

Book Review

Benjamin Wiker, *The Darwin Myth: The Life and Lies of Charles Darwin* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2009), xii + 196 pp., \$27.95.

When the promotional material for a book screams out “WHY CAN’T SCIENTISTS BELIEVE IN GOD? Book Exposes Charles Darwin as The Man Who Separated God From Science” you know you are in for a rough read. By the time you read the claim that seeing humans as animals has dire consequences which include cannibalism (“If you think cannibalism too distant a possibility, then you do not understand the dark spirit behind embryonic stem cell research,” (p. 170)), you realize that any historically nuanced – or for that matter, rational – attempt at an examination of Darwin’s life and legacy has long disappeared.

Benjamin Wiker holds the Ph.D. in Theological Ethics and is a Senior Fellow of the Discovery Institute (DI), a neo-creationist organization that has been responsible for much of the sound and fury that has surrounded teaching evolution in American public schools over the past quarter of a century. During this time, the DI has funded anti-evolutionists who have in turn produced books and opinion pieces that have blamed “Darwinism” for many perceived ills in modern culture. Wiker, for his part, previously authored *Moral Darwinism: How We All Became Hedonists* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), a tendentious work that attempted to see modern evolutionary thought as little more than a warmed-up version of Epicureanism. The work under review, while completed when Wiker was a DI Fellow, was funded by the tothesource Foundation, a group that seeks to challenge “hardcore secularism” and provides a “forum for integrating thinking and action within a Judeo-Christian moral framework.” Given this background, regular observers of American anti-evolutionism will know what to expect before beginning reading *The Darwin Myth*.

Wiker begins by telling us “[i]t is high time we understood who Darwin really was, and what he really did” (p. ix). To Wiker, Darwin was a serial liar and cheat whose “triumph has been to set ideological atheism as the default position of science” (p. xi). Darwin apparently lied about the motives for his investigations, the evidence for his theory, and the originality of his ideas. He was engaged in a long-term plot to

remove God from Victorian science and culture and lied about his own religious belief. In making this last claim, Wiker is unwilling to offer a sympathetic or nuanced reading of what Darwin himself wrote throughout his life and how these views changed. For Wiker, Darwin was always functionally an atheist, even before he departed on *HMS Beagle*. One is left wondering whether there was anything that Darwin did not lie or cheat about and how Emma Darwin ever managed to win a game of backgammon against her husband!

Wiker's work is entirely secondary and (selectively) derivative of the fine biographies produced by Janet Browne, Adrian Desmond and James Moore. He uses their work, but accuses these historians of distorting the picture of Darwin that they present. Yet this is precisely what Wiker himself does. Chapter 1 briefly discusses Darwin's youth and sees him as an unhandsome slacker who was resistant to change. No mention is made of the social milieu in which he lived. We are told that John Stevens Henslow's "machinations" (p. 24) diverted Darwin from the path to being a curate and onto the *Beagle*, the voyage of which is shallowly covered in Chapter 3. This discussion almost completely ignores Darwin's fossil discoveries and their significance, and does not mention his extensive geological work. Indeed, Wiker seems obsessed with Darwin's anthropological observations, to a degree that greatly skews the reader's impression of the effect that the voyage had on the young Darwin as a developing scientist.

Chapter 4 is titled "Hatching the Evolutionary Plot" and offers no substantive discussion of Darwin's work between 1835 and 1859. There is neither mention of why he rose to prominence in scientific circles, nor of his various geological and biological studies (particularly his award-winning and meticulous work on barnacles). One can only wonder whether these omissions are necessary to solidify Wiker's depiction of Darwin as a slacker with little scientific talent but an overarching plan to remove God from sight. The following chapter glosses *Origin* and *Descent* without providing any discussion of the arguments and evidence contained therein. No mention is made of sexual selection and how the theory was related to Darwin's observations of aboriginal groups while on the *Beagle*. Chapter 6 presents St George Jackson Mivart's objections to descent with modification though natural selection. Little mention is made of how Darwin himself dealt with those objections in the sixth edition of *Origin*. In his ongoing attempt to diminish Darwin, Wiker sees Mivart as "a distinguished scientist who had every right to claim to be at least Darwin's equal if not his superior" (p. 128). Like Darwin, Mivart received no formal training as a scientist

and the claim that he was Darwin's equal or superior is ludicrous and belied by their publications. (I write this, by the way, as someone sympathetic to how Mivart has been treated by historians and who has been engaged in an examination of his anatomical and philosophical writings for some time now.)

But all of this serves as a mere 134 page prelude to real argument that Wiker wishes to make. Three chapters ("What to Make of It All," "Darwin and Hitler," "Christianity and Evolution") repeat a series of creationist canards. Natural selection is a tautology. Darwin lied to himself when he felt that morality and natural selection could co-exist. Darwin's ideas led to, or supported, eugenics, Nazism, abortion, euthanasia, sex education and contraceptives for the poor, and pornography. Indeed, apparently Darwinism can be used to justify cannibalism.

This is poor history and, frankly, it is also poor polemic. Wiker does not present Darwin fairly but distorts him into a dark figure bent on destroying everything that Wiker apparently holds dear. As such, the book has nothing to recommend it beyond offering a snapshot of how certain groups in America have been unable to deal with scientific ideas.

John M. Lynch
Arizona State University