

American response to Darwin

David L. Hull

Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912. By Cynthia Eagle Russett. Pp. ix+228. (Freeman: San Francisco and Reading, May 1976.) Cloth £6.30; paper £3.20.

RUSSETT'S well-balanced account of the intellectual response to Darwinism in America further enhances the richly illustrated picture which we already have of the Darwinian revolution. As Russett would be the first to agree, her book could have been entitled just as readily *Spencer in America* because the authors which Russett treats were as likely to have their minds blown to bits by reading Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) as by Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). The genuinely scientific character of Darwin's theory legiti-

mised Spencer's Cosmic Philosophy, but the actual content of Darwin's theory had as little impact on its converts as on its opponents.

Russett deals exhaustively with all aspects of 'Darwinism' in America—scientific, philosophical, religious, social, historiographic, economic and literary. In spite of the opposition of the most powerful scientist in the United States, Louis Agassiz, and perversely to some extent because of it, evolution was almost universally accepted by American biologists within a decade after publication of the *Origin*, but the 'evolutionism' which became so popular tended to be Lamarckian and teleological—partly for scientific reasons, partly theological. Theologians were not alone in viewing the death of teleology as the death of God. Yet in slaying Paley, Darwin slew a corpse. Darwin merely shocked nineteenth-century intellectuals into realising how vacuous teleology had become. The Metaphysical Club at Cambridge was the focus of evolutionism among American philosophers. As might be expected, John Fiske, the most enthusiastic evolutionist, was a Spencerian. More serious philosophers such as William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, and Chauncey Wright, however, viewed Spencer as so much rubbish which had to be cleared from their path before proceeding on their way. Spencer was the "philosopher whom those who have no other philosopher appreciate" (p17).

The most interesting sections in Russett's book are those in which she deals with Social Darwinism and its effects on such novelists as Jack London, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser. Rugged individualism, socialism, aid to the poor, free will and determinism, nature-nurture, the relative superiority of the races, group selection and altruism—it is all here but presented more bluntly and at a safer distance than it is in the current brouhaha over sociobiology. Darwin also legitimised the 'historical method', which for Dewey was the discovery of the particular sequence of conditions which brought about a particular natural phenomenon, for Henry Adams the search for the one great law of history. Adams found his great law in a combination of thermodynamics and the law of inverse squares. Not only was the universe running down, it was doing so logarithmically. The religious phase of human history had lasted 90,000 yr, the mechanical phase would last 300 yr, the electrical 17.5 yr, and the ethereal phase but 4 yr.

Russett's prevailing concern is the interconnections between intellectual disciplines. For example, if Darwin and Wallace actually borrowed the notion

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of natural selection from Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798), then the alacrity with which economists like Thorstein Veblen read the basic principles of evolutionary theory back into human affairs was understandable. A quick glance at Malthus's *Essay*, however, brings the argument full circle because in it Malthus justifies his views about human population by reference to biological species in a state of nature. As complex as the interconnections between intellectual disciplines may be, Russett believes that the content of scientific theories can colour the general intellectual climate and *vice versa*. Her final chapter concerns the blow which Maxwell's equations, quantum theory and relativity theory dealt to the absolute, certain, deterministic, mechanistic worldview initiated by Newton.

The book is illustrated with the usual portraits as well as with extremely well-chosen cartoons and paintings. Some of these illustrations convey messages much more powerfully than any printed word could hope to do; for example, the contrast between 'Nature red in tooth and claw' and the cloying romanticism of Albert Bierstadt's painting of the Rocky Mountains. My only criticism is that Russett completely ignores the really excellent scholarship which has been produced during the past dozen years or so on Darwin and Darwinism. If she has read any of the more recent work, she does not mention it. □

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