

Commentary

The Darwins and the Cecils are only empty vessels

If we *men* with our fascination for the big man are going to remember Darwin, we should not forget that his thinking was also an example of a very particular evolution (Castree, 2009). Darwin came to and modified an idea already formed by others (Summerfield, 2010). Part of what was special about him, why he is now remembered, was because of how wealthy a man he was before he began to think his thoughts (Finnegan, 2010). The kernel of his big idea had already been described to him by a poorer man: Alfred Wallace (Davies, 2008). This part of the story only entered into public debate over Darwin's legacy late in that supposed anniversary year of 2009, and only after a few *fellows* of the Royal Geographical Society started a campaign named after his ship, the *Beagle* (Driver, 2010). The allegations are worth repeating:

“In 1855, Wallace's first paper on evolution prompted Charles Lyell to warn Darwin that Wallace seemed close to solving the ‘species problem’ and to urge him to publish his own theory. Three years later, while studying the fauna of the Malayan archipelago, Wallace completed his theory and sent it to Darwin from the island of Ternate on 9 March 1858. Sent to England on the same boat was a letter to Frederick Bates, who received it on 3 June. It seems that Darwin wrote to Joseph Hooker on 8 June, saying he had found the ‘missing keystone’ that enabled the completion of his evolution theory, while on 18 June, he wrote that he had just received a letter from Wallace proposing a theory of evolution identical to his own—a very suspicious chronology! Although it initially became known as the Darwin–Wallace theory, Darwin took the glory and Wallace was largely forgotten. Lacking Darwin's establishment connections, Wallace was shabbily treated” (Venables et al, 2009).

In responding to Darwin's anniversary it has already been noted by geographers that: “With the thinnest veneer of qualification, environmental determinism is back in vogue” (Kearns, 2010). So too again in vogue is eugenics, in this case with the veneer of appearing in crypto-form. ‘Crypto’ meaning the name ‘eugenics’ is no longer openly used, although the concepts are, again, now more and more frequently mentioned (Connelly, 2008). In the most unequal of affluent countries, such as the United States



Alfred R. Wallace

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913). Author of *The Geographical Distribution of Animals* (1876) and many other fine works. Social activist, land reformer, early opposer of social Darwinism and eugenics, supporter of women's suffrage and opponent of militarism. Recipient of the Royal Geographical Society's Funder's Medal in 1892. Oh—and early proposer of a theory of evolution due to natural selection...

and United Kingdom, it appears to be becoming acceptable again to talk of there being genetically inherited differences in the mental abilities of different groups of people (Dorling, 2010a). Geographers could be doing more to counter this current regressive trend, given their advantage of being well placed to remember the dismal imperialist past of their own discipline.

The idea that different people are made of different mental ‘material’ was most commonly espoused in the era of 1920s and 1930s when those who advocated the inheritability of intelligence wrote that it “is seen with especial clearness in these numerous cases—like the Cecils, or the Darwins—where intellectual ability runs in families” (Wells et al, 1931, page 823). That the offspring of such families do not now dominate intellectual life provides an extra spoonful of evidence to add to the great pile built up since the 1930s that now discredits eugenics and other such:

“foolish analogies between biology and society [whereby the world’s richest man]... Rockefeller was acclaimed the highest form of human being that evolution had produced, a use denounced even by William Graham Sumner, the great ‘Social Darwinist’ ” (Flynn, 2007, pages 147–148).

Today again a few ‘great men’ are very rich and inequalities in income, health, voting, and wealth are as wide as they were at their 1920s heights (Dorling, 2010b). Our fascination has been rekindled for myths of chaps with maps sailing across oceans in vacuums of scientific imaginative purity discovering truths just waiting to be uncovered. The big men with beards are again being venerated. We too easily forget the strangeness of the Victorian English arrogance that fuelled beliefs in the supposedly great insights of these few. The danger Hannah Arendt highlighted in the 1960s is reemerging: an “absence of thinking...the refusal to read, to think critically or deeply, the rejection of all but one or one kind of book” (Goldberg, 2009, page 373). We even usually now forget to mention the full title of Darwin’s work: *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Dorling, 2010c). And because we forget, we labour in danger of failing to notice the return (in a new form) of old evil ideas about ability and evolution.

The Charles Darwin who paced up and down the path at Down House, who collected beetles in the hills of Barmouth (where he later struggled over revisions of his text) has long ceased to exist. His name is now as much an empty vessel to be filled with the arguments of others as was his mind in the 1850s. We now keep him alive as a monster, not as he was but as how we choose him to be, and only if we choose him to be. His bushy visage adorns the reverse of the £10 note because his mythical might is valued slightly below that of Adam Smith (whose bug-eyed face is etched on every new £20 note in circulation).

Other people we choose to forget (Kundera, 1999). The circumstances might be none of our makings, but how we choose which version of those circumstances to remember will alter all our futures. Venerate Darwin as anything more than he was and you help to condemn many others to be dismissed as inadequate in a world being nastily reconstructed anew to pit the ‘favoured few’ against the ‘unfavoured masses’.

And who were the Cecils?

Exactly!

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