

## Book Reviews

**Janet Browne**, *Charles Darwin: voyaging*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1995, pp. xv, 606, illus., £25.00 (0-224-0402-5).

As Irvine Loudon has remarked, many Georgian doctors made more money from their non-medical activities than from medicine. In Robert Darwin's case, it was from the changing world of canals, roads and loans for capital enterprises. It was not until his second year at the University of Edinburgh that Charles Darwin became aware that his father was rich and that he need not depend upon medicine for a career. Or, for that matter, the Church either. It was Robert Darwin who paid some £1,800 for his son's circumnavigation of the globe on *H.M.S. Beagle* between 1830 and 1836, as well as subsidizing the purchase of Down House in Kent in 1842. When his father died in 1848, Charles Darwin inherited £51,000, thus ensuring him a life of comfort as a country gentleman.

To Alfred Tennyson the unchanging law of the universe was change itself, a conceit that Janet Browne happily exploits in this expansive and charmingly-written analytical account of Darwin's life up to May 1856 when, at last, he began the big book, *Natural selection*. Potential readers who want to know whether it is worth time and expense to read yet another biography of Darwin can be categorically reassured. While eschewing any dogmatic feminist perspective, what charms, delights, informs and transforms our understanding of Darwin in Browne's original treatment is the womanly, and family, perspectives that she brings to bear on her male subject. Browne notes the affinity between the Shrewsbury home and the characters of a Jane Austen novel; Charlotte M Yonge also springs to mind. Effectively brought up by older sisters, Browne suggests that Darwin's adult fears for his own health and that of his children were echoes of the trauma he experienced with the sudden death of his mother when he was eight. When forced to leave the loving family

atmosphere of home to board at Shrewsbury school, Darwin withdrew into a shell from which he never entirely escaped.

Eight years' experience as an editor of Darwin's correspondence has given Browne a happy familiarity with Regency and Victorian history; exploiting this, together with her expertise as a zoogeographer, she is able to view Darwin's slow development of a theory of evolution as a product of Darwin and his society, and show that Darwin himself was a much more complex person than the later transparent autobiography suggests.

Browne avoids polemics and exchanges with Darwin's many other biographers, and it is only by default, as it were, that she dismisses Adrian Desmond's Lamarckian secular and political radicals as the cause of Darwin's fearful procrastination over writing *Origin*. Instead, she prefers to see the noisy reception of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of creation* in 1844, as well as the uncomfortable metaphysical and moral questions raised by the rejection of special creation and design, as sufficient causes of Darwin's tardiness. Besides vivid accounts of Darwin's experiences as a medical student in Edinburgh, as a potential clerical student at Cambridge, and as a gentleman naturalist companion to Captain Robert Fitzroy (who is much more sympathetically portrayed than usual), we are given a vivid account and explanation of Darwin's six-years' work on barnacle taxonomy. This reader, for one, understood for the first time the full significance of this exhausting research after Browne's analysis. It was this detailed anatomical and palaeontological work, she suggests, that finally convinced Darwin that he had a watertight case for evolution by natural selection. "God was in the details, William Paley had said—and so was natural selection" (p. 529).

The first volume of the life concludes with a beautiful nautical image of Down House as a beached *Beagle*, with Captain Darwin in the

fo'c'sle-study running his naval household with the aid of an Admiralty of natural history suppliers and breeders, as well as experts like Lyell, Hooker and the young Huxley in every port. Beatrice Webb once likened Herbert Spencer to a spider collecting facts on the theoretical web he was spinning; the image equally well suits Darwin.

A pleasure to read, this exciting new biography deepens our understanding of Darwin as a geologist, biologist and human being. The sequel, covering Darwin's life of notoriety and fame after 1856, will be awaited with keen anticipation.

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Robert Rhodes James, *Henry Wellcome*, London, John Curtis/Hodder & Stoughton, 1994, pp. xix, 422, illus., £25.00 (0-340-60617-7).

Henry Wellcome remains something of an enigma, despite this sensitive and painstaking new biography. He probably always will. Robert Rhodes James leaves few avenues unexplored in his researches into Wellcome's life. Successful entrepreneur, pharmaceutical magnate and philanthropist, Wellcome would not, one suspects, be the first choice of a biographer free to pick his own subject. He is not and was not, as Rhodes James notes in his preface, particularly famous. Fame feeds biography, ensuring at the minimum a supply of anecdote and reminiscence to enliven the bare narrative of a life. Furthermore, Wellcome did not put many of his ideas to paper—a fact which Rhodes James considers one of his most intriguing aspects, but which must also have proved one of his most frustrating.

Nevertheless, the book presents a much more detailed account than has previously been available of Wellcome's life, beginning with his Minnesota childhood, the diligent years at pharmacy school and the intensely ambitious and successful period of his first positions, particularly with the firm of McKesson and Robbins. They were clearly reluctant to let him go, at the age of twenty-six, to join Silas

Burroughs in London. But in the end he left with, in effect, exclusive rights to sell their products in every country bar the United States.

The partnership with Burroughs, occasionally strained from the start, became at the end acrimonious and litigious. Those readers who already know something of this saga will find the detailed playing out of the dispute, with many extracts from letters between these two very different men, a fascinating and revealing part of the biography.

There is also much to be learned of that other great acrimonious dispute in Wellcome's life, his ill-fated marriage to Syrie Barnardo. Here however the author is hampered by the general paucity of sources and Wellcome's reticence. This is understandable to some extent, given the personal nature of the confrontation, but he has to depend more on Syrie's sometimes touching letters than on material which might elucidate Wellcome's views. Anxious always to think the best of his subject, Rhodes James is somewhat at a loss to explain Wellcome's seemingly harsh and absolute severing of any connection with his wife. Likewise he is perplexed at Wellcome's failure to visit his mother during the last years of her life, even though she was clearly dying of cancer and longed to see him. Money and occasional letters had to suffice.

Wisely avoiding any amateur psychologizing on these matters, Rhodes James concentrates instead on conveying the growing isolation of Wellcome following these episodes. Wellcome's later life was taken up almost entirely with the business, philanthropy, and the pursuit of hobbies, sometimes successfully combining all three. "Hobby" is not a term which Wellcome would have used to describe his forays into archaeology, anthropology and collecting, nor does Rhodes James, preferring to dub him a "scholar manqué". Wellcome's great wealth and enterprise enabled him to organize projects on a grand scale, whether pharmaceutical research, archaeological digs or museum collecting. However, the largely outdated theories on which he based the latter two activities were derived from an amateur