

The Demise of Charles Darwin

by Ian Taylor

It was four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon of April 19, 1882, when Charles Darwin took his last breath. His final hours had been accompanied by much chest pain and vomiting as his heart struggled to keep going through several attacks. The weakened heart did not survive the final attack and, with the signal death gasp, Charles Darwin left this mortal life. He had lived for 73 years and the last 40 of those years were spent quietly at his house in the village of Downe, just southeast of London. Darwin's eldest daughter Henrietta, aware of the importance of the last words of famous men, sat poised with pen in hand to catch every last word of her father. Darwin's wife, Emma, was in another part of the house at the moment of departure but was soon beside Henrietta and her son Francis. After a few moments alone with their thoughts they quickly composed themselves and decided that they must let the rest of the family and friends know the sad news.

Letters were hand written and sent to sons William, George, Leonard, and Horace, then to cousin Francis Galton and the family friend, Thomas Huxley. Most of these people lived in London and received their letters via the penny post by the afternoon of the following day. The horse and train postal service of a century ago was not only much less expensive but a great deal speedier than that of today. The national newspapers also had the news of Darwin's death and within 24 hours had announced that his body would be buried in the family vault at St Mary's Anglican churchyard in Downe. Darwin's elder brother, Erasmus, had died at 77 and his body had been placed in this same vault the year before.

Before going further with this account, some readers may have read or heard somewhere that in his last hours Darwin became a Christian. Science historian James Moore has spent 20 years investigating this story and provides the fascinating details in his book *The Darwin Legend*. It turns out that the story originated in the fertile imagination of evangelist Lady Hope.

Elizabeth Reid Cotton (1842-1922) was born in Tasmania, emigrated with her family as a young child to India then finally to England where she became an evangelist. She married the elderly admiral Sir James Hope at the age of 35 then he died four years later and she retained the title Lady Hope throughout the remainder of her evangelistic career. She worked with D. L. Moody during his English campaign then remarried T. Anthony Denny at the age of 51. She was widowed again 16 years later and, although quite wealthy, she mismanaged her money, became poverty stricken and in a desperate effort made her way to America and the Moody family. It was at this time that she wrote her account of her visit to Charles Darwin over thirty years earlier. She was a skilled writer having written 30 books, and told her story in a way that led the reader to conclude that she had discovered that Charles Darwin had had a conversion experience. She had actually visited Darwin at his home at his invitation seven months before he died, in September 1881. The occasion was precipitated by the visit of two well-known atheists, one of whom was Dr Aveling, Karl Marx's son-in-law, the day before. Darwin's wife, Emma although a unitarian attending St. Mary's Anglican church in the village, was always concerned about her husband's salvation and it seems that in order to appease his wife's concern after the visit of Aveling and his friend, Darwin had invited Lady Hope to call upon him. She had been visiting a Mr. Fegan, another evangelist, who lived in the village. It was likely that Darwin's invitation was purely a matter of domestic expediency.

In her article, Lady Hope said that she had brought up the subject of evolution and cleverly worded her report: "... his fingers twitched nervously and he said that as a young man he had had some foolish ideas." She went on to say that Darwin had asked her to arrange a prayer meeting in his garden house and talk about Jesus. From this and other statements like it, the reader would naturally conclude that Darwin was a genuine Christian but she had been careful not to say so. Following the publication of this article in the *Watchman-Examiner* (Boston, 1915), Lady Hope immediately became the darling of the Christian talk circuit of the day and her fortunes changed. As a result of this publicity and the endlessly repeated editions of Lady Hope's story, the Darwin family were besieged with Christian inquiry and they did their best to protest that Charles Darwin did not become a Christian nor did he make any death bed confession. After all,

Henrietta was there with pen in hand to record every last word.

To return to events surrounding Darwin's death and burial we are reminded from Scripture that anytime God steps into the affairs of men it is never, "something done in a corner" (Acts 26:26) but is always done openly. The details of Darwin's burial, not in St. Mary's churchyard but in Westminster Abbey, were quite definitely "done in a corner." It is a classic case of England's "old boy network" in action and worth a closer look. Victorian London had an obsession with men's clubs. The capital city had sufficient number of wealthy men to support hundreds of places of comfortable refuge. Each man had his own motive for being a member; for many, it was a place to meet like-minded men to discuss business or politics, for others, it was simply a place of sanctity from their family and the world.

