James Moore

Darwin – A `Devil's Chaplain'?[*]

Science is a collective enterprise. All over the world, researchers work together and vie with one another in labs and across institutions. The lone `genius,' the isolated intellectual, the solitary seeker after truth, is no more, if indeed he ever existed.

What then can be learnt by focusing on an individual – not just any individual, but the one who above all cuts the figure of the objective, detached researcher, the self-image of the modern scientist?

Darwin shows us is how collective, how social science really was and is. And because his science was deeply controversial – in tension with his colleagues and his times – his life reveals how doing science can be both exciting and dangerous.

But how dangerous *was* Darwin's science? To what extent did it threaten, not just Darwin himself, but his social world as well? In Victorian Britain, churchmen and priests, allied with conservative politicians, policed the boundaries of knowledge, guarding Truth with a capital `T.' Darwin worked in an ideologically charged environment, but was he justified in fearing his science would see him branded a `Devil's Chaplain'? And after his death – what happened then? How was his reputation shaped or twisted into the `Darwin' revered and reviled today?

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Charles Darwin came from a line of doctors. His father decided that he should follow family tradition and study medicine at Edinburgh University. Edinburgh was known as `the Athens of the North'; urbane and cosmopolitan, the city had strong intellectual and cultural links to the Continent. The university was the best place in Britain to study medicine. Charles was just 16 years old when he arrived.

The lectures bored him and he found it hard to concentrate. He preferred to wander the city and explore the shore along the Firth of Forth. A local naturalist, Dr Robert Grant, became his beachcombing companion and gave him his first lessons in zoology. Grant was a deist, a materialist and an evolutionist. Tradition has it that he was a homosexual. Grant was dedicated to overthrowing the Church and bringing about radical social change. He sponsored Darwin's first scientific paper, which he gave at a meeting of a student natural history club, the Plinian Society.

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The minutes of that meeting showed what happened next. A student radical read a paper arguing that all our thoughts are the product of the brain's structure. There is no soul. So offensive were these words that someone struck them from the minutes. Young Charles looked on. For the first time, he witnessed how dangerous science could be.

Weeks later, he dropped out of the university. Medicine wasn't for him – he knew it after watching surgery performed without anaesthetics on a screaming boy. He fled in terror. Back at home, Dr Darwin was disappointed in him. He decided that his aimless son should follow a less demanding but no less respectable profession. Shortly before his 19th birthday, Charles was packed off to Cambridge to be groomed for the Church of England.

Cambridge was totally unlike Edinburgh – a market town dominated by a mediaeval university. Cambridge University served mainly as a prep school for country parsons. With Oxford and King's College in London, it formed the intellectual power-base of the Anglican Establishment.

Charles lived and studied for three years in Christ's College. His cousin William was there preparing for the Church, setting a good example, ensuring Charles stayed on the straight and narrow. The university was an all-male community. Young women on their own were seen as temptresses. The campus police would arrest them and throw them into the university's own female gaol, the Spinning House, two minutes' walk from Charles's rooms. The police and professors held court here, with the accused unrepresented. If found guilty, the women could be flogged and thrown out of town.

One of the presiding professors taught Charles geology. Rev. Adam Sedgwick never married; he was a superb naturalist and a devout priest. He and his colleagues believed that the world was ruled directly by God. Cambridge itself was ordained to be orderly, stable, fixed like the rest of God's creation. No revolution took place here, much less evolution.

Charles himself was safe. He had a girlfriend at home, Fanny Owen, a squire's daughter, 20 years old, with black hair and flashing eyes. But they split up a year later when Fanny fell for an older man. Charles got over the heartache by collecting beetles.

Besides young women, collegians had to be protected from the likes of Rev. Robert Taylor. At Cambridge, Taylor had been a disciple of the rich vicar of Holy Trinity, Charles Simeon, who bought up livings to keep them in evangelical hands. After graduation, Taylor renounced Christianity and was gaoled for blasphemy. On his release, he styled himself a `missionary' for unbelief and, still in holy orders, marched back into Cambridge. It was May 1829, Charles's second year. Taylor threw the colleges into turmoil by trying to win converts. Days later, student vigilantes hounded him out of town.

