
THE MANY LIVES OF CHARLES DARWIN: EARLY BIOGRAPHIES AND THE
DEFINITIVE EVOLUTIONIST

by

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This article focuses on the early book-length biographies of Darwin published from his death in 1882 up to 1900. By making 1900 the cutoff point I can examine the biographies produced when the iconic figure was not yet set in stone, and before the rediscovery of Mendel's work in the early twentieth century and the anniversary celebrations of 1909 changed the way in which Darwin was regarded. Darwin's biographers dealt with three major themes. First, several biographers emphasized his scientific abilities, in particular his powers of observation and his prowess in conducting experiments. Second, many biographers discussed his character, a key issue in determining whether or not he could be trusted as a scientific guide. Finally, his scientific theories and religious beliefs, and how they related to the evolutionary controversy, formed a topic taken up by most biographers. By focusing on these three themes, the biographies published before 1900 were important in shaping the image of Darwin that was forming in American and British culture.

Keywords: Darwin; biography; cultural icon

Thanks to the complicated manoeuvring of his friends, Darwin was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey on 26 April 1882. The interment of Darwin at the Abbey, the ultimate social recognition reserved only for national heroes, visibly symbolized the authority of the new leaders of English culture: the professional scientists, liberal politicians and progressive churchmen.¹ The honour of writing the obituary in *Nature* fell to George John Romanes, widely considered Darwin's disciple. Although Romanes praised Darwin's powers of observation, his character was even more important. Biographers, Romanes insisted, would fail in rendering an accurate idea of Darwin's character. Like a 'marvellous work of art', Darwin's nobility had to be seen 'if any description of it is to be understood'. A character this beautiful and grand, Romanes declared, can only be called 'sublime'. The discussion of Darwin's work called attention to his contributions across the sciences, including geology, zoology, botany and psychology. Darwin's greatness as the 'reformer of biology' rested not just on his formulation of the theory of natural selection but also on his 'many years of devoted labour whereby he tested this idea in all conceivable ways—amassing facts from every

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department of science.’² Romanes’s obituary set the reverent tone for many of the biographies to follow over the next 14 years. By emphasizing Darwin’s powers of observation and his sterling character, Romanes’s hagiographical account of Darwin’s life was designed to make his master, and his work, immune from criticism. It was one of the first attempts after Darwin’s death to use biography to construct an iconic image for the evolutionist.

Biography has been important in the creation of a shared identity for scientists, in the justification of the aims and methods of science, and in the evolution of the scientific hero. Cantor has discussed how Faraday was constructed in the public arena through a series of biographies after his death in 1867.³ In her study of Newtonian biographies published between 1820 and 1870, Higgitt has demonstrated how Newton’s reputation was ‘utilized, and altered, by British men of science’ in their attempts to construct a new image of scientific genius.⁴ The large number of biographical studies of Darwin, 10 in all, that appeared in the USA and Britain after his death in 1882 and before the end of the century indicated that he had become just as attractive as a biographical subject as Newton or Faraday.⁵ The Darwin biographies were essential in the establishment of his status as the emblematic scientist after his death.

Janet Browne has explored how Darwin’s public identity was created in the last 20 years of his life, sometimes with his knowing participation. Personal visits to his home were managed to cultivate Darwin’s position as a reclusive gentleman-scientist, above the fray, who was dedicated only to the search for scientific truth. Public photographs, taken with Darwin’s permission, emphasized his generosity, his wisdom and his fatherly qualities. Darwin’s beard, first grown in 1862, allowed Darwin to be portrayed as a prophet.⁶ As Browne asserts, when Darwin died he ‘was popularly regarded as the quintessence of British science, for some a secular saint, for others the epitome of wisdom, respectability and honesty, a man who cautiously and assiduously accumulated a mountain of evidence in order to overturn humanity’s view of itself.’⁷ But this public image of Darwin as the great man had to be maintained by Darwin’s family and friends after his death. It had to be protected and preserved in many of the cultural sites where ordinary people in the late nineteenth century encountered science. As one of the best-known scientists of the period, Darwin was a ubiquitous presence, portrayed in cartoons, songs and many other cultural media.⁸

Scholars have paid little attention to the Darwin biographies from this period. Colp refers to those that were published between 1882 and 1887 as ‘dull and uninformed panegyrics’, and Churchill regards the biographies produced 25 years after Darwin’s death as examples of ‘pop journalism’ that could have benefited from the developing profession of history.⁹ Although deficient as biographical studies, they are valuable sources for understanding the struggle that took place over Darwin’s dead body to define the living Darwin. Because Darwin had tried during his life to avoid the public eye, and because no collection of his letters had been published while he was alive to shed light on his private life, he was something of a mystery to the public. As Janet Browne has observed, ‘in Darwin’s case, his death allowed a relatively free hand to his image-makers and disciples.’¹⁰ There was intense interest in Darwin’s private life and personal beliefs, because an understanding of them was considered to be crucial to an understanding of the larger meaning of Darwin’s evolutionary theories.

Immediately after Darwin’s death in 1882 a rush of obituary notices and biographical sketches appeared in the periodical press. In this article I focus on the book-length

biographies published from Darwin's death until 1900. By making 1900 the cutoff point I can examine the early biographies produced in the first 18 years after Darwin's demise, when the iconic figure was not yet set in stone, and before the rediscovery of Mendel's work in the early twentieth century and the anniversary celebrations of 1909 changed the way in which Darwin was regarded. The biographies fall into two chronological groups separated by one key work. The first set of biographies, four in all, came out within five years of Darwin's death. *Life and Work of Charles Darwin* (1883) by the entomologist Louis Compton Miall (1842–1921), and *The Life of Charles Darwin with British Opinion on Evolution* (1883), by George Washington Bacon (1830/31–1922), a map publisher, were among the first. *Charles Darwin* (1885), by the popularizer of science Grant Allen (1848–99), followed soon after. In 1887 a fourth biography appeared, entitled *Life of Charles Darwin*. The author was the anthropologist and historian George Thomas Bettany (1850–91).

