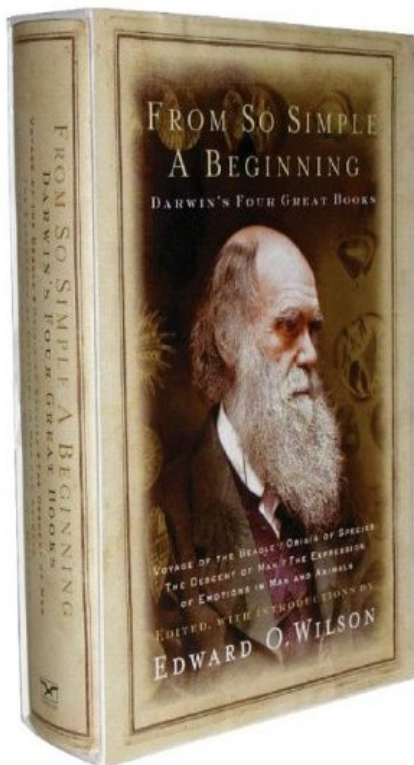


DARWIN: (R)EVOLUTIONARY LIFE

(*The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*. Sir Francis Darwin. Icon Books Ltd, Cambridge, 2003)

Heloísa dos Santos

FLUP



On account of my thesis on Darwin's influence on Literature and due to the celebrations of the two hundred years since his birth, I was asked by my coordinator to write a short review on one of his books. I was very honoured by the opportunity I was given and I chose to write about Darwin's autobiography. This was a choice I made based on a very particular reason: almost everyone knows about his theories and his work but few are the ones who know about the man himself. Having said that, my purpose here is to try to show who Charles Darwin was to the people who have the patience to read this essay, to tell them about his habits, his upbringing, a little about his family, but mostly about his

character, hoping they will be tempted to read his biography themselves.

Edited by his son, Sir Francis Darwin, the autobiographical portion of the book begins by informing readers that the memoirs we are about to read are recollections of some of Darwin's life that he himself wrote for his wife and children, in the form of letters, not intending for them to be published whatsoever. These recollections were written between May and August of the year 1876, just a few years before his death in 1882. The book is divided in three sections: Darwin's autobiography; "Reminiscences of My Father's Everyday Life"; "The Religion of Charles Darwin." In the first section we are presented with Darwin's recollections of his childhood, his life as a young adult, and a few episodes of his later years, all filled with both comical and insightful episodes of his education and his life as a child, as a young adult and as a man. It feels a little reassuring to learn that someone like Darwin had learning difficulties or that he found some lectures to be "very dull," as he states several times regarding different subjects. There are quite a few amusing recollections in this first section, and by amusing I mean images that can make readers let out a loud laugh, like the episode when he almost

swallowed a beetle because he was too excited to find three rare ones on the same occasion and didn't have enough hands to hold them. He put one in his mouth, and it was an accident waiting to happen. I was able to tell from my reading that Darwin's main concern was to amuse his family and to help them preserve happy memories of him. During his last few years his health began to deteriorate and still the comments made regarding his health were never complaints.

In the second section of the book we are granted access to Francis Darwin's recollections of his father's everyday life, such as his habits and his behaviour described in detail. In fact, his descriptions were so detailed that I was able to visualize Darwin's figure and how he laughed, how he slouched. His son's main concern was to show not only how much of a loving father Darwin was, but also to allow us to have some insight into his personality. From this section I was able to tell that he was a very humble person, even more than I had thought before, so humble that he claimed to be ignorant, regarding certain subjects of course. Everybody, or almost everybody, knows about Darwin's love for dogs (and Francis reinforces that idea by writing about his father's relation with one of his many dogs, Polly), but very few people know about his addiction to snuff or his little speech impediment. Through his son's words readers are able to understand just how kind-hearted Darwin was, how concerned he was with the methods instead of the means while he was doing research, how much he loved shooting for the sake of science, and how bad he felt about doing it.

In the final section of this book, which is called "The Religion of Charles Darwin," I choose not to analyze his comments on religion; in fact, there aren't many to comment on. This section is based on a letter written in 1879, and it shows just how reticent and careful Darwin was regarding religious matters. At some point, he wanted to become a clergyman, but all I can say is that he had his own faith, keeping his religion a private matter, as his son stated.

From all of this I can only say that in order to understand Darwin's passion for nature, to understand his theories, reading his autobiography should be the first thing to do. One can imagine just how difficult it must have been to publish something like *On the Origin of Species* back in the nineteenth century, but after reading this book, we can understand that, for a man like Charles Darwin, it was something that had to be done.