Soon Rev. Taylor acquired a permanent pulpit at The Rotunda, a theatre in Blackfriars Road, south London, with a revolutionary French *tricolore* flying on the roof. Here, wearing rakish canonicals, he staged infidel melodramas and preached bombastic anti-Christian sermons to working-class audiences. He was arrested again for blasphemy and thrown into prison. Radicals dubbed him `the Devil's Chaplain' – a name Darwin would not forget.

Radicals like Taylor believed that true science would free people from the tyranny of noble landowners, wealthy capitalists, and the established Church. Radical science threatened the social order and was dangerous.

Take the nebular hypothesis, for instance, the theory that our solar system was formed over countless ages, the planets condensing as droplets out of a whirling fiery mist. No act of God was needed to create the solar system, only the laws of material nature. Or phrenology, in which the brain consists of organs, the size of each being shown by the shape of the skull. In this science, all our thoughts, feelings and beliefs arise from underlying material entities – there is no place for a soul.

Another radical science was transmutation – evolution – which in Darwin's youth meant the progressive self-organization of matter into every plant and animal species, and finally man. Transmutation did away with the need for a Creator-God. Indeed, accepting transmutation encouraged people to organize themselves and rise up to defeat the privileged and wealthy classes who taught that God ordained a stable, fixed creation.

Radical science faced a heavy task. A cartoon published while Darwin was at Cambridge depicted the radicals, speaking for `Sense and Science,' on a see-saw with Anglican bishops opposite, out-weighing them with `Money and Interest.'

Social power lay with the fat established church, but radical demands for intellectual freedom and democracy were growing louder. In 1831, as Charles left Cambridge and Taylor was sent back to prison, churchmen and naturalists, including some of Darwin's old professors, founded the British Association for the Advancement of Science. This was nation's first ever scientific road-show and it rolls on today. The British Association was set up to police science – keep out the radicals – making the study of nature safe for society and, above all, the Church of England.

Charles might have joined the founders had he not, that very year, embarked on a voyage that would transform his science and ours.

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HMS *Beagle* took five years to circumnavigate the globe. Darwin got his place on board with a little help from the Cambridge professor who taught him botany, John Henslow. Like Prof. Sedgwick, Henslow was a priest and a superb naturalist. While tutoring Darwin, he also served on the university vice squad, sweeping the streets, pacing the footpaths, keeping young gents from moral mischief. In those days, Darwin came to be known as `the man who walks with Henslow.'

During the voyage, three things moved Darwin deeply and altered his views of nature and mankind. Wandering in a lush Brazilian forest, he had something like a religious experience. He felt there was more in man than just the breath of his body, yet he sensed that, as in romantic poetry, man and nature were one. At Concepcion in Chile came another emotional moment: Darwin survived a terrifying earthquake. Nature's power awed him – even a cathedral was not spared.

Most moving of all was Darwin's encounter with the native peoples of Tierra del Fuego, at the farthest tip of South America. Wild, naked nomads – how could people like this have come from the same God who created sherry-sipping Cambridge dons? He was shaken to the core.

On returning to London in 1837, Darwin found some radical reforms in place. Society was being democratized, but in science, wealth and rank prevailed. At the helm were his old professors and other leaders of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. One of them was Prof. Richard Owen of the Royal College of Surgeons, Britain's greatest fossil expert – ever. Today he is celebrated as the first to assemble a gigantic fossil lizard and call it a `dinosaur'; in Darwin's time, Owen was just as famous for defending the Church by showing material evolution to be impossible. He admitted that humans and apes resemble one another, but this, he insisted, was because God had designed primates according to the same master blueprint, not because apes somehow gave birth to humans.

Owen had a tremendous following among religious and political conservatives, who flocked to his lectures. Darwin admired his paleontology and even entrusted to him the fossil bones he had acquired during the *Beagle* voyage. At the same time, however, he gave up his father's idea of becoming a priest and began seeking career guidance among the Whig urban gentry.

