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978-0-521-76560-2 - Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America

Cannon Schmitt

Excerpt

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“No tropical country is more interesting than South America,” declares Grant Allen in his introduction to James Rodway’s *In the Guiana Forest: Studies of Nature in Relation to the Struggle for Life* (1894).¹ This judgement has nothing to do with the continent’s fabled gold or the ruins of its pre-Columbian civilizations. For Allen, who finds himself in close accord with Rodway’s subtitle, South America stands as the most interesting of tropical countries because of its natural productions, particularly insofar as those productions shed light on “the struggle for life” – that is, on evolutionary history and theory. Asia, Africa, and Australia also compel attention in that each, according to Allen, exemplifies an extremely early period in the development of life. But South America possesses unique appeal for professional biologists as well as amateur students of the natural world because “it preserves for us, as in amber, numberless intermediate stages” of evolutionary change.² Moreover, and despite the metaphor of fossilization encoded in the reference to amber, the South American representatives of those intermediate stages so fascinate because they take the form of actually existing flora and fauna rather than petrified insects or dry shards of bone. From ferns and flowering plants to birds and mammals, including those mammals Allen and Rodway refer to as “savages,” South America’s extant biota comprises a living archive in which the evolutionary past of the middle distance may be encountered in all its teeming glory.³

I begin with Allen’s paean to the New World tropics because it constitutes an arresting example of a more widespread phenomenon: the Victorian depiction of South America as an immense site of memory or *lieu de mémoire*.⁴ The neologism belongs to Pierre Nora, who coins it in a meditation on the disappearance of organic, self-sustaining “environments of memory” and their replacement by artificially constructed and maintained “sites.” “*Lieux de mémoire* originate,” he writes, “with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives,

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maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.”⁵ Nora argues that, lacking those rituals that once effortlessly joined one day, week, and year to the next, and in so doing ensured the existence of memory as a vibrant, felt continuity, we must now fabricate sites for memory to reside, sites that function “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting ... to materialize the immaterial.”⁶ Although Nora dates the advent of *lieux de mémoire* to the twentieth century, and although a continent cannot be spoken of as fabricated in quite the same sense that a museum or library may be, South America provided for the Victorians a place for just such stopping, blocking, and materializing, a place that memorialized the past in such a way as to make it available in the present.

Most immediately and obviously, South America memorialized empire, its failures as well as its unrealized possibilities. Nineteenth-century Britons who witnessed the remnants of Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas often fell into modes of imperial lamentation, deploring what they perceived as ruinous Iberian policy while plangently imagining what might have been had only the British arrived earlier, remained longer, fought harder. Consider the young Thomas Henry Huxley, who, during a brief stay in Rio de Janeiro en route to the Pacific, indulges in a flight of historical fancy remarkable only because so commonplace among his compatriots: “A few of the hungry Saxon millions now famishing in England, had they possession of such a country as this, and the Brazilians extirpated, might found a second Indian Empire.”⁷ But the particulars of Allen’s contentions, which locate the value of South America in its plants and animals, reveal another and stranger valence of the continent as a repository of the past, one more in line with Huxley’s eventual vocation as an indefatigable promoter of Darwinism than his callow geopolitical musings. Like geological deposits whose deepening layers of sediment correspond to ever-receding periods of the earth’s development (a simile recently available in the nineteenth century), South America was for the Victorians a space encoding the passage of evolutionary time – a rich assemblage of living beings that, despite continuing to thrive in the present, nonetheless recalled the history of life on the planet.⁸

In *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America*, I investigate the Victorian engagement with South America as a *lieu de mémoire*. Further, because of the paramount role of natural history and evolutionary theory in constituting that continent as such a site, and because of the corresponding place of South America in the genealogy of the theory of evolution, I do so by attending to the works of a group

