

J. David Archibald, *Critical Lives: Charles Darwin*

London: Reaktion Books, 2021. Pp. 240. ISBN 978-1-7891-4440-6. \$19.00 (paperback).

Lisa Winters

Independent scholar

Critical Lives is a series of books about leading cultural figures of the modern period. It has featured writers, artists, musicians, designers, philosophers and political revolutionaries and mainly focuses on the twentieth century, but ranges from the eighteenth to the twenty first. Darwin is one of only a few scientists or natural philosophers featured in this series, the others being Benjamin Franklin, Alfred Russel Wallace and Richard Owen. Those last two would undoubtedly make interesting companions to this book, as both were acquaintances of Darwin and could provide interesting perspectives on nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking. The *Times Literary Supplement* has a quote on the publisher's website that says that the 'main target audience is likely to be undergraduates, but that [it] will also do nicely for a general audience' (see <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/RB-CL.html>, accessed 28 May 2023). These books are short, accessible biographies for people who have little knowledge of the lives of these influential figures beyond their creations.

J. David Archibald as the author for *Charles Darwin* is not an arbitrary choice. Archibald is a professor emeritus of biology at the Evolutionary Biology Program Area of San Diego State University. Since 2014, his books have all focused on the history of evolutionary thinking and Darwin in particular. It is clear from his publications that Archibald is very familiar with Darwin's plethora of works as well as his personal correspondence.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, each detailing a significant period in Darwin's life in chronological order. It covers his family background, education, family life, religious beliefs, friends and rivals, and work on geology, botany and barnacles, as well as the great voyage on the *Beagle* and theory of evolution by means of natural selection that he is known for. The book concludes with Darwin's legacy, covering the recognition he received both in life and after death, a short review of evolutionary biology since the publication of his books and musings on why the different aspects of his life have inspired so much interest. It is a well-rounded review of Darwin's life, ensuring that it is actually a biography and not just background information to the shaping of his evolutionary theories.

Archibald has stayed very close to Darwin himself in writing this book. Almost all references are to his autobiography or the many letters he wrote and received during his life. The sources are reflected in the writing style; you feel as if someone who was close to Darwin is telling you about his life, using the same adjectives for people or events that he used in his writing. On the one hand, this has the advantage of your feeling that you really get to know Darwin through the many personal touches and interesting anecdotes. On the other hand, it means that this is not a story that incorporates multiple perspectives and a thorough discussion of the context in which Darwin lived. At times updates are given from more recent research (Darwin's finches are actually tanagers!) but there is otherwise little reflection on his life from a more modern point of view.

All in all, Archibald's biography of Darwin is easy to pick up and difficult to put down, assuming the prospective reader is at all interested in Darwin's life. The chapters are relatively short and enriched with a total of fifty-seven black-and-white illustrations. Due to

the nature of the Critical Lives series, the book is also a bit of a highlight reel, giving readers the essentials to get to know Darwin and his work without giving any new perspectives or insights. If you already know that Darwin is good for nothing but shooting and rat catching, about his beetle incident at Cambridge, the shape of his nose, his pros-and-cons list for taking a wife, his ever-present maladies and his earthworm experiments, this introduction might be wasted on you. If any of those things sound at all intriguing, *Critical Lives: Charles Darwin* is a good place to start.

doi:10.1017/S000708742300047X