Francis Darwin's pivotal three-volume *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (1887) separates the first and second group of biographies. It included an edited version of an autobiography written in 1876 by Darwin for his children, Francis's reminiscences of his father's daily routine, and many hitherto unpublished letters. In this work Francis Darwin (1848–1925) attempted to perpetuate the image that his father had helped to construct during his own lifetime. However, five biographies appeared between 1888 and 1900 that challenged his conception of the relationship between his father's life and the meaning of his theories. Some of the biographies in this second group were written for children, such as *Truth for Its Own Sake: The Story of Charles Darwin Written for Young People* (1889), by the editor of a natural history periodical, Walter Mawer, and *Charles Darwin: His Life and Work* (1891), by the naturalist, sportsman and museum curator Charles Frederick Holder (1851–1915). However, Darwin biographers aimed their work at other audiences as well. Earnest Albert Parkyn's *Darwin; His Work and Influence* (1894) was based on a lecture delivered to extension students in the Hall of Christ's College, whereas *Darwinianism: Workmen and Work* (1894), by the Scottish philosopher James Hutchison Stirling (1820–1909), and *Charles Darwin and the Theory of Natural Selection* (1896), by the zoologist Edward Bagnall Poulton (1856–1943), were intended for a sophisticated adult audience.

Darwin's biographers dealt with three major themes. First, several biographers emphasized his scientific abilities, in particular his powers of observation and his prowess in conducting experiments. Second, many biographers discussed his character, a key issue in determining whether or not he could be trusted as a scientific guide. Finally, his scientific theories and religious beliefs, and how they related to the evolutionary controversy, was a topic taken up by most biographers. By focusing on these three themes, the biographies published before 1900 were important in shaping the iconic image of Darwin that was forming in American and British culture.

DARWIN THE SCIENTIST

A new scientific persona was created in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which was reflected in the biographies written about eminent scientists. The flashes of genius attributed to romantic figures were replaced by biographies focusing on the slow, painstaking work of scientific investigation. Insight into the workings of nature came only after the scientist was

willing to sacrifice the self and adopt a rigorous objectivity.¹¹ In the years after the publication of *Origin of Species*, Darwin tried to cultivate a public image of himself that contributed to the development of the Victorian scientific ‘persona’ as an impartial figure, who industriously followed the evidence to its logical conclusion.¹² This was certainly the picture that his son, Francis, attempted to draw for his readers in his biography. It resonated with the ideal of the professional scientist promulgated by T. H. Huxley and the other evolutionary naturalists who had defended Darwin. Other biographers presented a different portrait of Darwin as scientist. They agreed that he was a great scientist. However, for them Darwin was the consummate natural historian. To Huxley and his professionalizing allies, the concept of the natural historian was part of an older, obsolete scientific tradition that sought insight into the order of nature from a religious perspective, often grounded on natural theology. Natural history also mixed up the study of living beings with geology and mineralogy. Huxley fought to replace the natural historian with the biologist. The biologist specialized in the study of the structure and function of plants and animals from a secular perspective.¹³

Francis wrote the most important late nineteenth-century Darwin biography. During the last eight years of Darwin’s life, Francis had been his father’s assistant, helping him with his botanical experiments. After his father’s death he continued his investigations in plant physiology, and in 1884 he was appointed a university lecturer in botany at Cambridge. But he also set to work on a large biography of his father. The inclusion of the letters gave it an authority that no previous biography would have had. Both Darwin’s friends and the Victorian periodicals praised the biography because it presented a wealth of new material and gave the impression of being almost complete. Although the three volumes were costly at 36 shillings in total, 5000 had been sold within a year, and the book reached a sixth edition by 1902.¹⁴ *Life and Letters* became the definitive Darwin biography for at least seven decades and it established key elements of an iconic image for the evolutionist that has survived to this day.¹⁵

The life and letters format was an important biographical genre in this period. It was widely believed that an individual’s life could be narrated most authentically through the reproduction of large portions of his or her correspondence and other personal papers.¹⁶ One of Francis’s main goals was to show that his father used meticulous research methods in his work. In his reminiscences Francis described his father as a patient experimenter who displayed ‘doggedness’ when at work. ‘Perseverance’, Francis affirmed, ‘seems hardly to express his almost fierce desire to force the truth to reveal itself.’¹⁷ In Francis’s hands, his father became the scientific cousin of the busy, productive, self-made nineteenth-century man in the tradition of Samuel Smiles.¹⁸ Francis’s emphasis on Darwin as the hard-working experimentalist depicted his father as being in tune with the research methods of the modern professional scientist, at least as conceived by Thomas Henry Huxley, John Tyndall and the other scientific naturalists. In the rest of *Life and Letters* Francis tells the story of how his father developed the theory of natural selection, how it was received, and how Darwin’s subsequent research provided further proof for evolution. The carefully selected letters confirm the picture of Darwin conveyed by Francis in his reminiscences. In the opening chapters of volume 2, Francis is able to explain why his father ended up with his theory of natural selection, by following the stages of Darwin’s thinking. The letters reveal how Darwin wrestled honestly with the difficulties he encountered and how he consulted widely with scientific colleagues.

But Darwin was not just portrayed in biographies as a careful experimentalist in line with the ideal of the professional scientist. He was also depicted as the supreme natural historian—as a representative of an older image of the scientist. Darwin appeared in this guise in biographies written for children. Presenting Darwin as the quintessential natural historian made him a familiar scientific figure, less intimidating for young readers and more acceptable to parents. Rather than focusing on Darwin's abilities as an experimenter, this picture of him stressed his powers of observation, particularly in the field. The need to develop the ability to see nature clearly had been a prevalent theme in children's literature since the late eighteenth century. Popularizers of science who wrote for children in the middle and late nineteenth century, including Phoebe Lankester, Jane Loudon and Charles Kingsley, still remembered the story 'Eyes and no eyes' from John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's *Evenings at Home* (1792–96). This well-known story taught young readers to look closely at the world instead of living life with open but unseeing eyes.¹⁹ For many biographers Darwin was the observer *par excellence* who taught his readers how to see nature for the first time.