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of remarkable and widely influential naturalists who traveled there and wrote about what they saw: Charles Darwin; Alfred Russel Wallace, independent co-founder of the theory of evolution by means of natural selection; Charles Kingsley, novelist, opponent of the Oxford Movement, and popularizer of science; and W. H. Hudson, memoirist, novelist, and ornithologist. All four men in their different ways encounter South America as and through memory. All parlay that encounter into narratives about savagery and civility, race and the origins of humanity – narratives they find at times consoling, at times disturbing. Many of those narratives take shape around indigenous South Americans or “savages” who, according to the dictates of the comparative method, are understood at once as living memories (ancestors who have somehow persisted into the present) and instigations to remembering (reminders of what humans once were).⁹ Others concern themselves more centrally with the recollected exploits of European precursors, embracing belatedness as a privileged form of encounter and an enabling narrative trope. Still others involve a return to and reenactment of memories individual as well as national and “racial.” All elaborate what I call a savage mnemonics: a form of memory that redefines what it is to be human (as well as modern, civilized, and British) in relation to the past, and specifically those pasts – historical, cultural, personal, and, above all, evolutionary – conceived of as savage.

At its most ambitious, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human* seeks to tell a story about the invention of a new and enduring human subject in the nineteenth century – not the only such story, to be sure, but a crucial and heretofore neglected one nonetheless. The human in question was decisively modern because thoroughly biological and “natural”: an animal among animals, a product of inexorable laws working themselves out over the course of profane, sublunary time no less than beetles or monkeys. As Darwin puts it in the final sentence of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), fusing his most daring assertion with some of the key evidence for its validity: “Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.”¹⁰ But this natural entity was, nevertheless, also an invention. This is the case not simply because, like all notions of the human, the modern human-as-animal was and remains a cultural artifact, but also in the sense that, more precisely and interestingly, it came into being by means of a particular technology: memory. This human emerged, in Darwin’s work and elsewhere, by way of how it was remembered. Accordingly, one burden of my argument has to do with anatomizing the ways that memory, as a technology of the human, enabled the invention of the human as natural.

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By using the term “technology,” I hope to signal the historicity of what goes by the name of memory as well as to prepare the ground for a recovery of some of its varied forms and purposes at different historical moments. John Frow writes, in a somewhat different context, that “[t]o speak of memory as *tekhne*, to deny that it has an unmediated relation to experience, is to say that the logic of textuality by which memory is structured has technological and institutional conditions of existence.”¹¹ It is therefore also to say that what counts as memory changes as those conditions of existence change. The writers I study elaborated and deployed a cluster of closely related forms of memory in the service of postulating “lowly origin[s]” that could be recollected: corporeal or unconscious memory, which imagines that the past inheres in the body of the individual; “racial” memory, which posits a faculty of recall that coheres around and lends coherence to an ancestry conceived in terms of race and nation; and something that might be named nature-memory, which understands the natural world in its entirety as a vast biological memorial. For “civilized” men such as these writers saw themselves to be, establishing their humanity entailed establishing continuity with the distant past achieved by remembering their own animal, inhuman, and savage origins. In the process, the state of being civilized itself came to be defined as the capacity to remember savage beginnings at once surpassed and (in the individual and elsewhere) preserved. In other words, ones that Bruno Latour might use: the human is a purity that comes into being by the production and disavowal of hybrids (the hybrid animal/human as well as the hybrid ancient/modern).¹² Thus did an epistemology indebted to a certain mnemotechnics – to know the human was to remember, and to remember specifically an outmoded or incipient version of one-self – imply an ontology riven by paradox – the human is the animal that remembers it no longer is an animal, the savage whose sole remaining connection to savagery is in memory.

In this book, then, I document some of the conditions of the formation of a modern version of the human, one that remains very much with us: the human as the subject of evolution.¹³ If, despite the efforts of certain US boards of education and the proponents of the current incarnation of creationism, so-called “intelligent design,” the truth of this version of ourselves now seems merely self-evident, its implications mundane rather than startling, this may be because of the degree to which it has come down to us as an abstraction.¹⁴ At its inception, however, this conception of the human emerged from the confluence of various kinds of specificity with consequences for our view of the Victorians, our approach to them and their textual productions, and our sense of ourselves.

