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## BOOKSHELF

# Review: Charles Darwin, the Origin of the Specious?

A.N. Wilson portrays Darwin as a good naturalist but a bad theorist whose ideas came from the social world, not nature. But if so, why has later science validated those ideas?



'When I read more of what the evolutionists had to say,' writes Wilson, 'Darwin's position as the great man of life-sciences looked uncertain.' PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Christoph Irmscher*

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In the summer of 1858, struggling to finish a book he was reluctant to call more than a preliminary “abstract” of his theory, Darwin sent the manuscript of “On the Origin of Species” to a friend, the botanist Joseph Hooker, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. As it turned out, Hooker’s house was a rather unsafe destination. “I find that my children have made away with upwards of ¼ of the MS,” a mortified Hooker admitted to Thomas Huxley. Darwin’s precious manuscript, weighing in at nearly two pounds when it arrived, had “by some screaming accident” been transferred to a drawer where Mrs. Hooker kept scratch paper for their steadily growing brood of children to draw on. And draw they did, as a “brutified, if not brutalised” Hooker told Huxley. If only Darwin had gotten angry at him. But Darwin, who had kept a copy, was a more than indulgent father himself, and perhaps the accidental defacement of his work seemed oddly appropriate to him. It presaged further, and worse, trouble to come. Writing about evolution, he had told Hooker more than a decade earlier, felt like “confessing a murder.”

A.N. Wilson would likely agree with the latter statement. What he claims that Darwin killed, or had attempted to kill, was not just our belief in a divinely ordered world but also our confidence in human distinctiveness: the lovely, comforting idea that our cultural achievements make us so much better than the animals. Natural selection, Darwin’s main contribution to a theory that Mr. Wilson tells us others had pretty much put in place before Darwin came along, has long been discredited scientifically anyway. Or so says Mr. Wilson, who seems hell-bent on exposing Darwin for what he believes him to be, an emperor who has no clothes. Mr. Wilson, a novelist by trade, has written biographies before, among them a well-received life of Queen Victoria. But his new book, “Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker,” is less a biography than an indictment of a man he finds wanting in so many respects that the reader wonders how Mr. Wilson could stand spending so much time writing about him. Had Mr. Wilson been one of the Hooker children, Darwin’s manuscript would have been rendered illegible in no time at all.

Mr. Wilson’s book offers no fresh information on Darwin’s life—no new archival research, no new discoveries, no unexpected insights. It doesn’t even pretend to capture the full arc of Darwin’s career—there’s no mention of his glorious first book on corals and only a glancing

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CHARLES DARWIN: VICTORIAN  
MYTHMAKER

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By A.N. Wilson

*Harper, 438 pages, \$32.50*

reference to his last one, a wildly successful study of earthworms. Mr. Wilson's notes draw mostly on the published correspondence, and there is no real evidence that he has familiarized himself with the considerable body of scholarship on Darwin or evolution, instead deriving his information from popular science books and the works of familiar anti-Darwinians such as

Michael Denton of the Discovery Institute and the Australian philosopher David Stove.

Most of Mr. Wilson's reservations about Darwin are deeply personal. As Mr. Wilson describes him, Darwin was motivated by one desire only, to be the "cock of the walk" of Victorian science. To achieve that goal, Darwin borrowed liberally from colleagues without thanking them for their trouble and coerced friends into defending him in public while settling comfortably into the life of a spoiled country squire: a grown man who called his infinitely tolerant wife "Mammy," liked to play with his many children, and readily gave in to a variety of partly real, partly imagined illnesses. Mr. Wilson's Darwin was a navel-gazing, humorless, flatulent bore, too dumb to learn foreign languages though curiously just smart enough to recognize good scientific ideas he could steal from others. Benign only to those who never crossed him, Darwin was a schemer and manipulator intent on asserting his right to scientific discoveries that weren't his.

Mr. Wilson seems most disturbed by how much money that crafty grandson of the founder of the Wedgwood pottery company had amassed without so much as lifting a finger. Sitting on a pile of unearned cash, Darwin naturally found it easy to dream of a world in which the wealthy prosper and the poor wither away. How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Darwin! "Slithery" is an adjective that Mr. Wilson likes to associate with that sinister wizard of evolution. In Mr. Wilson's hands, Darwin is the veritable snake in the garden of cultural history, a corrupter of minds who deserves to be seen clearly for what he always was: a footnote in the history of science.

Most of the dirt that Mr. Wilson has dug up looks awfully familiar. I will admit, though, that there's a certain bizarre pleasure in seeing everything negative that anyone has ever said about Darwin squeezed into one relentless book. At first I found reading Mr. Wilson's laundry list of offenses strangely addictive, like studying the "Wanted" posters that hang in the Post Office. As I carried on, however, pleasure slowly gave way to annoyance. Mr. Wilson's scientific misunderstandings, of which there are many, seem to come straight out of the creationist playbook. Chief among them is the standard complaint, repeated frequently in Mr. Wilson's book, that those transitional fossils that would prove that species transmute from one into another simply don't exist. Let us ignore, for a moment, that evolution doesn't mean that animals change shape in two to three easy steps; such transformations usually happen over many generations and through a series of chance mutations. Let us also disregard Mr. Wilson's argument that if evolution really takes as much time as Darwin said it would, predators would have long gobbled up vulnerable species too preoccupied with evolving into something better. What matters is that paleontologists have indeed identified thousands of these transitional fossils that Darwin predicted would turn up. Arguably, Mr. Wilson's claim would have already been moot in the early 1860s, when *Archaeopteryx*, with its birdlike feathers and reptile-like teeth, was first described. Some of the more recently discovered candidates have wonderful names, too, like the fishapod, which, among other weird features, apparently had ears that could hear in both land and water, or my personal favorite, the frogamander, wide-skulled like a frog but sporting fused ankle bones like a salamander.

