

The Purposefulness of the Creatures

Michael McGirr

Nicholas Drayson

Confessing a Murder

Jonathan Cape, \$29.95pb, 281pp, 0 224 06238 7

MOST PEOPLE HAVE heard of Charles Darwin; fewer have heard of Alfred Russel Wallace. But the two men came up with the theory of natural selection at around the same time. Indeed, it was Darwin's fear of being scooped by Wallace that caused him to get *The Origin of Species* into print in 1859 after mulling over its contents for at least twenty years. Without this spur, he may have procrastinated indefinitely. In some ways, this turn of events exemplifies part of the theory Darwin was expounding: his thought evolved more rapidly to respond to a threat to his survival from within his environment.

Historians have often pondered the apparent coincidence whereby the same Big Idea suddenly penetrates two different minds at the same time. In this case, some have suggested that the idea of natural selection was yet another example of humanity creating nature in its own image and likeness. The nineteenth century saw progress marked by increasing industrialisation, competition, imperialism and the cult of individual enterprise — in other words, survival of the fittest. Economic realities have a way of dictating the manner in which other realities are discussed. After all, Darwin was the grandson of Josiah Wedgwood, a wealthy industrialist.

Nicholas Drayson's novel, *Confessing a Murder*, has other ideas about Wallace, who has a cameo in the novel. He appears as an arrogant and uncommunicative Englishman, gathering specimens in what used to be called the Far East. This is where he meets the narrator, an amateur naturalist who has made money through trade. Wallace is 'not only a snob, but of small mind and rather a bore'. He has little intelligence but a phenomenal memory.

Wallace has brought with him to Macassar a seventeen-year-old assistant, Charley Allen. The narrator is prone to obsession, to say the least. He falls in love with Allen. And also with a golden beetle that Allen happens to have obtained. 'There was nothing in the world I wanted more than a specimen of the golden scarab.' As he draws closer to Allen, the narrator divulges The Theory. This is his understanding that species evolve different characteristics by the process of natural selection. Allen grasps the theory. He is not only an

intelligent boy but also benefits from 'the absence within him of any competing religious dogma'. Allen resists the narrator's offers to join him and repeats The Theory to Wallace who doesn't understand it but is able to repeat it word for word and hence to make his mark in history.

Some years later, when the narrator gets a copy of *The Origin of Species*, he is angered to find in it recognition of Wallace's work but no acknowledgment of himself. It was the same narrator who also introduced his childhood friend Charles Darwin to The Theory. He did so in a pub in the Blue Mountains called the Weatherboard Inn during Darwin's celebrated visit to Australia. Darwin, according to the narrator, had difficulty accepting The Theory, despite its lucidity and cogency, because of his residual religious prejudices. The narrator, an atheist, is not so encumbered. He is the common ancestor to which both Darwin and Wallace owe their being. He is also little less than a god.

Confessing a Murder is written in the narrator's old age. It is the journal of a man who is now the sole inhabitant of a small island somewhere in the Java Sea. He went there with Allen, and the pair became stranded. Allen is now dead. The narrator may not have long to live himself. He addresses a diary to Charles Darwin, whom he calls 'Bobby' and for whom he still holds something like romantic feelings. The journal will be sealed in a container and set adrift. Its author won't have much control over it. In a way, that encapsulates his life. He has been a powerful man, but he has never lost a deeper impotence, an inability to stir in others the feelings they stir in him. He was never chosen. If he is a god, he is one whose existence seldom seems to matter.

Much of the journal is spent describing the unique flora and fauna of the island, which, its editor explains, has since disappeared, probably in a volcanic explosion similar to that at Krakatoa in 1883. This gives Drayson's imagination room to expand. One of the delights of *Confessing a Murder* is its detailed descriptions of an imagined environment. It includes a lizard with uncanny powers of disguise, frogs that breed by seeming to digest their partners, crabs that work together to fell trees and so on. In this case, the angel is in the detail. Drayson elaborates his world with such small, delicate strokes that its existence becomes not just credible but seductive. You start wanting to go there. But it remains an enchanted island, off limits. The purposefulness of the creatures the narrator obsessively records (he has counted 1700 species of beetles) contrasts with the man's own moral complexity and isolation.

This is a rich novel, elegant and sad. Of course, it takes liberties with history. It presents the figure of Charles Darwin as far more caged by religious sentiment than I have encountered him previously. But that is hardly the main point. The man on the island gets his golden beetles. He is never more empty than in that act of possession.