In Praise of Darwin: George Romanes and the Evolution of a Darwinian Believer

by J David Pleins
New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 397 pages

reviewed by John Holmes

Our understanding of the science of evolution has grown immensely since Darwin first made the case for natural selection as its principal driver over a hundred and fifty years ago. But the challenges this science poses to our sense of who and what we are, and of a wider purpose within the universe, remain largely unchanged. Darwin kept his own doubts to himself and his close circle, but it was public knowledge from the outset that his account of nature in *On the Origin of Species* raised uncomfortable questions for theology. Many clergymen and even whole churches sought to stem the tide by refusing to accept his discoveries at all. Most scientists accepted evolution, but many of them looked for alternative mechanisms besides natural selection that might allow them to keep the evolutionary history of life on course towards fulfilling God’s progressive plan. There were others, however, who faced up to the fact that what Darwin had shown them was a world in which the engines of creation were apparently random variation and the brutal struggle for survival.

One of these was George John Romanes. Born in Canada in 1848, Romanes became one of Darwin’s closest friends and firmest supporters when he was only in his twenties. He went on to be among the leading defenders and explicators of the theory of natural selection, as well as a pioneer of the study of animal behavior. But where others of Darwin’s supporters, notably TH Huxley, sidestepped the existential anxieties posed by his scientific theories by declaring themselves agnostics, Romanes had had an intense religious upbringing and felt these challenges as a deep personal pain. They led him first to renounce Christianity in his anonymous *A Candid Examination of Theism* (1878), and then, ever so gradually, to work his way back to a position of faith. Romanes charted this journey through a long poem that he wrote in memory of Darwin after Darwin’s death in 1882.

The problems Romanes faced in finding a place for his faith in the world after Darwin are the same ones that many people still wrestle with today. For this reason, “Charles Darwin: A Memorial Poem”—like other Victorian poems that tackle the same questions—remains relevant and moving. One reader Romanes speaks to clearly and profoundly is the professor of religious studies J David Pleins. For the first time, Pleins has made Romanes’s poem available to modern readers in full, editing it from a recently rediscovered typescript and including it as an appendix to his new book *In Praise of Darwin*. The book itself is a curious hybrid of biography, literary criticism, and theological exegesis. The opening and closing chapters chart fairly briefly how Romanes lost and later rebuilt his faith in the light of Darwin’s science. But the meat of the book, totalling five chapters and 250 pages, is a companion to the poem from start to finish, verse-by-verse. Pleins divides it into five
stages, recounting in turn Romanes's initial responses to Darwin's death, Darwin's funeral, a meditation on the significance of his fame, a visit back to Down House where he had lived, and finally the crux of the poem where Romanes grapples with the problem of evil in a Darwinian world.

Through the lens of natural selection, suffering and slaughter are no longer incidental to any divine plan, brought into the world by human sin, but the necessary corollaries and even the mechanisms by which creation unfolds. For people who find atheism untenable or unbearable, the old problem of the existence of evil under the reign of a God who is fundamentally good thus becomes far more acute. As Pleins shows, Romanes faces this challenge with integrity and emerges from it with his faith restored. Ultimately, whether Romanes's poem will take hold in the imagination of individual readers will depend on how far they find themselves in sympathy with it. This rests not only on Romanes's theology but also on the verse through which he achieves and expresses it.

For Pleins, Romanes's answers are already theologically satisfying, so he is predisposed to like the poem. Romanes approaches a solution to the problem of evil by arguing that it is the root cause of good—that love, beauty, kindness and so forth are the end-product of natural selection. This is not the last word, however, for either Pleins or Romanes, as ultimately both accept with Job that God is beyond our paltry comprehension. Fortunately, in Pleins's words, interpreting the poem itself, “Beyond the formulas of science and the dogmas of faith, there exists a wisdom whose roots run deep and whose springs cannot be fathomed by the rational mind,” yet which “can be uncovered by a soul that is open to the mysteries of existence” (page 233). If, however, you find the idea of a benevolent God for whom the ends justify the means unsettling, or talk of being open to the mysteries of existence unsatisfyingly vague, the poem has more work to do to win you over to an appreciation of Romanes's struggle.

Pleins's lovingly attentive account of the poem is very helpful in teasing out its engagement with theological questions, Biblical sources, biographical events, and Darwinian evolution. But the poem itself is uneven, and some of its insights are more profound than others. Like many of his contemporaries who were scientists or scholars first and only poets second, Romanes could occasionally crystallize his thoughts in sonnets of intense power. But for every commanding sonnet in his poem, there are passages of conventional wisdom in conventional four-beat lines too obviously derived from Tennyson's much more powerful poem of personal crisis In Memoriam.

Pleins has done Romanes justice by making the poem available to us all to read, but he may have done him a disservice by insisting on walking us past every tree rather than showing us the wood as a whole. Readers who have struggled with the challenges Darwinism poses for faith, or who take these challenges seriously even if they are not themselves perturbed by them, will find that his poem works through that same struggle in honest, moving and at times crisply insightful language. All long poems are uneven, but it is easy to pass over the weaknesses and appreciate the strengths of Romanes's Memorial Poem as you read it. If you want the poem to come alive, I suggest coming to it fresh, reading it first, and seeing what it means to you. Once you have done that, a selective reading of Pleins's commentary can only enrich your experience.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Holmes is an Associate Professor in English Literature at the University of Reading. He is the Chair of the British Society for Literature and Science and the author of *Darwin’s Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

AUTHOR’S ADDRESS

John Holmes
Department of English Literature
University of Reading
Reading, Berkshire RG6 6AH
United Kingdom
j.r.holmes@reading.ac.uk