

Charles Darwin's Notebooks from the Voyage of the 'Beagle'

Charles Darwin (author), with Gordon Chancellor and John van Wyhe (eds.), and Kees Rookmaaker (assistant)
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This huge volume gathers for the first time the transcriptions of the fifteen notebooks written by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) during his famous journey on the *Beagle*, from 1831 to 1836. If Darwin's most celebrated book remains *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), as a consequence, many of his other writings remain overlooked, unknown, or unpublished. This was particularly the case with these substantial notebooks, but thanks to Dr. John van Wyhe (from the National University of Singapore) and his team, this impressive research project and valuable archives can now be accessed into this single book. In fact, this complete edition of Darwin's notebooks is now published for the first time by Cambridge University Press (p. xv). Here and there, whenever useful, some handwritten notes and sketches are even reproduced in facsimile (see pp. 340–341, pp. 532–533).

In this *Notebooks'* foreword, Richard Darwin Keynes writes that "Darwin is often regarded today as one of the greatest of all naturalists, who has undoubtedly changed much of our understanding of our place in the universe" (p. xv). Moreover, Keynes adds that "any true scientist will agree that Darwin's description of life on Earth as a great tree is correct in all its essentials" (p. xv). Even though Richard Darwin Keynes is Charles Darwin's great-grandson, he is more than just a relative and can be considered as an expert in Darwinian studies. And although Richard Darwin Keynes is also the editor of *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary* with the same publisher under the signature of R. D. Keynes (2001), his previous edited book should not be confused with these rare *Notebooks from the Voyage of the 'Beagle.'* In other words, the notebooks and diaries are two completely different books by Charles Darwin because the diaries were written on the ship while the notebooks were taken on inland expeditions when the *Beagle* was stopped at a port (p. xvii). This explains why even the French translation of Darwin's diary includes the English term "Diary" in its French title, in order to avoid any confusion with Darwin's notebooks (Darwin 2012).

In their introduction, the editors insist on the importance of these notebooks as compared to Darwin's diaries, not only because they are rarer, but also because "they offer a rich new vein of material for further study" (p. xvii). The domains covered in Darwin's notebooks are numerous and wide-ranging, according to the editors: "geology, zoology, botany, ecology, weather notes," but also "ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and linguistics as well as

maps, drawing, financial records, shopping lists, reading notes, memoranda, theoretical essays and personal diary entries." (p. xvii). Therefore, what is to be found here is a collection of observations, measures, field notes, spontaneous thoughts, and reflections made by Darwin about geology, botany, fossils, and people. However, these "rough" materials are presented chronologically and conceptualized by the editors into fifteen chapters which present each of Darwin's notebooks in detail. Each notebook bears the title of a place, from Cape de Verds, Rio, Buenos Ayres, Falkland, etc., to Desoblado and Sydney, including the famous Galapagos notebook (pp. 408–443). Nevertheless, as their title indicates, Darwin's notes are hardly a narrative or a continuous story; therefore, the editors have written before each notebook a few prefatory pages in order to set the context and continuity. For example, the editorial comments indicate how Darwin's theories were interpreted in various ways according to epochs and contexts, reminding us that "the belief that the Galapagos are where Darwin became an evolutionist is a mid twentieth-century version of Darwin's life story" (p. 408). Generally, footnotes by the editors are numerous and helpful all along Darwin's notes, to situate an allusion or to present a new character (see for instance the footnotes on p. 441). In sum, Darwin's Theory of Evolution is discussed by this book's editors rather than by Darwin himself (see p. 408).

Each of the notebooks is presented in itself with many contextual details as they constitute the main elements of this huge collection. Here, some examples of Darwin's notes must be quoted in order to depict the kind of knowledge he produced from his observations. For example, in the St. Fe notebook, Darwin seems to write his impressions and reflections as they are happening: "kinds of rock. – It is manifest all the metallic veins come from underlying granite" (p. 227). Further on, Darwin mentions or discusses as well the individuals he met, for instance in the Falkland notebook: "Black lieutenant. Indians marched by in numbers; /dilemma/ to dine with six gauchos pleasant man & certainly by far best conducted excellent asado little ditch: - Long tailed Shrike only comes in Summer to R Negro!" (p. 126). Elsewhere, in his Desoblado notebook, Darwin mixes descriptions, interpretations, and hypotheses: "From the quantity of Lava there must have been many volcanoes. surely these isolated cryst hills were such May seem to have little relation as axis with stratification but I think they generally have" (p. 532). All throughout the pages, Darwin's unrevised syntax and errors of punctuation are

respected and reproduced as such without any change or improvement.

Since we were so often told that “it all started there,” one could think the Galapagos notebook deserves a special attention, even though we only find here another series of observations by Darwin (pp. 429–443). After reading hundreds of pages of notes by Darwin, it is clear that these writings are like spontaneous and authentic narratives, for instance, when the 19th Century British scientist wrote with confidence and fascination, at the end of his Galapagos journey: “this track is so wonderful only famine (& murders) [ever] could have induced people to have discovered them – Men speak a little English – breakfast – make fire rubbing.” (p. 441).

Obviously, these valuable notebooks were not meant to be published as such and are not in any sense an earlier version of Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species*, but they somewhat reflect something like the embryo of the theoretical work (and framework) to come, for example, when Darwin writes in his Falkland notebook a very strong sentence that is almost premonitory for his future theoretical work: “I am inclined hence to believe this whole country to be of transition origin like so many primitive others” (p. 110). Nevertheless, some other passages are less rewarding and seem just like plain enumerations of words, distances, or series of numbers (pp. 158, 311, 316).

This impressive book comes with a detailed chronology indicating where Darwin was for about every day between 1832 and 1836, plus appendixes, bibliography, and a detailed index (pp. 570–615). Incidentally, the index includes many terms and places used by Darwin, but it is too bad it does not include conceptual or theoretical terms (I

would have liked to find “evolution” in the index). We even find a list of the expedition equipment (p. 583).

All in all, this hefty *Charles Darwin’s Notebooks from the Voyage of the ‘Beagle’* is a meticulously edited piece, neither for newcomers nor for undergraduates, but rather for advanced scholars in natural sciences, history of science, palaeontology, and anthropology. It provides some interesting dimensions about how scientific observation was made two centuries ago. Obviously, it would not replace Darwin’s most famous book, but as an archival source, it could definitely help graduate students in their research related to Darwin.

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