Book Review

Darwin and His Children: His Other Legacy. 2013. Tim M. Berra. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK. xii + 248 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0199309443 ISBN-10: 0199309442

The writing of scientific biographies has been an important tool for understanding not merely a scientist but the scientific and historical context in which he or she lived. Charles Darwin has been the subject of innumerable biographies, but Tim Berra, Professor Emeritus of Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology at The Ohio State University, has written something different in his book that cuts across three disciplines: the sciences, history of science, and biography. His focus is less on Darwin than on his children, a subject that no other biographer has yet undertaken. Such an accomplishment is not easy to achieve. In this context Berra deserves praise. The book begins with an overview of Charles Darwin's achievements and is both science and history of science. This chapter, the first, is probably the most important part of Darwin and His Children. This biographical and scientific information is well known. Berra derived it primarily from secondary sources. In this context the author admits to having favored secondary sources, a decision that receives treatment later. Two salient points derive from this first chapter. First Berra notes that Darwin, although enormously productive, was frequently ill. By contrast the late Stephen Jay Gould wrote that Darwin was too energetic, too inquisitive, and too relentless in pursuit of knowledge to have been ill. Gould's point is worthy of consideration. Second, when treating the effects of Darwin's ideas, Berra likens them to a "paradigm shift." (p. 9) This language derives from the late Thomas Kuhn, whose ideas have been fiercely debated.

The remaining chapters, three through twelve, are devoted to the children of Charles and Emma. Each chapter treats one child, and Berra arranges these chapters chronologically. They are noteworthy in the fact that no other book combines the biographies of all ten children in a single volume. The book is thus an innovation and worthy of scrutiny. Every child need not merit treatment here, but some comment is due Anne Elizabeth Darwin (Annie) because Charles never veered from the judgment that she was his favorite. She was an early and voracious reader, just like her father. The chapter contains a haunting photography of Annie at age seven, perhaps the treasure of portraits in this well illustrated book. Annie does not smile in the photograph, which seems to have been common at the time, though the fact that we know her fate imbues the seriousness of her expression with an aura of the ominous. In 1849 she contracted scarlet fever, the disease that some scholars believe had killed Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the late 18th century. Annie never recovered from the illness. She appears to have contract tuberculosis, then called consumption, though it is not clear when. The bacterial infection killed her in 1851 at just age ten. When one thinks of the great killers throughout history, smallpox, influenza, measles, and malaria come rapidly to mind, but tuberculosis has killed its share, including Carl Maria von Weber, Nicolo Paganini, and Eric Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell. Berra is right that Annie's death extinguished whatever religious sentiments Darwin might still have held. He thereafter claimed himself an agnostic, which, to be fair, is not tantamount to atheism.

These mini biographies of the children reveal as much about Charles Darwin as they do about his children. Emma must have had a tremendous influence on the children as well, though Berra appears to assign her a modest role. Feminists and scholars in gender studies might wonder whether Professor Berra has shortchanged Emma in what must have been her important role as mother of ten children and husband to Charles. One learns interesting facts about several of the other children. For example the third daughter Henrietta Emma Darwin was sickly as a child but, if not robust, she was in remarkably better health in adulthood. The parallel with Bram Stoker appears to be close. Stoker was so ill as a child that he was partially paralyzed. Yet in adulthood he emerged as a fine athlete devoid of any physical impairment.

This book should find a multitude of audiences. We have observed it to be a contribution to the sciences, to history of science and to biography. In this context the book should find a readership among some scientists, though one must be cautious. Scientists work at the frontiers of their field and are constantly in search of new information and theoretical constructs. Such scientists, feeling that they already know Darwin and his ideas, may not revisit them here. The scientist who

seeks out Darwin and His Children will already be inclined to value the sciences in their historical context. The point is that a subset rather than all scientists will be drawn to the book. The second field, history of science is a major subfield within history, even if it has ceded ground in recent years to gender, religious and ethnic studies. The student of history of science should avidly read Darwin and His Children, particularly the first chapter. This book is tantalizing because it is able to present the scaffolding of Darwin's ideas without requiring one to build the entire house. Third, there is a large of audience of readers who take fascination in biographies. The last ten chapters of this book open a new field of study in examining the lives of Charles and Emma's ten children. Here one need not be a scientist, scholar or specialist of any kind to enjoy Darwin and His Children. One suspects that readers of biography will be the largest audience of this book.

Darwin and His Children lives up to Berra's expectations for it. The book concretizes the lives of the people overlooked by scholars of Darwin, his own progeny. Herein lies the book's contribution to scholarship and its probable appeal to readers, particularly those with an interest in biography. Darwin and His Children is well researched and well written. Berra has the ability to communicate complex ideas in simple prose. As the above suggests, I would recommend this monograph to anyone with an interest in the sciences, history of science, and biography.

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