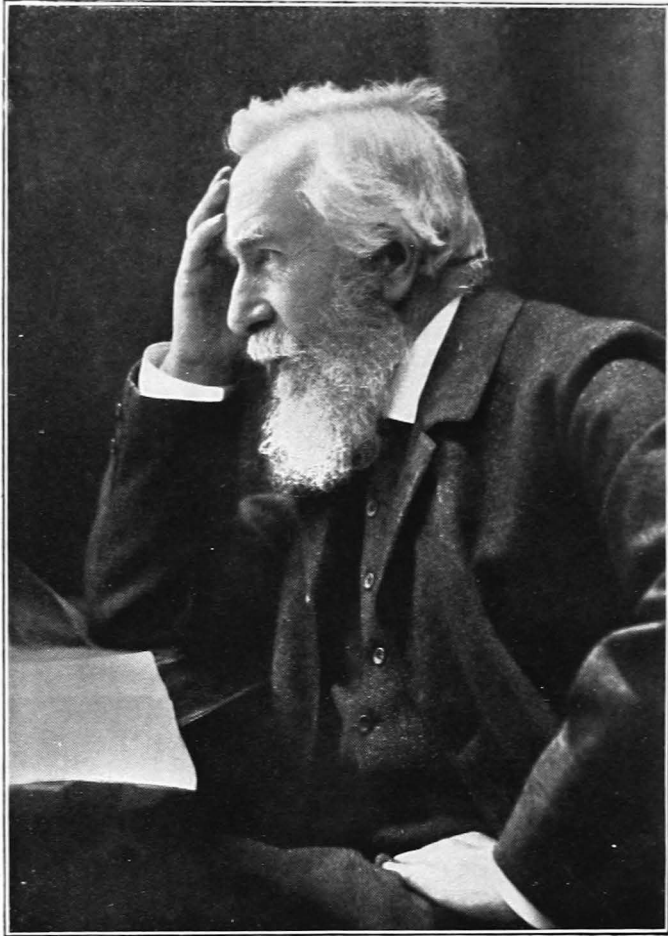


HAECKEL:

HIS LIFE AND WORK

PROFESSOR W. BÖLSCHKE



ERNST HAECKEL, 1906.

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HAECKEL : HIS LIFE AND WORK

HAECKEL

HIS LIFE AND WORK

BY
WILHELM BOLSCHE

WITH INTRODUCTION AND SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTER - BY THE
TRANSLATOR,

JOSEPH McCABE

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INTRODUCTION

ONE of the admirable maxims that crystallise the better sense or experience of men reminds us that we must "say nothing but good of the dead." Unhappily, we have taken the words of our sage fathers in too large a sense. A feeling has grown among us that we should "say nothing good except of the dead"—at least, as regards those who differ from us. So has many a man gone from the world with little suspicion of the appreciation that might have warmed him in the last chill years; many a man sunk into the grave with the harsh echo of dishonouring words still rumbling in his ears. It may be that our ideas, our truths, would not suffer greatly if we could patiently endeavour to trace the community of humane feeling that lies beneath the wide gulfs that often separate us intellectually from each other.

Professor Ernst Haeckel is one of those combative figures of all time who take misunderstanding as a part of their romantic career. If he had shut himself within the laboratory, as some of his gifted colleagues did, all the world would honour him to-day. His vast range of biological knowledge, almost without parallel in our specialist days, fitted him for great scientific achievements. His superb special contributions to biology—his studies of Radiolaria, Sponges, Medusæ, etc.—give ample evidence of it. As things are, he has, Professor Hertwig says, "written his name in letters of light in the history of science." He holds four gold medals for scientific research (Cothenius, Swammerdam, Darwin, and Challenger), four doctorates (Berlin, Jena-Edinburgh, and Cambridge), and about eighty diplomas from so many universities and academic bodies. But he was one of those who cannot but look out of the windows of the laboratory. His intense idealism, his sense of what he felt to be wrong and untrue, inflamed by incessant travel and communion with men, drove him into the field of battle. In the din and roar of a great conflict his name has passed on to a million lips, and become the varied war-cry of fiercely contending parties. A hundred Haeckels, grotesque in their unlikeness to each other, circulate in our midst to-day.

