

## **No Faith in Hope: Darwin, Lady Hope, and the Evolution of an American Lie**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Charles Darwin did not recant his work on evolutionary biology on his deathbed. Rather, it is an apocryphal story, with some basis in fact, which became distorted with retelling over time, as well as utilized by polemicists and proselytizers to discredit Darwin.

**Keywords:** Charles Darwin, Lady Hope, evolution, deathbed, evangelicals, affidavit, converted, myth, biology, interview

## **Sin fe en la esperanza: Darwin, Lady Hope y la evolución de una mentira estadounidense**

### **RESUMEN**

Charles Darwin no se retractó de su trabajo sobre biología evolutiva en su lecho de muerte. Más bien, es una historia apócrifa, con alguna base de hecho, que se distorsionó con el tiempo y fue utilizada por polemistas y proselitistas para desacreditar a Darwin.

**Palabras clave:** Charles Darwin, Lady Hope, evolución, lecho de muerte, evangélicos, declaración jurada, convertido, mito, biología, entrevista

## **不相信霍普：达尔文、霍普夫人 以及一个美国谎言的演变**

### **摘要**

查尔斯·达尔文在临终前并未公开宣布放弃其进化生物学著作。相反，这是一个虚构的谣传，其中存在部分事实，但随着不断复述而被曲解，同时被辩论家和宗教劝导者用于质疑达尔文。

**关键词：**查尔斯·达尔文，霍普夫人，进化，临终床，基督教福音派教徒，宣誓书，信仰改变，谣传，生物学，访谈

Contrary to popular belief, Charles Darwin did not “invent” evolution or the theory of evolution. Darwin did not claim that human beings evolved from monkeys. These and other claims, also better understood as misconceptions of the central elements of evolutionary biology, have been conventionally promulgated by religious fundamentalists attempting to undermine the validity of scientific facts. In an effort to enforce the power of Abrahamic creation theology/mythology, attacks on Darwin (and his works) have been the focal point of their evangelistic strategy. One lasting claim is that Darwin recanted his scientific work and converted to Christianity on his deathbed. Apparently, none of those promulgators repeating this tale can even cite their respective sources, nor can those who claim this story has no factual merit name the origin of the source of this tale.

For the purposes of this critique, a major fundamentalist claim about the elderly and dying Darwin will be examined based on what probably occurred. There is no reliable evidence and/or testimony to substantiate Charles Darwin renounced the validity of his work on his deathbed and/or converted to Christianity. So where does this story come from and why? About a century ago American evangelicals exploited the false story that Charles Darwin recanted his scientific work to Lady Elizabeth Hope in order to discredit the teaching of evolution. Born Elizabeth Reid Cotton in Longford, Tasmania, Lady Hope (1842–1922) married into the nobility in her first union with

Admiral Sir James Hope, and after his death, to a Thomas Anthony Denny. After years of dedication to work in temperance and evangelism, she came to America in 1913 and began spreading her story of her alleged encounter with Charles Darwin.<sup>1</sup> It is unknown what the original motivation was for her to spread this story, but at the least, she could use her fame associated with her account of Darwin as a platform to continue her work. Later on, others would exploit her story for their own nefarious purposes.

Although not the first account about Darwin, Lady Hope’s account was the one that has left a popular belief amongst the evangelical culture to this day. Nor were stories of deathbed conversions or revelations original to Darwin, as they seem to have generated around anyone of celebrity-like status in which said stories would serve the proselytizing purposes of the evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> For instance, there are deathbed conversion stories about Charles II, Washington, Oscar Wilde, and even John Wayne.

It is not a coincidence that Lady Hope’s personal financial situation was pretty dismal at the time her account of her interview with Darwin gains mass attention. She had a reputation for being a spendthrift, and she had gained notoriety in 1911 and 1912 for her bankruptcy proceedings, apparently blowing through all the money left to her from both her deceased husbands. Hope also had become estranged from her stepsons, in part because she still went publicly by the noble name and title from

her first husband. Hope then relocated to the East Coast United States, in the hopes of starting over.<sup>3</sup> 1915 would be the pinnacle year for her, as this is where her place in history truly intersected with Darwin's, and the legacy passed down to evangelicals today.