One author who adopted the strategy of emphasizing Darwin's powers of observation wrote a book for young readers just before Darwin's death. Published anonymously in 1879, *What Mr. Darwin Saw in His Voyages Round the World in the Ship 'Beagle'* made evolutionary theory safe for children by focusing on the Darwin of the *Beagle* voyage (figure 1). Published in New York by Harper, it reached a third edition by 1904. The author was Wendell Phillips Garrison (1840–1907), literary editor of the *Nation* from 1865 to 1906 and son of William Lloyd Garrison, the famous abolitionist. The book was composed primarily of excerpts from Darwin's *Journal*, rearranged into a thematic form that mimicked the traditional natural history book for children. There were sections on animals, man, geography and nature (figure 2). The natural history format made Darwin appealing rather than intimidating. Garrison also included a preface just for children, in which he highlighted Darwin's powers of observation, the quality most valued in a natural historian. Drawing on the young audience's familiarity with the themes of blindness and sight from the classic story 'Eyes and no eyes', Garrison wrote, 'everybody has eyes, but, as you know, some people are blind', and even 'those whose eyes are good and strong do not all see alike.' Garrison told his young readers that those 'who know the most' are those who 'see best'. Darwin therefore was quite knowledgeable as he was 'one of the best seers that ever lived, partly because he had learned so well what to look for, and partly because nothing escaped his eyes.' Because of Darwin, 'now all the world looks at things differently from what it used to before he showed it how.' By reading Garrison's book, based on Darwin's writings, the reader would learn to see how Darwin 'saw things'.²⁰

In his biographical *Charles Darwin: His Life and Work*, written for a youthful audience, Charles Frederick Holder expressed his debt to Francis Darwin's biography, which was 'the only work extant giving fully the life and letters of the naturalist.' Yet he adopted Garrison's strategy of emphasizing the *Beagle* voyage and Darwin as observer *par excellence*. A naturalist and a sportsman, Holder was assistant curator of zoology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York from 1871 to 1875, and later, in 1885, professor of zoology at the Throop Institute, now the California Institute of Technology. He wrote a dozen books and scores of magazine articles on the animal world, especially the wildlife of southern California, and a biography of Louis Agassiz. It is important to note that Holder was a Quaker. Published in New York and London by G. P. Putnam's Sons, the

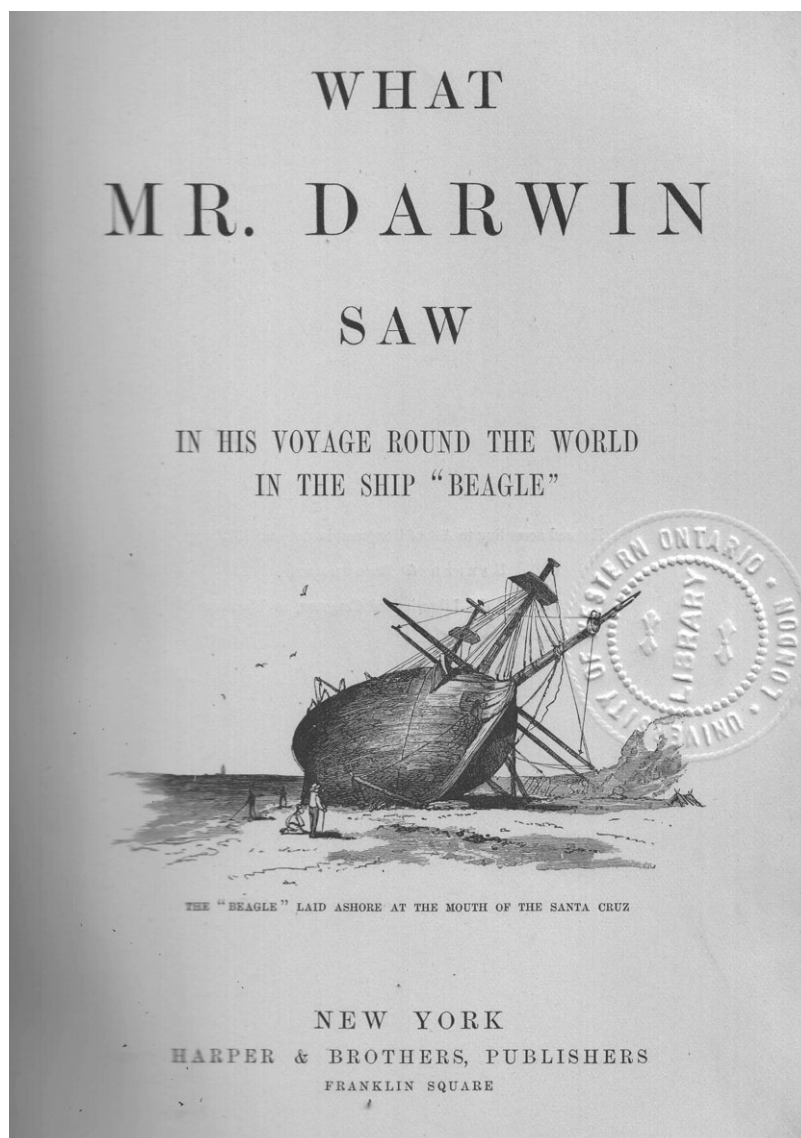


Figure 1. The frontispiece to Garrison's anonymously published book on Darwin's *Beagle* voyage.⁶⁴

biography was intended for both American and English readers. Priced at 7s.6d., it had a limited circulation, reaching a second edition. Holder decided to write the book for a young audience because 'it has always seemed to me that the life of Charles Darwin was one eminently fitted to be held up as an example to the youth of all lands.' Darwin's life story was a good example for the young because he was one of the greatest naturalists of the age and he had led a 'life of singular purity; the life of a man who, in loftiness of

THE CORMORANT—THE PENGUIN.

65

FALKLAND ISLANDS.

sometimes changing its color; it thus proceeded till, having gained a deeper part, it darted away, leaving a dusky train of ink to hide the hole into which it had crawled. While looking for marine animals, with my head about two feet above the rocky shore, I was more than once saluted by a jet of water, accompanied by a slight grating noise. At first I could not think what it was, but afterward I found out that it was this cuttle-fish, which, though concealed in a hole, thus often led me to its discovery. From the difficulty which these animals have in carrying their heads, they cannot crawl with ease when placed on the ground.

THE CORMORANT—THE PENGUIN.

