



The Quotable Darwin

Janet Browne • Princeton University Press, 2018

David McConnell

JANET Browne is the great biographer of Charles Darwin (1809-1882). She published the widely acclaimed 2 volumes *Charles Darwin Voyaging* and *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*. Browne graduated in science at Trinity College Dublin in 1972, turning to the history of science and especially to Darwin, and now holds the Aramont Chair of the History of Science at Harvard.

Darwin wrote about 20 large books, hundreds of articles and thousands of letters. He is one of the small number of people who by their own effort can be said to have made the world modern. Of course he is famous for the theory of evolution by natural selection. His carefully and modestly proposed hypothesis (shared with Alfred Russel Wallace) was controversial – it challenged and undermined the conventional religious beliefs of Jews, Christians and Muslims. If true then Genesis was little more than a good children’s story.

Now Browne has published *The Quotable Darwin* making Darwin, the astonishing scientist and lovable family man, so accessible. The well-known quotations are there but most are new to me. He wrote beautifully, nowhere better than the last sentence of *On The Origin of Species* [1859].

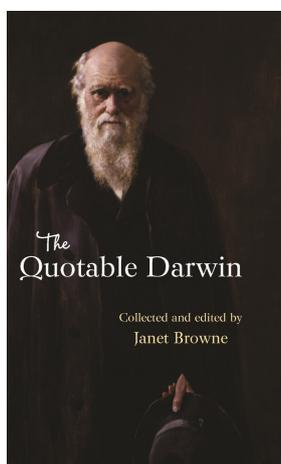
“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved”.

This was amended in the 2nd to 6th editions to read:

“...having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one....”

Browne includes the original (p115) and the amended version (p145) without comment. Of course this amendment set the hare running and it still is for some people – did Darwin believe in God?

This is answered by Browne’s selection of 18 quotations. They show the way his ideas developed over 50 years. We can see how he moved from having conventional religious beliefs in his youth, through theism when writing *Origin*, which he says gradually became weaker. By 1879, three years before his death, he writes that he is essentially agnostic and it is likely that he had been for many years. He did not believe that “the Bible was a divine revelation”, nor did he believe in “Jesus Christ as the Son of God”. Several quotations are taken from his *Autobiography*. It was written in 1876 and published after his death in 1887, with some parts



on religion censored by and for the family. In 1958 *Autobiography* was revised by his granddaughter Nora Barlow who restored 6000 words. One quotation tells us that his “disbelief ... was at last complete”. The thought that “my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends ... (who do not believe) will be everlastingly punished” by God was just one reason for agreeing with them.

He knew that *Origin* was disturbing; he was constrained by his deep love for his wife, who was devout, and family, and for his many *faithful* friends. He was determined to “avoid writing on religion”. He was “biased by the pain it would give ... my family, if I aided in any direct attacks on religion”. He preferred his work to speak for itself – which it did.

In general we can conclude that Darwin was a humanist – the term meaning that nothing we do or believe is affected by anything supernatural – nature holds the explanations for everything including the evolution of organisms, human beings, societies, civilisations, free will and morality. I suspect he left the word “Creator” in *Origin* because for him it meant “Nature”.

I was always affected by his admiration for native peoples – though not all of them. He was sure they were all members of the same species. Colour was a superficial quality – if I remember rightly, he thought highly of the Tahitians and South Africans but did not like the Maoris – they were too warlike. But he was hard on Europeans too. So I was delighted to see the strong condemnations of slavery in the quotes and his observation that “Wherever the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal”. I was touched by his humility on his theory of the Great Valley of Scotland which was wrong – all the more meaningful because he gave way to a different theory by Agassiz, the hugely respected geologist, who never accepted evolution. And it was good to see William Thompson (Lord Kelvin) in the quotations – people tend to overlook that he was Irish! He accepted evolution but not the Darwinian mechanism of natural selection.

It was also good to see Samuel Houghton there – his fine portrait in the Common Room of Trinity should not excuse the fact that he did not accept Darwinism. In fact he was the first to rush to print against Darwin. He was a good man who for many years fought for the admission of women to Trinity, starting in 1880. His opposition to Darwin does not read as if he had read him!

Now all of us have a chance to speed read Darwin through Janet Browne’s thoughtful choice of what he wrote as well as what some others said about him. □