Darwin and Lady Hope may have met. Furthermore, Darwin probably praised her efforts on temperance, as she was the leading crusader of the movement, and the Darwins, supporters of her social work.<sup>4</sup> However, supporting the "quality of life" work done by missionaries is not the same as supporting their theological doctrines. A biased and subjective mind can easily conflate the two overlapping elements of acts and beliefs.

Lady Hope and her story first came to public attention on August 4, 1915, at the Northfield Seminary girl's prep school in East Northfield, Massachusetts. Lady Hope was a guest speaker along with Professor A.T. Robertson (of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky). On the previous day, Robertson had given an exegesis on the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews which he developed into an admonition on Darwinism. In private the next day, Lady Hope confided in Robertson, and others there, including an editor from the Baptist *Watchman-Examiner*, her account of how she personally knew Darwin and Darwin's personal affection for the Epistle to the Hebrews.

He [Darwin in 1881] was almost bedridden for some months before he died ... I made some

allusion to the strong opinions expressed by many persons on the history of the Creation, its grandeur, and then their treatment of the earlier chapters of the Book of Genesis. [Darwin] seemed greatly distressed, his fingers twitched nervously, and a look of agony came over his face as he said: "I was a young man with uninformed ideas. I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything; and to my astonishment, the ideas took like wildfire. People made a religion of them ... I have a summerhouse in the garden, which holds about thirty people ... I want you very much to speak there ..."

"What shall I speak about?" I asked.

"CHRIST JESUS!"<sup>5</sup>

There are several elements here that, at face value, may have a hint of fact in them. Simultaneously, the claims made by subsequent promulgators of this tale do not hold up against the original transcription. First and foremost, Darwin is not dying or on his "deathbed," as Darwin died in 1882 and this interview allegedly took place the previous year. Secondly, Darwin does not make any statements that he was converting or recently had converted. Thirdly, there is no clear statement that he renounced anything, specifically his theory of natural selection. Yet a closer look at the wording reveals euphemisms for conversion and renouncement.

