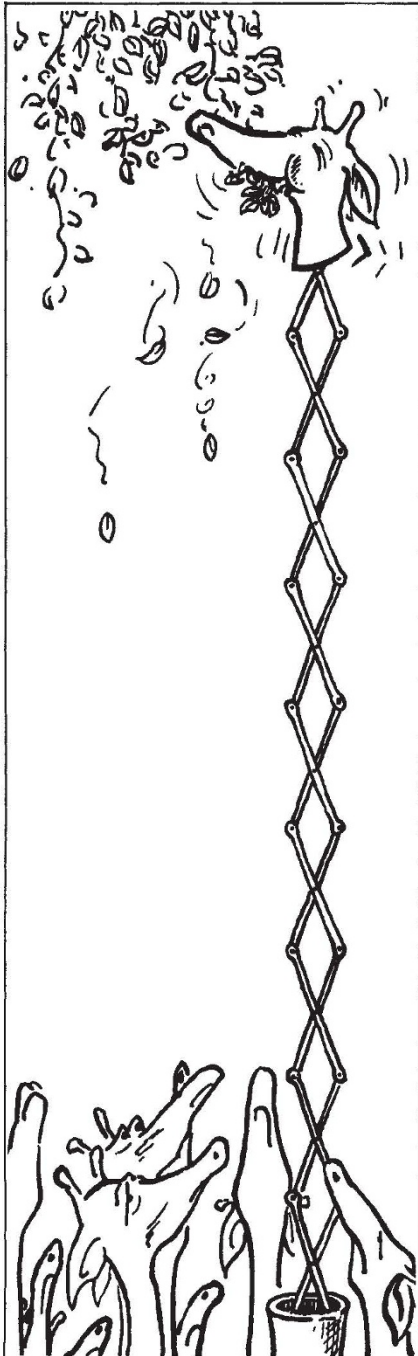


# Darwin and evolution: the comic cut

J.S. Jones

**Darwin for Beginners.** By Jonathan Miller and Borin van Loon. Pp.176. Hbk ISBN 0-906495-95-4; pbk ISBN 0-906495-96-2. (Writers and Readers/W.W. Norton/Pantheon: 1982.) Hbk £7.95, \$11.95; pbk £2.95, \$3.95.

EINSTEIN, Marx, food, Freud, capitalism — and Darwin. These are some of the titles in a series of illustrated books “for beginners” which discuss complex subjects in a simple way using a mixture of cartoons



Stretching a point about evolutionary theory. One of Borin van Loon's illustrations in *Darwin for Beginners*.

and text. How does Charles Darwin emerge from his treatment as the thinking man's Andy Capp?

The short answer is: remarkably well. Jonathan Miller gives us a concise and clear account of Darwinism, which is complemented by some two hundred crude but powerful illustrations by Borin van Loon. Darwin's predecessors, his life and the *Origin of Species* are covered in a body of text enough to provide only the preface for most books on evolution. We learn not only of the well-known elements of our hero's life, but also of neglected episodes such as Captain Fitzroy's early distrust of Darwin because the shape of his nose betrayed signs of laziness and hesitancy. The laziness — which provoked his father to exclaim that “You care for nothing but shooting, dogs and rat-catching. You will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family” — disappeared early, but the hesitancy remained for the rest of his days.

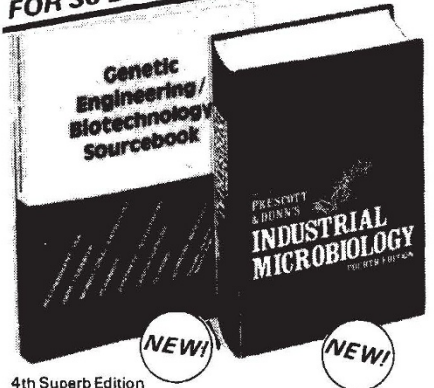
Darwin's lack of confidence and his hypochondria are often blamed on the effects of Chagas' disease (which he may have contracted in South America). Here a dramatic illustration shows him cowering before an infected mosquito — which is unfortunate as the vector is a wingless blood-sucking bug. There are many quotations from Darwin's writings, published and unpublished, including his musings on the advantages of a “nice soft wife on a sofa”; advantages which include, according to the accompanying cartoon, sharing a bed with Freud and Marx.

The treatment of Darwin's predecessors and his own work is outstandingly clear. We hear of Cuvier, to whom evolution was a process of stability interrupted by miraculous change, and of Paley, who saw in the perfection of living things the proof of an intelligent designer. That of neo-Darwinism and the “modern synthesis” is less successful, and shows signs of confusion. There is the compulsory nod towards neo-Cuvierism — or evolution by jerks as it is known to its critics — in which mysterious forces lead to evolutionary equilibria punctuated by rapid change, but nothing on neo-Paleyism, the view that all animal structure and behaviour is of necessity perfectly adaptive and is hence always a proof of strong natural selection.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is a success. It can be recommended to biologists who have ceased to be entertained by evolution as well as to newcomers to the subject. Darwin, Doonesbury, Dennis the Menace: in this post-literate society to be immortalized in a comic strip is the ultimate accolade payable to a great mind. What next — a cartoon version of *Principia Mathematica*?

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