

'Darwin's delay' the stuff of myth

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The long-held view that Charles Darwin avoided publishing his theory of evolution for 20 years because he was afraid of the reaction it would provoke is being rebutted as a myth by a Cambridge University academic.

In a new essay published today, Darwin historian Dr John van Wyhe argues that Darwin was not only determined to make his theory known in spite of public opinion, but had always intended to publish after completing other work in hand.

The paper overhauls established thinking on the greatest puzzle of the famous naturalist's life. Darwin first mooted the theory of evolution in the late 1830's, but it was not until 1859 that it was finally published in his landmark work, the *Origin Of Species*. This mysterious 20-year interval has become known as "Darwin's delay" or "the long wait".

Most historians argue that Darwin kept the theory secret because he was afraid of the reaction it might provoke among his peers and of damaging his reputation. At the time many scientists regarded species as fixed rather than mutable, while theologians were likely to view any theory of evolution as heretical. Psychological analyses have been carried out suggesting Darwin was frightened of ridicule and persecution and it has even been said that a dream he recorded in 1838, in which a person was hanged and came to life, was a Freudian expression of the same fears.

However, Dr van Wyhe's paper, published in the latest edition of the

Notes and Records of the Royal Society, suggests that “Darwin's delay” is a myth and that he was simply busy writing more than 10 books, and sporadically hindered by ill health.

“This is a crucial chapter in Darwin's life and one that needs to be rewritten,” Dr van Wyhe said. “The assumption of Darwin's delay has led to a distorted picture of the man and his science, but there is an army of evidence to suggest that he did not avoid publishing his theory for 20 years at all.

“In fact this is an idea that modern writers have inherited from earlier scholars who did not have access to all of Darwin's work. The delay view has become so deep-seated that ambiguous evidence is now seen as confirming it, whereas in fact the evidence clearly contradicts it.

“Darwin was aware that his theories would be despised but that does not mean he was afraid of saying what he believed. His project was highly ambitious and of immense scope and he needed time to garner the necessary evidence. But he was also working on other projects – his Beagle related works, then his work on barnacles – and these pushed back the date until he could start work on his species theory.”

Dr van Wyhe draws on notes, diaries and letters, many of the latter stored at Cambridge University Library, to prove that while Darwin's big idea may have been private, it was far from secret. In fact he discussed elements of the evolution theory quite openly with his family, friends and virtually all of his scientific colleagues. He even told correspondents he barely knew – including the botanist J. D. Hooker - and paid copyists on at least two occasions to copy his species theory out. In the sixth edition of *Origin*, Darwin confirms that he previously discussed his ideas with “very many” people.

Dr van Wyhe argues that there is no evidence Darwin was unsure or

frightened about publishing his theory. In 1844, when his initial ideas on evolution had been sketched out, he prepared a memorandum for his wife requesting for it to be published in the event of his death. But he also asked her to see that it be “enlarged” and developed by an editor before it was published, because in his view the work was not yet ready. While there is no evidence for Darwin having been afraid to go public, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that he felt his theory required more work.

In the 1840's, however, there was simply no time for the great scientist to give evolutionary theory his full attention. Dr van Wyhe suggests that when later in his autobiography Darwin mentioned that he “gained much by my delay”, he was not referring to deliberate procrastination but simply the time that elapsed between conception and publishing, caused by other, more urgent matters.

“This manner of work was typical for Darwin,” Dr van Wyhe adds. “He would notice something or have an idea and think about it and continue to make relevant observations for some time, and when he finished a current project he would devote it to one of his earlier ideas or interests.” Darwin did not publish his inheritance theory of pangenesis for 27 years, his book on orchids was not published until 30 years after that research began, his book on cross fertilisation was published after 37 years, his notes on the development of his son were not published for 37 years and his book on earthworms 42 years after first conceiving of the idea.

Darwin came to believe that species are mutable while in the midst of a major campaign to publish and edit the scientific results of his career-defining voyage on HMS Beagle. Other writings from the time show that he described his theory on species as “my prime hobby” – rather than his main objective at that time.

His ideas on evolution were drafted as early as 1842, having been pursued as a sideline, but the evidence suggests he planned a great work on the subject for which he did not have time. When he finished his long-term work on the Beagle voyage, he became preoccupied with research he was carrying out on invertebrates and particular barnacles – and in 1849 he wrote to Hooker advising him that he regarded this as a fascinating subject he would get through before moving on to the species theory.

Ill health delayed the work further, pushing the work on species late into the 1850s. Further evidence from Darwin's journals and private correspondence suggests that he was determined to publish no matter what people thought of him, and that he was planning a massive, multi-volume work on species. In 1858, however, Alfred Wallace hit on a strikingly similar theory, spurring Darwin to action and prompting him to publish a much shorter account - this became the Origin of species.

Source: University of Cambridge

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