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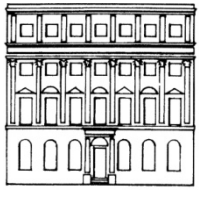

BULLETIN

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Natural History, Religion, and Politics in the Victorian Age
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Natural History, Religion, and Politics in the Victorian Age. Thirteenth Summer School in British History, held at the German Historical Institute London, 19–24 July 2015. Organizers: Kärin Nickelsen (Ludwig Maximilian University Munich) and Michael Schaich (GHIL).

In July 2015 the German Historical Institute London once again hosted the annual Summer School in British history, organized jointly with the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. Twenty students from various German universities attended this year's event, which, for the first time, looked at the history of science. The focus was on Charles Darwin, probably the most famous scientist of the Victorian Age, and the wider impact that his ideas had during the nineteenth century. Particular attention was paid to five aspects: (1) Letters, Books, and the Sciences in Victorian England, (2) Charles Darwin, (3) The Development and Implications of Darwinism, (4) Science and Religion in the Victorian Age, and (5) Global Darwin: Evolution, Race, and Empire. The invited experts, Professor Jim Secord (Cambridge) and Professor Peter Bowler (Belfast), provided a unique experience and in-depth discussions of all aspects, which the participants thoroughly enjoyed.

Proceedings began with a lecture by Jim Secord. He provided a general overview of letters, books, and the sciences in the Victorian Age, which gave us important background information for the whole week. The nineteenth century was an age of change, full of questions open to debate, not least about the sciences. Secord remarked that science was conceived of as having the potential to change people's lives in terms both of ideas and practical circumstances. The British were scared of the French Revolution and its effects but also fascinated by developments in France, as Secord pointed out, because Paris was accepted as the centre of European science. New institutions for science were established; at the same time, the reform of printing resulted in a wealth of easily accessible literature on scientific topics. Scholars of nature eventually looked for a new designation, because they did not want to be referred to as 'some teaching engineers'. In 1832 the word 'scientist' was invented; in Britain, however, it was not accepted until the early twentieth century.

The full programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

The fruitful first day of the seminar extended our knowledge considerably. After the seminar, Michael Schaich showed us around the GHIL. Especially the beautiful ceilings in the Conference Room and Common Room and the building's two similar staircases delighted not only the students studying history of art as a minor. The GHIL Library seemed to be the perfect place for a historian doing research. There are long wooden ladders and huge bookshelves and we enjoyed looking around this beautiful place. The guided tour through the institute was followed by dinner in the Library. For almost every one of us, dining in a library was an impressive, once-in-a-lifetime experience. The dinner was also a great chance for participants to get to know each other better and to find out how different their research projects were.

The second day covered 'the man' himself, Charles Darwin. It started with an introductory lecture on his life and work by Jim Secord. Darwin was born as the second son of a distinguished family that, as Secord put it, tried to develop new ideas and push society forward. The young Charles Darwin started studying in Edinburgh, and, when he left, came out with three main things: 1) a very broad knowledge for someone of his age, 2) a passion for natural history and 3) a deep hatred of medicine. He went on to Cambridge to become a clergyman, but came into contact with extraordinary scholars of nature who changed his view of natural history and the world, and when he left Cambridge, he followed his inner drive to become a naturalist. His five-year-long voyage on *HMS Beagle*, starting in 1831, provided the opportunity to do this. On this voyage, Darwin began to think about the human race and evolution in terms of how organisms develop, grow, or spread etc. He took his first notes on *Zoonomia* (laws of life), a term that had been coined by his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, in an eponymous work dating from 1794. But his evolutionary theory was not published until 1859, bolstered with rich evidence, in his book *On the Origin of Species*. The impact was enormous. By 1870 evolution, understood as the change and development of life on earth, was broadly accepted.

On the third day we had the honour of meeting and working with Peter Bowler, who introduced us to 'The Development and Implications of Darwinism'. Bowler focused on Darwin's originality and on the question of whether there was a Darwinian revolution. Bowler identified two of Darwin's original sub-theories: first, 'the tree of life',

which implied a common ancestry of all organisms and a divergent, open-ended, and undirected path of evolution. There was no main line of development and no general goal or purpose. In contrast to Darwin's *Tree of Life*, Bowler introduced Ernst Haeckel's *Tree*, which has a trunk and a main line of evolution, and the *Tree of Mammals* by H. F. Osborne, which illustrated parallel lines of preordained development. For a long time both were far more popular than Darwin's version.

Darwin's second original contribution was 'natural selection' as the main mechanism of evolution. It involved undirected variation and differential reproduction and survival of organisms in specific, unstable environments. The reactions to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* were diverse, as Bowler showed. There was hardly a 'Darwinian Revolution'. Evolution was rapidly accepted by religious thinkers and agnostics alike, and Darwin acted as a catalyst for further thought. However, hardly anybody endorsed natural selection. There was strong opposition to a view of evolution as undirected and driven by 'natural accidents'; but there were also sound scientific arguments, which Darwin had to take seriously, whether or not they came from religious thinkers. The latter point was elaborated and discussed further on the second day with Bowler.

After this rich theoretical input we visited Down House, Charles Darwin's family home. This trip 'introduced' us to Darwin authentically. The Museum is informative, covering all necessary aspects. The garden with the glasshouse was especially impressive: we could almost see Darwin working there. There were highly interesting manuscripts on Darwin's investigation of his own family and its possibly low 'fitness'. Apart from this line of study, which is a little sad, Down House seemed the perfect place for doing research. It is idyllic and one can understand why it provided a retreat for Darwin and his family after his travels on *HMS Beagle*.

On the last day we looked at the impact of Darwin's work on a global scale. Every student had to present a particular perspective, based on the many published reviews of Darwin's work. Preparation was made more attractive by the atmosphere in the GHIL Library, which we were able to use for this purpose. In class, we then empathized with the person of our choice and defended his or her position in subsequent debates. A wide range of opinions was represented, from the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton to the conservative

liberal Herbert Spencer. These presentations worked well to involve everyone in the discussion.

To sum up, this year's summer school was a great experience and opportunity. We had the chance to meet two excellent professors, not only in class but also in the more informal settings of coffee breaks, and to network with other students. All participants enjoyed the perfectly organized, highly informative seminar in the friendly atmosphere of the GHIL.

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