ONE day, in the Falkland islands, I observed a cormorant playing with a fish which it had caught. Eight times successively the bird let its prey go, then dived after it, and although in deep water, brought it each time to the surface. In the Zoölogical Gardens I have seen the otter treat a fish in the same manner, much as a cat does a mouse: I do not know of any other instance where Dame Nature seems so intentionally cruel. Another day, having placed myself between a penguin (*Aptenodytes demersa*) and the water,



THE CORMORANT.

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Figure 2. Darwin's *Journal of Researches* repackaged as a natural history book for children.⁶⁵

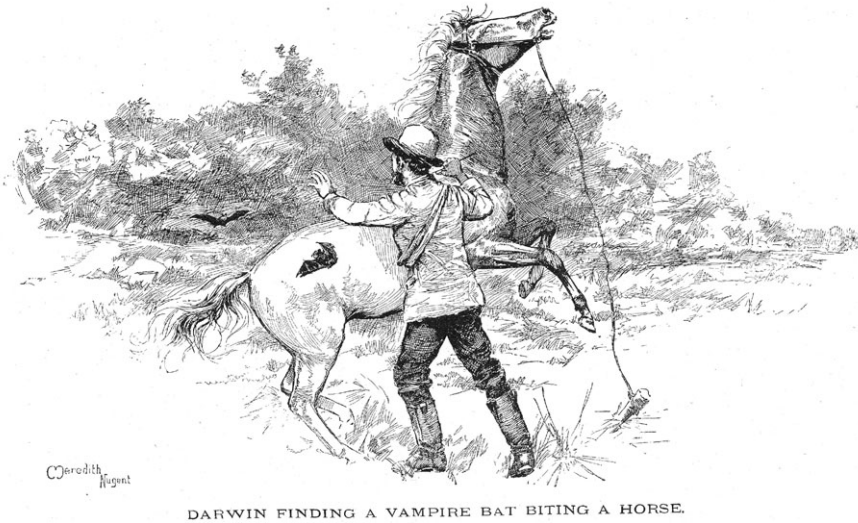
purpose and the accomplishment of grand results, was the centre of observation in his time; revered and honored, yet maligned and attacked as few have been.²¹

Holder portrayed Darwin as a natural historian (figure 3). He discussed Darwin's 'love of natural history' as a boy and student at Edinburgh. Whereas only two of the thirty chapters in Francis Darwin's biography focused on the *Beagle* voyage, Holder devoted ten of the twenty chapters to the same subject in his study of Darwin. Holder went into detail on Darwin's study of geological phenomena, his examination of the diverse zoology of South America, his interaction with the people of South America, and his power of close observation in the field. 'Nothing escaped his watchful eye,' Holder declared. Darwin applied his observational skills throughout the entire voyage. 'In following our hero on his long voyage,' Holder wrote, 'the reader cannot fail to be impressed with two things; his



Figure 3. 'Darwin and the Squirrels': Darwin depicted as a natural historian in one of the illustrations in Holder's biography. Although Darwin has great powers of observation, he is so at one with nature that he is oblivious to the squirrels climbing up his legs and back.⁶⁶

remarkable powers of observation, and the care and patience with which he made his investigations.' In the preface, Holder declared that one of the central aims of the biography was to enable his readers 'to observe the things which he saw, believing that in this way the remarkable traits of the man as an observer and thinker can be best and most forcibly shown.' But Darwin's ability to see to the heart of things did not prevent him from being a man of action. Holder's Darwin is an adventurer who faces many dangers while on the *Beagle* voyage (figure 4). This dovetails nicely with a discussion of the post-*Beagle* Darwin as an adventurous 'working naturalist' who was 'a model of exactness, patience and perseverance' although 'his daily life was a constant fight against



DARWIN FINDING A VAMPIRE BAT BITING A HORSE.

Figure 4. Darwin bravely swatting bats away from his frightened horse while on the *Beagle* voyage.⁶⁷

suffering.’²² Holder’s adventurous, observant natural historian has little in common with Francis Darwin’s patient experimentalist, who is closer to the professional scientist championed by T. H. Huxley and the other evolutionary naturalists. Nor did Holder’s swashbuckling Darwin tally with the public photographs that portrayed him as pure mind.

In *Charles Darwin and the Theory of Natural Selection*, the last of the biographies to be published before 1900, Poulton challenged the picture of Darwin as natural historian. Sold for 3s.6d. by Cassell, the book reached a second edition in 1900.²³ When the book appeared in 1896 Poulton was Hope Professor of Zoology at Oxford University. Poulton argued for the importance of natural selection as the main mechanism of evolution, and he rejected neo-Lamarckism.²⁴ Although Poulton referred to *Life and Letters* as ‘great’, he modified Francis’s picture of his father as scientist. Instead of presenting Darwin as the experimentalist, or as the observer, Poulton’s account emphasized Darwin as discoverer. ‘Powers of observation, however acute,’ Poulton declared, ‘could never make a scientific discoverer; for discovery requires the creative effort of the imagination.’ Poulton’s biography contained only one chapter, out of twenty-six, on the *Beagle* voyage. The biography focused on the gradual development of the theory of natural selection in Darwin’s mind. This process of discovery involved a ‘long succession of experiments and observations before he could bring himself to publish anything upon the subject.’ In effect, Poulton combined the emphasis on observation and experiment adopted by previous biographers. He acknowledged in the preface that he had consulted many works on Darwin, and that they dealt with ‘the many sides of Darwin’s life and work.’ But, like Francis, Poulton’s Darwin was the professional scientist whose intimate friendships with Henslow, Lyell, Hooker and Huxley had to be taken into account in any attempt to trace his mental development.²⁵

Francis Darwin, Holder and Poulton presented different pictures of what made Darwin a great scientist. Francis characterized Darwin as the patient experimenter; Holder depicted

him as the discriminating observer; and Poulton portrayed him as the imaginative discoverer. The first and the last were in line with the scientific persona championed by the evolutionary naturalists. Given that Francis and Poulton were sympathetic to the goals of evolutionary naturalism, this comes as no surprise. However, Holder's image of Darwin as natural historian seems unexpected, because it points to a second scientific persona, perhaps in competition with the patient worker. But Holder's Darwin was intended specifically for an audience of young readers. The two Darwins coexisted in harmony; each could be brought to the fore depending on which audience the biographer was addressing. In the end, Darwin's early biographers established the enduring tradition of treating the evolutionist's life as one of the most important embodiments of the modern scientist.

