There is plenty to read in this book; beyond van Wyhe’s narrative there are quotes and excerpts from Darwin’s works, notebooks, and letters, and works of other figures related to the topic. To connect a reader to the history they are engaged with, there is nothing better than providing them with such primary documents. In order to know Darwin or how others regarded him better, one should read his own

words or what his contemporaries wrote about him, as in the passages taken from obituaries that van Whye shares at the end of the book. In the case of some of the removable documents scattered throughout the book, however, some readers may find it a difficult task to understand what they are looking at. Having worked on a project to transcribe the letters of a nineteenth-century scientist (John Tyndall), I know all too well how tough it is to decipher Victorian penmanship. *The Darwin Experience* would have benefited if along with some of the primary documents the author would have provided the reader with a transcription. Granted these works are largely all available on-line through various websites (and each document includes its individual catalog number for the Darwin Papers archive at Cambridge University Library), but if this book is a self-contained “experience,” having the transcriptions handy, in an appendix perhaps, would aid some readers.

The Darwin Experience is a wonderful window into the life and work of Charles Darwin, suitable for newcomers to the topic as well as those already familiar because of its display-like presentation and the illustrations and facsimile documents. Even the endpaper design for this book mimics those of late-nineteenth-century printings of books by Darwin. There is simply too much to explore and enjoy in *The Darwin Experience*.

REFERENCES

van Whye J. 2008 Feb 9. It ain't necessarily so. [Internet.] Manchester UK: *The Guardian* [cited 2010 Jan 27]. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/feb/09/darwin.myths>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael D Barton graduated from Montana State University in 2010 with a master's degree in history. His research concerned the role of John Tyndall as a supporter of Charles Darwin, and he was a participant in the John Tyndall Correspondence Project (<http://www.yorku.ca/tyndall/>). He blogs about Darwin, evolution, and the history of science at The Dispersal of Darwin (<http://thedispersalofdarwin.wordpress.com/>). He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

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