

Book Review

J. David Pleins, *In Praise of Darwin: George Romanes and the Evolution of a Darwinian Believer* (New York and London: Bloosbury, 2014), xvii + 397 Pps., \$34.95. ISBN: 9781623565947

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J. David Pleins is Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University, USA. He is the author of *The Evolving God* (2013), *When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood* (2003), and served as an associate editor for Doubleday's *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6 volumes* (1992). George John Romanes, close friend and colleague of Darwin, remains a misunderstood figure in the history of evolutionary science. Although his scientific contributions have been valued, his religious journey has been both neglected and misjudged. Typically, only some of the work on theism he did at the very end of his life is acknowledged and even then his wife is usually blamed for doctoring the record with her pieties. His extensive poetry writing, much of it religious, has never been explored and his "Memorial Poem" to Darwin has been completely overlooked. The recent discovery of the original typescript of the poem, lost for more than a century and found only in 1999 at an auction, is reprinted fully in this book for the first time, and it allows us to enter the mind of a major Darwinian as we watch him struggle to positively put faith and science together. The impression of most people is that to be a Darwinian is to likewise be a religious skeptic. To this day, many who are Darwinians contend that belief in Darwinian mechanisms of evolution undermine religious thought. Romanes, however, thought differently: he had positive thoughts on the relationship between religion and science. The typescript of Romanes' "Memorial Poem" herein included contains a number of handwritten poems along with a series of experi-

mental poems that never made it into the version of the "Memorial Poem" that he printed for family and friends. The "Memorial Poem" is a unique and expansive work that grapples with the loss of his close friend and teacher, Darwin, struggles with the paradoxes of Darwin's fame, probes the meaning of Darwin's truth, and tackles the thorny problem of evil. To date, no scholar has asked how Romanes came to write this massive poetic tribute to Darwin, nor has anyone taken stock of the enduring theological insights that this "Memorial Poem" to Darwin contains. Plein rectifies this glaring omission in scholarship.

The book under review is divided into seven chapters. It begins with a brief look at Romanes' early life and career by Pleins, a time of initially positive religiosity that ended in philosophical skepticism. The next five chapters unpack the major segments and themes contained within the "Memorial Poem" to Darwin. Chapter 2 begins the poem proper, with meditations on the tolling of the funeral bell, Romanes' anguish, and the character of Darwin's name. The third chapter depicts Romanes' grief over the loss of his hero and dear friend. Chapter 4 explores the paradox of Darwin's fame as well as the eternal truth discerned within his name. Next, chapter 5 accompanies Romanes on a pilgrimage to Down House, where he sought to reconnect with his memories of Darwin, his fallen mentor. The sixth chapter grapples with the problem of evil, which according to Romanes is the greatest challenge to faith. The concluding chapter follows Romanes' trajectory after his "Memorial Poem" to

Darwin, the years in which his philosophy of monism matured, and during which his mature thoughts upon theism were formulated.

In sum, in this “Memorial Poem” to Darwin, we find in the figure of George John Romanes a seeker who crafted a new vision of God – a vision that sought to remain true to science while also being faithful to and honest about religion. This “Memorial Poem” to Darwin by Romanes challenges and alters our view of how Darwinians can remain true to their science and embrace religious belief simultaneously. This pathway to a new vision for theism, ironically, is *through* Darwinism, and not *against* it.