

Darwin sat on his theory of evolution for decades

A Darwinian scholar doubts it was because he feared religious leaders

BY ROGER HIGHFIELD

LONDON — Scholars call it “Darwin’s delay,” a reference to the best-known case of dithering in science, in which the great English naturalist sat on his theory of evolution for decades because he was so fearful its findings would be mauled by religious leaders and powerful figures in the establishment.

Today, that long-held belief within the scientific community is rebutted by a leading Darwinian scholar.

John van Wyhe, a Cambridge University academic and director of the *Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, says the reasons why Charles Darwin procrastinated are far more prosaic.

As well as his obligation to catalogue the vast numbers of specimens he found on his famous South American voyage on the *Beagle*, they include an all-consuming obsession with barnacles and the fact that he was a slow and methodical worker.

By the standard account, Darwin became convinced of evolution in 1837 and was only prompted to publish his work *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, after receiving a letter from Alfred Russel Wal-



Portrait of Charles Robert Darwin, the great naturalist, in his middle age. Photo was taken about 1854.

lace, a naturalist and explorer who had arrived at the same idea.

This period of contemplation has been given various names, from “the long wait” to “Darwin’s procrastination” and, most common of all, “Darwin’s delay.”

There has been endless speculation about its cause: fears for his reputation; religious persecution; upsetting his religious wife and even disturbing the social order.

Van Wyhe’s re-evaluation

of Darwin’s papers, published today in the *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, rewrites this pivotal chapter in the story of Darwin’s life. His letters, publications and the writings of those who knew him do not back the idea of a lifetime of avoiding publication.

“Contrary to common belief, Darwin did not keep his belief in evolution [or transmutation as it was then known] a secret before publication in 1858-59,” van Wyhe said. “Darwin was

aware that his theories would be, and indeed in conversation often were, disputed and, by some, despised. These passages reflect this and his anticipated counter-arguments. But this does not mean that he was terribly afraid of revealing what he believed or indeed went so far as to suppress his work for many years.”

Why was there the long gap between conception and publication? “His major occupation in terms of both energy and time was the publication of the scientific results of the *Beagle* voyage,” said van Wyhe. “Clearly, transmutation was a fascinating subject, but not his work of first priority.”

Although the transmutation notebooks were largely finished by 1840-41, Darwin continued making notes. By 1850, after being set back by ill health, he was still examining the “confounded” barnacles and wrote in October 1853 that he would be at his species book “in a year or two.”

By the spring of 1858 Darwin had completed more than 10 chapters covering two-thirds of the topics later discussed in *Origin of Species*.