

What Have Butterflies Got to Do with Darwin?

By William A. Dembski

Review of Bernard d'Abrera, *The Concise Atlas of Butterflies of the World* (London: Hill House, 2001), 353 pages.

Available online at http://www.biobooks.com/clearance_items.htm at a discount until the New Year.

Bernard d'Abrera's concise atlas of the world's butterflies is a beautifully produced book with the most stunning photographs of butterflies that I've ever seen. Though not intended as a coffee-table book, it could eminently serve that purpose. D'Abrera himself is a world-renowned butterfly and moth expert at the British Museum (Natural History) in London. Over the years he has produced books on the lepidoptera indigenous to various regions of the world. This book provides a synopsis of his life's work.

Although this book is in many ways a standard work of taxonomy, with numerous plates and catalogues, the first hundred pages are quite different from what one expects in a typical taxonomic atlas. To be sure, these pages comprise general introductory material. Thus readers are treated to a description of the life cycle, habits, and peculiarities of butterflies. But the entire discussion in these introductory chapters (before we get to the catalogues and plates) is framed as a critique of Darwinism.

Not only is this unusual, but the critique itself is not the sort one typically finds. Most critiques of Darwinism point to supposed problems with the theory (like gaps in the fossil record or unwarranted extrapolations from micro- to macroevolution). Some of this finds its way into d'Abrera's book. But the bulk of his critique focuses on exposing the facile ways in which Darwinism is used to underwrite claims about butterflies when the theory is either irrelevant or downright contradicted.

For strict Darwinists, the opening chapters of this book will be disconcerting. But for critics like myself, d'Abrera's introductory chapters are supremely refreshing. Yes, there is some colorful prose here. But it is in the service of realigning our sensibilities. Perhaps more so than other areas in biology, taxonomy has felt the constricting hand of Darwin. When Theodosius Dobzhansky remarked that nothing in biology makes sense apart from [Darwinian] evolution, he meant it not just as a statement of fact but as regulative principle to be enforced as Darwinian orthodoxy.

The overwhelming sense one gets in reading the introductory chapters of d'Abrera's book is of a man who has seen himself, his colleagues, and their work pushed around long enough and who will not stand for it any longer. D'Abrera casts Darwinism as a suffocating ideology and its purveyors as bullies. Consider the following passages from his text:

"Any person wishing to acquire a university degree of any altitude has only to place the word 'Evolution' in cunning juxtaposition with the lesser words, 'Phylogenetics',

'Molecular Biology', 'Genetics' or 'Biodiversity' in their abstract (or synopsis), and hey presto, they suddenly find themselves copiously funded!" (6)

"Some may ask why I have included my arguments against the several theories of evolution of species in a popular work such as this. I answer that I do so because ... those who support any or all of such theories do so relentlessly and unopposed in every literary, visual and spoken vehicle that exists -- be it base, popular or exalted highbrow. They are totally in control of every scientific journal or book in print and have no intention of having their hegemony threatened...." (53)

"No field worker who studies insects, may now freely gaze upon his discoveries of insect morphology, biology or behaviour, without the taint of speculative Darwinism compelling him to colour his conclusions. No more is such a worker allowed to make direct, uncomplicated observations about objective facts about butterflies or moths.... Instead he is now compelled through the pressure of insidious programming by the overlords of the scientific establishment, to subject everything he has objectively observed to the tyranny of subjectivist and useless speculation about butterflies and their hypothetical origins. He must do so for no other reason than being able to collect his grant and acquire his PhD or some other doubtful honour of mutual respectability amongst his peers. The really dangerous part of this global pseudo-scientific cultism is that our worker has unconsciously been made to pass from the intellectual liberty provided within the legitimate realms of disinterested hypothesis, into the cul-de-sac of totalitarian absolutism of unprovable dogma.... Evolutionists thus become roped into the bondage of their own theory. They postulate it as holy writ and then labour ceaselessly to find the 'evidence' to fit it. Such tendentious labours only bestow the opprobrium of 'contrivance' upon the evidence so gleaned." (64)

In western academic culture, critics of Darwinism often face stiff penalties -- slowed academic advancement, censorship, vilification, ostracism, and loss of employment. Whether d'Abrera's specific criticisms of Darwinism all hit the mark is not the important thing about this book (though I give the book high marks here as well). What is important about this book is its public call to allow informed dissent of Darwinism.

D'Abrera is as good as they get when it comes to naturalists expert in some particular species. D'Abrera has been studying butterflies since the age of three. He knows this creature as well as anybody, and he has found Darwin's theory completely unconvincing as a vehicle for gaining insights into butterflies. That in itself should give one pause. Too often critics of Darwinism are dismissed as religious nuts who can't stomach Darwinism because of the threat Darwinism is said to pose to their religion. D'Abrera shows that the dogmatism and intolerance is in fact on the other foot, and that it is the dogmatic supporters of Darwinism who need to learn tolerance.