

Autobiographies

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At the end of his life, at the age of sixty-seven Darwin spent an hour on most days of the summer of 1876 and wrote down his memories producing a text of about 150'000 characters. It was never meant for publication only for the eyes of his immediate family for their edification. As the editors remark, he would no doubt have been scandalized had he known that those personal memories would reach the world at large. The title is 'autobiographies' as the editors have seem fit also to add a fragmentary memoir of his childhood compiled as a young man of twenty-eight. This is a slight effort compared to his later more ambitious effort, and much of it is also incorporated into the latter, so let us briefly comment on it to get it out of the way.

Darwin expresses a great suspicion as to the supposed memories of early childhood claiming that those tend to be latter reconstructions based on what the child has been told. His earliest memories date from the age of four and a half, and he makes a point of establishing their authenticity by their references to features of which he could not have been told. As those features involve inner impressions which cannot be checked the argument is scientifically weak, if psychologically convincing. I have often encountered people who claim that their first memories are rather late in life, stemming from their early school-years. To me this seems incredible, not to say disturbing, I have very vivid memories from the age of three, and possibly, although they are harder to date, from the age of two¹. From the age of four starts a continuous personal narrative, and the early years make up a very hefty part of my personal history and are crucial for the formation of my identity. It is a source of amazement to me, that so many people can so easily dispense with that part of their lives and seemingly without any regrets. In particular Darwin was eight when his mother died and he claims that he has almost no memories of her. In particular it seems to have had no traumatic effect on him, at least no conscious one, something professional psychologists would jump at. On the other hand he has vivid childhood memories of his father and siblings. Much of his early recollections are centered on his own naughtiness, something that no doubt was symptomatic for the Victorian age, whose crowning symbol, was incidentally about to be literally crowned at the time the young Darwin was about to reminiscence.

Darwin makes a big point about his middling intellectual status, never being at the top of his class (and of course always scraping by and never belonging to the bottom either). All of his success is due to unrelenting industry and a passionate interest. This is of course a very Victorian virtue, you should do your best and be satisfied with that. You cannot do better. Darwin's modest ambition from early on was to make some contribution to Natural

¹ The memories of the early age also include an awareness of an identity formed long before, and some scattered memories must have been from the time when my maternal aunt happened to live in the same town as my family, which I believe puts them back to 1952.

History and receive some recognition. He relates his interest of collecting from an early age, a collecting mania that seemed to have no purpose beyond the activity itself². Darwin is eager to dismiss his formal schooling as completely irrelevant. He learned nothing, and he was bored. Whatever he knows he taught himself, being an autodidact par excellence. He tries to present as unsentimentally as possible, his strengths and shortcomings. As noted, he makes no claim for any great intellectual abilities, he regrets his mathematical deficiencies which prevents him from seeing much of what is hidden³. He also acknowledges his inability for sustained metaphysical argument, but, one naturally assumes, with less regret. Instead he stresses his doggedness and good retention, as well as a more than average ability to observe.

His early youth was spent pleasantly and without any definite purpose. He was in good health, in striking contrast to his mature years, when his ill-health plagued him and was the one and only impediment to his work. He did a stint at the medical school in Edinburgh but found the lectures boring and discerned in himself no interest in following in his fathers footsteps and practice medicine. His father accepted that and suggested instead that he should become a clergyman, and for that reason he went to Cambridge, which necessitated some remedial efforts as he had forgotten all his school-knowledge of the Classics and needed to have it revived⁴. His family had independent means and a life of leisure was actually an option for him. And clearly he shared many gentlemanly interests such as a passion for shooting and having a good time with merry friends. But of course throughout this period his interest in Natural history intensified, no doubt abetted by his associations with senior figures, whose company in a sense was naturally foisted on him rather than being purposely cultivated. Darwin, although not devoid of ambition, was definitely not a climber. If there was one event that shaped his destiny it was his voyage on the Beagle. Without those years dedicated to reflection and discovery in exotic surroundings, he certainly would not have become the man he ended up being, something he is at pains to stress.. His father disapproved of the scheme, but conceded that would it win the support of a man, whose common-sense he respected, he would consent. That support materialized through his maternal uncle, a Wedgewood, and he was set, overcoming some initial petty scruples⁵ of the captain in charge FitzRoy. The rest is history, as the saying goes.

Darwin's memoirs are intended to be intellectual, with no or little concession to mere

² In particular he refers to his fondness for beetles. In particular how he once having picked up two exciting beetles in each hand, quickly put one of them into his mouth to be able to catch a third he had just spotted. Quick thinking indeed, but it backfired, as the beetles in his mouth emitted some acid, which forced him to spit it out as well as losing the third. His fondness for beetles incidentally recalls a snapping retort by Haldane to the question of what one could infer of the Creator from his Creation - an inordinate fondness for beetles.

³ He refers fondly to the instruction he received in school (and at Cambridge) in Euclidean geometry, in particular the clarity and elegance of its reasoning. Nowadays such an appreciation would indicate definite mathematical talent. Maybe the students of the early 19th century was on the whole a smarter bunch than what you would expect today in a more egalitarian age. However, his study of algebra turned out to tax his abilities too much, he simply lacked the necessary motivation.

⁴ Darwin does sprinkle his memoirs with various Latin expressions, not all of them grammatical.