DARWIN THE MAN

Though Darwin's biographers did not always agree on where to place the evolutionist as a scientist, they were agreed on how to describe his character. With one exception, the biographies up to 1900 were overwhelmingly positive in their depiction of Darwin as a great man, a moral exemplar and a secular saint. Holder's treatment of Darwin in his biography was revealing. He explicitly referred to Darwin as a 'hero'. On the second page of the book he began his account of Darwin's childhood with the phrase 'our hero was born'. Later, in his chapters on the *Beagle* adventure, he told his readers that they are 'following our hero on his long voyage'. Throughout the book Holder emphasized Darwin's sterling personal qualities in addition to his powers of observation. Holder presented Darwin as a devoted family man, 'indulgent and kind, tender and sympathetic' to his children. He was equally moral in his dealings with others. Darwin was 'honourable in the smallest things in life, thoughtful of others, doing as he would be done by, sensitive to others to an extreme that was often injustice to himself, kind, lovable, ready to help the young, charitable, and possessed of extreme modesty.' Darwin was actually 'a hero of heroes, a model for all men'.²⁶ Holder's biography was thinly veiled hagiography. It was modelled on biographies of religious saints to counteract the widespread assumption that only Christians could be morally virtuous.

The ideal of character enjoyed a particular prominence in Victorian culture. It was especially crucial for biographers. Altick has asserted that the nineteenth-century biographer 'dedicated himself not merely to honouring a luminous memory, but also to turning his subject's character and achievements into an *exemplum*.'²⁷ Biography in the mid and late nineteenth century was based largely on the assumption that a familiarity with the lives of outstanding individuals tended to have an inspirational effect—a morally elevating impact—on readers. The notion that a model biography led to the development of character was embedded in the 'English Men of Letters' series launched by Macmillan under the general editorship of John Morley in 1877. The success of this series led to the establishment of many imitators over the next few decades, such as Longman's 'English Worthies', Scott's 'Great Writers' and, later on, Hodder's 'Literary Lives'.²⁸ Bettany's *Life of Charles Darwin* was in fact part of Scott's 'Great Writers' series. However, the other biographies of Darwin could just as easily have appeared in similar series given their concern with Darwin's character.

Emphasizing Darwin's high moral character in biographies was essential in view of the tactics of his opponents, in particular Christian critics who had religious and ethical

objections to evolutionary theory. From the late 1860s to the mid 1890s the chief strategy for damaging the respectability of evolutionary naturalism was to link it with the supposed immorality of *avant garde* art and literature, and in particular aestheticism. Some detractors complained that Darwin's seeming obsession with sex in the *Descent* made it suitable reading material for only the worldliest gentlemen.²⁹ Even a former ally and committed evolutionist, Samuel Butler, attacked Darwin publicly for morally unacceptable behaviour. In a letter to the *Athenaeum* in 1880 he demanded an apology when Darwin wrote a preface to a book that ridiculed Butler's evolutionary views while plagiarizing material from one of Butler's books.³⁰ After Darwin's death, Butler, in his *Luck, or Cunning?* (1886), also charged that Darwin had attempted to conceal the contributions of other evolutionists to boost his own claims to originality.³¹ It was therefore crucial for Darwin's biographers—at least those sympathetic to him and his theory—to depict him as a saintly paragon of moral virtue.

Several of the early biographies, for example those by Miall and Bettany, were hagiographical works. Miall, an entomologist, was appointed in 1876 as the first professor of biology at Yorkshire College, a position he continued to hold at the University of Leeds until he retired in 1907. Miall had some connections to the Darwinians. In the late 1860s, when he brought to light a new fossil discovery in a coalmine, he became acquainted with Huxley.³² Miall was attracted to natural history and penned several books for a popular audience, including *Object Lessons from Nature: A First Book of Science* (1893) and *Natural History of Aquatic Insects* (1903). Priced at 1s.6d., there was only one edition of his *Life and Work of Charles Darwin*. Miall referred to Darwin's 'quiet domestic happiness,' and to a man who was 'always kindly and sympathetic' though he was absorbed in 'great undertakings'. Miall praised Darwin's character, claiming that among the famous 'there is no record of a truer, or simpler, or nobler nature than his.'³³

George Thomas Bettany's *Life of Charles Darwin*, like Miall's biographical study, was hagiographical. It went through three editions and was priced at 2s.6d. Bettany, an anthropologist and historian, wrote primers on botany and zoology, a small biography of Thomas Malthus, and books on world religions, popular history, and medicine.³⁴ Bettany's Darwin was a great man, who 'revolutionised' the 'whole current of thinking men's mental life'. Darwin's achievements transcended his 'advantages of ancestry, surroundings, previous suggestion, position'. They were a result of his many positive personal qualities and scientific abilities. Darwin was 'a genius of rare simplicity of soul, of unwearied patience of observation, of striking fertility and ingenuity of method, of unflinching devotion to and belief in the efficacy of truth'. It was hard to know what Darwin really owed to his predecessors because of his 'exceeding modesty'. Bettany, like Miall, praised Darwin for being a good family man. Bettany closed his book by describing Darwin as a 'noble and beloved man'.³⁵

Like Holder, Miall and Bettany, Walter Mawer presented Darwin as a great man of upstanding character. Editor of *Life-Lore*, a short-lived natural history periodical of the late 1880s for boys, Mawer was also the author of a primer on micro-petrology and an elementary textbook of physiography. Mawer had links to secularism, having written a book for the Freethought Publishing Company.³⁶ Although it sold for 1s.6d., there was only one edition of Mawer's *Truth for Its Own Sake*. Mawer's Darwin possessed the nobility of a saint. Little did Darwin's parents know when he was born that he 'was destined to become the most illustrious of the good and noble since Jesus and Socrates'. Seeking to inspire his youthful readers, Mawer emphasized Darwin's honest search for

