struggles of the day rather than the polar ice of night.
The problem here is not with Foucault but with us. The problem now is whether there exists a sufficient will to think Foucault in this way, against the dominant current of fin-de-siecle nihilism which too many folks take postmodernity to mean. Black's still hip, as it always has been for bohemians—but it may be better now for radicals to fade to pink, even against a background almost certainly turning a greyer shade of blue. Little wonder Rousseau wept—only he was crying for himself. Foucault's message, by comparison, is dry-eyed. There is still hope that we can do better.
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Monkey Business

Darwin by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (Penguin/Michael Joseph). Reviewed by Jose Borghino.

This massive 828-page blockbuster opens with a rhetorical rollercoaster. The preface smacks more of a Hollywood adventure movie (I was reminded of the first 15 minutes of Raiders of the Lost Ark) than the normally staid and aesthetised prose of 'straight' science:

It is 1839. England is tumbling towards anarchy, with countrywide unrest and riots. The gutter presses are fizzing, fire-bombs flying. The shout on the streets is for revolution. Red revolutionists denounce the props of an old static society: priestly privilege, wage exploitation, and the workhouses. A million socialists are castigating marriage, capitalism, and the fat, corrupt Established Church. Radical Christians join them, hymn-singing Dissenters who condemn the 'fornicating' Church as a 'harlot', in bed with the State.

Even science must be purged: for the gutter atheists, material atoms are all that exist, and like the 'social atoms'—people—they are self-organising. ... The science of life—biology—lies ruined, prostituted, turned into a Creationist citadel by the clergy. Britain now stands teetering on the brink of collapse—or so it seems to the gentry, who close ranks to protect their privileges.

At this moment, how could an ambitious thirty-year-old gentleman open a secret notebook and with a devil-may-care sweep, suggest that headless hermaphrodite molluscs were the ancestors of mankind?

The 'gentleman' in question, of course, was Charles Robert Darwin: Cambridge-trained, once destined for the cloth, well-heeled and 'impeccably Whig' as Adrian Desmond and James Moore, the authors of this biography, describe him. The son of a Shropshire squire, Darwin can rightly be included with Marx and Freud in a troika of 19th century thinkers whose work still profoundly affects our value-systems today.

Despite some moments of boys-own bravado and rhetorical swashbuckle, the rest of the book rarely redeploy the cinematic gusto of the preface. (Just as well, I can hear Darwin say—he would have been greatly troubled by the sensationalist tone of the above excerpt, the repetition of 'gutter', and the salacious metaphors.) Darwin is an entertaining and (in the best sense) journalistic work which deliberately distances itself from the previous biographies that Desmond and Moore see as "curiously bloodless". By contrast, they try to "re-locate Darwin in his age" by writing a "defiantly social portrait", and they largely succeed.

The science in the book is fairly synoptic—which is understandable for a populist work; but too often Desmond and Moore assume a detailed knowledge of 19th Century British history. At one point, for instance, we are told that Cambridge, where Darwin was studying in 1831, was "gripped by election fever". The historical importance of this particular General Election is emphasised and we are told that the two Whig candidates for Cambridge were defeated, but the narrative immediately swerves towards Darwin's preparations for his voyage on HMS Beagle. It takes more than 10 frustrating pages (and six months of narrative time) for Desmond and Moore to let slip parenthetically that the Whigs had been returned to power. This is not suspense, it's an editorial slip—especially when all that was needed was a three-word sentence, 'The Whigs won'.

Desmond and Moore have utilised the flood of primary material recently unleashed by the Darwin Industry: Darwin's secret notebooks have been transcribed and his published Correspondence has reached Volume 7 of the 14,000 known letters from and to him.

This new material reveals a fascinating picture of science as an institution
in the 19th century. Science, at the beginning of that century, was the domain of the dilettante or self-financing gentleman-scholar, and it was not until mid-century that youngbloods like T H Huxley could begin constituting themselves as professional ‘scientists’; a respectable white-collar body providing the public with a service—instruction—and a commodity—knowledge.

Early 19th century science lay in the hands of country curates and lecturing Parsons whose excursions into biology or geology were financed by the remnants of a feudal system of privilege, inheritance and elitism. The young Turks like Huxley wanted to sweep the academies clean of the old, amateur spider-stuffers once and for all. This was a time when ‘bourgeois’ meant radical or even revolutionary, when capitalism was the new threat to tradition, and when liberalism was a dirty word to the powers that be,* not the term of approbation it is in our New World Order.

In 1859 Darwin finally went public with his theory after 20 years of subterfuge. Desmond and Moore’s ‘social relocation’ of Darwin highlights two things at this moment. First, the ground had been prepared and the time was exactly right; second, Darwin’s theory would have been impossible to conceive without the technological, communicational and financial advantages afforded a white, upper middle class male living in the most industrialised nation on earth, directly plugged into the network of political and intellectual power.

Unfortunately, Desmond and Moore never go beyond pointing to some unresolved problems with Darwin’s theory of evolution. If a reader wants to explore the science itself and modern reflections on it, they would do better to read Stephen Jay Gould (any of his books, but especially Wonderful Life or Ontology and Phylogeny). And if they want to learn about the implications of Darwinian theory for human beings they should read Jared Diamond’s Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee. No one will pass on unveiling the secret life of Darwin. But their method precludes them from going much further. I began this review with an excerpt from the preface to Darwin. The question that ends that excerpt is a rhetorical one—the answer is predetermined by Desmond and Moore’s methodology. Their ‘social biography’ cannot help but explain Darwin’s theories as the product of his times, of his upbringing, and of those contemporaries he read—in short, of his material circumstances and ideology.

Shave away the mountains of detail and the seductive detours in Darwin and we are left with a reductionist portrayal of Darwin as himself a ‘social darwinist’—a product of his age who merely projected onto the natural world the market-driven, bourgeois, free-for-all ethos which he had been brought up to accept as inevitable (and even desirable) in the human world. Perhaps I am being reductionist myself in distilling 828 pages to this bare paragraph, but I think there remains a lot more to be said (psychologically, at least) about the Shropshire squire whom Ruskin once mocked as having “a deep and tender interest about the coloured hinder half of certain monkeys”.

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