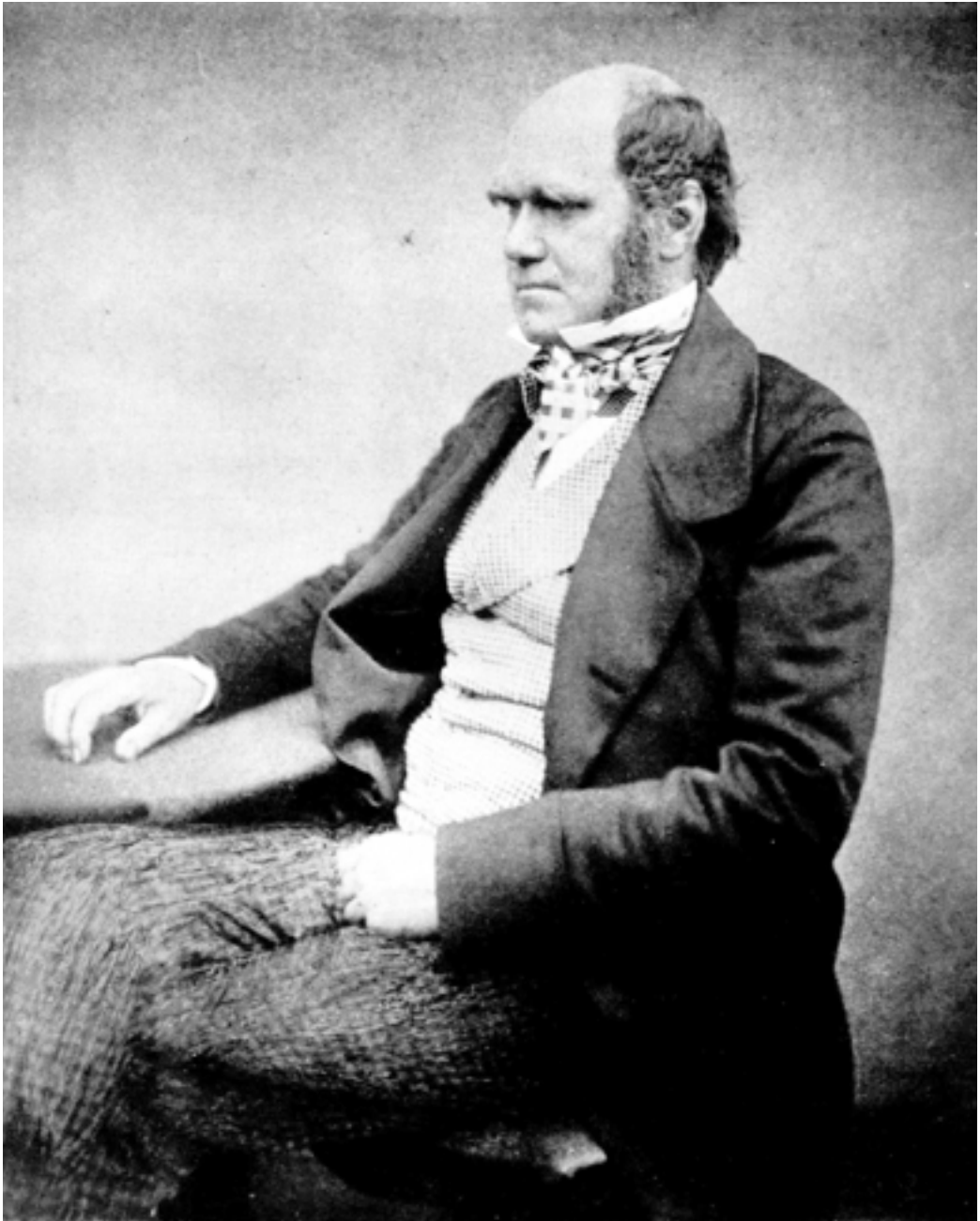
“Distressed” appears to be another way of saying Darwin regretted proposing his theory and therefore undermining the literal account of creation in Genesis. Then the reference to Darwin’s confession to being “young” and “un-informed” are also intended to have Darwin demoralize his own confidence in his work. The last part of the story, where Darwin solicits Lady Hope to preach about “Christ Jesus” is substituted for him actually verbally accepting the literal authority of scripture, as well as accepting the evangelical orthodoxy. Darwin does not outright convert or renounce, but he does allegedly say this in a more passive-aggressive language.

This, however, is just the first version of the story Lady Hope apparently gave that caught the attention it did. The story was repeated in multiple Christian publications up until the late 1920s, as well as the subject of the “Los Angeles Affidavit,” which was also the product of religious leaders to whom Lady Hope told the story. The affidavit was not just an anomaly that the fundamentalists wanted to document—they were hoping to utilize it in their crusade against the public teaching of evolution.<sup>6</sup> Their social warrior was none other than three-time failed Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925). Bryan was already on the offensive against public educators.<sup>7</sup> In order to gain Bryan’s attention, the story was transcribed into an affidavit in order to vouch for its factual accuracy by Annette Parkinson Smith, dated June 7, 1922. Smith’s letter to Bryan (excerpt below) has some interesting deviations and embellishments

from the Hope account as given in the *Watchman-Examiner*:

“Oh”! [Darwin] replied “those theories of evolution! Oh, I put out those theories when I was a young man, searching, searching for knowledge, and they made a religion of them! Oh! if I could only undo them”! and Dr. Darwin appeared much agitated as he said these words, evidently thinking that his hypothesis had done great harm. He expressed himself similarly on another occasion so that Lady Hope was quite convinced he repudiated them ... but Mrs. [Emma] Darwin, and her sons, knowing that the fame of the family rested upon said evolutionary theories,-and, probably, as one remarked to me recently,-the income from the sale of those books-did not care to welcome a visitor who brought a gospel message, and Mrs. D[arwin] showed some little (polite) displeasure when present in the room, and the gospel meeting was never held in the summer house.<sup>8</sup>

One of the cosigners of the affidavit accompanying Smith’s letter was Professor Melville Dozier (1846–1936), formerly an administrator of the college which would become UCLA and a former assistant superintendent of Los Angeles public schools. Dozier’s name as the chief signatory was meant to give some intellectual credence to the claim. Smith even cites Dozier’s credentials in the letter as a “scholar and a scientist.”<sup>9</sup>



Charles Darwin (1809-1882), circa 1854, Wikimedia Commons. Darwin was born on the same day in history as Abraham Lincoln. Darwin's contributions to the sciences, namely evolutionary biology, would become synonymous with his name.



