

Book Review

Y: The Descent of Men by Steve Jones (2003). Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. ISBN 0-618-13930-3.

John Archer, Department of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE, United Kingdom. Email: jarcher@uclan.ac.uk.

This is both an engaging and a fragmentary book. It is engaging in that Steve Jones' writing style made me feel that I was having a dialogue with him. It is fragmentary in that the book contains ten chapters loosely united by the theme of the biology of maleness and its social manifestations, but without a central message or theoretical glue to bind these engaging and interesting chapters together.

Reading the first chapter, "Nature's sole mistake", I gained the (admittedly wrong) impression that the rest of the book was going to enlist biology in order to apologise for being a man. This impression was encouraged by the publisher's hype about the book, but it is not an accurate reflection of it overall. Early on, I also had reservations about the style, as I thought the author strove too hard to produce metaphors and anecdotes at every turn, often detracting from the story he was telling. It seemed as though Jones felt he had to keep interrupting himself to say that this is like the first World War, or that is like the Minotaur's mother – giving the impression that the biological world isn't interesting enough by itself. In subsequent chapters I did not notice this so much, and the writing settled down.

The book explores the biological origins and characteristics of maleness in the natural world. It is a series of essays on different aspects of this very broad theme. The biology and anthropology of sex ratios are skilfully combined in Chapter 2. The developmental progression of influences on maleness, in particular the role of hormones, is the concern of the next chapter, covering diverse topics sandwiched between speculation and anecdote about testosterone-induced baldness (of particular interest to this reviewer). Chapter 4 is an essay on penile erection, or more accurately problems in achieving one (not of particular interest to this reviewer). This is followed up by one entitled "Man mutilated", which considered not only castration but also circumcision, setting out evidence that it is unjustified on medical grounds. Unfortunately, there are still many people who justify all manner of barbaric acts as God's will, and who will close their ears to this sort of

argument. Chapter 6 concerns sperm, including artificial means of enabling them to fertilise the ovum, and ways of preventing them doing so in the form of contraception. Chapter 8 tells the intriguing story of how human ancestral population movements can be traced from the pattern of genes on the Y chromosomes, beginning with an engaging anecdote about Jones' relative who sold his skull. This leads on to the descent of Jones and other Welshmen, before posing and answering the puzzle of the nine thousand-year-old Kennewick man, found in North America but possessing European features. The answer is a triumph of genetic detective work.

What is there in this book to interest the evolutionary-minded readers of *Evolutionary Psychology*? Throughout, there are references to Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, to justify the subtitle, but of course Darwin's work was about the evolution of the human species, both male and female, and he had only the natural history and technologically-limited science of the time on which to base his discussion. Jones' book is not an update of the *Descent of Man* in the light of modern scientific knowledge. Evolution is represented in the earlier chapters through the interesting evolutionary issue of sex ratios, although surprisingly Trivers and Willard do not appear in the sources for this. It is only later in the book, in Chapters 8 and 9, that issues familiar to evolutionary psychologists are considered. Trivers' parental investment theory of sexual selection is described, but surprisingly, he is not referred to by name or listed in the source material. Examples of sexual selection from the animal world are engagingly described, before considering those animals nearest to humans, and the question of which one may be a suitable comparison for humans is addressed. Steve Jones perhaps rightly considers that there is not a single animal model that can illuminate human mating systems. Perhaps if he had looked beyond individual species to principles, he might have got closer to helpful lessons from evolutionary biology. The conditions under which monogamy, polygyny and polyandry occur in other species is surely important for considering human examples of these mating systems, and the work of Eric Alden Smith (e.g., Smith, 1998) could usefully have been brought to bear.

Chapter 10 concerns the contentious issue of sex differences in behaviour, extensively studied by psychologists for around 40 years now. There are a few snide comments that reveal that the author is no fan of evolutionary psychology, still perversely referring to it as sociobiology, and its practitioners bracketed with authors of romantic fiction. But Jones acknowledges the contribution of biology to the understanding of sex differences (for example, in spatial ability) that are (or were) often attributed to socialization. He tries to negotiate his way through the minefield of nature and nurture: I wonder what he would have made of Simon Baron-Cohen's recent book (Baron-Cohen, 2003), which sets out the case for two essentially different ways of thinking initiated at an early age by the prenatal hormonal environment?

In the final chapter Jones returns to the theme of the crisis in masculinity, so beloved by his publicists. Perhaps it would have been more interesting to place this in historical context (in relation to the impact of feminism in the western world), and in a global context (in relation to the existence of societies where patriarchal values still exert a strong hold). There is actually a world outside university and intellectual life, and some of its values are very different from ours.

I would have liked to have ended this review by referring to the book as a seminal work. Although one reviewer has got there already, the book doesn't really have the consistency and coherence to be thus described. But it is, nevertheless, an interesting, well-written and engaging mixture, well worth reading.

References

- Baron-Cohen, S. (2003). *The Essential Difference: Men, women and the extreme male brain*. London: Penguin.
- Smith, E. A. (1998). Is Tibetan polyandry adaptive? Methodological and metatheoretical analyses. *Human Nature*, 9: 225-261.