

Book Reviews

Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: the power of place* (vol. 2 of a biography), London, Jonathan Cape, 2002, pp. 591, illus., £25.00 (hardback 0-224-04212-2).

The first volume of Janet Browne's biography of Darwin, subtitled *Voyaging* and published in 1995, took the reader up to May 1856 when Darwin began writing his "big book" on evolution by natural selection (*Medical History*, 1996, 40: 244–5). She had described Darwin's family life in Shrewsbury, his education in Edinburgh and Cambridge, and his epoch-making voyage on the *Beagle* that had established him as a geologist and travel writer. Readers captivated by her beautifully-written narrative have had to wait seven years for the sequel describing the more sedentary adventures of Darwin from 1856 until his death at Down House on 18 April 1882. Her opening sentence makes the contrasts between the two volumes clear: "If Charles Darwin had spent the first half of his life in the world of Jane Austen, he now stepped forward into the pages of Anthony Trollope" (p. 1). His stubborn determination to write in the face of illness and invalidism certainly reminds one of brickmaker Giles Hoggett's "it's dogged as does it" in *The last chronicle of Barset*.

Browne divides her twelve chapters between three overlapping aspects of Darwin's later career: we see him as author, experimentalist and celebrity, though she also portrays him as landowner, financier and as a family man devoted to his wife and children. This is a gentle biography with no fresh revelations or revolutionary readings. Making good use of Darwin's published correspondence, the book begins with the familiar story of Wallace's bombshell in 1858 and how it spurred Darwin to write "alone in his study, secure in his downland ship" (p. 47), the abstract of his ideas as *On the origin of species* in November 1859. Here he exploited the analogy between natural and artificial selection, the one centred on the mechanism of death to ensure survival of the

fittest, the other on the generation of life. Browne is very good on how Darwin and his network of friends (Lyell, Hooker, Huxley and, in America, Asa Gray) spread approval of natural selection even before the publication of *Origin*. Darwin tapped into the strong English tradition of natural history to give the book its genial humane literary style that assured its wide sales through the remainder of the century.

Writing *Origin* brought on eczema and severe bouts of vomiting. Dr Lane's water cure at Moor Park offered relief, and for many years Darwin was a regular user of hydrotherapy treatments. Browne acknowledges a gastro-intestinal complaint (a kind of perpetual land seasickness), but also supports the view that Darwin's invalidism was psychosomatic, induced by his horror of provoking religious controversy and causing anguish to his devoted wife, Emma. Once the evolutionary storm was over, although Darwin exploited invalidism as a useful ruse against too public an exposure, he was extremely active when the need arose (for example, in the vivisection controversy of 1870s). The physical symptoms largely disappeared after 1867. Browne rightly sets this in proportion, pointing out that Darwin was by no means an unusual Victorian in suffering from poor health.

The book provides many fascinating insights into Darwin's life: his large daily correspondence and huge annual post bill equivalent to £1,000 today; his wealth from authorship and astute investments; the sale of family (Wedgwood) heirlooms to buy a billiard table; and his reading of "trashy" Mudie Library novels as relaxation. (Browne believes, however, that their plots may also have prompted speculations and interest in breeding and heredity.) Above all, the reader is struck by the sustained portrait of Darwin as a loving father devoted to his children's happiness and welfare.

Browne shows how complex Darwin's authorship was and how he exploited the new power of the press to get across his revolutionary ideas. Even so, Darwin had great difficulty in controlling the meaning and tone of French and

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German translations of the *Origin*. It was the press that made Darwin into a public figure and celebrity. The fact that, unlike Darwin, Wallace was never caricatured in print, meant that the Victorians came to equate evolution solely with Darwin.

Darwin's post-1859 writings receive specific treatments, though their critical reception is largely ignored. We learn how Darwin's work on plants turned the Down grounds into an external workshop of Kew Gardens and Darwin into an experimentalist. His experiments on insectivorous plants, climbing plants and orchids, plant movement, and Mendel-type experiments on plant inheritance patterns, soothed his mind and relaxed him. Meanwhile, Darwinism developed as a Victorian body of thought as Spencer, Lyell, Wallace, Bates and Huxley produced their own seminal writings on evolution. Darwin capped his own views with *Descent of man* (1871) and its still-fascinating sequel *Expression of emotions* (1872), where once again he was much obliged to an army of correspondents, artists, photographers and anthropologists.

The publication of Darwin's letters will not be completed until the 2020s, so there will be plenty of opportunity for fresh appraisals of Darwin's life in the years to come. But Janet Browne's biography will remain a classic among existing and future critical volumes for providing such an intimate domestic portrait of Darwin at work surrounded by his wife, children and garden. Who will forget the arresting image of an old bearded gardener leaning on a spade and contemplating the humble earthworm and its tremendous role in "resurrection and life"?

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Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of nature: Krafft-Ebing, psychiatry, and the making of sexual identity*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. x, 321, illus. £19.00, US\$30.00 (hardback 0-226-63059-5).

Dare one say of a book on this subject that it is a labour of love? Perhaps not, though almost

obsessively, Harry Oosterhuis has spent many years combing the existing scholarly literature on Richard von Krafft-Ebing and reading all of his voluminous published work. More significantly still, he has uncovered a veritable treasure-trove—an archive held by Krafft-Ebing's descendants that contains his files on his patients, including, in about 200 of these cases, letters and autobiographical accounts produced by those he treated, or by their families and professional advisers. On this basis, he has constructed a wide-ranging account and reassessment of Krafft-Ebing's career, his place in late nineteenth-century German and Austrian psychiatry, and his work as a pioneering sexologist.

Oosterhuis by no means confines his attention to Krafft-Ebing's work on sexual identity and sexual perversion. As his title indicates, he is every bit as much concerned with his subject's overlapping but distinct career in psychiatry, and he presents a nuanced and fascinating discussion of Krafft-Ebing's work in this domain. Though often dismissed as just one more late-nineteenth-century somaticist, Krafft-Ebing's relations with the German mainstream, Theodor Meynert in particular, were quite fraught. Meynert saw him as unreliable and insufficiently scientific, too concerned with his patients and with clinical realities, and too inclined to embrace the foreign notions of the French. And from Meynert's narrow and sclerotic perspective, all these charges were true. Unsurprisingly, when Krafft-Ebing was proposed for a chair at Vienna, Meynert fought the proposal. He lost, but the target of his ire hated the Viennese scene, and before long had retreated to Graz. Krafft-Ebing, as Oosterhuis demonstrates, embraced the degenerationist and hereditarian ideas that were the orthodoxy of the era. But to leave matters at that point is to miss the complexities of his actual practice. Here, Krafft-Ebing made extensive use of case history materials, and relied heavily on the psychological dimensions of his patients' presentation of self in understanding their disorders, and indeed in treating them. He experimented with the hypnotic techniques advocated by the French, at both Paris and Nancy, and used them extensively in his