Erasmus Alvey Darwin, Charles's big brother, had trained in medicine, but he grew fond of opium and was too sick to practice. He was a freethinker with some radical ideas and, just as important, he was well-connected. His London friends were reformers and comfortably off. They believed in progress; they believed in a God who ruled the world, not miraculously or directly, but through natural laws. This God must have created living species by some progressive law, but none of them knew what it was. Charles Darwin, now 28 years old, determined to find out. He read voraciously – natural history, philosophy, theology, economics – and he kept extensive notes.

In the first of a series of secret notebooks, he drew a `tree of life' to show how living species had descended from one another by natural law. This was a `family tree,' full of the ancestors of today's species. In another note, written after observing Jenny, an adolescent ape in London's zoo, Darwin exclaimed: `Let man visit Ourang-outang … hear expressive whine, see its intelligence when spoken to; as if it understands every word … see its affection … see its passion and rage, sulkiness, and very actions of despair – then let him look at savage, roasting his parent, naked, artless, not improving yet improvable and let him dare to boast of his proud preeminence.'

Darwin had seen humans in the raw, in South America; churchmen and most naturalists, proud believers in creation, had not. For Darwin, evolution explained human racial and cultural differences. In another note, he jotted: `more humble and I believe true to see man' – savage and civilized man – `created from animals.' Creation by evolution was a belief born of theological humility.

Finally, Darwin admitted to himself the tendencies of what he believed: even our `love of the Deity,' he scribbled, is the `effect of [the brain's neural] organization – oh you materialist!' On another page he warns, `let one species change, let one instinct be altered, and the whole fabric totters and falls' – the whole traditional fabric of creationist beliefs about nature, God and mankind.

So evolution was dangerous – Darwin admitted it. Privately. To himself, in clandestine notebooks. By now, he had worked out a theory of how evolution took place. But he kept the theory of natural selection to himself as well, a terrible

secret. He would wait for the right time to publish and meanwhile stockpile evidence – or procrastinate, take your pick.

In 1839 he married, and by 1842 Emma Wedgwood, his first cousin, had borne him two children. That summer, Britain probably came closer to revolution than at any time in the nineteenth century. In London, public buildings were sandbagged and put under guard; troops were sent north to quell the riots in the industrial towns. For three days the soldiers marched past Upper Gower Street, where the Darwins lived, and through hostile crowds to Euston Station.

In September, Darwin evacuated his family to a quiet Kentish village, 15 miles outside of London. At Down, he would work on his theory, safe and secure, living like the country parson he was once intended to be.

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The Darwins' new home was Down House. For many years the parish priest had lived there. Darwin bought it from him for the princely sum of £2000, showing they were both wealthy men. Soon a new priest arrived, Rev. John Innes, who had studied at Oxford. `Varsity' ties were formed; Darwin and Innes would visit in each other's study, exchanging pinches of snuff and discussing parish business. By the 1850s, they were managing the local charities together; eventually Innes entrusted Darwin with the accounts of the Sunday school.

Outwardly respectable, in private Darwin continued to work on his perilous theory, unwilling to publish. In his study, he wrote book after book on geology. He dissected almost every known barnacle, and in 1844 he set down his theory of natural selection in a long essay. Mooting his belief in evolution was, he said, `like confessing a murder' – a capital crime. He entrusted the essay to his devout wife, to be published, he told her, `in case of my sudden death.' Working so hard, worrying about his theory, fearing it would make him an intellectual criminal, Darwin thought he might not survive to see natural selection in print.

The strain showed. In 1856, after winning the `Royal Medal' of the Royal Society for his work on barnacles, Darwin was ready to write the *Origin of Species*. As he started, a friend remarked to him on the `indecency' of sexual relations among jelly-fish. In a letter, Darwin passed on the lewd jest and then suddenly blurted, `What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature!'

It was a book that Darwin feared he might be accused of writing, a book that would reveal him as an unbeliever open him to punishment – like the original Devil's Chaplain, Rev. Robert Taylor – the Cambridge graduate and apostate priest, who was twice imprisoned for blasphemy.

In October 1859, finished with the proofs, Darwin fled to a spa on the Yorkshire moors and waited for the *Origin of Species* to be published. To an old Cambridge professor he wrote, `I fear you will not approve of your old pupil,' and to another, `Lord how savage you will be. How you will long to crucify me alive.' Those weeks of waiting, he said, were like `living in Hell.'

