

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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THE SLEUTHS CHALLENGE SCIENCE

BETRAYERS OF THE TRUTH. 1982. William Broad and Nicholas Wade. NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 256 p.

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Subtitled “Fraud and Deceit in the Halls of Science,” this work exposes a series of misdeeds in the name of science by some greats as Galileo and Newton, near greats, hopefully greats, and even some unknown tricksters. Included are cases of theft, for example, by the Alexandrian Ptolemy who stole from a Greek astronomer, or the recent plagiarist Alsabti who published or republished as his own the research of other investigators. There were those, including Isaac Newton, Gregor Mendel and Robert Millikan, who utilized some procedures or factors to cause their conclusions to be more convincing. Also discussed are the hoaxes such as Piltdown man, and, according to Broad and Wade, the Shroud of Turin.

Even Charles Darwin, they say, clearly “was laggard in giving credit to earlier authors of theories of evolution” (p 31). Loren Eiseley has shown similarity in phrases, rare words and examples between Darwin’s writing and that of his unacknowledged predecessor, Edward Blyth, who published papers on natural selection in 1835 and 1837. Darwin has been accused, apparently with good justification, of failing to give appropriate credit for his own ideas to other earlier thinkers including Buffon, Lamarck and his own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin.

In reflecting on the contents of this book, I can think of additional examples of deceit such as Ernst Haeckel’s 19th-century misrepresentation of embryos in order to support his concept of embryonic recapitulation. Even though some of these stories of deceptions can make interesting reading, I have no pleasure in contemplating them, and I would prefer to recall members of the army of dedicated scientists who have

been models in standing for the highest ideals in pursuit of truth. Such were many of my professors including my own graduate advisors. But I suppose there is value in *Betrayers of the Truth* and similar writings for revealing the unbridled deceitful nature of mankind, for encouraging reevaluation of various data (facts) and concepts, and for warning present and future investigators.

On the whole the book is interestingly and insightfully written. For example, it says:

To a probably insalubrious degree, science has replaced religion as the fundamental source of truth and value in the modern world (p 119).

Science is meant to be a community of intellectuals, dedicated to a common goal. If one scientist falls prey to dogma, and tries to promote doctrinaire beliefs in the name of science, won't his colleagues immediately perceive the error and take action to correct it? History shows that, to the contrary, a community of scientists is often ready to swallow whole the dogma served up to them, as long as it is palatable and has the right measure of scientific seasoning. Just as replication is no sure defense against error, objectivity often fails to resist infiltration by dogma (p 193).

Sometimes a whole community of researchers falls prey to a common delusion, as in the extraordinary case of the French physicists and N-rays, or — some would add — American psychologists and ape sign language (p 108).

Even though Broad and Wade say nothing directly either to favor or disfavor a creationist position, they do seem to understand that because evolution deals with history, it is not to be thought of as science at least in the strict sense:

The theory of evolution is another example of a theory highly valued by scientists because of its enormous explanatory power, but which lies in a sense too deep to be directly proved or disproved (p 17).

The appendix gives a chronological list of “Known or Suspected Cases of Scientific Fraud,” and the publisher requests that other uncited cases be brought to their attention. There are good bibliographic “Notes” for each chapter, and an extensive “Index” which includes names of individuals and topics. The book expresses many years of thought and effort and will on the whole, I believe, have a beneficial influence.