Francis Galton, Darwin's younger cousin, was a member of the exclusive Athenaeum Club. He had spent his life quite convinced that every human function could be quantified and developed statistical techniques still used to this day. His mechanistic view had quickly accepted Darwin's evolution and, with survival of the fittest as his credo, he advocated controlled breeding to produce England's future ruling classes. It was Galton who had introduced the word "eugenics", meaning "pure born" or "clean birth", to the English language. Upon receiving the letter announcing his cousin's death, Galton was determined that Darwin be buried with the highest honors, next to Sir Isaac Newton's tomb in Westminster Abbey. He raced over to the Royal Society to find the president, William Spottiswoode. Mathematician, linguist and co-owner of the publishing company that still bears his name, Spottiswoode was an extremely influential member of the Athenaeum Club and the inner-circle, X-Club. In his publishing position as Queen's Printer he was able to virtually control everything issuing from the academic press.

One of the primary functions of the X-Club was to ensure that all evidence supportive of Darwin's Theory was published as widely as possible. At the same time, contrary evidence such as that submitted by the creationists of the day, was effectively suppressed. The X-Club was founded in 1864 and consisted of nine members, all of whom were also members of the Athenaeum Club located in London's Pall Mall. The X-Club had been in operation for 29 years and dissolved with the death of Spottiswoode; most of the members were, by then, quite elderly and worn out with the battle for Darwinism. Thomas Huxley, Darwin's chief apostle, died only two years later.

The Athenaeum Club opened in the 1830's and is named after the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athene. There is a gilded statue of the goddess on top of the portico over the front entrance to the club. One of the most exclusive clubs in Britain, it is intended for Britain's intellectual elite; mitred bishops and theologians hobnob with agnostic authors and scientists over glasses of sherry served by liveried waiters. A man can only become a member by invitation and vote - very similar to the Masonic lodge.

When Thomas Huxley received notice of Darwin's death he went immediately to the Athenaeum Club where he was a member and sought out others who would want to know the news and who would be sympathetic to the idea of Darwin being buried among the famous in the Abbey. Darwin had openly rejoiced that his older friend, Charles Lyell, had made it to the Abbey in 1875, and it was reasonably supposed by Huxley that Darwin would have no objection to being placed there himself, perhaps next to Charles. He was. However, there was not only the Darwin family to persuade but the Church hierarchy.

Huxley had had a running battle with the Church for almost a quarter century but even so did have some friends in high places at the Club among whom was the canon of Westminster, Rev. Frederick Farrar. When approached, Farrar was quite open to the idea and suggested that Huxley ask the Dean of Westminster, Rev. George Bradley. This was an easy matter, because Bradley had been sponsored for election to the Club in 1873 by Galton, Huxley and Spottiswoode. How could the man refuse?

Sir John Lubbock was Charles Darwin's younger friend and rather wealthy neighbor in Downe. When he received his letter he went that Friday to the House of Commons where he was member of Parliament for the Liberal Party. He quickly gathered a petition of 28 names from within the 150 members on the benches that day who were in favor of Darwin being placed in the Abbey. At the same time, Rev. Charles Pritchard

was persuaded to write a letter to a conservative national newspaper advocating that Darwin not be buried in some obscure churchyard but in the national shrine where thousands could pay their respects.

It was by such back-room efforts that arrangements were completed in a very short time, and the funeral took place exactly one week later at noon on Wednesday, April 26. There were ten pall bearers, four of whom were combined members of the X-Club and the Athenaeum Club; the others were sons of the family and rather strangely, the Duke of Argyle who was an active creationist. The casket was finally lowered into its sandy grave beneath one of the flagstones in the north aisle of the Abbey and next to Sir Isaac Newton. It is known as "scientist's corner" since many famous names in science have made their way to this spot.

There is an interesting little sequel to this account which became focused only in recent years when the authorities began to charge admission to the Abbey. While there is J. Boehm's marble plaque on the wall to commemorate Charles Darwin, his actual burial place is beneath the flagstone in the centre of the north aisle. It is precisely at this location that there is an ornamental iron choir screen that divides the aisle; this screen has a gate and a ticket booth stands just inside the gate. Darwin's grave is just at this gate, thus, every one of the thousands of visitors who file past to pay their admission fee must step on Darwin's grave. In Numbers 19:16 we read:

*Whoever in the field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died,
or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.*

Reporting on Darwin's funeral, the *Guardian*, a tabloid of the High Anglican Church, said, "... lest the sacred pavement of the Abbey should cover a secret enemy of the Faith..." Christianity may rejoice in Darwin's burial at Westminster as a visible sign of, "...reconciliation between Faith and Science." In retrospect, this statement is seen to be self-denial of prophetic words, because without doubt the sacred pavement does hide a secret enemy of the Church. That enemy has not only destroyed the faith of thousands from his grave but according to Scripture, renders spiritually unclean even those who pay respects to his grave.

References

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