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BOOK REVIEWS

EVOLUTION FROM MOLECULES TO MEN. D. S. Bendall (Ed.) Cambridge University Press Pp. xii + 594 Price £18.00 ($29.95) H/B

In June 1982, Darwin College, Cambridge, held a conference to mark the centenary of Darwin's death and to assess the current status and prospects of Darwinian theory. This volume contains the contributions to the meeting, introduced by the text of a public lecture on the subject of Charles Darwin, given by Sir Andrew Huxley in Cambridge in May, 1982.

The eminence of the writers, the breadth of the contributions and the ability of the former to find an apt and penetrating quotation from Darwin on each of the latter is remarkable. I find it difficult to review such a volume without degenerating into a mere list of the contributions. With few exceptions, the standard is high though some stray towards pretentiousness.

The first section is devoted to a discussion of the intellectual background within which Darwin framed his theory and to a fairly detailed treatment of the development of his ideas in the critical period of the voyage of the Beagle and immediately afterwards. I had not myself realised the extent to which Lyell, on whose ideas Darwin was so dependent in the early stages, was reluctant to accept the full extension of the latter's ideas.

The second section—molecular and cellular evolution—covers the ground from the evolution of the genetic code through a discussion of gene clusters to bacterial evolution in the laboratory. I enjoyed the discussion of the "intimations of evolution from the three-dimensional structures of proteins".

The final two sections represent fields in which modern developments have been least successful in extending Darwin's own work—the evolution of whole organisms and finally the evolution of social behaviour. Many current controversies receive an airing from punctuated evolution to sociobiology. It ends with a summary by Passmore, pointing out that "the strange case of Charles Darwin consists in the fact that a century after his death it is still disputed whether The Origin of Species really counts as a scientific achievement". The spirit of the more strictly scientific papers is, however, the best testimony that Darwin was a scientist, not a religious sage.

Volumes arising from scientific meetings have often only an ephemeral value, but this criticism cannot be levelled at the present one. The balanced choice and status of contributions makes it a stimulating and worthwhile possession.

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