

BOOK REVIEW

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin

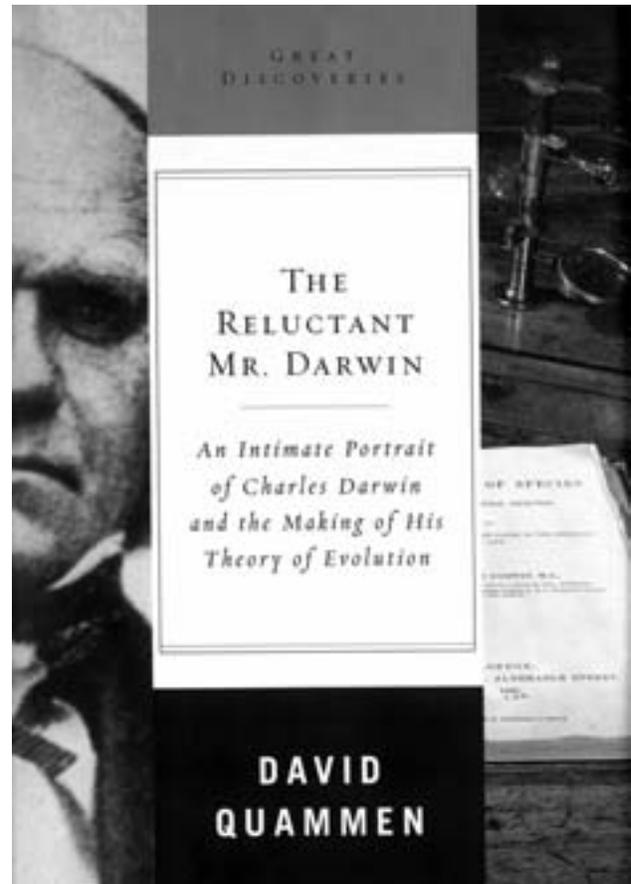
The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution. 2006. By David Quammen. W.W. Norton & Co., New York. 304 pp. Hardback – ISBN: 0-393-05981-2. \$22.95.

As part of the landed gentry, Charles Darwin's family lived a sedate and sophisticated life in a large Georgian house in Shrewsbury. Darwin's father, a successful doctor and capitalist, had a large library, especially rich in natural history; a greenhouse was just off the morning room, and Darwin's mother kept fancy pigeons. After what is often described as an unremarkable childhood, Darwin left for Edinburgh to study medicine at the age of sixteen, but was appalled by the body trade and especially the brutality of surgery without anesthesia. After he abandoned that career, his father told him, "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family." Darwin's next plan was to prepare himself for ordination at Cambridge and become a parson-naturalist.

But then it happened. In 1831, Darwin received an invitation to accompany Captain Fitzroy on the second *Beagle* expedition. Darwin wrote in his *Autobiography* that before leaving he "did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible." After nearly five years of collection, observation, and seasickness, he returned to England, and David Quammen's new biography *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* begins with this return.

When considering the number of existing biographies of Darwin, one may wonder what is left to say. However, Quammen's biography, while not revisionist, is noteworthy for several reasons. At 250 pages, it is concise and manageable, especially compared to Adrian Desmond and James Moore's 800 pages or Janet Browne's 1000-page treatment. Also, more than a biography of the man, Quammen's lucid and engaging book is the history of an idea — the "marvelous and shocking and grim" idea of natural selection. Quammen provides just enough biographical detail to convey the birth of this idea in the context of a great deal of hesitation and reluctance on Darwin's part.

With his characteristic flair for metaphor, Quammen entitles the first chapter "The Fabric Falls," and writes that for two years after the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin "lived a strange double life, like a spy in the corridors of the British scientific establishment, which at that time was closely attuned to Anglican orthodoxy and grounded in the tradition of natural theology." In 1837, an important breakthrough occurred when John Gould examined the bird specimens from the Galápagos Archipelago. Darwin had thought that one group represented an assortment of wrens, grosbeaks, orioles, and finches, but they were all finches, thirteen species, closely related but distinct, and all unknown to science. Also, three distinct species of mockingbird were nestled in the collection, and, unlike the finches, the mockingbirds had been carefully tagged. Each species inhabited a different island.



Another breakthrough occurred in 1844, when Joseph Hooker examined the old plant specimens from the *Beagle* and found that their island-by-island diversity contradicted the pre-conceived notions of species radiating from a center. Darwin wrote, "At last gleams of light have come & I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable." Quammen writes that this was a daring admission, "cast in sheepish understatement and contradicting one of the fundamental tenets of British natural theology." At that time, Darwin completed a 189-page draft of his species theory, tucked it away, and seemed to stop.

In speculating on the reasons for what is referred to as "Darwin's Delay," Quammen continues to examine the tensions between Darwin's class and status and the political implications of his work. As a gentleman and patriarch, Darwin was part of the establishment working in a political climate in which Church and government feared the Chartists and street agitators bolstered by Lamarckism and other such subversive ideas. As the law of the land, Christianity helped to keep the lower orders in check; anything that challenged the Church was seditious. Darwin was not only afraid to publish, he wanted no part of this

class warfare. The evolutionary radicals in the public arena were not his kind of people.

In 1846, Darwin began to dissect barnacles, and because of his reputation and vast network of contacts, he was able to obtain them from all over the world. In contrast to his former belief regarding the rarity of variation, he discovered that barnacles were highly variable, and Quammen writes, “Here they were, the minor differences on which natural selection works.” After almost eight years of barnacle work, his volumes won the Royal Medal for Natural Science, providing even more scientific esteem and credibility from the establishment.

