

BOOKS & ARTS

The origins of darwinism

Impending anniversaries and the trial over 'intelligent design' make this a good time to revisit Darwin.

From So Simple a Beginning: The Four Great Books of Charles Darwin

edited by Edward O. Wilson
W. W. Norton: 2005. 1,504 pp. \$49.95

Darwin: The Indelible Stamp

edited by James D. Watson
Running Press: 2005. 1,260 pp. \$29.95,
£19.99

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As we approach 2009, the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, we can expect the current flood of books on Darwin, darwiniana and evolution to become a deluge. So it is hardly surprising that more than one publisher has hit on the idea of producing commemorative volumes from Darwin's *oeuvre*. But even now, the trial continues in a Pennsylvania court over the attempt by the Dover school board to use 'intelligent design' to circumscribe the teaching of evolution.

From So Simple a Beginning and *Darwin: The Indelible Stamp* are both massive editions of Darwin's four major works on evolution. The editors, E. O. Wilson and James Watson, respectively, are distinguished scientists whose contributions to twentieth-century biology have been outstanding and have put them in the public eye.

The same four books are reprinted in each: *The Voyage of the Beagle*; *On the Origin of Species*; *The Descent of Man*, and *Selection in Relation to Sex*; and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Both editions provide a general introduction followed by a brief introductory essay for each text. Wilson provides an afterword on evolution and religion that clearly positions the volume in the current argument between evolution and intelligent design.

Both books have iconic and reference value and would sit well on a reader's bookshelf, perhaps next to the complete works of Shakespeare. They are hardly the kind of book that a reader might throw into a backpack to read during the sort of exploration of nature that Darwin so loved. For that purpose there are paperback editions of all these works readily available that provide much more historical contextualization and helpful scholarly support than either of the volumes under review.

For example, Darwin's *The Voyage of the*

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Charles Darwin is still relevant today.

Beagle, edited by Janet Browne and Michael Neve (Penguin, 1989), provides an extensive historical introduction and a biographical guide to the dramatis personae. Ernst Mayr's facsimile of the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* (Harvard University Press, 1964) provides an introduction from his perspective as a founder of the modern evolutionary synthesis. The recent edition of *The Descent of Man* edited by James Moore and Adrian Desmond (Penguin, 2004) provides a ground-breaking historical introduction to this most difficult and least read of Darwin's works and a useful biographical register. For *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* there is a version edited by Paul Ekman (Oxford University Press, 2002) that contains extensive introductory material, an afterword, appendices and an essay by Philip Prodger about Darwin's pioneering use of photographs (heliotype) in the book.

When approaching Darwin's original works there are two important issues to address. It is imperative to understand what Darwin said, and did not say, in the context of the science and culture of his day. Otherwise we run the risk of reading our present knowledge and

concerns into his words. So much has happened and continues to change in the growth of our scientific understanding of common descent and the theory of natural selection that we need to make connections between Darwin's darwinism and the modern theory of darwinian evolution. Both Wilson and Watson try to provide some historical context and connection to current science, as well as some personal observations about how Darwin's writings affected their intellectual development, but there is too little space devoted to such contextualization. And Watson's volume does not even have an index. Wilson reproduces Darwin's indexes and has generated a unified index for all four texts, keyed to contemporary biological terms and concepts. The reproductions of figures and photographs — paramount for *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* — have been redone for Wilson's edition, and are superior to those in Watson's.

Darwin's works have often been reprinted. Particularly memorable are

The Thinker's Library editions, published by the Rationalist Press Association in the wake of the fundamentalist attacks on evolution in the 1920s. C. S. Lewis complained that these cheap scientific books, which sold in the hundreds of thousands despite the economic distress of the times, promoted atheistic materialism. But one also recalls the editions of the Church Fathers that appeared in Darwin's day, produced by different factions interested in co-opting the authority of the past.

The two new reprints are not cheaply done, with the Wilson book having the superior production quality. Given the current controversy in the United States, where polls indicate that only about 10% of the population fully accept a darwinian account of human origins, it is likely that these volumes will play a role in canonizing Darwin's writing. The best outcome will be if Wilson and Watson increase the readership of Darwin, and of the literature on darwinism and evolution. ■

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