More seriously, some of Mr. Wilson's criticisms of Darwin are the result of intentional falsification. Take his summary of the research of Peter and Rosemary Grant, who have spent not just "twenty-five summers" but more than 40 years studying two species of finches on a small island in the Galápagos. What they have found, through studying beak morphology, coloration, song, bird size and cross-species hybridization, is not that Darwin was wrong, as Mr. Wilson asserts, but that the process he had discovered was likely even more powerful than he had expected. What the Grants had seen was, according to Nature magazine, "evolution in real time," in constant flux, not limited to linear pathways. Mr. Wilson's representation of their work relies not on the Grants' easily accessible accounts of what they have been up to but on a couple of hasty and obsolete paragraphs in John Hands's best-selling survey of the evolution of

everything in the universe, “Cosmosapiens” (2015). As it happens, Mr. Hands is also a defender of intelligent design advocate Michael Behe, another one of Mr. Wilson’s unorthodox sources.

Since Mr. Wilson is a literary man, I was particularly disappointed by how unreceptive he is toward Darwin the writer. Only someone who is tone-deaf to Darwin’s irony will think, as Mr. Wilson does, that the glorious final sentence of chapter 3 in “Origin” sounds like it’s been taken from a bedtime story told by a father who feels he has frightened his child too much: “When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.” Mr. Wilson earnestly objects that anyone who has seen a zebra mauled by a lion will question the idea that no fear is felt in nature. But Darwin’s sentence is tongue-in-cheek, a fake concession to readers exactly like Mr. Wilson who need the comforts of religion or culture to get on with their lives—“may” they go, sighs Darwin, and find the consolation they need (not in his book, though!). Darwin’s sarcastic little alliteration of “healthy” and “happy”—loaded words, if one remembers that Darwin was a lifelong invalid—is a nice additional touch.

Even more worryingly, Mr. Wilson doesn’t get the rationale behind Darwin’s subversive decision to call the massive book he published in 1871 “The Descent of Man” even though only the last 50 pages, after some 750 about the mating behaviors of birds or monkeys, are actually devoted to humans. Darwin’s point is, precisely, why “Descent” was so challenging: human courtship behavior is, in the mind of the evolutionary theorist, a mere afterthought to all the evidence he has accumulated from the animal world. This was bound to shock Victorian readers—just as it obviously shocks Mr. Wilson today.

A hundred and fifty years later, the work of that barnacle-dissecting country squire from Kent has been modified, augmented, superseded and improved upon, as well it should be. Darwin was quite wrong about many things, and of course he didn’t know squat about genetics, as Mr. Wilson never fails to remind us. And as a human being, Darwin probably did a few things he shouldn’t have done. But the enduring provocation of Darwin’s thought, for scientists as well as humanists, lies in how he envisioned, more radically than anyone before him and few after him, a world teeming with life in which humans are not the main actors: “How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods.”

As I was finishing Mr. Wilson’s book, something rather unexpected had happened to me: I had become more curious about him than about Darwin—perhaps not a good sign for a biography. Somewhere I discovered that Norman Wilson, our biographer’s father, used to run the Wedgwood factory. (Those were the good old days, when the company had not yet deteriorated into a multinational purveyor of luxury goods.) Unlike Darwin, who had sponged off his grandfather’s fortune, Norman Wilson reported for work every day, including Saturdays, at that same factory. It is certainly helpful to think of “Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker” as a biographer’s covert attempt to settle a bit of an old score.

But a degree of uneasiness remains. The sheer effort Mr. Wilson has put into toppling Darwin from his pedestal, as if he were the faded statue of a Confederate general headed for the scrapyard, ironically proves that he is not obsolete yet. Samuel “Soapy Sam” Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford who once foolishly asked an elated Thomas Huxley on which side of his family he was descended from an ape, would derive some posthumous pleasure from knowing that someone is still protesting. Yet the modern reader will end this book, as this reviewer certainly did, with the awkward feeling of having been forced into witnessing a fight that no longer needed to be fought. The handful of passages in which Mr. Wilson writes about his subject with genuine understanding—a notable example is his description of Charles and Emma Darwin “clutching at straws” as they watch their 10-year-old daughter wither away—reveal him to be a writer capable of remarkable empathy and even tenderness. But this is not a lasting impression. Throughout this book, Mr. Wilson’s dogged impulse to unmask Darwin as an ungenerous bully has, I am afraid, turned him into a bit of a bully in his own right. If Darwin once—regrettably, as Mr. Wilson is certainly right to remind us—congratulated himself on being an Englishman, many American readers will congratulate themselves on being neither English nor famous, so that they will, presumably, be safe from Mr. Wilson’s biographical efforts.

—*Mr. Irmischer, a professor of English at Indiana University, is the author of, among other books, “Louis Agassiz : Creator of American Science” and “The Poetics of Natural History.”*

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