

# BOOKS & ARTS



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## A vision of humanity united

A controversial new reconstruction of Charles Darwin's life suggests his family's campaign against slavery influenced his belief that all humans evolved from a single ancestor, explains **W. F. Bynum**.



**Darwin 200**

Lewis Carroll wrote of a mythical island whose inhabitants made a precarious living by taking in each other's laundry. Most books on Charles Darwin in his bicentennial year will probably follow suit, repackaging what a troop of Darwin scholars have uncovered from his extensive archives and writings. The more books that have been written on a subject, the easier it seems to be to write a new one. But *Darwin's Sacred Cause* is an exception.

Readers of Adrian Desmond and James Moore's earlier biography, *Darwin* (Michael Joseph, 1991) — and of Desmond's subsequent *Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest* (Penguin, 1998) — will expect much from

this new reading of Darwin's life and values. They will not be disappointed. In *Darwin's Sacred Cause*, Desmond and Moore assimilate the relevant secondary literature, but also go much further. They offer us a new reading of Darwin's life and scientific work, based on two well-known facts about him: he felt physical revulsion when confronted by cruelty and he loathed slavery.

Darwin's hasty exit from the surgical theatre, while a student in Edinburgh, is a classic anecdote of his early years. Even necessary pain, such as that caused by operations before anaesthetics were available, was more than he could bear. And no one can read his *Journal*

of Researches, later known as *Voyage of the Beagle*, without realizing how much human slavery affected his sensitivities. He feared that his book might be censored in the United States, where slavery was a major political and economic issue.

Desmond and Moore have reconstructed Darwin's life and science through the lenses of these two themes. This approach has many pay-offs. First, it enlarges our knowledge of Darwin's circle. He came from a family with ardent anti-slavery sentiments. Darwin's grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, produced the most powerful image of the British anti-slavery campaign:

### **Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins**

by Adrian Desmond and James Moore  
Allen Lane/Houghton Mifflin: 2009.  
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a jasperware medallion of 1787, depicting a slave in chains, which bore the motto 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?' (pictured, right). Darwin's sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins all wholeheartedly supported the 'sacred cause' with their energies and their money. The authors mine correspondence, pamphlets and monetary contributions to dissect this family concern in a detail never before achieved, and demonstrate convincingly that Darwin absorbed these family values.

This concentration on Darwin's abiding belief in the unity of the human races, in the wake of a rising tide of polygenism — the belief that humans were divided into different races with separate origins — encourages us to rethink his relationships with his acquaintances and colleagues. The doughty Harriet Martineau, his brother Erasmus's friend, becomes not just a source of Malthusian commentary, but an ardent critic of the iniquities of American slavery, based on first-hand experience during a long visit to the United States. Darwin's complex association with Charles Lyell is shown to have very deep and complicated roots. We know that Darwin was extremely disappointed with Lyell's reception of *On the Origin of Species*. Desmond and Moore dissect correspondence during Lyell's first two trips to North America, where the patrician geologist was wined and dined by aristocratic slaveholders in the American South. Their analysis of these years in the 1840s is both amusing and moving, as Darwin goaded Lyell to see beyond the polite trappings of southern society to the harsh realities on which it was based.

### A personal evolution

Desmond and Moore also invite us to reconsider Darwin's attitude to the naturalist Louis Agassiz. His rejection of Darwin's central message in *On the Origin of Species* is well known, but we can now see the deep roots of Darwin's antipathy to this Harvard apostle of polygenism, who wrote an introduction to the most prominent racist tract in antebellum America, *Types of Mankind* by J. C. Nott and G. R. Gliddon (1854). According to Desmond and Moore, Darwin canvassed first the zoologist James Dana at Yale, and then, when Dana proved too much in Agassiz's shadow, the botanist Asa Gray at Harvard, to act as his undercover agent in Agassiz's America. They argue that Agassiz's polygenism, rather than his espousal of continental, idealist modes of thinking, was what Darwin found especially odious.

This account of Darwin's personal evolution also alters the focus on the important influences on his thinking. In particular, the Bristol physician and ethnologist James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848) becomes a major player.

Darwin certainly owned and read carefully many of Prichard's books, especially his *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, a monumental work of erudition that was transmuted from his University of Edinburgh MD thesis (1808) to a single volume (1813), and finally, in its last incarnation, into a five-volume encyclopaedic compendium of biology, linguistics, ethnology and physical anthropology. Prichard was a Quaker-turned-Evangelical Anglican, and certainly no evolutionist. Nevertheless, he was an ardent believer in the unity of mankind, marshalling all the evidence he could that all human races were derived from a single stock. Prichard invoked what he called the 'analogy of nature', by which he meant that humans, similar to domestic animals (dogs, sheep, cattle), vary far more than species in the wild. Mankind, like the dog, is domesticated, and therefore capable of wide variation.

Given the importance Darwin placed on domestication as a model of biological variation, the symmetry of their arguments is stark. Darwin noted at the back of one of his volumes of Prichard, 'How like my Book all this will be.'

The comment is famous and has been variously interpreted by historians. Desmond and Moore argue that Darwin intended his treatment of human variation, albeit within an evolutionary context, to read much like Prichard's. The extensive documentation contained in their book makes this interpretation plausible. Certainly Darwin found in his ethnological reading much appeal to the 'analogy of nature' among those wanting to account for human variation as being on a par with the variation still produced among domestic animals.

Prichard argued that skin colour varies with the degree of 'civilization', and proposed that Adam was black. He also had a notion of sexual selection, whereby ideas of beauty, different in specific cultural contexts, would have reinforced racial variations. Darwin, too, in Desmond and Moore's account, saw sexual selection as the key to varieties of mankind. They suggest that Darwin abandoned a chapter on the races of man in his planned book on natural selection because he felt he needed more information on sexual selection. In the event, the planned book was overtaken by Alfred Russel Wallace's letter revealing that he had come to similar conclusions independently, and the findings

of the two men were famously presented together at a meeting of the Linnean Society in 1859. The authors provide good evidence for this, although there is rather more on sexual selection in the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* than the uninitiated reader would conclude from *Darwin's Sacred Cause*.

### Back to his roots

The 'analogy of nature' presupposes that all domestic plants and animals — humans as well as pigeons, dogs and sheep — are varieties of a single original species. Prichard assumed it was true, and Darwin strove manfully to follow in his footsteps. Darwin's researches

on pigeons were a tour de force, and never written about with more force than here. The case for dogs was more complicated, and his conclusion, in *On the Origin of Species*, that our domestic dogs are descended from more than one species, was a problem — especially given the importance of his notion of descent with variation. On Desmond and Moore's reading of his values, with its commitment to human unity, dogs presented a real difficulty.

The natural culmination of this volume is Darwin's *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Murray, 1871). Desmond and Moore reinforce their point that Darwin's concern with sexual selection had some of its origins in his abiding belief in the fundamental unity of the human races, but even these authors cannot rehabilitate Darwin's disappointing discussion of human descent. During the 1850s and 1860s, evidence for the antiquity and early history of humans had been established. Too many of Darwin's leading ideas were still grounded in his own amazingly creative period in the late 1830s. After *On the Origin of Species*, much of Darwin's innovative research was in botany; it is as if he wanted most of all simply to be in his own garden.

**W. F. Bynum** is emeritus professor of the history of medicine at University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK. He is author of *The History of Medicine: A Very Short Introduction* and editor of a new edition of *On the Origin of Species*. e-mail: w.bynum@ucl.ac.uk

For more on Darwin, see Editorial, page 763, and online at [www.nature.com/darwin](http://www.nature.com/darwin).



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