Emma Darwin (1808-1896), portrait painting by George Richmond, Wikimedia Commons. Emma was actually a first cousin to Charles. The Darwins would have ten children together. Emma was present at Darwin's deathbed, unlike Lady Hope.

Furthermore, she closes the letter with “Every effort is needed to counteract teaching of unBiblical theories in L.A. schools, High Schools, University & c.”<sup>10</sup> There are several problems with the story attested to in the affidavit. The story now has Lady Hope meeting with Darwin several times, not just once. This time the story has Darwin clearly mentioning evolution by the term “evolution.” Additionally, Emma Darwin was not included as being present in the original account as given to the *Watchman-Examiner*. These are all significant elements that cannot be reconciled simply as Hope remembered more pertinent details as time went along. Whether the details got lost or “improved” with transmission cannot be known with certainty. Yet the closing remarks are telling in that it was obvious Smith and her group sought to exploit this story and pass it along to a man of Bryan’s notoriety and celebrity influence. In addition, it was a desperate inclusion of Prof. Dozier as a cosigner in the letter, seeing as how he was not attesting to being present when Darwin supposedly had this conversation with Lady Hope.

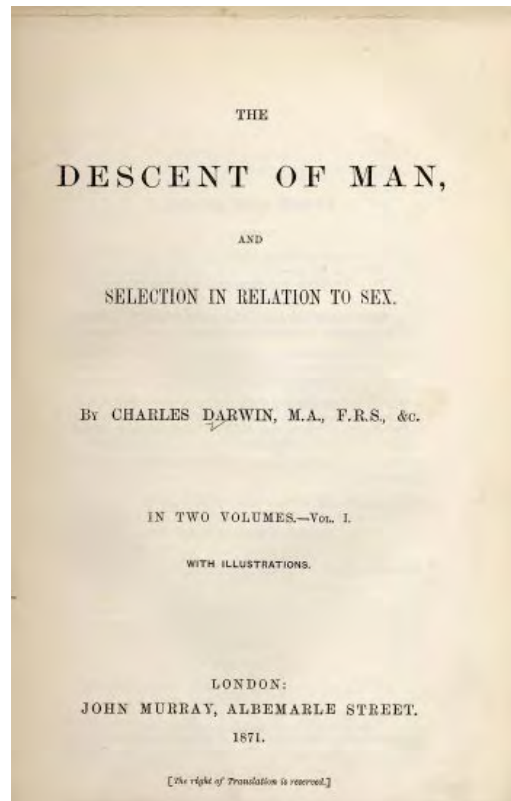
In response to Smith’s letter, Bryan stated he was familiar with Lady Hope’s account, but that it (as articulated in the letter to him) was insufficient to refute the evidence documented in his works. Furthermore, he wrote “The question is not whether Darwin at the last moment came back to Christianity—as Christians we believe we can believe this possible—but *unless he specifically repudiated his views* as to the origin of man...” (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> At first glance, this looks as though Bryan

outright rejected the story as beneficial to his cause. However, the wording in his reply seems to be a subtle implication that those attesting to in the affidavit should improve their memory of Lady Hope’s account, and then revise their statements so that the account sounded more convincing. The reason this seems likely on Bryan’s mind and explained in his response is that Smith has Lady Hope claiming Darwin wished he could “undo” his theories of evolution. Furthermore, Smith goes on to claim that Lady Hope was “quite convinced he [Darwin] repudiated them [evolution].”<sup>12</sup> In physical terms, Bryan saw the potential of the story, but currently, there was nothing kinetic and, therefore, not utilitarian. Bryan was an intellectual and an attorney-at-law and he would have known that this hearsay, especially so long after Darwin’s death, was of no value in a court of law. Then again, Bryan was also fighting in the court of public opinion, where the rules of evidence are quite different.

