

## A Review of the Film *Creation*

**Nick Spencer**

Making a film about Darwin's life is not an easy task. Having returned from the *Beagle* in 1836, he never left England again, and having moved to Downe in Kent in 1842, he hardly ever left home. Following the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the world may have convulsed around him, but he remained rooted in domestic harmony and hidden from public view.

The makers of *Creation*, a new film about Darwin, get round this by combining two major strands of Darwin's middle age – the writing of *The Origin* and the death of his favourite daughter, Annie – in a way that is absorbing and beautifully-shot and acted, if not always entirely accurate.

Annie's death, of a "typhoid fever" in 1851, devastated Darwin and tore down the little that was left of his already-threadbare Christianity. He was never able to speak of her again. *Creation* makes out that Darwin somehow had to lay to rest Annie's ghost before being able to write and publish his masterpiece, and weaves these two elements together throughout the film.

In reality, Darwin had written two detailed sketches of his theory of natural selection long before Annie's death, and was some way through a massive book on the subject (planned to be four times longer than *The Origin*) when he was bumped into publication by a letter from Alfred Russel Wallace, who had famously come up with the same theory independently.

The film recognises all this but, taking some cinematic license, skates over some of the more mundane elements of the story (such as the joint reading of papers from Darwin and Wallace at the Linnean Society in 1858), to make out that Darwin almost broke down, hallucinations and all, and needed to make a kind of pilgrimage back to Annie's death-bed in Malvern, before finally being able to publish. This makes for a more dramatic film although a less accurate one. Quite apart from the fact that Darwin simply never mentioned Annie again, following her death, there was no evidence that he suffered from hallucinations or, more importantly, that the publication of *The Origin* was in any way tied up with Annie's death. In reality, the film tells us more about early twenty-first century angst over death than it does about mid-nineteenth century society, where grief was hidden, painfully, behind shuttered windows and stiff upper lips.

In a similar way, the film also implies, without ever stating, that Darwin was a closet-atheist who, spurred on by his pugnacious friend, Huxley, worked away in order to kill God. In reality, he was a Christian-flavoured theist throughout this period and took some pride in never having written against (or indeed about) Christianity (at least, since his very positive comments about it in *Voyage of the Beagle*). Accordingly, his close friendship with 'Brodie' Innes, Vicar of Downe, suffers in the film, the Reverend being made to stand for an antiquated and hostile ecclesiastical establishment in a way that he never did.

Such historical problems aside, the film offers a good portrait of Darwin family life and of the life of a self-financing Victorian naturalist, of the sort that was dying out as science

became a more professionalised activity during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also raises - indeed, focuses closely on - some very good questions about the compatibility of natural evil with the God of Christianity, surely the toughest question for any Christian to answer.

Overall, *Creation* seems to have a gently atheistic slant throughout, not so much because of any Dawkins-like agenda as because Darwin's story is simply more newsworthy if tied up with an earth-shattering religious and social revolution. Stories about "killing God" are simply more exciting than ones about well-articulated and well-defended scientific theories.

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Those interested in the historical minutiae of Darwin's life might be interested in the following list of points compiled by Denis Alexander where the film *Creation* and historical evidence seem to part ways to a greater or lesser degree. If you have seen the film and noticed other points, or if you would like to query any of the points made below, then do contact Dr Alexander ([dra24@hermes.cam.ac.uk](mailto:dra24@hermes.cam.ac.uk)):

#### **HISTORICAL INACCURACIES IN CREATION**

1. Huxley did not say to Darwin that his future work would "kill God".
2. Huxley did not harass Darwin to complete *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin already felt a lot of pressure to complete his great work because of Wallace's co-discovery.
3. Darwin did not see 'ghosts' of Annie – he was resolutely opposed to all things paranormal.
4. Huxley did not think science and religion were intrinsically opposed, although he did use science somewhat as an ideological tool to try and wrest the finances and prestige of institutional religion more over to the nascent community of professionalizing scientists. Here is what Huxley actually wrote about science and religion:

"The antagonism between science and religion, about which we hear so much, appears to me to be purely factitious - fabricated, on the one hand, by short-sighted religious people who confound a certain branch of science, theology, with religion; and, on the other, by equally short-sighted scientific people who forget that science takes for its province only that which is susceptible of clear intellectual comprehension".

[T.H.Huxley, "The Interpreters of Genesis and the Interpreters of Nature" in *Science and Hebrew Tradition*, (London: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 160-161. N.B. The word 'factitious' is not a misspelling, it is the word used in the original text, but it does actually render the meaning of our contemporary word 'fictitious'].

5. The omission of the famous (in retrospect) joint reading of the Darwin and Wallace papers to the Linnean Society in 1858 renders the film's handling of the news of Wallace's joint discovery of natural selection somewhat distorted. Neither was there in person to read their paper – Wallace because he was

- overseas, Darwin because he was attending the funeral of his retarded son, Charles Waring, who had died of scarlet fever.
6. There is no evidence that Emma did not want Annie to be taken to Malvern during what turned out to be her final illness. The reason that Emma did not go with Charles to Malvern is because she was pregnant and close to full term, so could not travel.
  7. Charles Darwin did not give to his wife Emma the choice as to whether he should publish *On the Origin of Species*. There is no evidence that Emma was opposed to its publication. In fact Emma had read Charles' 230 page 'summary' of his views written back in 1844 and had made comments in the margins.
  8. There is no evidence that Darwin went crazy after Annie's death, starting to tear down the walls of his 'water shed', release captive pigeons etc as portrayed in the film.
  9. It is true that the attempts to 'civilise' the wild Tierra del Fuegians was a failure as the film portrays. But the film omits to mention that Darwin was generally favourable towards the effects of the missionary work that he observed whilst on the Beagle voyage. In fact Darwin continued to support a Missionary Society financially up to the end of his life, more because he saw its work as having a Victorian 'civilising influence' than for religious reasons.
  10. Darwin maintained cordial relations with the Vicar of Downe Parish Church, the Revd. 'Brodie' Innes, until the end of his life. There is no historical evidence for a rift in their friendship as portrayed in the film.
  11. Darwin never called himself a "scientist" (as the film suggests), and always preferred to be known by the more traditional term "naturalist" or "man of science". Darwin was very much in the mould of the traditional gentleman-natural philosopher, whereas the term "scientist" was applied more towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the newly emerging professional class who gained an income from their scientific employment.

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