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Darwin Online

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In the wake of the 1909 centenary celebrations of his birth the *New York Times* detected a changing mood that made it ‘probable’ that Charles Darwin’s ‘fame’ had ‘reached its acme’. Three years after his bicentennial – ‘history’s biggest birthday party’ as Steven Shapin described it – no one is making similar predictions of an imminent decline of interest in Darwin. Quite the reverse, as the existence of these two sites under review indicates. The expectation is for a sustained and growing interest in Darwin and, more particularly, the processes by which he worked. To a degree the expectation will be self-fulfilling. In a historical research version of Say’s Law, the supply of primary source material by sites such as these will create its own demand, a point to which we will return. But even in the absence of such projects Darwin would continue to fascinate historians, not least because of the totemic status he has accrued in the largely internet-based controversies around Creationism and Intelligent Design. That the reclusive, respectable and unfailingly polite Darwin has assumed such centrality in the no-holds barred bear-pit of the World Wide Web may be ironic, but it renders both of these online projects – which are anything but fervid, and help recapture the historical Darwin – welcome and timely.

Darwin was ‘a gentleman of science’ (arguably *the* archetypal Victorian gentleman of science) rather than a ‘scientist’ in the modern sense. He never inhabited a ‘lab’ or donned a white coat. Certainly he engaged in

observation and experimentation – and one of the delights of the online correspondence is the opportunity to read first hand accounts of his work on plants, pigeons and worms – but Darwin's prime research hub was his domestic study. Writing, reading, and corresponding were his principal activities, and each now has its own website.

It is easy to forget that what made Darwin unique, and distinguished him even from Alfred Russel Wallace, was not just that he 'discovered' evolution by natural selection, but that in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) he *constructed* 'one long argument' in favour of his theory, which deftly defused all but the most determined of objections. An essential element in Darwin's significance, in short, was that he was a skilled author and, to a degree, 'a populariser', although one who self-consciously shunned polemic. Darwin's significance as an author has long been acknowledged digitally in the excellent 'Darwin Online [3]' resource (not under review here), which makes available multiple editions of his work.

But behind Darwin's painstaking prose lay dedicated reading and correspondence. It is an attempt to recapture the former to which the Darwin Library project [4] is dedicated. As part of the broader Biodiversity Heritage Library, the Darwin Library aims at 'a digital edition and virtual reconstruction of the surviving books owned by Charles Darwin', including full transcriptions of his annotations and marks. This is a large-scale undertaking: ultimately 1,480 texts will be made available, but the first tranche of 330 volumes, released in April 2011, represent 44 per cent of the books that bore Darwin's annotations or marks, and 28,951 annotated and marked book pages, along with 1,624 attached note slips, are now available online.

The longer-standing Darwin Correspondence Project [5] (DCP) is an even greater undertaking. It was established by Frederick Burkhardt, aided by the zoologist Sydney Smith, back in 1974, with the aim of publishing not only Darwin's letters but also those sent to him. The first volume, published by Cambridge University Press (CUP), appeared in 1985, and in recent years full versions of Darwin's correspondence, along with summaries, editorial notes and explanatory annotations, have been appearing on the website. The Project, therefore, is much more than an exercise in scanning and reduplication. It actively locates the letters – to date more than 15,000 letters exchanged with nearly 2,000 correspondents – and researches their contents, providing excellent explanatory notes. Full transcriptions of over 7,000 of Darwin's letters, from the period before 1868, are available online, along with summaries and information on the 8,000 or so later letters. These will become available in due course, (full transcriptions appear online four years after the publication of the relevant CUP volume) with the project due for completion in 2025. It hardly needs to be said that it is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in Darwin in particular, or Victorian intellectual life more generally.

The value of Darwin's Library is more limited. Funded by JISC in the UK and NEH in the US, the Library makes Darwin's books searchable 'as part of an independent unit' or as part of the Biodiversity Heritage Library as a whole. Some of the books have been scanned from Darwin's personal copies, others are surrogates but bibliographically identical to those Darwin owned. The guide on how to navigate the site is straightforward, but the search mechanism is not quite as immediate as it might be and users will find themselves performing much clicking before they actually get to see the pages they want. When they do they will find the scanned page on the left of the screen and a box of transcriptions of Darwin's annotations on the right. One further warning is that the technology does not work equally well with all browsers. Those using Internet Explorer will not always find the special characters used to represent some aspects of the annotations displaying correctly, and the site suggests the use of an alternative browser such as Firefox.

