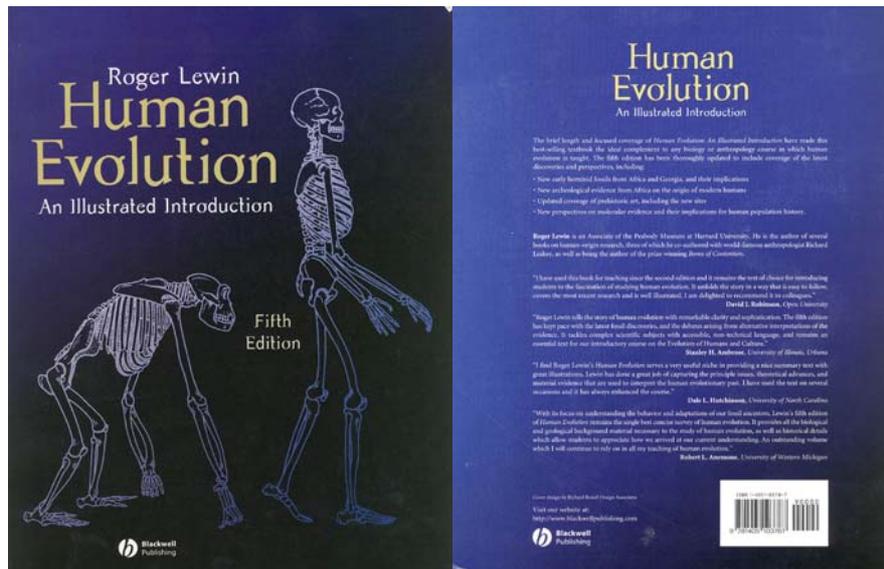


Lewin, R. 2005. Human evolution (5th edition). – Oxford, Blackwell Publishing

Book review by J.W.F. Reumer



All books on the evolution of humans, hominoids, anthropoids or the like are now outdated. The reason for this bold statement is the discovery in November 2004 of *Homo floresiensis*, the diminutive Indonesian hominid that is most probably a *Homo erectus* that got stuck on the island of Flores and subsequently dwarfed. Contenders there are enough, as is always the case when something new and unexpected turns up. *Homo floresiensis*, or ‘the Hobbit’ as it is now vernacularly called, is no aberrant individual, no case of pathologic microcephaly, no accidental midget. It is a truly dwarfed *Homo*, and as such similar to dwarf elephants, dwarf hippos and dwarf deer found on other islands in California, the Mediterranean, Indonesia, or the Philippines. This fact is remarkable as such. It is the more remarkable as it proves that *Homo* behaves just like any other larger mammal species from an evolutionary point of view. THAT is the real bone of contention. Ever since the early days of Christianity, *via* T.H. Huxley in the 1860s (see page 3 in the first chapter of this book), down to the present day, people have a tendency to consider *Homo* as something quite different from the animal kingdom. Yes, animals can evolve in response to environmental changes, okay for that, but man? When large mammals have to adapt to a life on the savannah, they become agile, long-legged striders. So does *Homo*. When large mammals become isolated on oceanic islands, they dwarf. So does *Homo*, we now know. Our bipedality and the discovery of the floresian Hobbit are two arguments in favour of our mammalness.

Many books have been published about the few dozen anthropoid specimens that we have. Some books are better than other, but all books – whatever their quality – give phylogenetic trees, provide pictures of KNM-ER 406, Turkana Boy, Shkul, Louis Leakey and Don Johanson, and discuss our distinctive human features. These features therefore do not make a book either good or bad. Some books are designed for the coffee table, others for the highly specialised palaeoanthropologist, still others for the waste-paper bin. This one is destined for neither of these purposes. It is a textbook for students, and a good one too! Yes, it does not say a word about the Hobbit, but I am sure that the 6th edition eventually will (I now have the recently emerged 5th edition of 2005 before me). It does pay attention to bipedalism, and just that is what attracted my interest. I was not disappointed: “Anthropologists have often sought “special” – that is, essentially human – explanations for the origin of bipedalism. Strictly biological explanations are, however, more likely to be correct”. That is the way our evolution should be treated. Bipedalism is considered the result of adaptations to a changing environment, most notably the wider spacing of food items in an increasingly open environment. Other views are treated as well, but all within the framework of evolutionary adaptations.

‘Human Evolution’ by Roger Lewin (who authored or co-authored quite a few books on human origins, such as ‘Bones of contention’ and ‘Origins’ is a general textbook that treats our evolution in 35 concise and highly informative chapters. Titles such as ‘Our place in nature’, ‘Dating methods’ (about fixing ages, not finding partners), ‘Early *Homo*’, and ‘The Neanderthal rigma’ show that the entire range of palaeoanthropology is covered. The book is full of black-and-white photographs, and hundreds of informative schemes and drawings. The price (around £20,00) is low and hence not a limiting factor. This book should neither be on your coffee table nor in your waste-paper box. It should not even be on one of your book-shelves. It should be on your desk, within reach, and always immediately at hand whenever wanted. A good buy!

Lewin, R. 2004. Human evolution (5th edition). Oxford, Blackwell Publishing. 277 pp. ISBN 1-4051-0378-7. Price £19.99 (paperback).

Cited literature

Lewin, R. 1997. Bones of contention. Controversies in the search for human origins. – Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Leakey, R. & R. Lewin. 1993. Origins reconsidered. In search of what makes us human. – London, Little, Brown and Co.