

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DARWIN'S "ORIGIN OF SPECIES" ¹

JOHN MURRAY, as an amateur geologist, was keenly interested in the scientific speculations of his day. Like his father, he published the works of Mrs. Somerville, Sir Roderick Murchison and Sir Charles Lyell. In 1845 he bought the copyright of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (first published by Colburn) for £150. When, early in 1859, Lyell asked him to consider an important new work by Darwin he readily agreed to read the manuscript with a view to its publication.

"I have learned with pleasure from Sir Charles Lyell," wrote Darwin in March, "that you intend to publish my work on the *Origin of Species*, but before deciding and offering any terms you desire to see my MS. . . . It is the result of more than twenty years' work; but as here given is only a popular abstract of a large work on the same subject, without references to authorities and without long catalogues of facts on which my conclusions are based. The book *ought* to be popular with a large body of scientific and semi-scientific readers, as it bears on agriculture, the history of our domestic productions and on whole fields of Zoology, Botany and Geology. I have done my best, but whether it will succeed I cannot say. I have been quite surprised at finding how much interested strangers and acquaint-

¹ The extracts from unpublished letters from Darwin and some of his critics in this chapter may have some historical interest even for the most modern of the moderns.

ances have been in the subject. Only some small portions are at all abstruse. I hope to be ready for press early in May, and then most earnestly wish to print at a rapid rate, for my health is much broken, and I want rest."

On April 1 Murray replied :

"I hasten to thank you for your obliging letter of yesterday, and for the interesting details regarding your work on species. On the strength of this information, and my knowledge of your former publications, I can have no hesitation in swerving from my usual routine, and in stating at once, even without seeing the MS., that I shall be most happy to publish it for you on the same terms as those on which I publish for Sir C. Lyell."

This meant, he explains, that he would publish an edition—the number of copies to be afterwards agreed upon—and that, as soon as he could ascertain the cost of production, he would make an offer amounting to about two-thirds of the net proceeds.

Darwin wrote by return that he accepted the offer with pleasure, but added :

"I feel bound, for your sake and my own, to say in clearest terms that if, after looking over part of MS., you do not think it likely to have a remunerative sale, I *completely* and explicitly free you from your offer. But you will see that it would be a stigma on my work to advertise it, and then not publish it. My volume cannot be mere light reading, and some part must be dry and even rather abstruse ; yet as far as I can judge—perhaps very falsely—it will be interesting to all (and they are many) who care for the curious problems of the origin of all animal forms."

He promised to send, in the course of a few days, the first six chapters of his work which would give a fair, but not too favourable, idea of the whole. He con-

cluded with the warning that "It is impossible for you or anyone to judge of the real merit of my book without reading the whole, as the whole is one long argument."

Darwin had written to Lyell (on March 28) :

"Would you advise me to tell Murray that my book is not more *un-orthodox* than the subject makes inevitable? That I do not discuss the origin of man. That I do not bring in any discussion about Genesis, etc., etc., and only give facts, and such conclusions from them as seem to me fair. Or had I better say *nothing* to Murray, and assume that he cannot object to this much unorthodoxy, which in fact is not more than any Geological Treatise which runs slap counter to Genesis?"

After reading the manuscript, Murray was, as might be imagined, so perplexed and bewildered that he decided to take further advice on the contents. In the first place he consulted his friend, "Master" George Pollock, who, though not a scientist, was accustomed as a lawyer to apply broad principles of reason to different kinds of subjects. Murray himself was extremely sceptical of the scientific soundness of the work, and thought 500 copies as large a number as it was prudent to print. He declared that the Darwinian theory was as absurd as though one should contemplate a fruitful union between a poker and a rabbit. George Pollock came to a different conclusion, however. He thought that the work was probably beyond the apprehension of any living scientist. He advised the publication of a thousand copies, observing that Mr. Darwin had brilliantly surmounted the formidable obstacles which he was honest enough to put in his own path.¹

No important decision could be arrived at in Albe-

¹ From an article on "Master George Pollock" by E. S. P. Haynes, published in the *Cornhill Magazine* for August, 1916.