

PREFACE

AN APPRECIATION OF MILNER'S *ENCYCLOPEDIA*

Stephen Jay Gould



"Fossilface" (Stephen Jay Gould) and "Dino" (Richard Milner), circa 1954.

We have, as a society, lost our bearings in so many ways. Perhaps other things are more important in a world of poverty and pollution, but I rank our growing preference for automated sameness over a personal touch as one of the greatest ills of our age. But primates are social creatures, and (for all its tragedies) perhaps the one great legacy of our cultural history resides in our stated respect for individuality. This principle applies with special force to scholarship.

With a misplaced definition of "objectivity," many people think that books of nonfiction, particularly reference works like encyclopedias, should be impersonal, and devoid of style or idiosyncrasy. No, and a thousand times no. The truly great books of reference have a personal stamp, as any work of passion worthy of our attention must. We still speak of Johnson's *Dictionary*, Roget's *Thesaurus*, and Robert's *Rules of Order*. Among the monuments in our intellectual history are Lyell's *Geology* and Marshall's *Economics*. Milner's *Encyclopedia of Evolution* has joined this noble tradition of reference books stamped with the vibrant idiosyncrasy of true scholarship. If camels are horses built by committees, then Milner's encyclopedia has provided Darwin with a full-blooded Thoroughbred.

Muscular and vibrant idiosyncrasy avoids crankiness and uses the personal touch both to impart a vision and to supply details that conventional accounts would never treat or even discover. This book finds just the right balance between the necessarily universal and the unique. It can be used as a work of reference in the conventional manner—to find the names, the dates, the leading concepts clearly and crisply defined, the major arguments and the chief actors.

But the strength of Milner's compendium does not reside in this worthy material, for others have worked in this mode. Milner's different approach follows the variety of his own life. He has loved and studied evolution and paleontology since we were boys together at a junior high school in Queens. (We were the only two dinosaur nuts at a time when such an interest marked a kid as a geek or a weirdo. He was called "Dino" on the playground; I was "Fossilface.") He completed five years of graduate work in anthropology, but then, through a series of interesting circumstances, spent fifteen years in the midst of pop culture before returning, in midlife, to his first (and longest) love for natural history.

From this vantage point both in and outside academia, Milner views evolution and its impact in a comprehensive way often ignored (through true ignorance, that is, not condescension) by more traditional scholars. Milner's uniqueness and idiosyncrasy (in the good sense) lie in his range of chosen topics—a full spectrum of influences on evolutionary thought, from the abstractions of high culture to the come-ons of sideshow hucksters. I see two special strengths in this ecumenical approach:

1. If we make an artificial division into high and vernacular culture, and consider just the former in a narrowly confined and misplaced concept of importance, then we will never understand the impact of science in society. Consider the role of garden clubs, of bird watchers, of telescope makers, of horseplayers who study probability. Academic knowl-

edge of science may be abysmal in America, but scientific styles of thought are widespread, if only we could harness them.

2. Science pursues an external truth, but only from a perspective inextricably embedded in social contexts. If scientists ignore the context, they not only act in an elitist way, they also preclude any real understanding of scientific change and utility. Social context is particularly important for evolutionary science, because this subject, more than any other, impacts the great myths and hopes of Western society—ideas of progress, God, human origins, the meaning of life, the basis of ethics, to name just a few.

Richard Milner has given us so much more than a conventional reference work. His book is a series of mini-essays on the highways and byways of this most socially contentious of all scientific ideas. It offers scores of essays on people, many unknown to almost all professionals but as important to the diffusion of the idea of evolution as the wisest professor: Henry Ward Beecher, the great Victorian liberal clergyman who defended Darwin; Carl Akeley and the canonical vision of taxidermy in the romantic mode; E. Ray Lankester, the head of the British Museum, who exposed the fraudulent "spirit-medium" Henry Slade; Chief Red Cloud, who befriended the great paleontologist O.C. Marsh while Custer advanced on the Black Hills; Willis O'Brien, who developed stop-motion photography and made the great dinosaurs of early movies (including the King Kong vs. pterodactyl scene); Charles R. Knight, whose paintings established the image of the dinosaur for professionals and amateurs alike, and who thereby (despite his invisibility in scholarly publications) has had as much influence in paleontology as any scientist on earth.

But Milner does not stop with historical personages. He treats the fictional (Tarzan) and the fossil, both real ("*Lucy*," *Zinjanthropus*) and fake (Piltdown Man). He also writes about individual nonhuman animals who have made a difference in evolutionary theory—all the leading personalities of apedom, from Digit the gorilla to Nim Chimpsky, and even Lonesome George, the last surviving (and mateless) saddlebacked Galápagos tortoise.

Milner's events are as fascinating, and diverse, as his people. I never knew that the trial of the medium Henry Slade featured a battle between Darwin and Wallace, as the rationalist (and wealthy) Darwin contributed funds to the prosecution, while the spiritualistic (and impecunious) Wallace testified directly for the defense.

I never heard about T.H. Huxley's arrest in connection with agitation by the Sunday Leagues against pervasive blue laws that had made almost everything but churchgoing illegal on the Christian sabbath. (He preached a "sermon" to 2,000 people on Darwinism one Sunday, surrounded with enough music and recitation to court definition as a "secular service." The baffled police knew that this wasn't kosher but couldn't devise an appropriate charge; they finally ran Huxley in for keeping a disorderly house.) I had never encountered "The Happy Family," a popular sideshow attraction of the 19th century, featuring animals calmly living together that would tear each other apart in the wild. Although started before Darwin, and meant (in part) as a commentary on Isaiah ("the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb"), these exhibits were later viewed as an argument against Darwin and the struggle for existence. (There was no particular secret in rearing such a group. Good trainers can recognize unusually docile animals, and most creatures raised together from birth and given adequate food on a regular schedule will grow to live in peace.)

Details in the hands of an anecdotalist or an antiquarian remain just that—interesting in themselves perhaps, but incoherent and without aim. Details in the hands of a scholar with a general purpose are the essence of understanding. Milner has given us details in the sublime and coordinated sense. He has also fused high with vernacular culture to show us the full impact of science's most seminal idea—evolution.

In so doing, he has produced a popular book worthy of Darwin's words to Huxley, as he importuned his old friend and combative champion to write a work on evolution for the general public: "I sometimes think that general and popular treatises are almost as important for the progress of science as original work."