America’s Darwin: Darwinian Theory and US Literary Culture
edited by Tina Gianquitto and Lydia Fisher
Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press, 2014. 400 pages

reviewed by Christoph Irmscher

A few years ago, one of my undergraduate students, after reading the famous passage in On the Origin of Species in which Darwin pictures for his readers how the machinery of natural selection works, “daily and hourly scrutinizing, … rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good, silently and insensibly working,” said that this sounded like a scene from a horror novel: as if someone had entered a dark, forgotten room deep down in the basement of a crumbling house and suddenly turned the lights on. What was and remains so horrifying about Darwin’s vision, this sudden illumination of a dark secret in the basement of our world, is that natural selection works, and keeps on working, whether anyone is there to watch it or not.

America’s Darwin collects fourteen essays that chart, from different angles and with different methods, the ways in which American writers and scientists have tried to normalize Darwin’s heterodox vision and integrate it into the cultural fabric of a nation constitutionally averse to thinking that life has no definite purpose. Some of the essays treat familiar figures; others take us into lesser-known territory. The authors, who carefully link their observations to quotations taken directly from Darwin’s works, cover a broad range of writers (from Herman Melville to Sara Gruen) and address a long list of topics, from insectivorous plants and American beavers to interspecies mating. And the two editors have valiantly attempted to sort the essays into three different categories (aesthetics, social reform, species definitions). However, as I was reading my way through this uniformly interesting volume, I quickly forgot about such divisions. As the editors hoped they would, the essays indeed began to work as the interlocking parts of a larger, intricate whole.

Although the book’s subtitle suggests a focus on literary culture, several of the essays deal with the more scientific aspects of Darwin’s American reception, and they were the ones I enjoyed the most. Gregory Eiselein, for example, diligently traces the connections between Darwin’s The Expression of the Emotions and James’s psychology but finds the most powerful similarities in their shared enthusiasm for the role of uncertainty in scientific discovery. Far less sanguine was John Burroughs’s support for Darwin, as Jeff Walker tells us. The Master of Woodchuck Lodge simply couldn’t let go of the notion that humans were superior to the rest of nature or give up his firm belief that the evolution of life progressed toward some distinct purpose.

Such need for transcendence did not much matter to the British émigré and Illinois farmer-turned-entomologist Benjamin Walsh, one of my favorite characters in the gallery of
American Darwinians. Walsh, Cambridge-trained like Darwin, developed the concept of “phytophagic speciation”: a form of sympatric speciation in which a new species of plant-eating insect emerges as a result not of geographic isolation (as in allopatric speciation) but of a shift in preferred host plant. Walsh ingeniously proposed that, if the individuals choosing the new host plant reproduce in sufficient numbers, their preference would be transmitted to their descendants, which would eventually, after many generations, lead to the creation of a new phytophagic species. Darwin included Walsh’s theory in the fourth edition of the Origin, a book the elated Walsh confidently predicted would never “perish.” Walsh was so dedicated to his science that, after he lost his foot in a railroad accident, he joked to his wife that a prosthetic limb would serve wonderfully well as a pin cushion for his insect-collecting. A few days later, he died from his injuries.

Another gem in this volume is Gillian Feely-Harnick’s long piece on Darwin’s American contemporary Lewis Henry Morgan, filled with archival material regarding Morgan’s groundbreaking work on American beavers. Morgan wanted to get rid of the term “instinct,” since he felt it contributed to an arbitrary distinction between humans (who have souls) and animals (who don’t). His hope was that the concept of “intelligence,” variable according to each individual’s adaptation to his her environment, would help tear such unnecessary barriers down. Finally, Tina Gianquitto, in an excellent essay on Darwin’s botany and its American afterlife, explains how the naturalist’s obsession with the sensitive sundew or Drosera drove the sentimentalism out of the language of women’s flower books but then helped replace it with an equally fantastic, anarchic world ruled by the crude desires of meat-devouring plants.

Among the more conventional literary essays tackling American writers and their varied attempts to absorb Darwin’s legacy, Melanie Dawson’s piece on Frank Norris stands out. Positing direct links between Darwin’s work on the expression of emotions and Norris’s novel McTeague, Dawson provocatively suggests that the brutal dentist McTeague’s tumbling descent into a primitive pre-modern state of manhood in fact requires the civilized environment that seeks to tame such raw affective displays. Other essays discuss a Melville poem that seems more obviously indebted to Lyell than to Darwin; Edith Wharton’s attempt, in her social fiction, to fuse Darwin and Lamarck; Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s use of female choice in her utopian novel Moving the Mountain; a forgotten eugenic utopia made up by the forgotten late-nineteenth-century writer Mary Bradley Lane; and the undermining of the nature-culture polarity in Jack London’s canine fiction. A final pair of essays—on two stories by T Coraghessan Boyle and two recent novels about human-simian interactions—seeks to reimagine humans as, for better or worse, co-existing “on the same plane as all other organisms.”

One reads these essays with a constantly renewed sense of the capaciousness of Darwin’s intellect, interested equally in the movements of earthworms and the reasons why humans bare their teeth. Philosopher John Dewey, quoted appreciatively in this volume, said that Darwinism imposed on philosophy the obligation to cease inquiring “after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them.” But the search for influences of Darwinian theory on modern US culture as it appears in this volume isn’t in itself Darwinian. America’s Darwin derives its main impetus from a set of predictable questions—who read what and why and with what results and toward what larger purpose, because this is, after all, how human culture works.
The answers we get are illuminating. But it is also undeniable that this is a book about us, not about the beavers or bugs American Darwinists studied. It’s worth remembering that even Dewey’s philosophy still very much depends on the idea that the world is, after all, meant for us to figure out, on the expectation that the external universe and the human mind will cooperate so that we may glimpse some temporary truth to help us make sense of ourselves as we stumble along.

And so the reader finishes America’s Darwin with the sober realization that, after all these years, after torrents of ink spilled, we still haven’t quite caught up with that forward-thinking, barnacle-dissecting squire of Down House. All those fantasies—humanist or, as we would now say, post-humanist—of people acting like animals, and animals acting like people, of plants plotting murder, and apes wanting to have sex with us, are intended as comforting reminders that somewhere, somehow, non-human nature still needs and wants us, despite all we have done to it.

Last year was the warmest year on record since such recordkeeping began, but we still haven’t begun to wrap our minds around the idea of a world that would exist without us in it. And yet, as Darwin taught us, it did, long before we came along. And as Rachel Carson (not mentioned in America’s Darwin, though in some ways she was more directly inspired by him than many of the other figures discussed) pointed out, it once again will, unless the unlikely happens and we mend our ways. The poet Wallace Stevens once said that even the absence of imagination would have to be imagined. And that might, indeed, be our final task, the last hope we have left.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Christoph Irmscher is Provost Professor of English at Indiana University Bloomington and the George F Getz Jr Professor in Indiana University’s Wells Scholars Program, which he also directs. He is the author most recently of Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

AUTHOR’S ADDRESS
Christoph Irmscher
Wells Scholars Program
Harlos House
Indiana University
1331 East Tenth Street
Bloomington IN 47405
cirmsche@indiana.edu