**What about Darwin?**

by Thomas F Glick  
Baltimore (MD): The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 520 pages

reviewed by Glenn Branch

Thomas F Glick is a historian of science at Boston University, perhaps best known for his work on the reception of Darwinism, as in *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism* (Glick 1988), *Negotiating Darwin* (Artigas and others 2006), and *The Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (Engels and Glick 2008). His *What about Darwin?*—subtitled, in good Victorian fashion and with a scarcely avoidable pun, “all species of opinion from scientists, sages, friends, and enemies, who met, read, and discussed the naturalist who changed the world”—is about the reception of Darwinism, too, but the approach here is like that of a scrapbook. Glick explains, “I have tried to keep the mood light, looking for passages that project a sense of who Darwin was, how he affected people, and, later on, how various authors marshaled the icon” (p xv). With over four hundred passages from authors ranging from Henry Adams (who described himself in the third person as “a Darwinist because it was easier than not”; p 1) to Émile Zola (whose 1885 novel *Germinal* features characters arguing about the social implications of evolution), *What about Darwin?* succeeds in giving a tantalizing taste of the various ways in which Darwin was understood and misunderstood, from 1859 to about the mid-1940s.

Especially well represented are the members of what Glick calls “affinity groups,” tightly knit circles of people with common interests. “Entire affinity groups, such as the American transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott) and the Bloomsbury Group (Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, John Maynard Keynes), appear here in toto, or almost so,” he explains (p. xxiii), as do the usual suspects of Darwin’s circle: Joseph Hooker, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Lyell, and so on. Less expected but perhaps by that token more welcome are people whose interest in Darwin might come as a surprise. It was dismaying to see Marcus Garvey blaming African-American passivity on Darwin (“If you still think with Darwin, then you can allow someone else to speak for you”; p 138), entertaining to discover Sherlock Holmes alluding to *The Descent of Man in A Study in Scarlet* (“Do you remember what Darwin says about music?”; p 98), and a bit ironic to find Joseph Stalin boasting that because “the Party pursues a policy of defending science in every way” (p 404), a Scopes trial in the USSR would be impossible. His boast appeared in *Pravda* in 1927—just a year before Lysenko propounded his theory of vernalization, with its disastrous consequences for Soviet genetics and agriculture.

*What about Darwin?* is simply a delightful book to browse through, and perhaps the only activity more delightful would be to argue about who should have been included, and what, and why. I’ll offer two candidates who I think were unjustly overlooked. First, why is there nothing from Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), the English writer and Catholic apologist?
Glick includes two passages from his close ally GK Chesterton—so close that George Bernard Shaw referred to them as the Chesterbelloc (attributing the back legs to Chesterton and the front legs to Belloc)—as well as a passage from HG Wells responding to Belloc’s attack on Wells’s *Outline of History*, but offers nothing from Belloc himself. Belloc’s critique of Wells’s exposition of evolution (which was itself vetted by the biologist E Ray Lankester, who is represented in *What about Darwin?* in his own right) was worthless scientifically, but it helped to provoke JBS Haldane to study natural selection, or so McOuat and Winsor (1995) argue, so it would have been worth a mention. Amusingly, Belloc’s grandmother was considered as a French translator of the *Origin*, but eventually demurred: “on reading it, she finds it too scientific,” Darwin reported (Browne 2002:142).

Second, Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), the American author, is also absent. In October 2009, I was privileged to attend a symposium on Darwinism, Science, Religion, and Society at the University of Cincinnati, where philosophers and political scientists dominated the panels, presenting detailed arguments and extensive data. So when Michael Roos, a professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, took the podium to address “Hemingway, Darwin, and the problem of God,” I wondered whether those in attendance were bracing for a pointless exercise in literary vapidity. If so, they must have been pleasantly surprised. After documenting the absence of any reference to Darwin’s influence on Hemingway in the scholarly literature, Roos persuasively argued that in Hemingway’s background “we find, instead of a Darwinian void, almost a Darwinian ubiquity,” citing such diverse and underestimated sources as his childhood visits to the Field Museum; his fondness for authors, such as Theodore Roosevelt, whose writings were permeated by evolutionary themes; and his high school zoology class. (The intrepid Roos in fact located and examined Hemingway’s notes from the class.) But *What about Darwin?* skips right from Hermann von Helmholtz to John Stevens Henslow—understandably, given that Darwin’s influence on Hemingway is diffuse and obscure, but regrettablly.

It’s tempting to go on. Why—I found myself wondering—did Glick quote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein discussing Darwin on emotion at secondhand, from student notes from a lecture in the early 1930s, but ignore his famous declaration in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “Darwin’s theory has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis in natural science” (1922:§4.1122)? Addressing any readers who are prone to worry about such matters, Glick cordially invites them to add their thoughts at a Facebook page for the book, “to comment on the book in its current form, to contribute new quotations by individuals of note around the world, and to participate in an ongoing conversation on Darwin and his influence” (p xviii, the URL is http://www.facebook.com/pages/What-about-Darwin/316747122973). Unfortunately, as of September 1, 2011, there were only seven “likes” for the page, and no activity either from Glick or his readers since February 19, 2010. Both Darwin and Glick’s project deserve better. In the meantime, it’s fair to say that *What about Darwin?* is thoroughly enjoyable—though not for the same reason that Darwin found the books of Mark Twain enjoyable. Twain was told, “Mr Darwin reads them every night to lull him to sleep” (p 439), and was delighted.

**References**


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