
Charles Darwin as Historical Methodologist; The Role of Scottish Conjectural History in the Origin of Species

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Abstract

The importance typically granted to the Scottish literati on Charles Darwin's work has been based primarily on the assessment of their works in political economics. But this does not convey the full magnitude of their influence. I will argue that the Scottish philosophes need to be regarded first and foremost as *historians* with regard to how their work impacted Darwin when he wrote the *Origin of Species*, and that it is from their works that Darwin derived a model for his own historiographical methodology. This also suggests a new way to think of Malthus' influence as not simply a political economist, but as an historian. Furthermore, it suggests a new source of uniformitarian methodology (especially in the actualist sense) championed by Lyell. The uniformitarianism stressed by Lyell was very much in line with scientific principles for understanding historical development that were developed and advocated by the Scottish Conjectural historians. I view Malthus' work as a continuation and clarification of the Scots' civil histories; indeed, the computational insight Darwin earned from Malthus gave deeper substantiation to the scientific thrust Darwin gained from Scottish historical principles. I will argue that Scottish Enlightenment historiography is the strong thread that weaves together the influences of both the geologists and Malthus. I hope to demonstrate that seeing Darwin's historiography as drawn from Scottish speculative history offers us some insight into the rhetorical rationale he used to develop his "long argument," and the nature of his historiographical methodology more generally.

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