Fifty years old, at the pinnacle of his career, he had everything to lose. But his worst fears never came true.

The *Origin of Species* was the last great work in the history of science in which theology was an active ingredient. The word `evolution' did not appear in the text,

but Darwin used `creation` and cognate terms over one hundred times. Opposite the title stood a quotation from Lord Bacon about studying God's works as well as His Word, and another by the reverend Master of Trinity College, Cambridge about `general laws' as God's way of governing. On the last page, Darwin rhapsodized about the `grandeur' in his view of life, with nature's `most beautiful and most wonderful' diversity arising from `powers … originally breathed into a few forms or into one.'

This played to the audience, but Darwin's tone and terminology – even the biblical `breathed' – were apparently sincere. From start to finish, the *Origin of Species* was a pious, respectable work: `one long argument' against miraculous creation, but equally a reformer's case for creation by natural law.

Equally, the *Origin* played to a rising generation of intellectuals who were making science safe for Darwin. Like his brother Erasmus, they were polite radicals, dissenters, and believers in progress; some were hellbent on breaking down the Church's monopoly on truth and making their own scientific careers.

When the *Origin* was published, one young Turk leapt to Darwin's defence. Thomas Huxley called himself the `devil's disciple,' others dubbed him `Darwin's bulldog.' Thirty-something, angry and ambitious, he ridiculed Richard Owen's conservative idea that apes and humans were only structurally similar rather than related by descent. In the 1860s, no one aided Darwin as much, no one did more for his public reputation than this brilliant, witty controversialist.

Within ten years of the publication of the *Origin*, Huxley was hailing Darwin as a high priest. In a lightning sketch on the back of a letter, he once depicted Darwin as a new Pope, archbishop of the `church scientific,' being venerated by a visiting naturalist. At the same time many radicals saw Darwin as the antithesis of religion. A New York cartoon portrayed him as the `sun of the nineteenth century' beaming on a benighted humanity, banishing clouds of bishops, Bibles and priestly hobgoblins.

For his part, Darwin avoided speaking or writing publicly about religion. In private, he revealed that he no longer believed `in the Bible as a divine revelation, & therefore not in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.' Yet his `belief in what is called a personal God,' he said, had been as strong as a prelate's when he wrote the *Origin of Species*; and three years before his death, he confessed that he had `never been an atheist, in the sense of denying the existence of a god … generally (& more & more as I grow older), but not always … agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.' He cautioned that `freedom of thought is best promoted,' not by `direct arguments against christianity & theism,' but `by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow[s] from the advance of science.' He said so in fact to Karl Marx's son-in-common-law, Edward Aveling, in a letter that, like his old notebooks, Darwin marked conspicuously `Private.'

He kept his heresies to himself. He never knowingly gave offence except to radical freethinkers and atheists who wanted him publicly on their side. And for his reticence, his character, and his epoch-making science, Darwin was accorded Britain's highest posthumous honour. Passed over for a knighthood, in April 1882 he achieved immortality: his remains were interred with religious pomp in the nation's most hallowed sanctuary, Westminster Abbey. Priests gathered at the graveside, and politicians of all parties, as well as Huxley and his allies, who had

begun calling themselves `scientists.' They were paying their dues, for Darwin had delivered nature and human destiny into their hands.

Evolution was respectable now. No revolution had taken place, no pyrotechnics, just a quiet change at the top. Professional scientists were usurping the priests. This was a bloodless palace coup. Society would never be the same. A Devil's Chaplain had done his work.

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`The Church has Darwin's corpse, but that is all she can boast ... She has not buried Darwin's ideas. They are still at work, sapping and undermining her very foundations.' Sentiments like this were soon heard following the funeral. To fiery radicals, the service smacked of so much hypocrisy and humbug – it was toff-nosed resurrectionism run amuck. `All Freethinkers' hail Darwin as `a brother and an ally,' boasted Aveling. While Darwin might not have consciously taken sides, `he was, and will ever be, working with our cause.' Aveling chose his words carefully, mindful of Darwin's private letter.