⁵ Pertaining to the shape of Darwin's nose!

gossip (although he does have scathing remarks about some of his colleagues, and one obviously suspects that their private characters loosened his tongue, or maybe rather his hand). Thus it is particularly interesting to find out about his views on science, as science and the scientific occupies a central role in his life and in his opinions.

First science means a rejection of religion. In his youth he shared the usual religious homilies of his age and found great pleasure in reading Paley's, whose argument for the existence of a creator based on the design of the natural world very much impressed him in the same way Euclid's elements had delighted him in his childhood. But gradually, too gradual to cause any anguish, he lost his faith, realizing that any unfettered rational inquiry would not be compatible with a literal interpretation of the Bible. Now, such ideas were definitely in the air, and it is clear from his account that his father too was a freethinker. Darwin considers the matter important enough to warrant a special section in his memoirs. His freethinking was of course not without some controversy, his wife was a devout and conventional Christian and he was careful not to step on her toes⁶. But it was easy enough to make a split between his scientific role and his social role as a family-man. Besides there is always the escape-route of a general and vague theism. Darwin's Bulldog - T.H.Huxley, coined the term - agnostic, for the purpose of being able to side-step the religious issue and concentrate on the work to be done.

Darwin was a great collector, not only of beetles but facts. He maintained a wide network of correspondents and systematically organized everything he read or observed in index-cards, whose contents he could retrieve at will. His interest was of course not mindless collection, but to organize facts and see how they fitted with general laws. In this respect he seems to fit the quintessential scientist in the public mind. The indefatigable inductionist that patiently collects evidence than forms general laws as championed by Francis Bacon. And in fact Darwin does refer to his onetime Baconian activities in a way that it is tempting to infer an element of irony. Darwin was a naturalist and had no interest in forming a systematic opinion on the scientific method, but it is noteworthy that he makes a point of always noting down evidence that speaks against a theory, because such evidence is liable to be forgotten. Later commentators, such as Popper and Gould, refer to Darwin's dictum that there is no such thing, pace Bacon, as an unprejudiced observation. Every observation is made in support of a hypothesis (and may or may not comply with it).

Pivotal in his life were the books he wrote, and he makes an exhaustive list for the benefit of his readers. He notes how long each book took to write, with special references to the amounts of time that was robbed from him due to ill-health. He professes to have no great facility for writing and expressing himself, in contrast to his friend Huxley, but that could actually be turned into an advantage, because it forces him to carefully think things through before he commits them to paper. However, he recommends that field-notes should be written down quickly and spontaneously, and that they thereby are superior to efforts more conscientiously applied. Furthermore he notes the often long incubation period for most of his books, and claims that this is good, because time enables you a more impartial assessment of your work, in fact allows you to be as detached as an outsider in spotting

⁶ In his memoirs he refers to Christianity as a damnable doctrine, words what his wife must have copied out and been hurt by.

mistakes. His main claim to fame - the Origin of Species, was written during a twenty year period, he having conceived of the basics of his theory of Natural Selection in his late twenties, when he encountered Malthus theories about why the poor always needed to be on the brink of starvation from simple mathematical principles. Many attempts at writing the book had been made, and the final version benefitted from being an abstract of a much larger work he had in mind, and which might have eventually appeared but for the pressures brought about by being anticipated by Wallace. A larger work would never have had the same impact on the public as the shorter abstract he brought to their eyes. On Wallace he has only, or almost only good things to say, and claims, maybe a bit disingenuously, that personally he would not have cared whether he or Wallace would have reaped the honor, the main thing being that the theory would have gained wide acceptance. However, he disapproves of Wallace straying into spiritualism and his getting cold feet when it came to the issue of whether the human mind itself was the product of evolution. He notes with pleasure the favorable reception of the book while those who attacked him on evolution such as Richard Owen earned his enmity, although in this regard he had a softer spot for his old mentor Lyell, and the inability of the latter to accept the tenets of his theory. Perhaps by not seeing him as a rival. He also sketches his method of writing a book by successive elaborations on abstracts, i.e. by first writing an abstract of the book itself, then on the individual chapters, than on the level of individual paragraphs. Essential for the whole enterprise was to be able to marshall all the relevant facts, a feat made possible through his system of index cards, to which we have already alluded.

Darwin was totally devoted to his work, the only relief from his unrelenting labors, being on the negative side, his bouts with illness (which symptomatically is never referred to in other than the most general terms) and on the positive side his relation to his wife and children, of whom he had a fair amount. Like most Victorians he suffered deeply from the premature death of off-springs, although a fair share of his issue, did reach adulthood. In his childhood and youth he derived great pleasure from poetry and music, and he read Shakespeare, especially his historical plays, with great interest and delight. At the onset of puberty he developed a sense for natural beauty of landscape, but through his professional life he gradually lost those aesthetic sensibilities. Now, he confesses, poetry bores him and Shakespeare leaves him cold, and music can have no other impact on him, than engage him in work. Unlike the loss of religious faith he very much regrets this state of affairs, and explains it by atrophy, and suggests that one should everyday listen to some music and read some poetry in order to keep the aesthetic sense alive.

So would any other way of life been open to him? He writes approvingly of a life devoted to philanthropy, but of course this is a concession to prevalent moral attitudes of selflessness and devotion to others. In our age a devotion to science has a similar moral edge, seen as a devotion to the betterment of mankind.

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