Besides technical snags the value of the Library is also limited by its restricted coverage and the inherent difficulties of studying reading. Darwin's reading, as the site acknowledges, was more extensive than Darwin's library. Although there is an aspiration to integrate the library with the other principal evidence – including Darwin's *Abstracts* (DAR 71-75), *Reading Notes* and *Reading Lists* (DAR 119, 128 etc), and any evidence to be found in publications, correspondence, sales catalogues, library records and elsewhere – there are no immediate plans to do so. Of course, even if it could be done, reconstructing precisely *how* any historical actor read is fraught with difficulties. The best clues are to be found in what Darwin wrote about what he had seen. Thus the 'chief interest of the Darwin books lies', as his son Francis noted when first

donating the library to the Botany School at Cambridge University in 1908, ‘in the pencil notes scribbled on their pages, or written on scraps of paper and pinned to the last page’. And it is the immediate online access to Darwin’s annotations that will prove the chief attraction of this site.

Access, and more particularly widening access, provides the obvious rationale for both of these sites. Below the surface, however, there is also an implicit assertion of the value of following Darwin through his scientific practice. Just as Keynes believed that most ‘practical men’ were ‘usually the slaves of some defunct economist’, so most digitization projects are governed by an often unarticulated historiographical assumption. In these cases it easy to detect the influence of the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour, and his emphasis upon the study of work in practice. This point is worth unpacking as both sites contain an implicit rebuke both to what we might regard as ‘traditional’ accounts of individual scientific genius and to once fashionable notions of science as ‘socially constructed’ knowledge.

The point of studying Darwin’s library, his annotations and his scribbled notes is to understand how he, as a working scientist, ‘constructed’ his theories, stage-by-stage, rather than, say, how he hit upon evolution by natural selection in an epiphanic moment on the Galapagos Islands. According to Jim Secord, the Director of the DCP, the importance of Darwin’s letters lies in showing how ‘science is done’ and this ‘doing’ of science, as Secord’s own publications and those of the Project’s General Editor, Janet Browne, demonstrate, stretches beyond the framing of theories into their distribution and reception. In this regard, Burkhardt and Smith’s decision to include the letters Darwin received, as well as those he wrote, was particularly prescient, with much recent writing in the history of science built around Latour’s rather nebulous notion of ‘networks’. The emphasis here is upon relationships between individuals; what you will not find on these sites is much consideration of the broader ‘social’ context of economics and class in which science is performed.

Not that the DCP limits itself, in the manner of the Darwin Library, to reproducing its material without comment. Besides the invaluable notes providing brief biographies of Darwin’s correspondents, and explaining specific references within the transcriptions, the site is supplemented with additional sections for ‘Universities’, ‘Schools’, and ‘Themes’. The first two contain excellent resources and guidance for teaching. The ‘Universities’ section is based around four letter sets – dealing with scientific networks, practices, controversy, and religion – which were originally developed for teaching final year undergraduates in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. The ‘Schools’ material is less well developed, but the ‘Interactive Beagle voyage package’ (currently under construction) looks as promising as the advice on how to replicate Darwin’s experiments on, for example, owl pellet dissection and salt water seeds, for key stage three to five pupils. It is the ‘Themes’ section, however, that is the most interesting, for what it (inadvertently) reveals.

Unlike the ‘Universities’ and ‘Schools’ sections, ‘Themes’, which is divided into six categories of unequal length, is not obviously aimed at a specific audience. Nor is the rather arbitrary selection of themes – ‘About Darwin’, ‘Geology’, ‘Life science’, ‘Gender’, ‘Human nature’, and ‘Religion’ – explained. One clue probably lies in the DCP’s funding arrangements. Four of the six themes have named funding sources: for ‘Life science’, the British Ecological Society; for ‘Gender’, the Bonita Trust; for ‘Human nature’, The John Templeton Foundation, The National Science Foundation, and the AHRC; and for ‘Religion’, the Templeton Foundation again.

External funding, of course, is a necessity for a project of the DCP’s ambition, and with the budgets of state-funded research councils under threat it is inevitable that an increasing proportion of such funding will come from private and charitable organizations. In the case of the DCP, moreover, the challenge is not just to find funding but to secure ongoing funding streams to guarantee what is, by its nature, a long term task. In this regard, the DCP appears to have been unusually successful. In May 2011 it was able to announce a £5 million funding package, which allows the project to plan towards completion. Of the £5 million, half was provided by the Evolution Education Trust, with its £2.5 million matched by contributions from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Isaac Newton Trust, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