The family remained in deepest mourning and sensitive to the slightest stain on Darwin's reputation. They imagined that his public image – as the respectable parish naturalist – would be theirs to project. His identity was to be as closely guarded as his daily existence had been the forty years since he fled London, a nervous young husband with his heretical thoughts tucked away in pocket notebooks.

In this belief, the Darwins began to collect and recollect – letters, sayings, memorabilia. The sons, with an eye on posterity, produced hefty reminiscences; Francis – who had worked closely with his father on plants – took on the job of preparing a *Life and Letters*. This literary headstone, the expected tribute to all men great and good, had to be erected without delay.

The *Life and Letters* was to be based on Darwin's autobiography, a private narrative begun in 1876 and written for the family. Francis, who was entrusted with the manuscript, had copied it out laboriously in his rounded, legible hand. Emma now tooth-combed Francis's copy. In the section headed `religious belief,' she set down an interdict next to the most sensitive passage. Here her husband had declared his innermost thoughts. He failed to see how anyone `ought to wish Christianity to be true,' given its `damnable doctrine' that unbelievers such as his father, his brother, and `almost all' his best friends stood to be `everlastingly punished.' Emma, for her part, could not see why anything so emotive and ill-expressed should appear in print. `It seems to me raw,' she jotted in the margin.

Still, Francis decided to publish the autobiography more or less complete, including the whole section on religious belief. When the first proofs arrived, bitter feelings erupted. The `damnable' passage that had upset Emma was evidently only one of many to cause offence. Others in the section on religious belief were almost as bad, and the attempts to censor them caused a sharp rift among the children.

Francis, nettled and nonplussed, appealed to his mother. `If the Religious part is not published, I shall be absolutely bound to say that it has been omitted ... and I do not believe that father would like it.' It seemed shabby and would reflect badly on his open, honest image. Anyway, by allowing him to speak for himself, `many who cannot believe in the old faith and yet feel it wicked to doubt' may be comforted. `If they are to be led by anybody, they may do worse than be led by a great man'

whose life was `absolutely pure and honourable,' who wrote about his religious views `with simple truthfulness' and, in the end, was – as he said – `content to remain an Agnostic.'

Emma's response was conciliatory and a compromise was struck: the autobiography was dismembered, the section on religious belief was removed to a separate chapter in the *Life and Letters*, and only `extracts, somewhat abbreviated,' were printed.

In 1887, Francis's three-volume monument went on sale for almost two pounds. Four thousand copies sold in a month, making it a best-seller. Here the family's `Darwin' appears as a modest, hesitant agnostic who reluctantly gave up Christianity for lack of historical evidence. No inkling is given of his guilty pleasures in materialist *bon mots* in the early notebooks, his fears of punishment, or his veiled self-reference as a `Devil's Chaplain.' The `damnable' passage has vanished. Every scrap of countervailing testimony Francis could muster is included – anything that would point to the tempered respectability of his father's religious views.

Yet the family was not omnipotent. They could not prevent others with inside knowledge from embroidering it for their own ends. Aveling had been thwarted. But rumors about Darwin were now to spread from the opposite – religious – quarter, enough to unsettle the family again, although not, mercifully, until after Emma's death in 1896.

Neither the *Life and Letters* nor anything else the family published sufficed to stop the sneaking suspicion that Darwin underwent a deathbed conversion to Christianity. For almost a century it has remained a persistent rumor within evangelical circles on both sides of the Atlantic, a rumour that credits a lady who claimed to have visited and spoken with Darwin before he died.

Tales about Darwin's deathbed began to circulate long before the lady spoke out, but they were apparently as baseless as they were harmless: a reference to Darwin's `last confession of faith' in a sermon preached in Wales; a report of a Toronto minister assuring his congregation that `Mr. Darwin, when on his death-bed, abjectly whined for a minister and renouncing Evolution, sought safety in the blood of the Saviour.'

The story that *did* catch on first appeared in August 1915, in America's oldest and largest Baptist magazine, the Boston-based *Watchman-Examiner*. It was sponsored by the editor himself, Curtis Lee Laws, who in an issue five years later would plead the cause of those he was the first to call `Fundamentalists.'