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In the works of the writers and thinkers I study, one such specificity is geographical: South America provides them with the locus for their reinvention of the human. The centrality of that continent in their accounts necessitates, among other things, a rethinking of received notions about Victorian racial ideology, so often understood to coalesce around a black/white or east/west binary. Falling outside of and to some degree confounding both binaries, South American “savages” evidence the existence of a logic of alterity that is at the same time a logic of similitude, accommodating complex negotiations of difference and likeness across not only spatial but also temporal distance. Similarly, while Victorians traveling in and writing about South America often have recourse to colonial or imperial modalities of thought, analyses resulting from the straightforward invocation of the rubric “empire,” while necessary and illuminating, are insufficient in themselves, even in their metaphorical or analogical application. New models of transnationalism are required, models that incorporate even as they revise familiar versions of Victorian Britain’s relations with the rest of the globe.

Another consequential specificity of the reinvention of the human with which I am concerned has to do with a scientific practice and its associated conventions: natural history, which, over the course of the nineteenth century, gave rise to and was in turn transformed by evolutionary theory.¹⁵ The particularities of natural history as a conceptual, discursive, and practical regime definitively inflected the notion of the human that took shape in connection with nineteenth-century South America. Most importantly, the catholicity of the natural-historical enterprise at the beginning of the Victorian period ensured that not only plants and animals but also minerals and cultures fell within the purview of the scientific traveler.¹⁶ The natural-historical collection could and did contain stuffed bird skins, pinned insects, pictographs broken from rock walls, clothing, cooking implements, and human remains.¹⁷ Out of this congeries came museum displays, travel narratives, scientific monographs, and, eventually, claims about human kinship with what must now be called other animals.

Finally, neither natural history nor Victorian South America could have taken the shape they did without the aid of various kinds of memory. While our more familiar definitions of “memory” still recognize some of those – most commonly, for instance, individual recollection with its attendant feelings of belatedness or nostalgia – others are lost to us. Nora notes that among the “costs of the historical metamorphosis of memory” may be counted “a wholesale preoccupation with the individual

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psychology of remembering.”¹⁸ As a result, anything falling outside that psychology risks losing its resemblance to memory altogether. But the body as a retainer of the archaic past, the growth of the nation as collective commemoration, the natural world as all-encompassing archive: for the Victorians these all counted as memory, and a key contention of this book has to do not simply with their existence as such but with their indispensability to the development of what have proven to be more enduring conceptual formations, evolutionary theory and the human as the subject of evolution chief among them.

SOUTH AMERICOMANIA

In 1824, British Foreign Secretary George Canning asserted: “Spanish America is free and if we do not mismanage our affairs sadly, she is English.”¹⁹ Written near the end of a series of independence movements that delivered Mexico and most of Central and South America from Spanish and Portuguese rule, Canning’s assertion rings with enthusiasm for the opening up of territories that had been largely closed since the sixteenth century. British troops fought beside Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín in the struggle against Spain, and for many Britons the newly independent nations of the Americas represented a victory of national self-determination over despotism. At the same time, those nations also appealed to the British for the same reasons that their own considerable and growing imperial holdings in North America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa did: they promised heretofore untapped markets, mineral and agricultural wealth, and a wide field for the aspirations of British travelers of all sorts – not only the naturalists with whom I am primarily concerned but also mercenaries, businessmen, bankers, immigrants, mining engineers, and mountaineers. The flood of investment, trade, and travel that poured in from the late 1820s on made Britain the dominant foreign power in Latin America until it ceded that role to the United States in the decade following the First World War. In Leslie Bethell’s pithy formulation, “The nineteenth century was the ‘British century’ in Latin America.”²⁰

Bethell’s statement is not reversible; the nineteenth century can hardly be described as the “Latin-American century” in Britain. Still, the Victorians did maintain a continuous and often acute level of interest in the region attested to by, among other things, numerous and diverse texts: personal histories of the wars of independence, such as Thomas Cochrane’s *Narrative of Services in the Liberation of Chile, Peru and Brazil* (1860);

