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Review Of "Darwinism, War And History: The Debate Over The Biology Of War From The 'Origin Of The Species' To The First World War" By P. Crook

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Review

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Ingle’s intention was to improve upon earlier hagiographical efforts, which relied heavily on Fox’s Journal, by using recent scholarship to examine the founder’s life in historical context. Ingle’s research in both primary and secondary sources was substantial. But despite his discussion of political events and, in particular, the impact of hostile governmental policies on the Friends, the author has not produced a definitive, modern biography. The book’s coverage is unbalanced, with too much detail and repetition for the period to 1660 and too superficial a discussion thereafter. For example, Ingle barely mentions the Friends’ involvement in the colonies of West New Jersey and Pennsylvania, suggesting nothing about Fox’s reaction to their exodus; and though Fox wrote many epistles during the 1680s, we learn little about what he said.

Of most concern to those looking for an interdisciplinary approach, however, is Ingle’s failure to offer new insight into Fox’s role in creating Quakerism. Ingle works so hard to remove filiopietistic trappings from this biography that we are left wondering how, with Fox as leader, the sect grew at all. Ingle’s Fox lacks both charisma and wisdom; he seems an oddly ordinary man who made good decisions without forethought or understanding, was inconsistent in dealing with associates, and strayed sometimes from his own principles. All of this portrait may have been true, but Ingle offers no other reason—except, perhaps, luck or institutional momentum—for the movement’s expansion and its ability to surmount persecution and internal division.

A systematic study of the minutes of meetings and the books of sufferings, with a fresh reading of other sources, would have permitted an analysis of Fox’s influence among rank-and-file Friends in comparison with that of other leaders, such as Robert Barclay, Margaret Fell, William Penn, George Whitehead, and Alexander Parker. The author briefly mentions the contributions of other Friends but makes no effort to weigh their significance against that of Fox. More careful scrutiny of the localities in which Quakerism flourished, as opposed to those where it faltered, would have suggested the social and economic factors for its growth.

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*Darwinism, War and History: The Debate Over the Biology of War from the “Origin of the Species” to the First World War.* By Paul Crook (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994) 306 pp. $64.95 cloth $27.95 paper

In this comprehensive survey of the debate about war and human aggression through World War I, Crook argues that Darwin’s major legacy was not a biologized militarism but a far more extensive “peace biology,” split between those who stressed humanity’s ability to transcend and control nature and opposed biological reductionism (a strain
rooted in the work of Thomas H. Huxley and Alfred R. Wallace) and those who countered Darwinized militarism with their own readings of biology—for example, Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London, 1902). This “double dealing,” as Crook terms it, produced a pervasive tension that became manifest in a wartime alliance of Darwinism with “peace eugenics” that stressed war’s dysgenic function—an alliance that exposed peace biology to “alien and autocratic influences,” while allowing it to survive a growing emphasis on humans as “fighting animals” in instinct and crowd behavior theory (3, 194).

Crook concedes that this debate may have involved a struggle for professional power and prestige among natural and social scientists. But he resists instrumental and other externalist explanations, insisting instead that the debate represented both a psychological adjustment to pervasive cultural anxieties and a desire to explore the internal logic of the new scientific paradigm. Although his methodology necessarily consists of relatively conventional textual analysis, the result is an important contribution to a revisionist understanding of Darwin’s impact on social thought across the disciplines. Whereas the older view of “social Darwinism” portrayed the triumph of a gospel of brute force and a survivor ethic against traditional values, “peace biology” illustrates the degree to which Darwin’s theories were incorporated into preexisting value systems—a theme developed earlier in Howard Kayes’ *Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology* (New Haven, 1986), the work of Peter Bowler (for example, *Theories of Human Evolution: A Century of Debate, 1844–1944* [Baltimore, 1986]), and my *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia, 1979), among other works. This congruence allowed peace advocates to “cash in” on traditional values, Crook contends, as contemporaries ignored their intellectual inconsistencies and attacked biologized militarism (193).

Tracing the contours of peace biology, this study also shows that *On the Origin of Species* (London, 1859) had its greatest influence on those to the left-liberal side of the political spectrum—a point argued in different contexts in Carl Degler’s *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York, 1991) and Mark Pittenger’s *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870–1920* (Madison, 1993), both of which appeared after this work was in press. For Crook, this liberal legacy underlies the myopia of present-day sociobiologists and their critics as they replay the earlier debate, replete with charges and denials of “social Darwinism,” which in themselves reveal a “collective amnesia” concerning their forebears (196).

Although building on social-Darwinist revisionism, Crook is not uncritical, faulting its tendency to ignore the potential of Darwinism to induce new prejudices (concerning race or gender, for example) and to exaggerate the elements of order and harmony in such earlier traditions as Malthusianism and utilitarianism. He is consistently cautious concerning its claims, characterizing them as merely “contendable” and thus
reason for the "prudent historian" to generalize "in a suitably chastened frame of mind" (29, 41, 97). Against the claims of an overly sanguine revisionism, he insists that Darwinism provided ammunition for a virulent, albeit minority, strain of militarism, although he has its proponents varying from "many" to "certainly seen to be one type... rightly or wrongly" (14, 196).

Yet it is precisely in regard to this popular perception that he could have pursued his argument further. The issue is not simply to tally pro- and antiwar Darwinians, but to explain the gap between charges at the time that militarists were abusing Darwinism and the relatively small number of bona fide militarist Darwinians that Crook produces (80–83). The most egregious offenders were military men, several of whom appear to have been arguing against the peace biologists who cast the argument in Darwinian terms in the first place. Others (such as proponents of "social efficiency") qualify by virtue of charges of misapplied Darwinism by their opponents (91). Images of the "fighting animal," whether or not couched in Darwinian terms, typically prefaced calls for humanity to transcend its bloody past. More attention to demonizing, and to the norms that governed Darwinian discourse in different cultures, could only strengthen the central argument of this intelligent, well-researched book.

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This study of mainstream, Liberal parliamentary politics from 1830 to 1865 is an unapologetically straight political history, entirely indifferent to interdisciplinary methods, with no concessions to the social sciences and no use even for social history. Parry bases his study on voluminous printed sources, both contemporary (parliamentary debates, newspapers, and periodicals) and secondary; he is industriously old-fashioned in his methodology, which is not necessarily a liability for what he is trying to do. The result is not whig history but Whig history—especially the big Whigs—for Parry is writing a book "about government and leadership" that regards politics as a transaction between government leaders and their parliamentary supporters (2).

In asserting that "the parliamentary whig-Liberal tradition was central to British politics," Parry places himself in explicit opposition to recent studies that emphasize the grassroots elements in the constituencies (19). He also opposes the prevailing Liberal historiography in other respects. He insists on the continuity of a mainstream Liberal tradition from the 1830s to 1885, and rejects the idea of a fundamental division between sluggish whigs and progressive radicals. Above all, he rejects the standard historiography that regards William Ewart Gladstone as the culmination of Victorian Liberalism. Indeed, Gladstone is the bete noire of a book