The present work is a plain study of the personality of Haeckel and the growth of his ideas. The character of Haeckel was forged amid circumstances that have largely passed away from the scientific world of our time. The features even of the world he has worked in of recent years in Germany are so different from our own that no Englishman can understand him without sober study of his life. He has often been

called "the Darwin of Germany." The phrase is most misleading. It suggests a comparison that is bound to end in untruth and injustice. In the same year that Haeckel opened his Darwinian campaign in Germany he won the prize for the long jump—a record jump. It is the note of much in his character. He was no quiet recluse, to shrink from opposition and hard names, but a lusty, healthy, impetuous, intrepid youth, even when his hair had worn to grey. A story is told of how, not many years ago, the Grand Duke of Weimar playfully rallied him, in the midst of a brilliant company, on his belief in evolution. To the horror of the guests, he slapped the powerful noble on the shoulder, and told him to come to Jena and see the proofs of it. In his seventy-first year we find him severely censuring his Emperor—the emperor of many fortresses—in a public lecture at Berlin.

How his vigour and his resentment rose as barrier after barrier was raised before him; how his scorn of compromise was engendered and fed; how he accumulated mountains of knowledge in obscure, technical works before he formulated his sharp didactic conclusions—all this is told in the following story. For good or ill he has won an influence in this country, and his story should be read. It is in itself one of rare and varied interest, and it is told by one of the most brilliant penmen of modern Germany—his former pupil, now a distinguished biologist, Professor Wilhelm Bolsche.

The time seems to have come in England for the publication of some authoritative picture of the great biologist and controversialist. One work of his circulates by the hundred thousand among us, and has had a deep and lasting influence on the thoughts of large classes of men. His influence is hardly less in France and Italy, as well as in Germany; his doctrines have, in fact, been translated into fifteen different tongues. The deep, sometimes bitter, controversy that they have engendered must have led to a desire to know more of the man and his making. The attempts that have been made here and there to "construct" him from his ideas and literary manner are, as the reader will see, very far removed from the reality. Behind all the strained inferences from doctrines, behind all the dishonouring epithets, there is a genial, warm, deeply artistic, intensely idealist nature, sung with enthusiasm by poets who have known him. Once, in playful scientific mood, Haeckel tried to explain his own character in his familiar terms of heredity and environment. He came of a line of lawyers—straight, orderly, inexorable men. He had lived and worked in quiet Jena, in the beautiful valley of the Saale. But he did not speak of that larger environment—the field of battle, stretching far away, beyond the calm Thuringian hills, to the ends of Europe. We must place Haeckel's ardent and high-minded nature in that field, face to face with his opponents, if we would understand him.

For the supplementary chapter I have drawn freely on another biographical sketch by one of Haeckel's pupils, Dr. Breitenbach, and other sources. For the illustrations (to the first edition) I am indebted chiefly to Professor Haeckel himself, and can only offer him in return this grateful effort to lift his inspiring and impressive personality above the dust and cloud of a great controversy.

JOSEPH McCABE.

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Abroad, his ideals, even his ideas, are making triumphant progress. He thinks of the vast changes that have taken place since he stood out, almost alone, reckless of all but honour and truth, at the Stettin Congress in 1863. "Das Leben ist schon," he still repeats. What will men say of *him* when the lines of history draw in, and the critic will have the proper perspective? I believe no great worker ever thought less about it. Through inexorable labour, through

constant sacrifice, through storms of painful obloquy, he has lived his ideals, if he has made mistakes—been mortal. Those ideals are an enduring contribution to the good. The first, the motto of his young days, was *Impavidi progrediamur*—"Let us march on fearlessly." The second, the motto of his later years, was: "The good, the true, and the beautiful are the ideals, yea the gods, of our Monistic philosophy."

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