Review Essay

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The coincidence of the birthdates of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin on February 12, 1809, has precipitated two books on these two great men of the nineteenth century. While Rebel Giants is a dual biography, Angels and Ages is a collection of thematic essays. The former was composed by an academic historian, David Contosta, the latter by a journalist, Adam Gopnik. Both are felicitously written, short, published by commercial presses, and intended for a general (rather than a scholarly) audience. Gopnik classifies Lincoln’s and Darwin’s common birthday as an “intriguing coincidence” (8). While conceding that their shared birthday is the “kind of coincidence that fills astrologers with glee,” Contosta argues that the “many parallels and intersections in their lives. . . . offer insights into the wellsprings of greatness and the crucial intersection between individuals and events in monumental paradigm shifts” (13). Both Contosta and Gopnik assert that we can learn more about Darwin and Lincoln by viewing them together than separately. This contention seems unlikely on its face as Darwin and Lincoln lived on separate continents, worked in disparate fields, never met, and had no direct or even indirect influence on each other. Nonetheless, both Contosta and Gopnik gamely give it a go.

Contosta writes a joint, or rather a parallel, biography of Lincoln and Darwin, showing that the lives of the two “rebel giants” follow a rough concordance. They received an education in the 1820s, set off on adventures in the 1830s that informed their worldview and careers (Lincoln at New Salem and Darwin on the H.M.S. Beagle), come into their own in the 1840s (Lincoln as a successful lawyer and Darwin as a prominent naturalist), and endured setbacks in the 1850s (Lincoln lost two attempts to win a seat in the U.S. Senate and Darwin faced
a priority challenge from Alfred Russel Wallace), only to achieve ultimate success in the late 1850s and early 1860s (Lincoln’s election as president and Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species*).

To be sure, there are some similarities between the two men: they disappointed demanding fathers, lost their mothers as boys, mourned a child at a crucial moment in their professional lives, suffered bouts of depression and self-doubt, and held unorthodox religious views that embarrassed their descendants and prompted some biographers to fudge the facts in favor of faith. Moreover, as Contosta notes, “both hated slavery, both read and admired William Shakespeare, both were latter-day sons of the Enlightenment who elevated reason over religious revelation, both were ambitious as well as patient men, both had sure and steady mental powers rather than quick minds, and despite vast differences in their formal educations, both were in many ways self-taught” (15).

Contosta follows a chronological approach, alternating between Lincoln and Darwin and locating them in the political, social, intellectual, and scientific context of the mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American world. Surprisingly, the placement of the two side-by-side offers a certain trans-Atlantic symmetry that provides the occasional insight. Contosta incongruously hurries past Lincoln’s prosecution of the Civil War and Darwin’s post-*Origin* career, giving short shrift to the crowning achievements of his subjects. Though neither a specialist in the history of science nor the Civil War, Contosta proves to be a more or less trustworthy guide, alerting general readers to important caveats, including that Lincoln was “no radical abolitionist” (170) and that Darwin did not use the word “evolution” to describe his ideas until 1872 in the sixth edition of *Origin* (199). Unfortunately, Contosta makes the occasional error as well. For example, Darwin first used Herbert Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” to describe natural selection in 1869 in the fifth edition of *Origin*, not in the sixth edition (199), but Contosta’s effort to distinguish Darwin’s beliefs from those of the “Social Darwinists” is laudable and clear (283–84). In short, Darwin was a humanitarian reformer who sympathized with the plight of aboriginal peoples from Africa to Australia to the Americas. He strongly believed that all humans shared a common descent and were members of the same species. Darwin did not believe that natural selection justified European imperialism.

*Rebel Giants* contains chapters on the “Afterlives” and “Legacies” of the two men, providing general readers with a brief and informative summary of how Darwin and Lincoln were mourned after their deaths and remembered by historians, scientists, and the general public in
the twentieth century. Contosta traces how Lincoln’s legacy changed in light of modern concerns about the impairment of civil liberties by presidents during wartime and conflicting assertions about how much credit Lincoln should be given for ending slavery in the United States. Contosta explains how subsequent scientific discoveries confirmed Darwin’s theory and many of his educated speculations. Contosta concludes by discussing fundamentalist Protestants’ legal challenges to the teaching of evolution in the public schools in the United States, including _Kitzmiller v. Dover_ (2005).