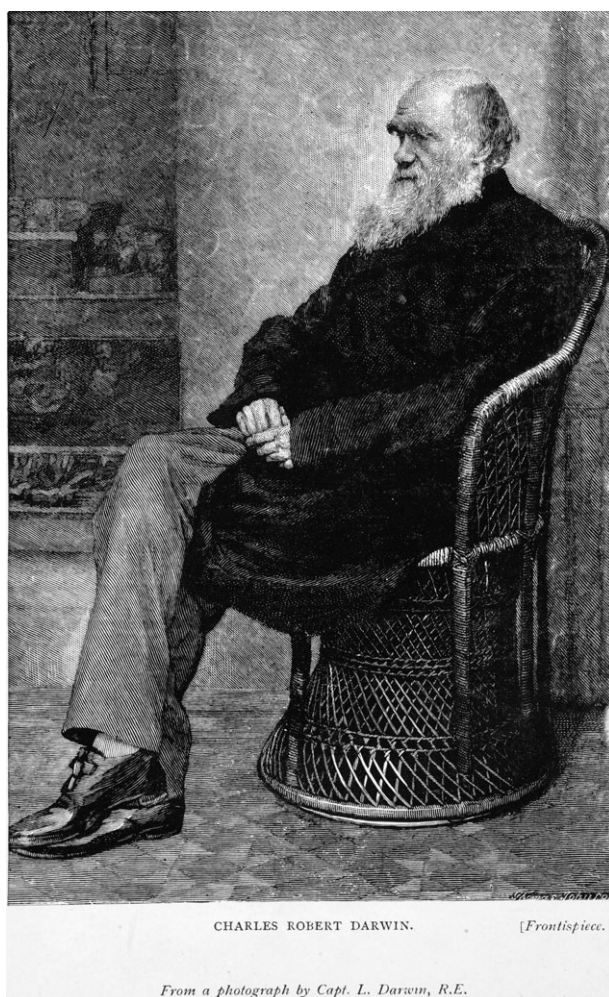


Figure 5. Darwin as the respectable, saintly unbeliever.⁶⁸ This is the same picture that Francis Darwin had used for the frontispiece of the second volume of *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. (Reproduced courtesy of the British Library. © The British Library Board. 10854.b.31.)

scientific truth, wherever it led him. ‘He was to give to the world’, Mawer declared, ‘an example of patient perseverance in the search for truth such as mankind had never seen.’ Mawer outlined the obstacles that Darwin encountered in his heroic quest for truth. Darwin had to struggle to keep his love of nature alive when he was subjected to classical training at Dr Butler’s grammar school in Shrewsbury, to the deadening medical education at Edinburgh, and to the discipline of college life at Cambridge. Nature herself, a “kind muse” coaxed him onward’. Darwin’s encounters with nature instilled moral qualities in him, as they imbued him with ‘meekness and veneration’. Mawer pointed to proofs of Darwin’s lofty moral stature in his anti-slavery sentiments and in the way in which he was loved by his family and servants (figure 5).³⁷

But it was Francis Darwin who was the most concerned with presenting his father's character in the best possible light. *Life and Letters* can be read as an expression of filial devotion. In his 'Reminiscences of My Father's Everyday Life', chapter 3 of the first volume, Francis discussed his father's kindness towards his children, his politeness towards the servants, and the courteous fashion in which he treated the villagers of Down. Like other biographers, he also pointed to Darwin's modesty in his reminiscences.³⁸ But the letters were also selected with a view to demonstrating Darwin's sterling personal qualities. In the preface, Francis acknowledged that 'in choosing letters for publication I have been largely guided by the wish to illustrate my father's personal character.'³⁹

Although James Hutchison Stirling acknowledged a special obligation to Francis Darwin's *Life and Letters*, his biography was anything but hagiographical.⁴⁰ It was the only biography in that period that raised questions about Darwin's moral character. Stirling was a deeply religious Scottish philosopher, and a great admirer of Thomas Carlyle and modern German thought. His first book, *The Secret of Hegel* (1865), proved to be his most widely read. Unable to obtain a chair in philosophy, he was never more than a marginal intellectual figure. *Darwinianism* was priced beyond the range of many members of a mass reading audience at 10s.6d. It reached but one edition. When Stirling discussed Darwin's boyhood, he described in detail his love of causing excitement, even if it meant telling a lie. Stirling maintained that Darwin had never grown out of his childish desire to excite. Darwin was still an 'arch little rogue'. Like previous biographers, Stirling drew a careful distinction between the early Darwin of the *Beagle* and the later Darwin of Down. However, instead of using the early Darwin to help readers accept the later Darwin, Stirling played the two Darwins against each other. Whereas in his *Journal of Researches* on the *Beagle* voyage Darwin had demonstrated his skills as a careful observer and good scientist, in *Origin* Darwin had mischievously presented his daring theory of natural selection based merely on a 'compilation' of facts collected from others.⁴¹

Character was a central concern for Darwin's biographers. For the overwhelming majority of biographers, Darwin was a great man, akin to a religious saint, not just a great scientist. Holder, Miall, Bettany, Mawer and Francis Darwin all stressed his moral qualities, as illustrated in his relationship to members of his family, his servants, his friends and even his enemies. Darwin was a paragon not just for adults but also for children. In arguing that Darwin's moral purity was unusual, these biographers were also arguing for the validity of his theories. His high personal moral standards were reflected in his honest search for truth, wherever it took him. The hagiographical nature of many of the biographies offer persuasive proof that the attacks of Samuel Butler, and those who wished to link Darwin to aestheticism, did not have much traction, despite Stirling's attempt to raise questions about Darwin's reputation.

DARWIN THE EVOLUTIONIST

Although Darwin's name was 'familiar wherever civilization has spread', and although he was 'the greatest naturalist, if not the most eminent man of the century', George Washington Bacon believed that the 'real nature and value of his work, and the simple dignity of his life, were known only to the cultured few.' In his *Life of Charles Darwin*, among the earliest of the Darwin biographies, Bacon attempted to remedy this 'want'

until 'the issue of an authoritative biography'.⁴² Elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1896, Bacon's shop on the Strand was well known for its maps and atlases.⁴³ Bacon dealt with both Darwin as a scientist and as a human being. Darwin's 'phenomenal genius as a scientific observer', Bacon declared, was evident throughout *Naturalist's Voyage Round the World*, and 'the beauty of his character' charmed Darwin's friends. Bacon emphasized his honesty and his kindness. Bacon brought his estimation of Darwin's powers of observation and his sterling character to bear on discussions of the controversies surrounding Darwin's evolutionary theory. To Bacon, Darwin's hypothesis had established itself as 'one of the accepted generalizations of science'. Bacon also denied that Darwin's theory diminished the 'sublimity of Creation' or that it degraded humanity.⁴⁴ For biographers, discussions of Darwin's scientific abilities and his character were inextricably linked to controversial issues surrounding his evolutionary theory and his own religious views.