Laws noted that the story had been told only days before, during a conference held at the Massachusetts girls' school founded by the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody. The story had been repeated before the plenary audience by the main speaker, a leading Baptist professor. The source of this `remarkable story' was said to be a `consecrated English woman' attending the conference. She had written it out at the editor's request under her *nom de plume* `Lady Hope.'

Who was this noble guest? Elizabeth Cotton, the firstborn of an army general, had come to prominence as a temperance campaigner in the 1870s. For years she rolled the wagon around the country, opening coffee houses and cultivating the great and the good. Lord Shaftesbury sang her praises, Moody made use of her during his British missions, and in 1877 another soldier of the Cross, Admiral Sir James Hope, commander-in-chief in China during the second Opium War, took

her as his wife. The lady carried on bountifully, with *noblesse oblige*. She read the Bible from door-to-door and wrote treacly tracts and novels. After the Admiral's death, in 1893, she married an elderly millionaire and acquired a London address to match. Still, however, she traded off her second-hand title, calling herself Lady Hope.

Her largesse now grew lavish, her lifestyle grand. She swapped the temperance wagon for a motor car and raced up and down the country at unholy speeds. Creditors finally caught up with her. None of her devout West End friends – not even the retired head of Scotland Yard – could keep the courts at bay. Her bankruptcy in 1911 was splashed all over, headlined `A Widow's Affairs.' Discharged a year later, she retreated to New York City, ostensibly `to overcome the grief of her husband's death.' Less plausibly, after the *Watchman-Examiner* story came out, she claimed that her flight was `to avoid the persecution of the Darwins.'

Not that Americans minded. Most knew nothing of Lady Hope; those who did forgave. What counted was the story she told in August 1915. Editors reprinted it, preachers repeated it, Fundamentalists swallowed it. Few indeed could refuse. The story had spiritual integrity, like holy scripture. Here is Darwin, aged and bedridden, cradling an open Bible, his head haloed by an autumn sunset that bathed a `far-reaching scene of woods and cornfields' outside his window. Lady Hope attends him, noting his `purple' dressing gown, the `brightness and animation' of his face; and she nods as he speaks of `"the grandeur of this Book".'

The imagery is familiar, irresistible, overwhelming. This is a deathbed scene – Darwin has been converted!

Such stories vouched for themselves and evangelicals were inured to them. Lady Hope tapped a huge voyeurs' market. Had Darwin not been her subject, her story would still have sold. Shrewdly crafted, it reported neither a death-scene nor a repentance, but it aped such tales to perfection by playing up the drama and playing down the date of her alleged interview, some six months before Darwin died. It was a brilliant counterfeit. Bankrupt abroad, Lady Hope sought spiritual credit in the States and got it in abundance.

Much in the story is certainly fictitious. But it cannot be dismissed as pure invention either – it contains startling marks of authenticity. Darwin's west-facing upstairs window in Down House did overlook a `far-reaching scene of woods and cornfields.' The sunsets in that direction were so beautiful that the sons used to climb into the pigeon loft by the kitchen garden to watch them. Darwin also habitually retired to his room in the afternoon, where he lay down, smoked a cigarette, and had Emma read to him until he fell asleep. He did wear a `long bright coloured dressing gown' that, like his other overclothes, was very dark, `with a reddish brown or purple tint.'

And out of his window, about four hundred yards away at the end of his thinking path, the Sandwalk, there was indeed a summer house. But it was tiny, far too small for the `thirty people' Lady Hope said she hoped would meet there for a hymn-singing service.

Of course, some of this information was scattered about Darwin's *Life and Letters* and in other publications that had appeared by 1915. The more intimate titbits might conceivably have been winkled out of members of the Darwin household. But why should Lady Hope have gone to the trouble of collecting all these details,

committing them to an otherwise hazy memory, and then *not* offering her most convincing version in the first place?

Until her death in 1922, Lady Hope clung tenaciously to the story, supplying further details when asked. She claimed to have been conducting religious meetings in Darwin’s village, staying `very near’ Down House; she knew the `large gate’ that opened onto its `carriage drive.’ Darwin himself asked her to call at `three p.m.’ She went upstairs and found him in `a large room with a high ceiling’ just off the `landing.’ He was lying on a `sofa’ beside a `fine bay window.’ `Mrs. Darwin’ was present also, at least part of the time. She showed `some little (polite) displeasure’ when the intent of the visit became clear, and for that reason, in part, the summer house service was never held.

