



On the Hassler expedition, 1871-1872. Far left, Louis Agassiz; third from left, Elizabeth Agassiz

and Bass professor of English Louis Menand (*The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*).

Irmscher's final chapter presents a poignant account of the Hassler expedition to South America, on which Louis, Elizabeth, and the rest of their field party embarked in December 1871, returning the following summer, slightly more than a year before Louis died following a stroke. The expedition is significant in several

most impressively from the Hassler expedition, and from this last chapter of Irmscher's biography, is Elizabeth Agassiz. Possessed of her own keen powers of observation of the natural world, she was a talented, indeed prolific, writer who transcribed many of her husband's lectures into (his) published articles and wrote her own books on natural history for the general public. Her many accomplishments, at a time when most educational and professional opportunities were restricted to men, are a testament to her intelligence, energy, organization, and drive, and the considerable attention paid to her by Irmscher (a former lecturer in English and in history and literature at Harvard) is a particularly attractive feature of his book.

Irmscher's treatment offers many lessons for today. There is no denying that Louis Agassiz was an exceptional naturalist who brought keen powers of observation to his studies of Earth's history and biological diversity. He introduced to American science the tradition of field biology, which extends to the present day. Yet many of his supposedly empirically based conclusions were deeply flawed. The history of science is replete with examples of theory driving observation. In the extreme, these underscore the fallacy of pure objectivity in science, a message that was as important in Agassiz's time as it is in ours. ♡

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returning freed slaves to Africa or Central America—as the most practical and realistic solution for slavery.)

Irmscher says no. Agassiz's scientific studies betray little if any interest in the biological meaning and significance of race before he arrived in North America, or, indeed, afterward, at least as applied to nonhumans—yet he must have recognized quickly the preoccupation with race prevailing in the United States, especially Boston, in the years leading up to the Civil War. The situation, Irmscher argues, provided an irresistible opportunity for the charismatic and confident Agassiz to assume the mantle of scientific authority in his extreme pronouncements about human race, which could only enhance his professional standing and help him achieve his ambitious goals. Not all biographers of Agassiz are as unforgiving. To Edward Lurie, for example, in *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science*, “Agassiz, just arrived in America, was hardly aware of the use to which his ideas might be put by defenders of slavery,” but that claim seems hard to reconcile with Agassiz's sharp mind and repeated, extended visits to antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, where he was feted by the Southern aristocracy. Irmscher's detailed scrutiny of Agassiz's racial views is in keeping with other recent analyses by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (in *Darwin's Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution*)

respects, not least in retracing to a considerable extent the route of Darwin's own voyage to South America on the *Beagle* more than 35 years earlier, including a visit to the Galápagos Islands. By 1871, 12 years after the initial publication of *Origin of Species*, the inadequacy of Agassiz's creationist views was widely accepted by most of the scientific establishment on both sides of the Atlantic, but Agassiz, it seems, still hoped that field-based observations and new collections would yield the evidence required to disprove Darwin and his supporters.

Agassiz would, once again, be proved wrong. Instead, the person who emerges

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Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Leslie Gillis requests title and author for a book that ends, “I don't know. I'm just a city boy myself”—in response to a question about whether flowers popping up through the snow are crocuses.

“iron filings” (March-April). Alison Harris recalled this fable about steel filings and a magnet from *Extraordinary Tales* by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares (1971, edited and translated by Anthony Kerrigan; page 96). Their source, Hesketh Pearson's *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946;

page 212), credits Richard Le Gallienne's *The Romantic '90s* (1926; pages 254ff).

“thoughts of great men” (March-April). Mary Ann Brewin found no citation for this alleged Mark Twain remark, but recommended www.twainquotes.com for many other sourced comments.

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