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Stott, Rebecca. Darwin's Ghosts

After the publication of his seminal *The Origin of Species*, Darwin was chastised by his fellows for not discussing the many thinkers and scientists who had entertained similar evolutionary ideas and hypotheses before him. Thus, in the third edition of his work, Darwin wrote up a preface entitled ?An Historical Sketch? to fill that gap. But his preface was just what he called it?a sketch, little more than a list of names with very little background or information. Stott here remedies that lack, delving deeply into the historical record to provide brief but information-rich biographies of some of the great thinkers who preceded Darwin?s theory of natural selection. She begins with Aristotle, who, while exiled to the island of Lesbos, undertook one of the first large-scale biological surveys of the rich sea life to be found there. From there, Stott covers other such luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci; 9th century Islamic polymath al-Jahiz; French scientists Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon; Georges Cuvier; Darwin?s contemporary Alfred Russel Wallace; and Darwin?s own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, among others. In the process, Stott conclusively demonstrates that, while evolution itself was still a controversial idea and one which ruined or nearly ruined the lives and careers of many of its early proponents, it was an idea whose time had come by the time Darwin?s book was published. His work was not done in a vacuum, building as it did on a long and rich intellectual history; *The Origin of Species* merely provided the most fully conceptualized theory and the only one which provided an observable, viable method by which evolution occurred?natural selection.

Fascinating, well-researched, and never dry, *Darwin?s Ghosts* is a treasure-trove for both those already interested in the topic and those coming to this history for the first time. Recommended.

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