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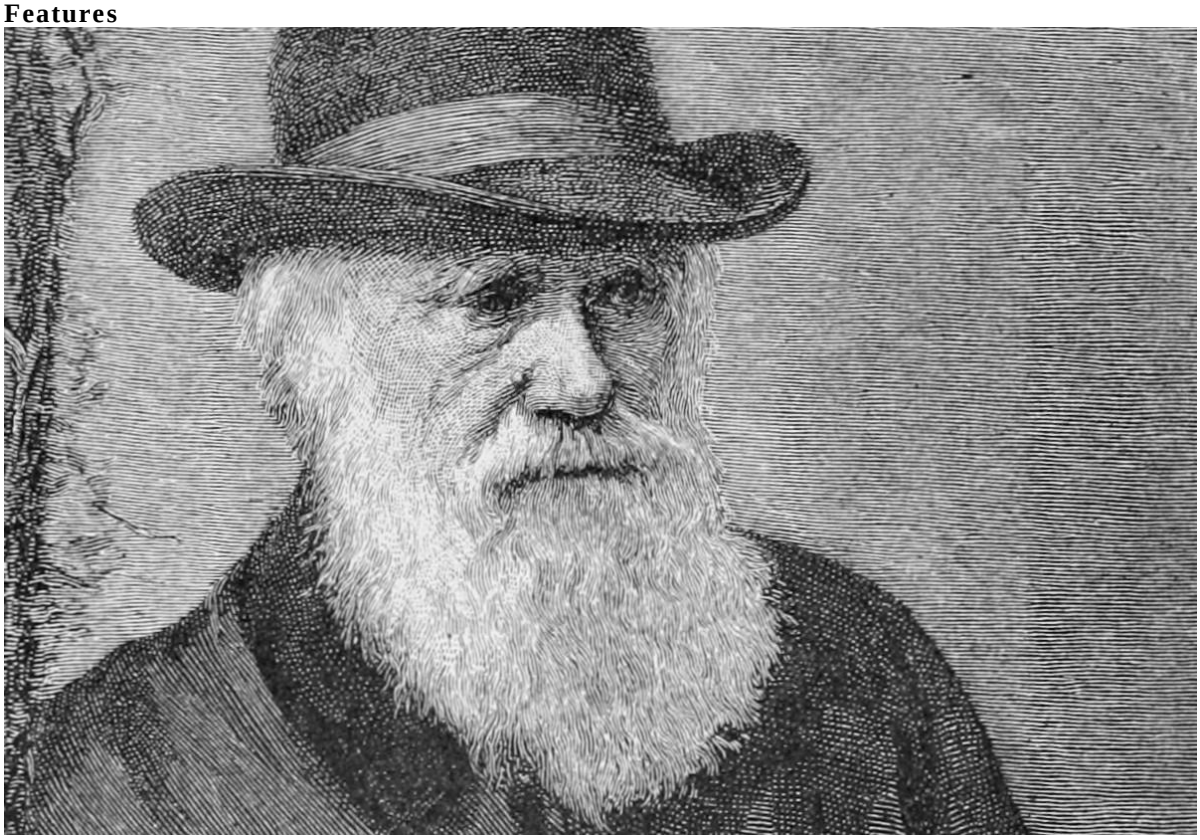


Did Darwin get it wrong?

by Carolyn Moynihan | April 01, 2019

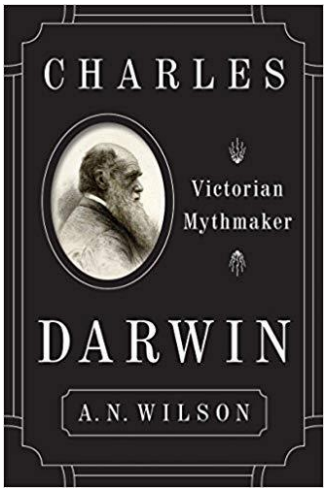
Charles Darwin, via Wikimedia Commons

***Book Review**: Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker, by A. N. Wilson. Harper, December 2017.*

"Darwin was wrong." That is the arresting opening sentence of a recent biography of the man whose name is synonymous with the theory of evolution. Countless unbelievers in Darwinism have said as much, and they are not all Biblical fundamentalists; in fact, the author of *Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker* is neither religious nor anti-evolutionist.

A.N. Wilson, a prolific British author best known for his biographies of prominent Victorians, tells us that he is happy to live in a state of uncertainty about the "why" of life. He even set out to write his book about Darwin assuming that "this Victorian Titan" was right in his theory of evolution: one species evolving vertically from another through incremental changes over eons of time, with natural selection leading to the survival of the fittest.

Wilson regards evolution as a fact. But as he read the recent literature on the subject, he came to understand that "there is no consensus among scientists about the theory of evolution." And although today's Darwinists adhere to the doctrine of natural selection, it has been so heavily revised in the light of modern genetics that, as arch-priest of Darwinism Richard Dawkins once said, Darwin "would scarcely recognise his own theory in it."



His own theory?

This is one of the big themes of Wilson's book. He points out that the scientific concept of evolution had been around for some time when Darwin took it up. His own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was an enthusiast for the idea that all forms of life are related and wrote a long heroic poem about it.

According to Wilson, Charles Darwin shared his distinctive theory with English contemporaries Edward Blyth (somewhat) and Alfred Russel Wallace (almost completely); the idea of species descending from a common parentage may have come first from Blyth, he suggests. And then there was Richard Owen, a critic of natural selection whom Wilson believes has been "forcibly diminished by the Darwinians."

Darwin in his own time, says Wilson, "apparently believed that he had made the subject [of evolution] his and his alone," and in protecting his notion of it he could be ruthless.

Yet, even the idea of natural selection came in a seminal way, not from Darwin's brain but from Thomas Malthus. In his 1798 book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the clergyman economist argued that when food production rose people had more children, but food production could not keep up with the increase, so the poor would tend to succumb to starvation and vice, and social progress would be impeded. Moral restraint regarding procreation was the key to the continuing perfection of society.

Malthus' *Essay* was revised many times; its sixth edition, published in 1826, was acknowledged as an influence by Darwin, of whom Wilson writes:

"The implications of Malthus's book, he would later recall, 'struck me at once'. That is, it was not just the strongest or the most robust who would get ahead in the 'struggle for existence'. Rather, it was those who possessed some particular attribute, or variation, which made them suited to living in a particular environment. Those possessing such attributes got ahead. Those lacking them went to the wall."

Furthermore, it was Herbert Spencer, probably the most famous "philosopher" of the day, who came up with the phrase "survival of the fittest" to describe Darwin's theory -- a tag which Darwin adopted and which stuck.

A 'consolation myth' for Victorian England

And it was all playing out in front of Darwin in his own society. That is the central contention of Wilson's book:

"Darwinism succeeded for precisely the reason that so many critics of religions think that religions succeed. Darwin offered to the emergent Victorian middle classes a consolation myth. He told them that all their getting and spending, all their neglect of their own poor huddled masses, all their greed and selfishness was in fact natural."

Or, as Wilson elaborates elsewhere:

"It was the way things were. The whole of nature, arising from the primeval slime and evolving through its various animal forms from amoebas to the higher primates, was on a journey of improvement, moving onwards

and upwards, from barnacles to shrimps, from fish to fowl, from orang-outangs to silk-hatted Members of Parliament and leaders of British industry. It was all happening without the interference or tiresome conscience-pricking of the Almighty."

The full original title of Darwin's most famous book was, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. "Races" in this case did not refer to humanity but to species in general. However, in his later work, *The Descent of Man*, Darwin could, going by Wilson's account, be taken for a white supremacist, and is quite explicit about the need to discourage the feckless poor from breeding.

His cousin, Francis Galton, picked this up and produced the "science" of eugenics: a system of "more from the fit, fewer from the unfit" famously promoted as "social hygiene" by early family planners, and infamously taken up by the Nazis.

"This seductive idea, the law of competitive struggle for life in which the weak or unadaptive are eliminated, Darwin somewhat reluctantly applied to human beings," says Wilson. "As such, it has done untold mischief in recent history and is still influential today."

Darwin, the Humboldt of the Anglosphere

Wilson sees in Darwin a brilliant naturalist and "unforgettable word painter" who should have stuck to his knitting. Instead, he conceived the idea of becoming a new Alexander Humboldt – "a man who set out to conquer the world with his brain." Darwin thus made a fatal move from observation to theory; he wanted to come up with "a theory of everything."

The sticking point in evolution for the first generation of British scientists who tried to come to terms with the fact of evolution was human kinship with the apes.

(In the 1860 Oxford evolution "debate" – when Darwin's theory was discussed, although he was too ill to be present – Bishop Samuel Wilberforce famously asked Thomas Huxley, "Darwin's Bulldog", on which side of his family he was descended from a monkey. The socially inferior Huxley, however, put "Soapy Sam" in his place by quietly responding that he would not be ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor, but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth. However, this story may more of myth in it than history.)

St. George Jackson Mivart, who first supported Darwin's theory but later rejected its applicability to the human intellect, was one of "thousands of … contemporaries" (Darwin's friend Wallace was another) who maintained that belief in God and a belief in evolution were quite compatible. Wilson shows Darwin correcting and refining his theory in response to their ideas, but only to show, in an anti-theological spirit, that natural processes account for everything, as a disciple like Richard Dawkins does today.

Was Darwin a believer?

Though intended in his youth for Holy Orders and life as a country vicar-naturalist (something that quite appealed to him at the time), Darwin was always cagey about the state of his belief. His devoted wife, Emma, daughter of the famous pottery magnate and noncomformist Josiah Wedgwood, remained a devout believer of Unitarian persuasion, and Darwin's increasing unbelief pained her.

Wilson quotes his posthumously published autobiography thus: "I had gradually come by this time [January 1839, thirty - three years before the final edition of *The Origin of Species*], to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world … was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos , or the beliefs of any barbarian."

And the New Testament? In addition to Emma's plaintive questions to him about Christ's beautiful law of love, Wilson cites a brief note that came up for auction in 2015 and sold for $197,000. It was written by Darwin to a young lawyer, Francis McDermott, who wanted to know plainly what the great man thought about God:

'If I am to have the pleasure of reading your books, I must feel that at the end I shall not have lost my faith in the New Testament. My reason in writing to you is to ask you in writing to give me a Yes or No to the question, Do you believe in the New Testament?'

Darwin wrote back: 'November 24, 1880 – Dear Sir, I am sorry to have to inform you that I do not believe in the Bible as a divine revelation, & therefore not in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Yours faithfully, Charles Darwin'.

Wilson goes onto observe: "Darwin was to be, for many people, during and after his lifetime, the embodiment of the essentially Victorian myth that science had somehow disproved, or invalidated, religion." In spite of that, he was buried in state at Westminster Abbey -- against the wishes of Emma, who stayed home. This, says Wilson, was "a demonstration that, far from being cowed by Darwin's agnosticism, the Establishment was determined to neuter its danger by bestowing on it a laurel crown."

Wilson observes that the majority of Christians today accepts the "fact" of evolution, and believes there is no essential conflict between religious faith and evolution.

Why is Darwin still the hero of evolution?

Darwin knew nothing about genetics, the rediscovery of which revolutionised the theory of evolution last century. His idea of very slow change in species over umpteen millennia has had to concede the evidence that nature does "make leaps". For him, natural selection involved a kind of warfare in which the weak went to the wall, and sociobiology, most famously in Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, has perpetuated this theory in the human sphere; but many scientists today talk about co-operative behaviour in a species.

In his survey of the recent debate among evolutionary scientists and philosophers, A.N. Wilson highlights the row between Richard Dawkins (representing many others) and E. O. Wilson (it seems the field is littered with Wilsons!) when the latter – "the father of sociolobiology" -- discarded "kin [selfish gene] selection" in favour of "multilevel [altruistic group] selection" as the driving force of "fitness". In simple terms this means that individuals who co-operate in groups achieve more and enhance the survival of their group, while selfish individualism does not. Or, as Wilson himself explained: "In a nutshell, individual selection favours what we call sin and group selection favours virtue."

In the light of this history and ongoing debate it is difficult to see why Charles Darwin should remain "the man who discovered evolution", or indeed, as Wilson concludes, why "his idea" of evolution (natural selection) should survive as the white, empire-building class it suited so well dies out. Will it, like other Victorian intellectual fads become a footnote in our intellectual history?

There is much, much more in Wilson's provocative and entertaining book, including sympathetic sketches of the home-loving Darwin's family life. There is the Voyage of the Beagle and Darwin's painstaking research with barnacles and earthworms. In the background is a throng of many familiar figures – and some less familiar – of the age, ranging from Jane Austen to John Henry Newman, from Goethe to George Elliot, from Hume and Kant to Karl Marx and Kipling, and later, Hitler.

Indications are that scientists hate the book. Dr John van Whye, an historian of science and the director of Darwin Online, wrote a short, severe critique for New Scientist and posted an even more damning one on Amazon ("The worst biography of Darwin ever written"), where it sits at the top of 40 others. He accuses Wilson of multiple errors including fundamental misunderstandings of Darwinian theory.

However, since it is the first book on evolution this reviewer has ever read, it sounds very plausible, and is, quite probably, the most readable, up-to-date account of Darwin and his idea that you are likely to come across.

Carolyn Moynihan is deputy editor of MercatorNet.

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