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Darwinian Aftermaths: Reflections on the Thirty-Second Issue of *FORUM*.

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Depictions of the concept of aftermath, written from different perspectives in literature and culture, make up the articles collected in the thirty-second issue of *FORUM*. Together, they reveal that aftermaths can be experienced following sudden, catastrophic events, which force the subject to reconsider and rebuild their reality. They also show that small, incremental developments are equally capable of effecting dramatic changes.

One example of slow developments which effected enormous change can be found in the unfolding of Charles Darwin's contributions to the science of evolution. Darwin's theories on natural selection and evolution describe a process by which species populations adapt and change over a period of time by passing inheritable traits to the next generation. Those organisms which inherit characteristics enabling them to thrive in their environment live to pass these on to their own offspring. Eventually, these adaptations and variations lead to the emergence of new species groups. The significance of Darwin's theories is irrefutable, as they fundamentally and irrecoverably changed how the Victorians understood the world and their own place within it.

The considerable impact which Darwin's theories had upon nineteenth century thought has given rise to popular discourses which suggest that *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) had an immediate and explosive effect upon Victorian life. A well-known example of this is the Oxford debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and 'Darwin's bulldog' T.H. Huxley, so named for his enthusiastic support of Darwin and his work. During the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science – so it goes - the man of science and the man of God famously clashed while discussing the possibility that humankind shared their ancestry with apes. In response to Huxley's defence of Darwin's work, Bishop Wilberforce remarked that "if what Mr. Darwin has proposed were true, then we should all be descended from monkeys. I wonder—Professor Huxley—whether you would be so good as to tell the audience whether it is on your grandmother's side or your grandfather's that you claim descent from an ape?" to which Huxley retorted that "he was not ashamed to have an ape for an ancestor, but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth" (Qtd. by Kaalund). In this version of

events, science claims victory over religion, Darwin's theories are accepted, the world and mankind's place within it are forever changed.

In this light, the publication of *On the Origin of Species* represents a significant event, the aftermath of which had a profound and permanent effect upon not only scientific practice and research, but how humans perceived themselves in relation to their history and the world around them. However, historical moments are rarely so neatly packaged. In her article, "Oxford Serialised: Revisiting the Huxley-Wilberforce Debate through the Periodical Press" (2014) Nanna Katrine Lüders Kaalund examines the role that the periodical press had in generating the mythology around Darwin's impact through their reporting of the Wilberforce-Huxley spat. She notes that the political or religious orientation of journals determined whether they adopted a "Darwinite", "anti-Darwinite" or neutral stance (Kaalund). This scattering of opinion signals that the impact of the Oxford debate, and the Darwinist theories which precipitated it, were more mixed than the surrounding mythology suggests. Both Kaalund and Jonathan Conlin cast doubt upon the credibility of accounts contemporaneous to the debate. Conlin posits that mixed accounts of the debate reveal the mixed mood of an educated public, rather than a decisive shift in their thinking (96).

The actual circumstances surrounding the development of Darwin's theories and their role in scientific discourse were far more gradual. *On the Origin of Species* itself was more than twenty years in the making. Briefly, in 1831 Darwin embarked on a survey expedition aboard *HMS Beagle.* Captain Robert FitzRoy believed it would be useful to have a naturalist on board and Darwin, whose scientific imagination had already been stimulated by discourses which included Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), was keen to see the world before becoming a parson upon his return. Initially, Darwin gained renown as a collector of fossils and as a gentleman geologist following the publication of the diary he kept throughout his six years aboard the *Beagle*, renamed as *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by HMS Beagle* (1839). However, six years spent examining foreign landmasses and the species which inhabited them, accumulating comprehensive observational evidence, and with a mind which had been shaped by extensive reading, had presented Darwin with the possibility that species were neither fixed nor immutable.

Darwin was able to understand the implications of fossil and rock formations he encountered during his voyage and, crucially, he was able to make the extraordinary imaginative leap to envision slow developments over such an immense length of time that they could never be witnessed during a

human lifetime. Darwin was acutely alert, however, to the fact that his discoveries undermined the religious orthodoxy which was dominant during the nineteenth century: the belief that "the world [had been] lovingly created around the needs of one species, Homo sapiens, created by God in His own likeness" (Conlin 2). Darwin's theories destabilised this anthropocentric world view, which saw "humanity and God banished to the edge of the universe: the former reduced to the level of an impoverished ape, the latter missing, presumed dead" (2). These were Darwin's own feelings on the subject, as he confided to his close friend Joseph Dalton Hooker that "it is like confessing a murder" (Darwin).

Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection were first made public in 1858.

It took him two decades to refine his argument and, while this could be interpreted as rigorous scientific enquiry, it could be equally indicative of a hesitation to make his ideas known. Darwin was an unlikely pioneer and reluctant celebrity, preferring to stay at home in Kent rather than socialising with the London scientific intelligentsia, and so it is reasonable to assert that he was apprehensive about the attention that his work was certain to excite. Had it not been for Alfred Russel Wallace independently conceiving of the theory of evolution through natural selection – Conlin posits - it is possible that Darwin may have kept his findings to himself. Wallace and Darwin's theories were presented jointly to the Linnean Society, but neither naturalist attended, nor did their discoveries prompt the reaction Darwin seems to have feared (Conlin 4). Conlin quotes the then president of the Linnean Society Thomas Bell as summarising 1858 as a year that had not been marked "by any of those striking discoveries which at once revolutionise . . . [our] department of science" (Qtd. by Conlin 4). Despite their expertise the men of science who comprised the Linnean Society failed to recognise the implications of Darwin and Russel's findings, or their significance.

It is irrefutable that Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection profoundly altered humanity's understanding of their place in the world and revolutionised scientific conceptions of the origins of life. Given these serious implications, it is understandable that the Wilberforce-Huxley debate has been positioned as a narrative monument, memorialising the moment in which science overcame religion and changed the world forever. However, the acknowledgment of Darwinian theory's scientific and cultural importance was more gradual. At each stage of the process, Darwin had to reconcile himself with the suggestions that his discoveries held for humanity; they can be understood as a series of small aftermaths before crystallising into *On the Origin of Species*.

Like the gradual adaptations which allow species to evolve, and the slow process of scientific research, aftermaths can be small, quiet, but nonetheless more profound and historic than their louder, more dramatic counterparts. The circumstances surrounding Darwin's theories illustrate an event which has been rendered apocryphal, and highlights the importance of recognising the gravity of events when they make their significance known. The articles in *FORUM's* thirty-second issue identify events, their aftermaths, and their consequences, signifying that their authors are alert to the various ways in which they manifest within their chosen medium. Placing these works alongside one another implies that, in one way or another, we are in a constant state of aftermath, and it is our joint responsibility to pay attention.

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