Contosta’s account of the trajectories of Lincoln and Darwin is marred by a creeping determinism that never lets the reader forget that the two “rebel giants” were destined for greatness. Describing the malaise that seemed to envelop Lincoln and Darwin in the late 1840s and early 1850s, Contosta assures the reader that “these lulls were fortunate, since the time was not right for either of them. Conditions were not yet ripe in England for Darwin to publish his shocking conclusions, and the crisis over slavery and states’ rights had not yet entered a critical enough phase for Lincoln to seek the presidency” (126). It would be unfair to say that Contosta completely neglects the role of contingency and luck in the ultimate success of the two men, but the reader is unprepared for the shock of Alfred Wallace’s priority claim for discovering evolution through natural selection and, to a lesser extent, the depth of Lincoln’s travails as president.

In contrast to Contosta’s scholarly approach, complete with endnotes following each chapter, Gopnik’s intent was to write a book in the tone of “conversational _New Yorker_ essays” (210). To that end, Gopnik eschews the “scholarly machinery” (205) of citations of any kind, a bibliography, or even an index. Nonetheless, he includes “shout-outs” in the text to the scholars upon whose work he relied (205). For example, in the midst of a four-page digression about John Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, Gopnik credits “David S. Reynolds’s superb biography” with teaching him that Brown “was as radical an abolitionist as existed” (52). The effect of this convention is academic name-dropping, interrupting the flow of the essay without providing the information of a proper citation.

Unlike Contosta’s book, which follows a chronological approach to the lives and legacies of Darwin and Lincoln, Gopnik’s book is a series of extended essays, alternating between Lincoln and Darwin, that have no apparent organizing principle. It is a remarkable feat to write a book with over two hundred pages of text on Lincoln and Darwin without giving the reader much information about the life, ideas, actions, or legacies of either. You would look in vain in _Angels_...
and Ages for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, or the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. Likewise, Gopnik manages to avoid writing about the Galápagos, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, and Thomas H. Huxley. This confusion is evident from the beginning. Gopnik describes Lincoln and Darwin as “two princes—call them prophets, why not?—of liberal civilization” (22). It continues until the end, when Gopnik hails them as “poets of modern life” (204). Throughout the book, Gopnik sprinkles literary allusions likening Lincoln and Darwin to Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Jane Austen, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, Henry Adams, Samuel Beckett, and William Shakespeare—to baffling effect. His premise seems to be that a crucial component of Lincoln’s and Darwin’s success was that they were “great writers.” Gopnik argues that “we pick them out among their contemporaries because they wrote so well, and they wrote so well because they saw so clearly, and they saw so clearly because they cleared their minds of the cant of their day and used the craft of legal and scientific reasoning to let themselves start afresh” (184). To make sense of their writings, however, we have to know what they wrote about as well as when and for whom they wrote it. Gopnik offers precious little on all accounts. On occasion, Gopnik makes a good point, but to appreciate it the reader must be already quite familiar with the subject because he offers little explanation. For example, Gopnik properly dismisses those who try to “make Lincoln into just one more racist” as making “a noxious equilibrium between . . . liberals who struggle with their own prejudices” being “somehow equal in prejudice to those who never took the trouble to make the struggle” (49). Unfortunately, Gopnik does not provide an account of Lincoln’s beliefs regarding racial equality and civil rights, let alone chart their evolution over time or their relation to the beliefs of most white antebellum Americans.

Gopnik’s book is marred by rather elementary errors, especially in regard to Lincoln’s course on slavery. Despite acknowledging on one occasion that “Lincoln came late . . . and reluctantly to emancipation” (7), Gopnik repeatedly makes Lincoln into a lifelong abolitionist, seemingly crediting him for emancipation writ large in the same way that Darwin can be credited with devising evolution. Forgetting his earlier comments about Lincoln’s dilatory and reluctant embrace of emancipation, Gopnik writes, “Lincoln’s life was spent trying to end the enslavement of a people” (48), and “the end of slavery had been at the center of [Lincoln’s] imagination for all his adult life” (181). Gopnik is seemingly unaware of Lincoln’s moderation on the issue of slavery—a moderation that allowed him to be elected president,
albeit with no electoral votes from the South. He does not seem to realize that slavery was a “minor issue” to Lincoln until the repeal of the Missouri Compromise by the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, that Lincoln assisted in the recovery of a couple of fugitive slaves according to federal law and the Constitution, nor that the Republicans, including Lincoln, opposed the westward expansion of slavery rather than slavery in the Southern states. During the election of 1860, of course, Lincoln pledged not to interfere with slavery in the South. Gopnik does not chart the path of Lincoln’s antislavery views from their free soil beginnings in the mid-1850s to federal emancipation by constitutional amendment by the end of the war—with a stop at gradual emancipation with compensation to slaveholders and colonization of former slaves in the early years of the war in between. Indeed, it is not clear that Gopnik understands that the Thirteenth Amendment was necessary to liberate all the slaves in the United States and that even after its ratification in December 1865 several million slaves remained in Cuba and Brazil.