Many biographers either glossed over Darwin's theory of natural selection or downplayed its provocative implications. For Miall, it was the notion of evolution in general that had been proved by Darwin, not his specific explanation of how evolution operated. Having de-emphasized the theory of natural selection, Miall could now argue that evolution was not directionless. Although he asserted that 'Natural Theology went out of fashion', he argued that 'teleology, but without its theological inferences, came to the front once more'.⁴⁵ Parkyn's *Darwin; His Work and Influence*, published by Methuen & Co., also portrayed Darwin's evolutionary theory as teleological.⁴⁶ Parkyn, a scholar at Christ's College, Cambridge, wrote on a variety of topics, including human physiology, prehistoric art, and the movement of plants. Hagiographic like many of the other biographies, Parkyn's book included a discussion of natural selection, which pointed out that Darwin did not ignore 'the influences first insisted on by Lamarck'. When he began discussing human evolution, Parkyn emphasized the progressive nature of the process. According to Parkyn, the 'ultimate goal of Evolution' is advancing the human race towards 'perfection'.⁴⁷

Like Parkyn's biography, Grant Allen's *Charles Darwin* presented the evolutionist in a favourable light while downplaying the importance of the theory of natural selection. Somewhat more successful than Parkyn's biography, Allen's book reached a third edition by 1888.⁴⁸ Allen had been on excellent terms with Darwin. They began corresponding in the late 1870s when Allen was trying to establish himself as a scientific writer. Encouraged by Darwin, Allen drew on Darwin's botanical works to promote an evolutionary botany and physiological aesthetics.⁴⁹ However, for Allen the most important evolutionary naturalist was Herbert Spencer, and Allen's preference for Spencerian evolution is obvious. In the pages of a book purporting to celebrate Darwin's achievements, Spencer's progressive, cosmic evolution supersedes Darwin's random process of natural selection.⁵⁰

One biographer went even further than Miall, Parkyn and Allen. Bettany maintained that Darwin's theory provided support for the natural theology tradition. When he discussed the implications of Darwin's theory for religion, Bettany denied that Darwin had done away with teleology and purpose. He pointed out that some evolutionists were Christians. 'Let those who think that his having expressed these views is a regrettable blow to orthodox Christianity', Bettany asserted, 'set against it the enormous service Darwin did to reasonable natural theology by giving an intelligible key to the explanation of the universe'.⁵¹ By contrast, Poulton's biography was designed to counter treatments of Darwin that downplayed the importance of natural selection. Darwin's life was considered

in relation to ‘the great central discovery of Natural Selection and its exposition in the “Origin of Species”.’ Poulton criticized scientists, including Darwin’s friends Huxley and Gray, who had not accepted the theory of natural selection and its larger implications. The common and coarser form of teleology embedded in natural theology, and embraced by Gray, had to be replaced with a wider teleology stressing how the whole world was the result of mutual interaction according to definite laws of nature, including the law of evolution.⁵²

Biographers also examined Darwin’s personal religious beliefs, at times linking them to the issue of the validity of Darwin’s theories. Francis dealt with Darwin and religion in chapter 3 of the first volume, entitled ‘Religion’. Here Francis quoted from a letter of 1879 in which his father designated his position as being ‘agnostic’ while rejecting Edward Aveling’s attempt to coopt his father for atheistical secularism in his *Religious Views of Charles Darwin* (1883). Francis also included a revealing passage by Darwin in which he asserted that he was a theist when he wrote the *Origin*, but afterwards moved in the direction of agnosticism. The now well-known key section linked Darwin’s views on human evolution to his agnostic position. After 1859, when Darwin thought about the notion of a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man, a concept on which natural theology was based, Darwin was beset by an evolutionary scepticism. ‘But then arises the doubt,’ Darwin wrote, ‘can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animals be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions?’⁵³ In his treatment of his father’s private religious beliefs, an issue that had been speculated on ever since *Origin of Species* appeared, Francis sought to present a definitive picture of the evolutionist as holding to religious views that were respectable, although not orthodox.⁵⁴

Francis’s portrayal of his father as the reputable agnostic was a well-considered one, particularly because his handling of this issue in *Life and Letters* had threatened to split the Darwin family. The family was anxious to protect Darwin’s public image as the respectable parish naturalist.⁵⁵ Disagreement within the family centred on the section on religious belief in the autobiography. Francis wanted to publish the autobiography in its entirety, but when the family read the first proofs in 1885, some members wanted certain passages to be excised, or even the whole section on religion omitted. At one point, Emma dreaded giving it ‘to the world’. She believed that some passages would be painful for religious people to read. ‘I still think that nothing will be gained’, Emma wrote to one of her children, ‘and much lost by its publication and I shrink much for you for all that it will bring upon you.’⁵⁶ A compromise was struck by the middle of 1885. The section on religious belief was separated from the rest of the autobiography and given its own chapter. Only extracts were printed.⁵⁷ After the appearance of the first reviews of Francis’s biography, William Darwin wrote to his mother Emma that worries about the damage to Charles’s reputation could be laid to rest. Even the *Record*, an aggressively evangelical periodical, had responded positively to *Life and Letters*. ‘Have you seen the article in the “Record”? It is a remarkable article from its tone of respect and appreciation.’ The *Record*, William admitted, was ‘one of the few papers that I thought perhaps might be unpleasant.’ Now that ‘the bulk of the reviews are out,’ William told his mother, ‘you can get rid of any anxiety as to anything disagreeable appearing.’⁵⁸