Given the politically contested nature of Darwinism, and the size of the sums of money involved, it would be prudent for the DCP to be as transparent as possible about funding sources and to take steps to avoid any suggestion that the donors are influencing the site's content. The project's website lists 18 funding organizations, 16 of which have live links to the organizations' websites. But one of the two with no live link is the Evolution Education Trust, whose £2.5m was so crucial to the Project's continued existence. The Trust has no website of its own and finding information on it is not easy. It was only established in June 2010 and registered with the Charity Commission in August of that year. Its defined objects are so broad as to be almost meaningless and it is not clear whether or not it has given money to any other causes, although it is listed as a supporter of 'The Charles Darwin Trust', and appears to be linked to Abcam plc (or at least individuals prominent within that company), a Cambridge-based commercial seller of antibodies. None of which is to suggest that there is anything untoward with the Trust's donation. But more might be done to demonstrate the absence of snipers on the grassy knoll.

That funding influences the size of the content seems to be undeniable when one compares the relatively paltry material in the 'About Darwin' and 'Geology' sections (areas closer to the director's and general editor's own interests) with the more lavish 'Human nature' and 'Religion' sections, the latter of which is funded exclusively by the Templeton Foundation. Some of the sources of funding are curious: the Bonita Trust, for example, which funds the 'Darwin and gender' theme, and is an independent philanthropic trust under Gibraltar law, seems to have begun life as a subsidiary of PartyGaming plc, which derived 2008 pre-tax profits of over $600 million from online gaming. There are no grounds to suspect that its motives are anything other than philanthropic. The same cannot be said of the Templeton Foundation.

The Foundation has a track record of funding the libertarian right (Gertrude Himmelfarb, Milton Friedman, and the Cato Institute) and attracting the ire of A. C. Grayling, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and many others. Its commitment to 'open-minded inquiry' comes with a codicil of its self-declared drawing of inspiration from 'the late Sir John Templeton's optimism about the possibility of acquiring "new spiritual information"'. In practice it has a penchant for those who minimize any sense of conflict between science and religion. It comes as little surprise, therefore, to find this is precisely the line taken in the DCP's 'Religion' theme.

In the unsigned 'What did Darwin believe?' section there is an emphasis on how many clergymen were Darwin's friends and how many found ways of reconciling Christianity and evolution, which whilst undeniable, rather tends to obscure the fundamental philosophical challenge Darwinism posed to all forms of religion. The assertion that Darwin's letters, including those to complete strangers, are 'more revealing' of his personal beliefs than his *Autobiography*, written for his family and immediate social circle, is at best doubtful, and at worst a tendentious attempt to discount the *Autobiography*'s very clear account of Darwin's stage-by-stage shedding of religious belief. And that is before we come to the anonymous author's rather questionable interpretation of some of those letters. For example, the reading of a letter Darwin sent to the author John Fordyce in 1879 in which he declared 'I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God' seems to be willfully ingenuous.

Any concerns one might have either over the DCP's funding or its historiographical assumptions, however, are far outweighed by its unquestionable value to future scholars, who will, most probably, have very different objectives. It is a truism that the internet is changing the way in which historians work, by enabling us to access, search, and reproduce a multitude of primary resources within a matter of minutes from the comfort of one's own desk. Nowhere has the transformation been more obvious than in the field of Darwin studies. It is a salutary thought that although only 20 years old, Adrian Desmond and James Moore's groundbreaking biography of *Darwin* (1991) pre-dates the first ever webpage, posted by Tim Berners-Lee on 6 August 1991. Any new biography would undoubtedly lean heavily both on the DCP and, to a lesser extent, Darwin's Library.

The result would be a portrait in which the importance of the 'social' is diminished in favour of a focus on the individual and his practices: writing, reading, and networking. Whether or not this would ultimately

make for a better biography is open to question. One of the paradoxes of making such a wealth of material accessible is that it encourages the Namierite in us all, at the expense of more expansive analyses. Whatever the benefits of facilitating access to so much material, releasing a tsunami of undigestible, and often extraneous, detail can stymie creative thinking and lead scholars to lose sight of the bigger picture.

The bigger picture (in British universities at least) in which these two projects take their place is the pressure towards interdisciplinarity. More specifically, the pressure for humanities research to be reoriented toward the study of – or compatible with – the natural sciences. And just as the supply of primary source material creates its own demand, so too will the provision of 'science in culture' research money create its own supply of historical scholars keen to exploit online resources on historical science. Darwin's Library and Darwin's Correspondence Project can look to the future without any fear that interest in Darwin has reached its acme.

Links
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/8536
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/8537
[3] http://darwin-online.org.uk/
[4] http://biodiversitylibrary.org/collection/darwinlibrary
[5] http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/