Next, we come to an actual professor of college biology at John Fletcher College in Iowa, Dr. S.J. Bole. In 1940, Bole published *The Battlefield of Faith* and in it, the account Lady Hope gave him of her meeting with Darwin. Bole mentioned that his undergraduate professors all accepted evolution as factual allegedly ignoring evidence against it, which he does not cite or list. Bole goes on to comment that when he was teaching at Wheaton College, he was emotionally moved by an evangelist who shared his “born again” experience after his religious convictions were destroyed by his higher learning.<sup>13</sup>

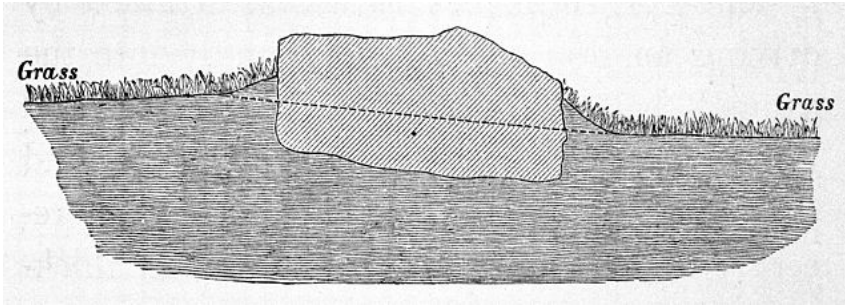
This version of the Hope story is the longest and most nuanced of all previous versions. According to Lady Hope, she had to flee England of religious persecution at the hands of the Darwin family and their partisans. Hope claimed that she did not remember what years she met with Darwin, but this time, Darwin strongly regrets his theories conflicting with the Creation story in Genesis. Bole concludes the chapter on Lady Hope claiming there are other scientific men who believe in evolution, but that: "There were and are others equally scholarly that did not and do not believe in evolution ... I often ask my students at the end of a semester's study ... to carefully give the evidence in favor of evolution. With few or no exceptions, they find it difficult ... every such course shows that nature and life on every hand speak of a Creator and a world of order."<sup>14</sup> The sum and substance of this version are very similar to the version as printed in the *Watchman-Examiner*. The emphasis this time seems to rely on Darwin's regret (or recantation). Bole claims there are other scholars who did not accept evolution but never mentions a single one. The claim by Hope that she was being persecuted is suspect: were these her words or Bole's? This sounds more like Bole is reflecting on his position now amongst men of science, or, in other words, the removal of the divine from the life sciences and classrooms is persecution against fundamentalist Christianity. And what better story to sell than one of a noble English lady being persecuted for her beliefs, as well as her encounter with the recanting Charles Darwin!

Since context is everything in history, the context of the Darwin family in Victorian times is paramount to this discussion. Darwin died a committed agnostic, but his beliefs were a source of tension between him and his wife, Emma. Emma Darwin was a devout Anglo-Unitarian. Darwin's writings and personal reflections were edited to remove some of his more controversial comments on religion.<sup>15</sup>



*The Descent of Man* (Vol.1), 1871, is the volume in which Darwin presents his "long argument" for human evolution. Wikimedia Commons. Darwin's earlier work, *On the Origin of Species*, did not deal with human evolution, or "transmutation," as it was then referred to. Darwin was correct in postulating that *homo sapiens* first appeared in Africa.



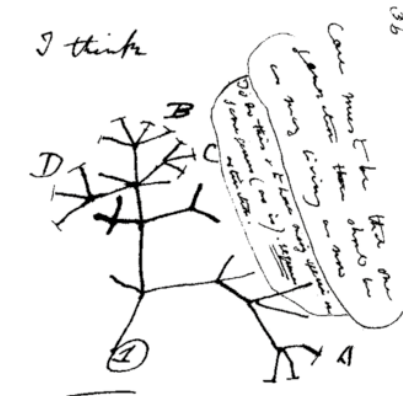


Darwin, *The Formation of the Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*, 1881. One of the Druid stones at Stonehenge. Darwin was trying to demonstrate how earthworms affect their environment. Wikimedia Commons. This book was published the year before Darwin died and contains more evidence refuting Lady Hope's claim.