But Francis’s careful efforts to demonstrate that his father was a respectable agnostic were challenged by Mawer, Stirling and Holder, whose biographies were subsequently published. Mawer’s Darwin was more radical than Francis’s. Darwin’s quest for scientific truth taught

him that the doctrines of orthodoxy were false. Although Mawer never analysed the theory of natural selection in detail, he described Darwin's evolutionary theory as disproving the orthodox idea that God created things as they are now. However, Mawer handled Darwin's questioning of traditional Christian truths with great delicacy, in deference to his youthful audience. He first raised the issue in the section on Darwin's acceptance of his father's proposal that he go to Cambridge to become a clergyman. 'Although at nineteen years of age Charles Darwin believed that the doctrines of the Church of England ought to be accepted,' Mawer explained, 'there came a time when he considered some of these to be unworthy and untrue.' Mawer defended Darwin by pointing out that he had arrived at his position by following truth to its logical conclusion. Darwin was actually more religious than those who attacked him. 'His devotion to Truth as Truth,' Mawer declared, 'when assailed most bitterly and violently by orthodox people, and his meekness under these assaults, never returning one unkind word upon his adversaries, together with his universal benevolence... reveal a religious mind more than does a professed adherence to all the creeds.' Several times in the biography Mawer returns to the topic of the Christian opposition to Darwin's theories, and comments on the 'bitter theological hatred which has so often disfigured the search for truth'.⁵⁹ Mawer's biography is hagiographical, but it offers his youthful readers a more secular version of the evolutionist at odds with Francis's account. Francis was unhappy with Mawer's book, and on his behalf Murray sent a letter of complaint to Swan Sonnenschein & Co.⁶⁰

But Mawer was not the only one to contest Francis's notion that Darwin was privately a respectable agnostic. Stirling depicted Darwin as being a materialist. As an admirer of German idealism, he was alarmed by the progress of materialism. 'Materialism', he wrote, 'has had an enormous advance since Darwin: from him on, my brethren, the doctors have had it all their own way.' He insisted, 'the end of the doctrine of natural selection—the end of the thought of Mr. Darwin is only this—matter and natural (mechanical) law in matter.' Stirling closed his biography of Darwin with a spirited defence of design. 'I admire the naturalist and I honour the man,' Stirling announced, 'but I hope to be forgiven if, "for the life of me", I cannot but smile when assured by Mr. Darwin that there is not necessarily such a thing as design in the universe, —"*Now that the law of natural selection has been discovered*".'⁶¹

Whereas Mawer and Stirling believed that Darwin was personally an atheist or materialist, Holder also diverged from Francis by going in the totally opposite direction. For Holder, Darwin's private beliefs were in line with those of a liberal Christian. Darwin, Holder claimed, rarely referred to religion in his works because he did not desire to hurt the feelings of his readers and he believed that religious belief should 'not be paraded in public print'. Darwin had been called an infidel and an atheist, but 'nothing could be further from the truth'. Darwin 'was a firm believer in a First Cause'. Holder argued that Darwin should be seen more as a liberal Christian than as a foe of religion. Although 'in theory an agnostic', he was 'in practice an orthodox Christian of the broadest type'.⁶²

When it came to evaluating the metaphysical implications of Darwin's theory, and to determining the nature of his personal religious beliefs, there was little consensus. Miall and Parkyn insisted that Darwin's theory did not rule out a progressive evolutionary process, whereas Allen read progress into the workings of the entire cosmos. Bettany went even further, arguing that evolution supplied natural theology with a new life. Poulton rejected all of these positions, maintaining that a true understanding of Darwin's theory of natural selection ruled out a narrow conception of teleology in nature.

Biographers disagreed on the state of Darwin's private beliefs. In *Life and Letters* his family had tried to manage Darwin's reputation as a respectable agnostic. Despite the evidence contained in the autobiography and letters published in *Life and Letters*, Mawer, Stirling and Holder presented very different pictures of Darwin's inner beliefs in their biographies. For Mawer, Darwin's real position was closer to the secularists, whereas Stirling's Darwin was a materialist. Holder's Darwin was more like a liberal Christian than an agnostic. The disparity in how Darwin's private religious beliefs were depicted from biography to biography suggests that they would remain something of a mystery to the Anglo-American public.

CONCLUSION: HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE CREATION OF A CULTURAL ICON

Biographies of Charles Darwin had an essential role in the formation of his status as an iconic figure. Establishing Darwin's character and determining the extent of his scientific abilities as they emerged during the course of his life could either authenticate or invalidate the scientific theory he formulated in his *Origin of Species*. Who was the real Charles Darwin? Was he the brilliant, upstanding scientist, or was he Stirling's morally questionable evolutionist? What did his theories mean? The fight over how to interpret Darwin's life defined the meaning of his theories for each biographer. Did they support a teleological interpretation of evolution, or was the process purely random? Were Darwin's theories a boon to natural theology and Christianity, or did they lead straight to unbelief? Hagiographies could be used to justify both Christian and secular versions of evolution. The creation of a cultural icon is a complex business. The personal traits of a figure can be emphasized, downplayed, or forgotten altogether. In the case of Darwin, we can already see that by 1900 he was beginning to be portrayed as a gifted experimentalist and a man of upstanding character. Darwin as the man of action of the *Beagle*, and as the devious rhetorician, were already fading from view. But the personal beliefs of the man were still far from clear.

There were many Darwins in the late nineteenth century. But the Darwin that emerged, and the one that remains influential, was the product of the conventions of biography in that period as they intersected with the creation of a new persona for the scientist. The nineteenth century as a whole was the scene of a massive outpouring of diaries, notebooks, letters, self-portraits, autobiographies and memoirs. These varied biographical genres were suffused with a moral passion whose purpose was to describe an admirable role model who had accomplished something great.⁶³ In the Victorian era, the heroes of self-help created by Samuel Smiles possessed the determination needed to overcome all obstacles. In contrast with the Romantic heroes of the earlier period, they were not transcendent geniuses. The new scientific persona, linked to the professional ideal championed by evolutionary naturalists such as Huxley, also emphasized persistence in the search for truth as well as the self-sacrifice required to attain objectivity. Darwin was by no means the obvious exemplar of the professional scientist. He had little formal training; his discoveries were not made in a laboratory; and he was not a specialist. In many ways, Darwin had more in common with the natural historians of the first part of the century. But by portraying Darwin through the conventions of biography, and by depicting him in accordance with the new scientific persona, he could be presented as a prime example of the heroic, modern scientist.

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