Lincoln & Darwin: Shared Visions of Race, Science, and Religion
by James Lander

reviewed by Steven Conn

Around the world, 2009 was known as the Darwin Year, a grand bicentennial celebration of Charles Darwin’s birth and a sesquicentennial celebration of On the Origin of Species, arguably the single most important book to appear in the last 150 years. Everywhere, that is, except in the United States, where the Darwin Year was marked in a somewhat more subdued fashion.

In part that was a consequence of the uneasy relationship Americans still have with Darwin. Indeed, in 2009 Americans were busier marking the 200th birthday of Abraham Lincoln, born on exactly the same day as Darwin. President Barack Obama was in Springfield, Illinois, on February 12, 2009, to celebrate Lincoln, and he made only a passing reference to Charles Darwin at the event.

Exploring this remarkable historical coincidence has been almost irresistible for historians, and James Lander, with his Lincoln & Darwin: Shared Visions of Race, Science, and Religion, joins a crowded field which includes most recently David Contosta’s Rebel Giants (2008) and Adam Gopnik’s Angels and Ages (2009).

As the subtitle suggests, Lander’s approach to this well-worked material is to focus on three areas—race, science and religion—and argue that these two men shared the same outlook on all three. To make that claim, Lander proceeds carefully and thoroughly through each life, pairing the thoughts and careers of Lincoln and Darwin in virtually every one of the book’s twenty-six chapters. He begins by describing their “origins and education,” noting for example that each lost their mothers within a year of each other. We then march almost year by year through these two lives as Lander works hard to draw them as almost parallel.

Sometimes Lander works too hard, and the comparison feels a little strained. So, for example, Lander writes that in 1849 Darwin’s chronic health problems “drove him to try out the latest medical technology” while in the same year “Lincoln made a serious effort to contribute something of his own to the history of technology” (p 67). In fact, while Darwin was unarguably a “man of science,” Lincoln’s interests, certainly as president, seem really to have been more about developing technology.

Happily, more often than not these comparisons and juxtapositions persuade, and they reveal two extraordinary intellects as they wrestled with some of the most important questions of their age. It should not surprise anyone that Darwin’s religious faith was desultory at best, but Lander offers us a very useful tonic when he reminds us that Lincoln too cared...
little about religion and that his religious expressions were probably more tactical than spiritual.

Perhaps the strongest section of the book is Lander’s consideration of the relationship between science and race, and how both shaped American politics in the 1850s. Lander does not shy away from showing us that some of the finest “scientific” minds of the antebellum era dedicated themselves to justifying racism (and thus slavery too) through the use of “science”. Lander takes this one step further, to demonstrate how influential “scientific racism” was on key political figures and on the debates over key issues. It is easy for us today to dismiss a book like John H Van Evrie’s *Negroes and Negro “Slavery”: The First an Inferior Race; the Latter Its Normal Condition* (1854) for the vile nonsense it is; Lander reminds us that when it appeared, it carried the endorsement of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. As Americans mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, it is vital to remember what the Confederacy really stood for.

Resurrecting Van Evrie’s book is just one example of the extensive work Lander has done with the publications of the 1840s and ’50s, especially in America. Lander hews closely to the available sources, making very good use of Darwin’s correspondence. From those letters we learn just how carefully Darwin followed American events leading up to and during the Civil War. Darwin was passionate in his hatred of slavery, and his letters to Asa Gray also show us just how much he was rooting for Lincoln and the Union to prevail in the war.

Lander has also done a fine job recreating Lincoln’s intellectual world by reconstructing the library he had available to him in the office of his law partner. Here, though, the evidence is more slippery. Lander several times has to acknowledge that while Lincoln had access to this or that publication, we can’t be sure he actually read it. This includes Darwin’s book itself. As the story moves to its crescendo in 1859 and 1860, Lander acknowledges, “Gray’s *Atlantic Monthly* review is very likely the source that brought Lincoln closest to *The Origin* assuming he probably never read the book himself” (p 133). Darwin cared a great deal about Lincoln; we simply don’t know if that feeling was reciprocal.

In the end, both figures emerge as being largely out of step with many of their contemporaries and thoroughly ahead of their time. One hundred and fifty years later, we have inherited a political world descended from Lincoln and a scientific world that owes much to Darwin.

**References**


**About the Author**

Steven Conn is Professor of History at the Ohio State University, where he also directs the Public History Program. In 2009, he contributed “Charles Darwin’s American adventure: A melodrama in three acts” to OSU’s on-line history magazine *Origins* (http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/origins/article.cfm?articleid=37).
AUTHOR’S ADDRESS

Steven Conn
Department of History
Ohio State University
Columbus OH 43210
conn.23@osu.edu