One such example exemplifies this in his autobiography: "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text [the Gospels] seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."<sup>16</sup> As the autobiography editor, Nora Barlow states, these words were left out of the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* which was first published within the decade after his death which included annotations by Emma Darwin.<sup>17</sup> Those present at Darwin's death were Emma, daughters Henrietta (Litchfield) and Bessy, and son Francis.<sup>18</sup> Henrietta was later quoted in the newspaper, *The Christian*, specifically refuting Hope's story as reported and promulgated in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Later, the publication of Darwin's thoughts on religion were disputed within the family, and, via a compromise, the more polemical statements were omitted and or edit-

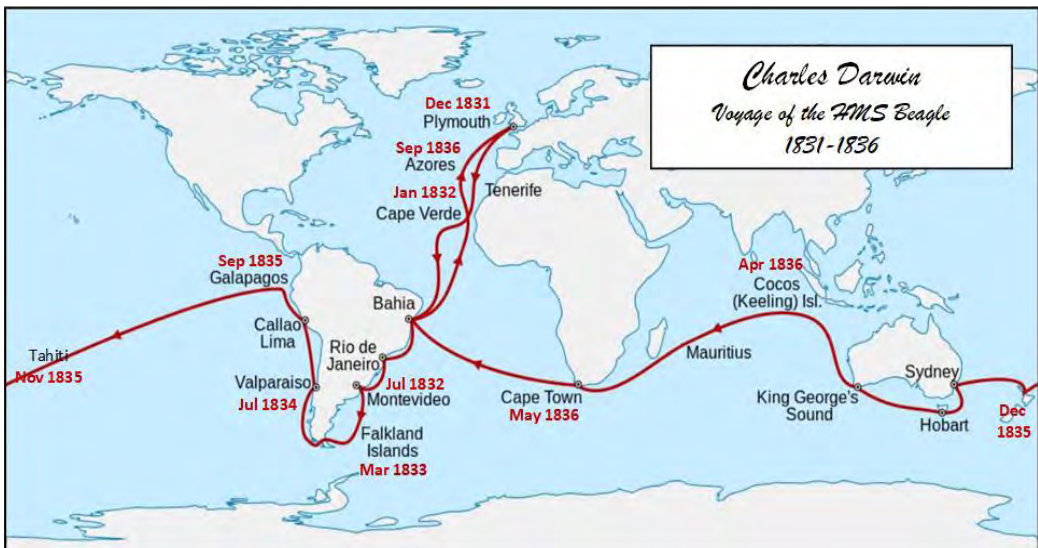
ed.<sup>20</sup> Yet in none of these intra-familial arguments was there a discussion or argument over a deathbed confession/recantation. The sum and substance of the dispute center on Darwin's lack of faith in the orthodox beliefs, personal statements which his family viewed to be contrary to his Darwin's contemporaries within Victorian England. There is no mention of a conversion, a confession, or a recantation of his scientific accomplishments. If Darwin did find a newfound faith or a major change in his religious beliefs, the perfect place to add this would have been as an annotation in the autobiography, especially given the close proximity to his death when it was published and it would have still been fresh on the family's (i.e., Emma's) memory.

Since words and opinions attributed to Darwin were and are still used against him, we should also look at words we know he wrote, and right at the time of the alleged time of his interview with Lady Hope. In Darwin's final treatise on earthworms, he states the



Then between A & B. various  
sort of relation. C & B. The  
first gradation, B & D  
rather greater distinction  
Then genus would be  
formed. - binary relation

Charles Darwin, Tree of Life diagram, Wikimedia Commons. This well-illustration adorns artwork and can be seen on even tee shirts today.