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guides to immigration, including Henry C. R. Johnson's *A Long Vacation in the Argentine Alps, or Where to Settle in the River Plate States* (1868); anti-slavery tracts such as Edward Wilberforce's *Brazil Viewed through a Naval Glass; with Notes on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (1856); travel narratives like Lady Florence Caroline Dixie's *Across Patagonia* (1880) and Edward Whymper's *Travels Amongst the Great Andes of the Equator* (1891); accounts of mining ventures, including Sir Richard Francis Burton's *Explorations of the Highlands of Brazil; with a Full Account of the Gold and Diamond Mines* (1869) and Alexander James Duffield's *Peru in the Guano Age: Being a Short Account of a Recent Visit to the Guano Deposits with Some Reflections on the Money They Have Produced and the Uses to Which It Has Been Applied* (1877); and novels, from R. M. Ballantyne's *Martin Rattler; or, A Boy's Adventure in the Forests of Brazil* (1858) to Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904).²¹

Although very little of Latin America was actually in British possession during this period – on the mainland of South America, only the small settlement of British Guiana – much of the discourse on the region features the themes, figures of speech and thought, and narrative structures characteristic of writings on actual or prospective parts of the empire. In particular, like other non-European spaces, Latin America is often represented as the locus of the primitive or the atavistic. In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock names this trope “anachronistic space,” a discursive strategy by means of which “the stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from Europe and thus equally valid, but as *temporally* different and thus as irrevocably superannuated by history.”²² For a stunningly literal instance of the depiction of South America as an anachronistic space, one need look no further than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 *The Lost World*, the source of the title for this section of my introduction. One of Doyle's characters, Lord Roxton, is diagnosed as a “South Americomaniac”: “He could not speak of that great country without ardour, and this ardour was infectious.”²³ The novel follows Roxton and other members of a small group of adventurers as they push their way to the top of a rainforest plateau to discover not only ape-men who appear to provide the missing link between humans and other primates but also living dinosaurs, one specimen of which, a pterodactyl, they bring back with them as proof of what they have seen. (It escapes at novel's end, a prehistoric monstrosity roaming the skies above twentieth-century London.) Doyle's narrator describes Professor Challenger, the leader of this expedition through space

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and time, as “a Columbus of science who has discovered a lost world,” articulating the British relation to Latin America as that between (admittedly belated) discoverer and heretofore unknown, or once known and since forgotten (“lost”), land.²⁴

Although Doyle’s dinosaurs obviously constitute a wildly exaggerated conception of what it meant for South America to be an anachronistic space, the difference from apparently more sober accounts is one of degree rather than kind. The British botanist and colonial administrator Everard im Thurn, for instance, whose writings were a key source for Doyle, observes of the area around Roraima, the Venezuelan *tepuy* or table-top mountain that served as the model for the lost world: “To the ethnologist also the district will prove interesting; for it is so remote and unexplored that the Arecuna Indians, who chiefly inhabit it, are in a very unusually primitive condition.”²⁵ Doyle’s novel, im Thurn’s ethnography, and a host of other texts represent Latin America as an anachronistic space in McClintock’s sense, out of step with Britain and so subject to “discovery” and conquest in the name of modernization. The nearly complete absence of British-controlled territory in the region, however, suggests that if there was a conquest in history to match that invoked in texts it rarely took the shape of formal occupation. Britain’s only significant nineteenth-century attempt to increase its holdings in South America was the failed invasion of the Río de la Plata in 1806–07. Searching for a model with which to describe the relations between Victorian Britain and the new nations of Central and South America, economic and political historians have had recourse to terms such as “informal empire,” first suggested by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, or “business imperialism,” coined by D.C.M. Platt, both precursors of what would come to be known as neo-colonialism.²⁶ In *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914*, P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins go so far as to consider South America “the crucial regional test” for their hypothesis that empire, at least in Britain’s case, is most usefully and accurately understood as an economic rather than exclusively politico-military phenomenon.²⁷ For Cain and Hopkins, the British empire comprised not only areas under the control of the Crown but all those parts of the world in which the influence of British financial interests attenuated without necessarily abrogating local sovereignty.²⁸

The difference between outright conquest and the British role in Latin America seems to have been grasped by Doyle, who is careful in *The Lost World* to describe Professor Challenger as a “Columbus of science.” That specification, which borrows from but simultaneously reinfects the

