

The Quran - A Biography by Bruce Lawrence
Thomas Paine's Rights of Man - A Biography by Christopher Hitchens
Darwin's Origin of Species by Janet Browne
All published by Atlantic Books 2006.

Biographies of things rather than just people are much in vogue these days, and Atlantic's new series of biographies 'Books That Shook the World' are part of this genre.

The idea is simple: a book is described in terms of its genesis, impact, and influence, as well, where relevant, as the life and times of its author. Someone ignorant of the book could thus, in one hit, gain sufficient overall knowledge at least to decide whether or not to read further in the subject, and primarily, the book in question. In addition, the authors of the biographies are experts, and each brings their own angle, and agenda, to the biography, deepening and broadening it as a result.

Bruce Lawrence's biography of the Quran is different from the other two under review, as it includes not only an analysis of the Quran, its major concepts and the Prophet, but also looks at its broader influence and impact through the eyes of its observers and interpreters, including Osama bin Laden. This is a most satisfying text, and its chapter on the Sufi Jalal ad-din al-Rumi, and the influence on him of the Quran and its imagery is especially fine.

Christopher Hitchens is in top form with his biography of the Rights of Man, as much about Paine himself as his most famous work. Almost the first half of the biography is about Paine and his struggles, both in Europe and America, and the second half consider the Rights of Man and its content and influence, as well as the Paine-Edmund Burke argument, and the contribution of Paine's work to the development of political thinking and culture in America. Hitchens concludes with an overview of Paine's other great work The Age of Reason, and an assessment of Paine's legacy, which he is clearly convinced, will continue to be profound in the free world.

Janet Browne's biography of Darwin's Origin of Species is an absolute joy to read, no matter how much one believes one already knows about it or its author. The extraordinary intellectual leaps that Darwin took are acknowledged, as is the way he changed the way human beings think about their origins, and, purely coincidentally, ripped away the stranglehold that Christian doctrine had on scientific thinking in his day. Browne also acknowledges the role played in the development of Darwin's theories by others, not least Alfred Russel Wallace, and the importance of those who championed them, quintessentially his 'bulldog' Thomas Henry Huxley. Browne's book is easy to read, informative, and intensely satisfying.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh