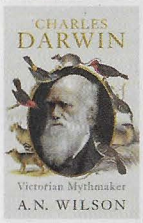
Reduced fact content

Hostile biography of Darwin is deeply flawed, says **John van Wyhe**

Charles Darwin: Victorian mythmaker
by A. N. Wilson, John Murray



A. N. WILSON has written many biographies, his subjects ranging from Queen Victoria to Hitler. His latest, about Charles Darwin, begins with the startling sentence: "Darwin was wrong." Wilson argues that "Darwin offered to the emergent Victorian middle classes a consolation myth... there was something inexorable, natural about their superiority to the working class."

According to Wilson, Darwin told his contemporaries "that their land-grabs in Africa, their hunger for stock-market wealth in the face of widespread urban poverty, their rigid class system and their everlasting wars were not things to be ashamed of, but actually part of the processes of nature". Darwin's theory, Wilson concludes, is just an ersatz religion.

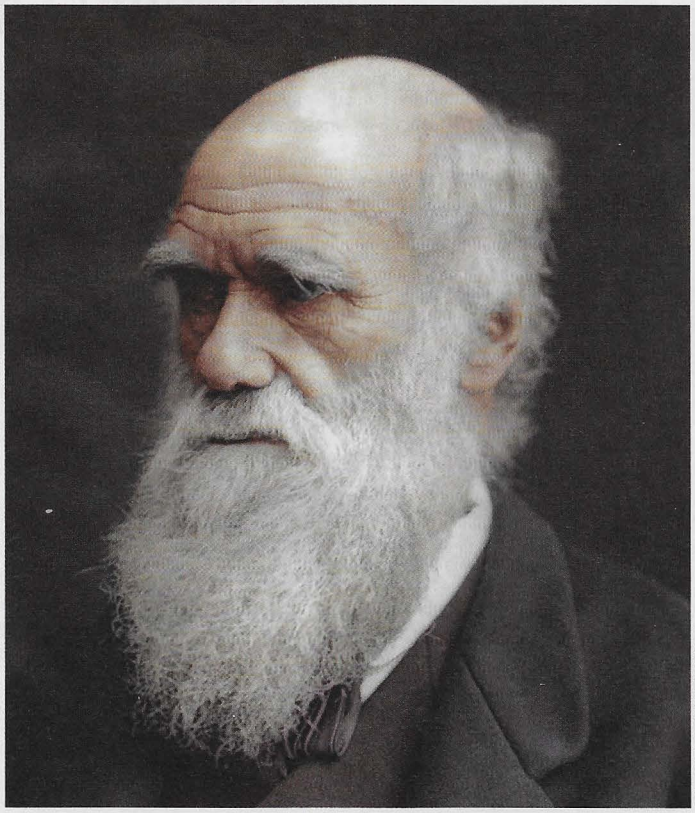
Wilson maintains that Darwin's theory isn't the basis of current knowledge. He thinks Darwinism was about extreme gradualism over geological time. But Darwinian gradualism simply means that one animal can't all of a sudden give birth to a new species. The current view of life on Earth is precisely one of lineages branching from common ancestors. This, and not the speed of change, is the core of Darwin's theory.

The other component of Darwinism, according to Wilson, is "that evolutionary progress happens by conflict". Here is the common misunderstanding that the struggle that occurs because some animals live and some die means conscious fighting.

Darwin's theory, as any competent reference work describes, is about the differential survival of individual living things based on tiny differences between them. This in effect filters living things to become adapted to a changing world. DNA evidence indicates that all living things are related genealogically on a vast ever-branching tree of life. This is Darwinism. Wilson instead erroneously describes variations in "species", not individuals, and he mocks a "Darwinian" scenario in which the short-necked ancestors of today's giraffes were supposedly "panting to reach those leaves, but without success". This is not Darwinism, this is Lamarckism.

Wilson's book contains numerous factual errors, such as "if Darwin were correct, there would be hundreds, thousands of examples" of transitional fossils. There are. Darwin's first grandchild did not die in childbirth as Wilson states. A fragment of Wallace's letter to Darwin from when Wallace was living in Ternate does not survive. "Darwin believed that his own theory... made it impossible to believe in the Bible." Not so. The first 50 pages of Darwin's evolution notebook are not missing. (Wilson copied this claim from a conspiracy-laden essay, "Darwin, Coleridge, and the theory of unconscious creation", published by Loren Eiseley in 1965.) The missing pages were located and published in 1967.

"Wilson invents and condemns a towering ambition Darwin had to be a universal genius"



PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY IMAGES

Painted in a corner: "mythmaker" Charles Darwin

Wilson claims Darwin "never" persuaded the scientific community in Britain during his lifetime "that one species could evolve into another". In fact, Darwin was world famous for having done so. There are very, very many more errors. Footnotes lead to incorrect references and many dates are quite wrong. It's hard to see how any care for either historical or scientific accuracy could result in such a book.

Throughout, Wilson bashes Darwin for supposed arrogance, dishonesty and incompetence, and trots out a long line of old anti-Darwin myths: for example, that Darwin stole ideas from Edward Blyth, whom Wilson mistakes for an evolutionist. Wilson invents and condemns a "towering ambition" Darwin had "to be a universal genius". And eugenics and Nazi race laws are also blamed (incorrectly) on him.

The book claims to be a "radical reappraisal of one of the great Victorians, a book which isn't afraid to challenge the Darwinian orthodoxy". But it is one of the most unreliable, inaccurate and tendentious anti-Darwin books of recent times. ■

John van Wyhe is a historian of science at the National University of Singapore