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mythology of discovery, emphasizes the degree to which the exploration of the once more new continent of South America took place under the aegis of the expansion of knowledge rather than territory. As Nancy Stepan observes, “The New World political independence movements in the early nineteenth century open[ed] up the South American tropical regions to an intellectual and visual rediscovery.”²⁹ In the vanguard of those undertaking the voyage from Britain to South America during this period, not only to the tropics but to the Andean highlands and Patagonian plains as well, were naturalists for whom that voyage meant an opportunity to study a landscape, flora, and fauna entirely different from what might be met with in Europe. With interests ranging from the botanical and geological to the entomological and ethnological, they represent themselves as driven by an epistemophilia in which the quest for natural-historical knowledge is inseparable from wonder and appreciation but unrelated to usurpation, domination, or expansionism.

Despite such self-representations, these naturalists were necessarily implicated in empire both practically and ideologically. In practical terms, most of the expeditions they mounted were made possible by a national-imperial infrastructure involving, for instance, transportation on British naval vessels and hospitality extended by resident British diplomats, merchants, and settlers. Moreover, they were also always on the alert for potentially valuable commodities – rubber, quinine, and coffee, to mention only the most obvious candidates.³⁰ Ideologically, too, these naturalists participated in the work of empire, in part by denying that they were doing so. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt names the dynamic by which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travelers to the non-European world explicitly distanced themselves from an imperial enterprise in which they were nevertheless ineluctably engaged with the term “anti-conquest,” a representational gambit “whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence” – that is, their absolute difference from the conquistadors, slavers, and settlers who have come before them – “in the same moment as they assert European hegemony.” The naturalist in particular, argues Pratt, constituted “a utopian image of a European bourgeois subject simultaneously innocent and imperial, asserting a harmless hegemonic vision.”³¹ The quest for natural-historical knowledge, while in principle distinct from the imperial project, often enabled the exploration of new territory, advanced the possibility of exerting control over that territory, and extolled the desirability of doing so. In sum, as D. Graham Burnett has shown in his study of the writings of farmer, amateur ichthyologist, and

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ethnologist William Hillhouse and cartographer Robert Schomburgk, nineteenth-century British science and empire are often so inter-involved that “it is demonstrably difficult to separate ‘scientific’ exploration from colonial reconnaissance and colonial administration.”³²

Made in connection with explorers of the highlands of British Guiana, Burnett’s observation also speaks to the work of British travelers in the rest of South America. But what modifications might be required in a context in which there was no properly colonial reconnaissance or administration to speak of? Or, to put the question more bluntly: what difference does informality make? One answer might be that Victorian scientific endeavor in South America was in many instances tied to goals more consistent with the expansion of capitalism and the securing of political hegemony than with seizure or administration of territory. Along these lines, Robert Aguirre, writing about Great Britain’s engagement with Mexico and Central America in the nineteenth century, notes that scientific texts, panoramas, museum displays, and other “cultural forms engendered by this engagement ... lent crucial ideological support to the practice of informal imperialism, shaping an audience receptive to the influx of British power in the region.”³³ This argument, *mutatis mutandis*, closely resembles that of Edward Said, who asserts that “[i]n British culture ... one may discover a consistency of concern ... that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds ... conceived of as desirable but subordinate.”³⁴

Like Pratt’s notion of “anti-conquest,” Aguirre’s formulation proves valuable insofar as it enables an analysis of self-avowedly non- or even anti-imperialist texts that remains attentive to the ways in which those texts and their authors nonetheless participated in an enterprise that can meaningfully be described as imperial. Such an analysis will be a frequent preoccupation of mine in the pages that follow. Nonetheless, Pratt, Burnett, and Aguirre all minimize what is to my mind one of the most noteworthy aspects of the Victorian encounter with Latin America – or, more exactly, of some of the various and diverse encounters the naturalists I study had with South American flora and fauna, including its peoples. For all of them, such encounters shake their sense of themselves, implicate them, change them. Rarely masters of all they survey gazing down on marvelous possessions with imperial eyes, these travelers more often find themselves enmeshed in and overawed by their surroundings. Writing about eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scientific voyages of discovery in the South Seas, Jonathan Lamb contends that to