

Book Reviews

ADRIAN DESMOND and JAMES MOORE, *Darwin*, London, Michael Joseph Ltd, 1991, pp. xvii, 773, illus., £20.00 (0-7181-3430-3).

Charles Darwin has attracted many biographers fascinated by the paradox of the wealthy and industrious Victorian invalid who, immured in rural isolation, reluctantly destroyed the world-picture of the wealthy Victorians. Adrian Desmond and James Moore, in their lengthy new biography, are quite brusque about the invalidism: they assume that Darwin's chronic illness was linked with guilt at his creeping murder of religion. Here lies a further paradox because, as they emphasize, Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus and father Robert were both free-thinkers. The family freedom from religious orthodoxy was for Charles a precious gift that freed him to follow his theories to their logical end. It was paradoxical too that biological evolution, though new and shocking to most Victorians, was an ancient idea, well expounded in the 1790s by Erasmus Darwin, who was then promptly squashed by the religious powers-that-were. Robert Darwin saw his father's intellectual martyrdom and kept so quiet about his own commitment to evolution that it is difficult to know whether he continued to believe in it. Charles revived the old idea and added a *modus operandi*, natural selection as he called it: but that too was unoriginal, and tautological—the survival of the fittest-to-survive. Yet he shook the world, and has given us a crucial and enduring insight into the development of all life.

These wider issues are not much aired by Desmond and Moore. Their book is a straight biography, a lively and compelling narrative that drives forward strongly. To say that the book is well-written would be an understatement: it is well overwritten and often reads like a novel. But there is a strong basis of scholarship, and the authors have dipped deep into the manuscripts of the great Darwin archive at the Cambridge University Library, as well as the published volumes of the *Correspondence*. They provide nearly 1500 notes (mostly multiple), a 30-page index, and a splendid exhibition of 91 illustrations; and there is a refreshing absence of misprints. All in all, with this union of lively writing and good scholarship, the book probably deserves to be acclaimed as the best biography of Darwin.

As such, it needs to live up to high standards, and does not always do so. The style is frequently irritating in its hyperbole: letters are usually “fired off” rather than sent, Darwin “traipses” more than he travels; and so on. The hype could usefully be toned down in a second edition. The index is not always reliable: for example, Charles's grandfather Erasmus appears on the first line of the text (page 5) and dominates pages 5–11; yet the first reference to him in the index is for page 23.

The worst criticism to be made is that the book is unhistorical, in three ways. First, the authors' enthusiasm for their subject leaves the impression that he had no precursors. C. D. Darlington's admirable book *Darwin's place in history*, which reviews earlier proponents of evolution, does not appear in the bibliography, and many of the earlier naturalists discussed by Darlington, such as W. C. Wells, J. C. Prichard and William Lawrence, go unmentioned. Nor is Darwin's own lack of historical awareness sufficiently emphasized: indeed the authors seem to share it. For example, in discussing Darwin's assiduous studies of sea-borne seeds in 1855, they say: “the trouble was, everybody—Hooker included—assumed that seeds were killed by sea water”. In fact the opposite was widely known in the eighteenth century. Erasmus Darwin's note on *Cassia* in *The loves of the plants* (1789) gave details of seeds from America carried by the Gulf Stream to the Norwegian coast, “frequently in so recent a state as to vegetate, when properly taken care of”. (Charles marked this note with a pencil line, but probably not until he re-read it in 1857.)

A second “historical” deficiency is quite blatant: the authors dismiss all previous biographers of Darwin with the remark that their books are “curiously bloodless affairs”. Such an insult invites the riposte that this biography is not the only one to “read like a novel”: Irving Stone's *The origin*, published ten years ago, was a successful precursor.

The third historical objection concerns an important feature of the book, the vivid evocations of civil commotion and mayhem: “It is 1839. England is tumbling towards anarchy, with

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countrywide unrest and riots . . . Red revolutionists . . . denounce the props of an old static society . . . Britain now stands teetering on the brink of collapse—or so it seems to the gentry . . .”. Yet Charles Darwin was one of the gentry, and his letters do not mention any of this, not even the “red revolutionists”. Can it be that the authors have gone over the top and are imposing their own view rather than the reality? But it would be unkind to end on a hostile note. Whatever its excesses of language, the book makes a dull life interesting, while preserving a high standard of scholarship.

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CHARLES WEBSTER (ed.), *Aneurin Bevan on the National Health Service*, Research Publications 10, University of Oxford, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine (45–47 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE), 1991, pp. xix, 225, illus., £7.95 (paperback, 0–906844–09–6).

This book contains 23 papers setting forth Aneurin Bevan’s views on the Health Service between 1945 and 1958. Before the Service began in 1948, we see him developing and defending the plan he devised, making the concessions necessary to put it across. Above all, he held out to doctors the prospect of clinical freedom, with the state providing the funds and facilities needed to practise medical science to the full. There was also to be no restraint on civil liberties; all employed in the Service would be free to express whatever criticisms they had of it. Nothing could contrast more sharply with the situation that exists today.

After 1948, we find Bevan trying to cope with the funding problems that arose as the result of expenditure far exceeding estimates. His main aim then was to resist the pressure emanating from the Treasury to revoke the principle of free care which he so deeply cherished. Though Bevan himself secured the legislation needed to impose a charge for prescriptions, he later claimed that he never expected it to be implemented and resigned from Government when charges were introduced for dentures and spectacles.

Similarly, though he later proposed a reform of local government that would permit the Service to be administered in the democratic manner he considered desirable, he nationalized the hospital service and sympathized with the doctors in their opposition to municipal rule. As in his subsequent abandonment of the principle of unilateral nuclear disarmament, Bevan proved more flexible than the zealots who worshipped him. Where the health service was concerned, his greatest success—though not cited by Webster in his introduction—was, as one Labour MP put it, “the way he applied the anaesthetic to supporters on his own side, making them believe in things they had opposed all their lives”.

Though the papers provide a convenient reference for Bevan’s views, they are hard to follow without detailed knowledge of the events surrounding them. Webster’s attempts in his Introduction to provide some background are no substitute for a fuller history. The book is thus likely to appeal to those who already know the story, and they will find a curious omission: one of Bevan’s most impressive papers is not contained here. That was the memorandum he submitted to the Cabinet on 16 October 1945, rebutting Herbert Morrison’s arguments against nationalization of the hospital service and ending with a rousing plea for support. A chance like this, he warned his colleagues, came only once in a generation: “If it is not done now, it will not be done in our time.”

After reading this document, it is difficult to attach much weight to Bevan’s later espousal of municipal rule. The reform he proposed in 1954 called for the creation of 240 local authorities, all except those in great cities serving populations of less than 100,000. These would be far too small for hospital administration, as the 1962 Hospital Plan later indicated. Nor did Bevan have any faith in local government ability to finance the move; all the money in his proposed reform was to come from Whitehall with local authorities acting merely on an agency basis. What Chancellor of the Exchequer could possibly have accepted that?

Webster has compiled this collection in an attempt to counteract what he sees as a tendency in histories of the NHS to write Bevan out of the story. This, too, is hard to accept, certainly as far as my own work is concerned. I devoted much space to Bevan’s role, giving full credit to the