All this new detail can be verified. Darwin had an exaggerated respect for the titled. A `Lady’ who had helped in the village, who ministered in the homes of the elderly and the ill, might well have received an invitation to call on him in autumn 1881, when his own health was giving `much cause for uneasiness.’ At this time, he welcomed other visitors, including his old friend Rev. Innes, whose religious concerns he shared. Lady Hope had more status than any of these guests. Indeed, at the time she was a leading figure in the national temperance movement, with personal backing from Lord Shaftesbury. Darwin, a county magistrate for 25 years, shared her worry about rural drunkenness and disorder.

Moreover, Darwin did lie on a sofa for his daily siesta; his tall, spacious room was off the first-floor landing and its windows shared the imposing bay added in 1843 to all three storeys on the west side of the house. Emma would most definitely have stayed with him if Lady Hope had been allowed access to this inner sanctum. Propriety dictated as much. And regardless of Lady Hope’s reputation as a devout temperance worker, Emma would not have tolerated anything so intrusive as personal evangelizing.

Francis Darwin, if he had been present in Down House, would have felt just as strongly. After 1915, whenever Lady Hope’s story came to his notice or the family’s, the reaction was fast and furious.

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Lady Hope misrepresented Darwin's religious views to a vastly greater extent than the family did in the *Life and Letters*. But the distortions differed in degree, not kind. Both accounts were historically based; each was adapted to a different audience. They contained the stuff of legends. Just as the *Life and Letters* was tailored for a liberal British intelligentsia who set a premium on religious moderation, so Lady Hope pitched her story to conservative Americans for whom, increasingly, fervid commitment to the Bible had become the test of orthodoxy. Fundamentalists had neither the interest nor the inclination to digest a three-volume scientific biography. Their staple fare was low-brow religious magazines such as the *Watchman-Examiner*. When these papers began to circulate Lady Hope's story, the most powerful Darwin legend ever was launched.

The story spread like wild fire. Inflammatory tracts began to appear, with titles such as `Darwin on His Deathbed,' `Darwin's Last Hours,' `Darwin, `The Believer',' and `Darwin Returned to the Bible.' These achieved an enormous circulation. Everywhere across Fundamentalist America, and to some extent in the nether

regions of British evangelicalism, the conviction grew that Darwin had seen the light and died a penitent.

The Darwin family had every right to feel aggrieved at this. And Lady Hope's story itself was justly repugnant to them, a wierd mix of the plausible and the preposterous, though convincing enough to damage Darwin's image. But what the family denied, angrily and repeatedly, was not Lady Hope's version of events; it was the *legend* her story had started, the legend of a deathbed conversion. In refuting this, chiefly by reference to the *Life and Letters*, the family did not offer historical arguments. They merely promoted their own sanitized portrait of Darwin while neglecting the actual purport of Lady Hope's story and its authentic details of time and place. In their indignation they were too complaisant. From the start, they allowed Fundamentalists to set the terms of the debate.

Why? One reason is that the family failed to grasp the long-term problem of protecting their `Darwin.' In Britain he had remained in their safe custody, at least during Emma's lifetime – the *Life and Letters* had insured that. But by the 1920s the family's `Darwin' had escaped into the wider culture, and nowhere more strikingly than in the United States. There his name was linked to all sorts of religious and political movements, often through the very words of the *Life and Letters*. Atheism, socialism, modernism, racism – the list was long before Fundamentalism was added.

Another reason why the Darwins never got past denying the Fundamentalist legend is that they were devoted to their own. The legends embodied rival religious interests. The family invested heavily in its own modest legend because certain members dismissed what Fundamentalists stood for. They defended the Darwin of the *Life and Letters*, not just because they had known their father to be a temperate, respectable agnostic, but because to them the *Origin of Species* was a scientific refutation of fiat creationism.

The family members in question were the sons – evolutionists and freethinkers all. The longest-lived and indeed the last surviving child was Leonard Darwin. His accession to the family headship in 1928 opened a new phase of the *Life and Letters* legend. Now the family's `Darwin' was enshrined.