Both authors would have benefited from consulting Darwin’s Sacred Cause: How A Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin’s Views on Human Evolution (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008) by Adrian Desmond and James Moore. In particular, Gopnik would have learned that it was Darwin, not Lincoln, who was a lifelong abolitionist. Indeed, Desmond and Moore argue that Darwin’s work on the common ancestry of all living things was prompted by his interest in proving that African slaves had the same origins as their European masters, which would undermine polygenesis—the idea that God fashioned the different races of humans (and other creatures) in separate creations specific to certain geographical areas. Proslavery advocates used this idea as a racist justification for the enslavement of the “inferior” race. Desmond and Moore show that the activities of Darwin’s family in the British abolition movement, the abolitionists at the University of Cambridge, and the racist craniologists at the University of Edinburgh, along with Darwin’s visceral outrage at the sight of Brazilian slaves abused during his Beagle travels, informed Darwin’s research into the origin of species.

Gopnik’s and Contosta’s pairing of an aristocratic English naturalist with a hard-scrabble American lawyer is forced if not contrived. Indeed, both authors struggle mightily in finding links between Lincoln and Darwin, inasmuch as the American politician and the British scientist never so much as shared a conversation let alone collaborated on a project. Gopnik essentially concedes the point but begs the question of why pair them. “In the long run,” he maintains, “it is not what they [Lincoln and Darwin] have in common with each other that matters;
it is what they have in common with us” (21). In contrast, Contosta bravely claims “there is every reason to believe that the publication of Origin, given all the publicity it received in the United States, came to Lincoln’s attention at some point” (17). This claim lacks conviction and does not convince. Contosta offers only circumstantial evidence, e.g., that Lincoln had enjoyed Robert Chambers’s Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (1844), an evolutionary predecessor to Darwin’s Origin, and that his law partner William Herndon had purchased some of Darwin’s works. The best Contosta can do is to speculate that “Lincoln would have been fascinated by the Origin of Species” (242).

Of course, Darwin was aware of Lincoln after his election as president and certainly followed the course of the American Civil War, as did many other Englishmen and women. From the beginning, Darwin wanted the United States to prevail over the Confederacy, believing that Union victory would spell the end of slavery. Unfamiliar with the nuance of American politics and unconcerned by the constitutional limits of presidential power, Darwin was distressed by Lincoln’s moderation during the secession crisis and the first two years of the war. Darwin found Lincoln’s justification of the war to preserve the Union to be no stronger than Confederate aspirations for self-determination. Like some abolitionists and Radical Republicans, Darwin hoped that the Civil War would last long enough to compel Lincoln to attack slavery. That such a war would cost many lives did not sway Darwin in the least. If the North were to make the Civil War a “crusade against Slavery,” Darwin argued to his American colleague, Asa Gray of Harvard, even “the loss of millions of lives” would be “amply repaid in the cause of humanity.”

Ultimately, this exchange reveals profound differences between Darwin the moral scientist and Lincoln the pragmatic politician. Despite his opposition to slavery, Lincoln had to operate within the political realities and legal constraints that forced him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation halfway through the conflict and made it only half-way abolition, for it omitted slaves in the loyal slave states and those in rebellious areas that had already been pacified by the U.S. army. Darwin had no such restrictions, living in the idealistic world of reform and science. Darwin wanted Lincoln to strike a decisive blow against American slavery, just as he had put the lie to polygenesis and the scientific justification for African slavery. That the United States, Cuba, and Brazil ultimately freed their slaves no doubt would have cheered both men, though neither lived to see the end of slavery in the New World in 1888.