

ONE

THE AGONY OF ROMANES

“Why?”

Up from the yellowed pages, over the confusion and bloodshed of a whole century, long forgotten but now of urgent meaning for our time, still rises Romanes’ dying cry.

Rich, widely respected, known throughout the science of the time as Darwin’s disciple and foremost British psychologist, George Romanes was the founder of the field he called comparative psychology. In keeping with Darwin’s own strong interest, considerable research and thought, Romanes’ purpose for the new field was to probe the similarities between the minds of animals and humans.

Typical among Romanes’ pioneering books were, *Mental Evolution Among Animals*, and then *Mental Evolution in Man*. Of special interest today, however, is the book that quickly dropped out of science and history. In keeping with the mysterious disappearance of Darwin’s lost theory, following publication in 1897, Romanes’ *Darwin and After Darwin* virtually dropped out of print until picked up and published online in its entirety first by Project Gutenberg in 2008 and then more recently by Google Books.

Almost wholly ignored for a century, today it looms as a prophecy of haunting accuracy.

Why, Romanes wrote, “not only do the Neo-Darwinians strain the teachings of Darwin; they positively reverse those teachings— representing as anti-Darwinian the whole of one side of Darwin’s system ...”

Why was one of the new Neo-Darwinians “letting it appear that he is unjustifiably throwing over his own opinions the authority of Darwin’s name.”

More specifically, why “so greatly have some of the Neo-Darwinians misunderstood the teachings of Darwin, that they represent as ‘Darwinian heresy’ any suggestions in the way of factors ‘supplementary to,’ or ‘co-operative with’ natural selection.”

The great man himself, Romanes wrote with difficulty but determination, “was always ready to entertain ‘additional suggestions’ regarding the causes of organic evolution—several of which, indeed, he himself supplied.” What was being done to Darwin was, for Romanes, like a knife being twisted in the fatal wound.

Of the “new writings ... now habitually represented by the Neo-Darwinians as setting forth the views of Darwin in their ‘pure’ form,” in sorrow, anger, and despair he wrote that “both in conversation and in the press, we habitually meet with complete inversions of the truth.”

Being manufactured to replace the living Darwin he had known, Romanes charged, was a new scientific pseudo-religion and a new breed of pseudo-priests to exploit the dead. Being enshrined was a “scientific creed ... not a whit less dogmatic and intolerant than was the more theological one which it has supplanted ... and while it usually incorporates the main elements of Darwin’s teaching, it still more usually comprises gross perversions of their consequences.”

Out beyond the bedroom window to which his eye strayed as he lay dying, was the world to which what he felt, and wrote, and prayed for time to complete and publish, was a matter of complete indifference. 1894 it was, things went on as usual. The British and Belgian governments were signing a secret accord dividing up all the people, gold, diamonds, and whatever else there was of value in Central Africa between them. London Tower Bridge was opening. George Bernard Shaw's play "Arms and the Man" premiered in London, and Sherlock Holmes "Adventure of the Empty House" was published. In America, Coxe's Army of the unemployed set out from Massillon, Ohio, for Washington, D.C. In New York City 12,000 tailors go on strike protesting sweat shops. The country is electrified by Edison's kinoscope for moving pictures, Elwood Haynes successfully tests the new automobile at 6 miles per hour, Indian chiefs from the Sioux and Onondaga tribes meet to urge their people to renounce Christianity, and 136,000 mine workers strike in Ohio for a pay increase. Elsewhere, Japan was defeating China in the Battle of Ping Yang. 6,000 Armenians were being massacred by the Turks in Kurdistan. Debussy's ballet "L'apres-midi d'un faune" premieres in Paris. A vaccine for diphtheria is announced in France by Dr. Roux. A first commentary on evolution in comic book form, “Origin of a New Species,” is launched by Richard Outcault, soon to become world famous as the creator of “Buster Brown.”

And Romanes lies here dying of what—after year after year of a painful decline—they finally decided was a fatal brain tumor.

Many times his thoughts would have gone back to that day when they first

met. Himself this mere tyro, this awkward nobody who'd written a letter of admiration, and after a brief correspondence received a letter in return from Darwin to come visit him. How the great man had rushed forward to seize his hands with delight upon his arrival. "How glad I am that you are so young!" Darwin had exclaimed.

During Darwin's final decade theirs had been a unique relationship. Young George Romanes had become not only his worshiping disciple, but in regard to where Darwin's mind was going, his closest intellectual companion.

Their relationship "reached an intensity that seemed to have no rival," Darwinian authority and historian of science Robert J. Richards tells us. "Their frequent meetings and correspondence bespoke the insinuating bonds of father and son. When Darwin died in 1882, Romanes grieved as he had previously done for no man."

"Half the interest of my life seems to have gone when I cannot look forward any more to his dear voice of welcome, or to the letters that were my greatest happiness. For now there is no one to venerate, no one to work for, or to think about while working," Romanes wrote to Darwin's son Francis.

The rest of Darwin's designations in his will went elsewhere, but specifically to Romanes Darwin left all his notes on his pioneering exploration of the field of psychology.

As first his eyes, then his balance, then ultimately his legs and even speech declined and left him, Romanes had labored to write his tribute to Darwin.

Whether "the misrepresentation be due to any unfavourable bias against one side of his teaching, or to sheer carelessness in the reading of his books," what was happening was both inexcusable and reprehensible. The Neo-Darwinians, he wrote—for it was Romanes who first coined the phrase—had set out to "positively reverse" Darwin's teachings.

But already, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Romanes' was a voice trying to work upon the conscience of the living from the grave. Before the book's completion, he had died.

"I myself believe that Darwin's judgement with regard to all these points will eventually prove more sound and accurate than that of any of the recent would-be improvers upon his system," Romanes wrote as the room, and everything in it, and the years with Darwin, the adventure of science, the treasured camaraderie, the thrill of debate, the glow of praise, the clasp of love, Scotland, the touch of children, and the world on and on beyond all that steadily dissolved into a blur.

Here is the quote he had used, from Darwin himself, to underline his own astonishment and concern.

“But as my conclusions have lately been much misrepresented, and it has been stated that I attribute the modification of species exclusively to natural selection,” Darwin had written as far back as in *Origin of Species* originally, “I may be permitted to remark that in the first edition of this work, and subsequently, I placed in a most conspicuous position—namely, at the close of the Introduction—the following words: ‘I am convinced that natural selection has been the main, but not the exclusive means of modification.’”

Then came the lament for Darwin that became Romanes’s own.

“This has been of no avail. Great is the power of steady misrepresentation,” Darwin had written. “But the history of science shows that fortunately this power does not long endure.”

It was a fine sentiment, a comforting hope to take the edge off Darwin’s lament. But having seen “misrepresentation” steadily grow rather than decline during the decade after his mentor’s death, Romanes had not been optimistic.

For as if he spoke with the supposed power of a reincarnated Nostradamus, the story thereafter of what both he and Darwin feared did for a very long time endure.