Inspired by the anthropologist Sir Arthur Keith, Leonard oversaw the restoration of Down House and its administration transferred to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. On the opening day in June 1929, the guests pressed forward as Leonard and Sir Arthur took their places on the verandah, beneath Darwin's window, from where Lady Hope had described `a far-reaching scene of woods and cornfields.' Sir Arthur pitched his speech to the freethinkers present. Darwin, he declared, `permitted the bare, unhusked truth to speak for itself; he went only so far as the light of reason would carry him. Only men who teach thus continue to teach for all time. Down House, then, is ... a common heritage for truthseekers of all countries and of all centuries ... a permanent sanctuary for Darwinian pilgrims.'

Crowning the ceremony, the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) published Sir Arthur's speech and issued a 54-page booklet entitled *Autobiography of Charles Darwin*. This was the *Life and Letters* text cheaply repackaged, and the sales were phenomenal – six huge editions in twenty years. Leonard still had qualms about it. `The expressions [my father] used were not selected with that care which he would

have exercised if he had thought that there was the slightest chance of its being subject to carping criticism.'

Until his death in 1943, Leonard continued to crush Lady Hope's story whenever its ugly head appeared, but despite his efforts, the deathbed legend went on circulating as vigorously as the family's in the cheap RPA *Autobiography*. By coincidence the story surfaced in *The Scotsman* in 1958, weeks after Darwin's grand-daughter Nora Barlow published, at long last, the full text of the autobiography `with original omissions restored.' Nora chided the editor for publishing a baseless tale, and her riposte came just in time to get top billing in the Darwin centenary number of the RPA magazine, *The Humanist*.

This was the last time British freethinkers would dismiss the deathbed legend. Just as the family's legend had been laid to rest by Nora Barlow, so now it was the Fundamentalists' turn. In the 1960s *The Humanist* published a pair of articles in which, for the first time, Lady Hope was taken seriously as a historical witness. Her identity remained `shadowy' and a `mystery,' but Pat Sloan convincingly reduced the deathbed legend to `a merely civil reception by the invalid Darwin to a visiting lady evangelist.' `Despite the Darwins' doubts,' Sloan concluded, `Lady Hope may at some time have visited' Down House.

The irony of this disclosure was doubly rich. For not only was it the RPA that published evidence to embarrass the Darwin family's denials; it was a freethinker who did the historical spadework – spadework that might have been performed by those who stood to profit religiously from it. But `the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light,' as the later history of Lady Hope's story makes clear. Decades after *The Humanist*'s articles came out, the deathbed legend continues to circulate in evangelical books, tracts, and magazines. It is an ironic, backhanded compliment to Darwin that those who revile his theories continue to attach such significance to his supposed religious judgment.

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By now the pattern is tiresomely familiar. Everyone has tried to get, or keep, Darwin on their side – Fundamentalists, scientists, Secularists, Lady Hope, and the family alike. In the long run, none of them has succeeded. They have all been upstaged. Darwin has turned out to be bigger, more complex, more awkwardly historical than anyone imagined. He especially resists latter-day Procrusteans who would force him into conformity with their views.

Born to wealth, raised in privilege, advantaged by traveling the globe as a young man, Darwin came to view life in a way that, he believed, would cost him dear if people knew his innermost thoughts. As an evolutionist in the turbulent, half-reformed, Anglican dominated society of young Victoria's reign, he devised schemes for concealment, `fortifications for the self.' His existence became contradictory, his life a camouflage. He became profoundly ill. Outwardly liberal and polite, of modest opinions, the pillar of the parish, he was inwardly Darwin *contra mundum*, the failed ordinand, the Christian *manqué* – a `Devil's Chaplain.' He weathered the storm of self-exposure in the *Origin of Species*, but even in late-Victorian times, with fame and fortune secure, he waited ten years after the word was coined before calling himself an `agnostic.'

And still he shrank from controversy, from atheistic alliances, from the taint of irreligion. For Emma's sake, the family's and his own, Charles was determined to be his own man.

Perhaps the time has come to let him be. Perhaps the time has come to follow Darwin’s modest example and declare it `more humble and I believe true to see man created from animals.’