

placed “alongside the great pioneering philanthropists of the age”.

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Charles Darwin, *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*, edited and with an introduction by James Moore and Adrian Desmond, London, Penguin Books, 2004, pp. lxvi, 791, illus. £9.99 (paperback 0-140-43631-6).

Adrian Desmond and James Moore have teamed up once more to write an introduction to the Penguin edition of Charles Darwin's *The descent of man*. This is a book with a confusing history. Darwin expected it to raise a storm of clerical protest, but it elicited in the main, as Desmond and Moore put it, only “muffled growls”. It is acknowledged to be among Darwin's most important works, not least because it saw him come clean on human evolution, yet few have read it with the close attention lavished on *The origin of species*. And even many of those who have read *The descent* have done so in an egregiously selective fashion, discovering in it justifications for everything from brutal imperialism, unrestrained capitalism and state-mandated eugenics, to socialism, birth control and the enlightened rule of a secular-scientific clerisy.

Part of the difficulty with *The descent* has been that it seems to lack the prescience and cool neutrality of *The origin of species*. It appears to be far more rooted in a particular time and place, sadly lacking in the Olympian social and political detachment of Darwin's greatest and best-read book. As readers of their splendidly atmospheric Darwin biography might expect, Desmond and Moore beg to differ. They argue that *The origin of species* is very nearly as “social” as *The descent*. Accordingly, they insist that the mechanism of natural selection was underpinned by the same Whig-Malthusianism that ushered in the calculated horrors of the post-1834 workhouses and the Victorian cult of economic individualism. Moreover, only because Darwin

self-consciously avoided the subject of humans in 1859 (aside from his famous aside) has it been possible to see it as a work of biology in becoming contrast to *The descent's* impure anthropology. Wherever one stands on this debate, few would demur from Desmond and Moore's account of how prevailing racial, sexual and social prejudices infused *The descent's* account of the evolution of civilized society and the relative roles of males and females in selecting mates. Desmond and Moore do an excellent job of contextualizing Darwin's ideas about human evolution and the role of sexual selection. With their customary élan, the authors also rightly emphasize the dangerousness of Darwin's idea in a theistic society in which science remained, in the minds of many, a mere handmaiden to revealed religion.

But Desmond and Moore go further. They assert that previous attempts to restore Darwin to his proper historical context have not gone far enough. Most scholars accept that Darwin's arguments in *The descent* inadvertently injured the advocates of welfarism and female emancipation. The prevailing social and sexual prejudices that Darwin imbibed are easy to identify since the same ideas resonate today. However, there is one aspect of Darwin's upbringing and context that has been attended to far less: the anti-slavery movement. Desmond and Moore argue that we have failed to see how profoundly Darwin's mindset was shaped by the abolitionism of his grandfathers, reinforced by his personal revulsion at the brutality he witnessed being meted out to slaves (and other subject peoples) during the *Beagle* voyage. In later life, Darwin's abolitionist views may have burned at a lower intensity, but Desmond and Moore point out that his disgust at the Confederacy during the American Civil War demonstrates that slavery remained always a live issue for Charles Darwin. Abolitionism was still a touchstone of his political beliefs. And in their introduction, Desmond and Moore seek to trace, from Darwin's letters, marginalia, jottings and *The descent* itself, evidence that this passionate distaste for slavery played a major role in his biological work.

They arrive at a radical thesis: that a single humanitarian objective—the condemnation of slavery—energized Darwin’s evolutionism. They propose that his thinking about evolution derived in large part from an urge to prove that all races of mankind were joined genealogically and therefore had equal ethical status; that consanguinity demanded common decency. Darwin’s main interest, almost obsession, was to explain racial variation in a way that confounded the polygenist’s assertion of separate creations. And in so doing, it is claimed, he arrived at the idea of sexual selection as a means of explaining the racial characteristics (such as skin colour) so important to the polygenists. For Darwin, these reflected local aesthetic preferences that predominated due to the force of sexual selection. They were emphatically not evidence of distinct origins.

This hypothesis, say Desmond and Moore, explains many of the oddities of *The descent*, in particular its failure to say much about the fossil evidence for human evolution. Only if we see the book as inspired by abolitionist sensibilities can we account for why the discussion of human evolution from bestial progenitors was so half-heartedly compiled. Desmond and Moore also use Darwin’s hatred of slavery to help explain his delay in publishing *The origin*, his omission from it of his own species, and the vehemence with which he defended sexual selection. *The descent*, then, was in essence a contribution to a debate that James Cowles Prichard would have fully understood back in the 1830s. And for all his negative remarks about “savages”, in writing *The descent* Darwin drew upon a deep reservoir of radical humanitarianism which, for pragmatic reasons, he elected mostly to conceal from the reader.

Evaluating Desmond and Moore’s thesis is no easy matter; not least because—as indicated early in the piece—the authors provide just a summary of the claims and evidence which they plan to develop in more detail elsewhere. Even so, the point is well taken that we may have been too quick to dismiss the importance of Darwin’s horror at slavery in the genesis of his evolutionary theory. And it might well be that the second part of the book, *Selection in relation to*

sex, originated in Darwin’s attempt to find a means of explaining racial variation more congenial to his humanitarian beliefs. After all, few sights during the *Beagle* voyage affected him as deeply as seeing slaves in South America savagely flogged. And few issues so galvanized ethnological debate in the years of Darwin’s scientific coming of age than the relative status of “primitive” and “civilised” peoples. Yet on the evidence presented here, Desmond and Moore have not proved their case. That Darwin loathed slavery is certain. But in *The descent* and elsewhere he does not always write as a card-carrying humanitarian. Thus he could adopt a tone of near-indifference when talking of the extinction of some “primitive” races, and he was perfectly willing to employ standard tropes of the savage’s lack of reason when striving to fill the gap between apes and white Europeans. To be fair, Desmond and Moore argue that by the 1860s Darwin had lost some of his youthful egalitarianism. Still, it is not yet established that slavery was significantly more important than dozens of other factors in his earlier ruminations.

Nevertheless, this introduction presents the essence of a fascinating and (at the very least) plausible thesis. Darwin scholars should look forward to its presentation in full. And, even as it stands, Desmond and Moore have provided an exceptionally rich and evocative introduction to one of Darwin’s most under-read books.

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John C Burnham, *What is medical history?*
Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, pp. vii, 163,
£45.00 (hardback 0-7456-3224-6), £17.99
(paperback 0-7456-3225-4).

Having pursued my medical studies via the diversion of a history of medicine degree, I am frequently asked to justify and explain my interest in the subject. I was intrigued, therefore, to discover John Burnham’s work, which details in part the author’s theories as to the importance of medical history, and provides an explanation of what it is about the subject that attracts such