

Dawson, Gowan: *Show Me the Bone. Reconstructing Prehistoric Monsters in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2016. ISBN: 9780226332734; 480 S.

**Rezensioniert von:** Irina Podgorny, Archivo Histórico del Museo de La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata/CONICET

Recently I overheard two young students on the U-Bahn in Berlin talking in English about Argentine history. Whereas one of the interlocutors seemed to be completely ignorant about the fate of the country where I was born, his companion related with passion and authority how things were and still are in the Southern Cone. He summarized: „In her last speech, just before dying, Eva Perón said to her followers: ‘Don’t cry for me, Argentina.’ Ever after the country, however, has lived in sadness and disarray.” Leaving aside the validity of the diagnostic I asked myself in silence whether Tim Rice would have expected that his song lyrics written by him for „Evita“, a British rock opera concept album in 1976, were going to take history by storm forty years later.

Gowan Dawson’s book refers exactly to this problem: the process by which works of fiction dominate the past and shape the future. Dawson deals with the realm of science, particularly the world of comparative anatomists and paleontologists in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States of America. He follows the emergence and destiny of the slogan „Give me the bone, and I will describe the animal.” Attributed to French anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) it was actually introduced by the politician and polymath Samuel Latham Mitchill in 1819 at New York’s College of Physicians and Surgeons. Feigning a Cuvier quote Latham Mitchill offered rhetorical support for Cuvier’s law of correlation of form. The sentence „came to symbolize the remarkable new insights into anatomy that, during the nineteenth century, enabled naturalists to infer the size, appearance, and even life habits of animals from just a single part of their anatomy” (p. 3). Here was the path, Dawson emphasizes, for making natural history into a

science like Lavoisier’s chemistry or Newton’s physics: „these inferences testified to the seemingly unlimited powers of scientific reasoning, especially in predicting things that were beyond direct experience [...]” (p. 3)

In ten chapters and an Epilogue grouped in four parts („Arrival, 1795–1839: Translations and Appropriations“, „Triumph, 1839–54: Bones, Serials, and Models“, „Overthrow, 1854–62: Scientific Naturalists, Popularizers, and Cannibals“ and „Afterlife, 1862–1917: Missing Links and Hidden Clues“) Dawson tracks the process and consequences of having understood and propagated Cuvier’s laws, specifically that „even the merest fragment of fossilized bone, necessarily indicates the configuration of the whole.” (p. 3) The author follows in detail the different paths of Cuvierism in nineteenth-century Anglo-American contexts.

Dawson credits Martin Rudwick for having already analyzed this topic.<sup>1</sup> Rudwick underscored that the historiography championed by British Darwinists from the second half of the nineteenth-century presented Cuvier as a kind of religious anti-evolutionist anatomist. Rudwick translated into English Cuvier’s texts about his innovative techniques of comparative anatomy and also proved that Cuvier was far from being antiprogressive, an image that had been created to erode the authority of Cuvier’s so-called „British heirs“ William Buckland and Richard Owen. Dawson takes the matter further by showing that „ownership of Cuvier’s celebrated law of correlation [...] was fought over by radical advocates of materialism and clerical upholders of natural theology with the battle extending from Oxford colleges and genteel lecture theaters to cheap pamphlets sold on street corners” (p. 59). This is one of the book’s most important insights about the public reception of paleontology in the English-speaking context.

Dawson has compiled much published material from a time when scientific novel-ties and the progress of media fed upon each other. For Anglo-American readers by the 1860s debates previously confined to the

<sup>1</sup> Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Scenes from deep time. Early pictorial representations of the prehistoric world*, Chicago 1995; Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Georges Cuvier, fossil bones, and geological catastrophes. New translations & interpretations of the primary texts*, Chicago 1998.

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chambers of learned societies nourished the dailies and periodicals and contributed to the exponential increase in newspaper circulation and readership.<sup>2</sup> Dawson's book allows exploring how the press, the publishers and naturalists alike fashioned their careers and lobbied for ideas and individuals. Novelty was everywhere apparent, not only in the discovery of new, living animal species or in the mounting of fossil vertebrate specimens. „Show me the bone“ provides a map to follow the emergence, transformations and appropriations of a cliché.

Would Cuvier have predicted what kind of monster the fragments of his work were going to create? Certainly not. Dawson shows (in line with the conversation I overheard in Berlin) that these fossil words are the result of relatively rapid transformations, translations, readings, editions, and consumer expectations configured by marketing strategies and the dynamics of the cultural industries which were not part of Cuvier's „Leçons d'Anatomie Comparée“ published in several volumes between 1800 and 1805. Dawson's story finds many homologues from Darwin's struggle for existence to Einstein's relativity and on to Thomas S. Kuhn's paradigms. Are significant ideas ever free of significant misrepresentation?

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<sup>2</sup> for an early and incisive study: Susan Sheets-Pyenson, Popular science periodicals in Paris and London. The emergence of a low scientific culture, 1820–1875, in: *Annals of Science* 42 (1985), pp. 549–72; See also: James Secord, *Victorian Sensation. The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Chicago 2001.