Darwin had sixteen years to refine the ideas he had outlined in 1842 and drafted in 1844. He had fathered nine children, buried two, and published eight books. Why not publish? Instead, he started to breed pigeons.

Quammen compares Darwin to a kiwi, a bird that lays a disproportionately large egg. Not only was it large, but Darwin postponed and delayed and then published only when forced to do so. When Alfred Russel Wallace independently developed the idea of evolution by natural selection, Quammen writes that Darwin responded with surprise, nausea, and despair. In 1858, the Darwin-Wallace material was read before the Linnean Society and published in the society’s *Journal of Proceedings* two months later — and triggered no immediate reaction. In 1859, just ten months after the Wallace scare, Darwin published *Origins*, writing, “I am infinitely pleased & proud at the appearance of my child.”

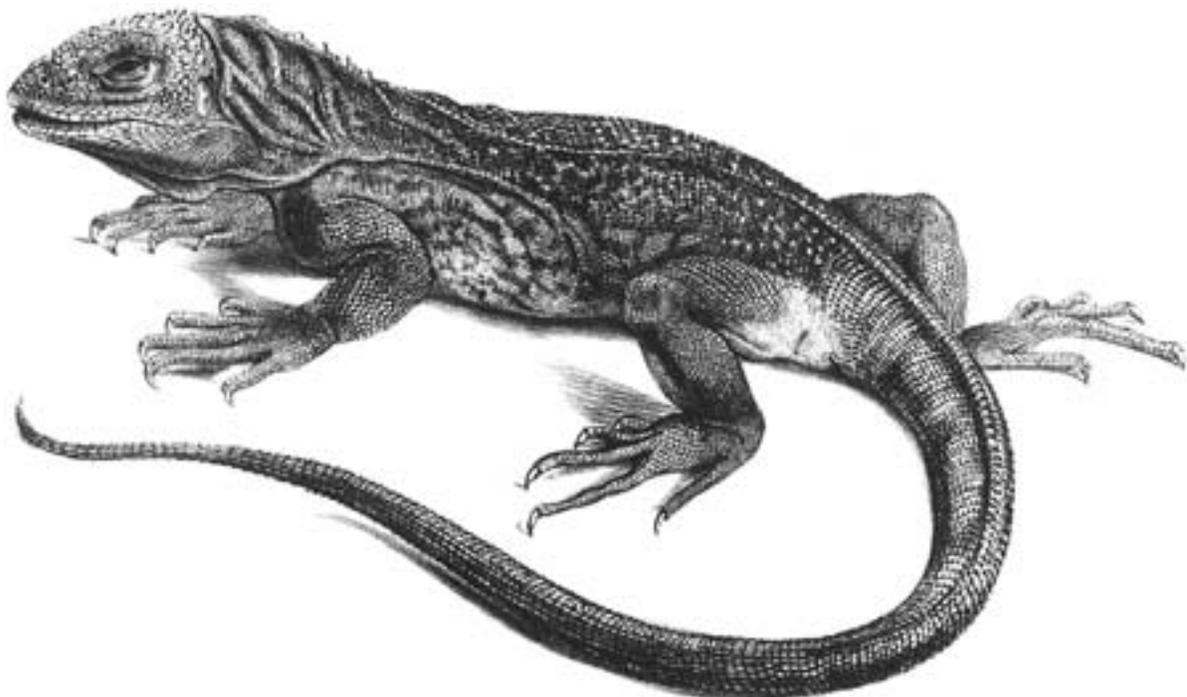
The idea of descent of species from common ancestors became widely accepted soon after *Origins*, but natural selection did not. Natural selection as the differential reproductive success resulting from small, undirected variations served as the chief mechanism of adaptation and divergence — but it lacked pur-

pose or design and challenged not the existence of a Divine force, but the godliness of humans. The coinage of such words and phrases as “agnosticism” by Thomas Huxley and “survival of the fittest” by Herbert Spencer indicates what a profound shift was taking place in intellectual and scientific circles.

Throughout the biography Quammen discusses the incompatibility of Darwinian evolution and Christianity, writing that scientific insight and religious dogma “had never come more directly into conflict.” In the introduction by way of comparison, he notes that a 2004 Gallup poll revealed that 45 percent of Americans interviewed were creationists; 38 percent theistic evolutionists, and only 13 percent materialistic evolutionists. These results remained virtually unchanged over the course of a generation, representing “an extreme level of skepticism and willful antipathy.”

Although the majority seems slow to digest it, Quammen calls *Origins* one of the most influential books ever written, provoking the most cataclysmic change in human thinking in four hundred years. He also calls it “hastily composed” and “seriously flawed,” and one wishes that his reasons for doing so were more convincing. One also wishes that Thomas Huxley were more a part of the story, but, overall, this perceptive and concise biography is well worth reading. Part narrative and part essay, it creates suspense, refuses to romanticize Darwin, and confronts the politics of evolution in matter-of-fact and explicit ways — and, after considering Darwin’s torturous reluctance and delay, perhaps we can better understand the contemporary unwillingness and inability to accept such a well-established scientific discovery.

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This image of a Marine Iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*) is Plate 12 from C. R. Darwin (ed. 1843. *Reptiles, Part 5, No. 2 of The Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle* by Thomas Bell “edited and superintended by Charles Darwin.” Smith Elder and Co., London). The original image was drawn at natural size from nature on stone by B. Waterhouse Hawkins, printed by C. Hallmandel, and labeled *Amblyrhynchus Demarlii*, as the species was then known. Reproduced with permission from The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>).