Voyage of the HMS Beagle 1831 – 1836. Wikimedia Commons augmented with additional dates by the editor. Charles Darwin's voyage aboard the *Beagle* lasted about five years. The publication of his book *Voyage of the Beagle*, which chronicled his voyage, brought him widespread acclaim and influenced his later published theories on evolution by natural selection."

following: "... but long before he [man] existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed by earth-worms."<sup>21</sup> This closing statement shows Darwin did not accept the fundamentalist/literal claim of six days of creation as worms were here long before man, not "created" at the same time or on the same day, and that the worms shaped the land, not an all-powerful omniscient deity.<sup>22</sup>

Let us return to Lady Hope herself. Having worn out her welcome in her own country, she found a more welcoming, albeit gullible audience in America.<sup>23</sup> It is doubtful that Lady Hope had the clairvoyance to see where her story may go and be further exploited a century later. More likely, she tailored the story in the hopes of showing her influence on such a famous (or infamous) man like Charles Darwin would propel her to a second proselytizing career in America. Lady Hope did not intend to interfere or undermine the public teaching of evolution. Big things tend to have little beginnings. Lady Hope's story was either invented or embellished for her own self-importance. A story where the infamous Charles Darwin simply applauded her temperance work would have no audience; a story where a repentant "devil's chaplain" confessed to her would have a mass appeal. From a social-psychological standpoint, Lady Hope needed to belong to something or some group. And what better way to gain acceptance to a group than by telling that group a story you know they would accept uncritically? The idiom "never let the truth ruin a good story" comes to mind.

In the end, this demonstrates the importance of comparing reliable primary sources (e.g., Charles and Emma Darwin), and not relying on an unsubstantiated claim by an individual of dubious background. Lady Hope was fading into obscurity at the time she initially told her story in Massachusetts. Lady Hope was penniless and was looking to curry favor with new followers and supporters. In early twentieth-century American style, her claim went viral in fundamentalist Christian culture and different groups attempted to capitalize on it to discredit the teaching of evolutionary biology. The story even reached one of the most notable public personalities of his day, William Jennings Bryan, and that was prior to him being personally contacted by the beholders of the "Los Angeles Affidavit." Bryan probably saw the potential in the account, but nothing immediately useful to his crusade. It was not enough for the father to disown the child— all evidence of the child had to be impeached.

It was probably not Lady Hope's intention to attack the teaching of evolution, but her followers obviously appropriated the story for their own disreputable purposes. Since important details in the story change with different audiences, the accounts got tailored accordingly by those transmitting them in ways they deemed necessary. The specifics and overt references to evolution also get altered with each retelling. The Darwin family claiming they were present at Darwin's death doesn't totally destroy the fable as Hope's story doesn't claim their interview was his deathbed. Darwin's own words do contradict the

recanting element implied/stated in the story, specifically in his monograph on earthworms and his autobiography. Henrietta's opinion that the story gained a threshold in America is spot on, even if her claim that she was with Darwin at his death is irrelevant given

what Hope actually says. None of the writings by Darwin, whether in his autobiography, with familial annotations, or in his last scientific publication show a man changing his long-held views on the orthodox Anglican religion.

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## Notes

- 1 James R. Moore, *The Darwin Legend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 24. This volume is unfortunately out of print. My work expands upon what Moore analyzed and his book contains many of the primary and secondary sources in question.
- 2 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 81–82.
- 3 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 89–90; J.W.C Fegan letter to J.A Kensit (of the Protestant Truth Society), May 1, 1925, in *The Darwin Legend* James R. Moore (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 156, 180.
- 4 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 22, 97; Feagen, letter to Kensit, 156; J.W.C Fegan letter to S. J. Pratt, May 22, 1925, in *The Darwin Legend*, James R. Moore (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 162.
- 5 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 91–93.
- 6 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 94, 96.
- 7 Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 55; Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith, William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 277.
- 8 Anette Parkinson Smith letter to William Jennings Bryan, June 7, 1922, in *The Darwin Legend*, James R. Moore (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 123–26.
- 9 Smith, letter to Bryan, 123–26; Melville Dozier et al., affidavit to William Jennings Bryan, in *The Darwin Legend*, James R. Moore (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 127.
- 10 Smith, letter to Bryan, Moore, 126.
- 11 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 127–28. This author’s tenth-grade biology teacher shared a similar view as William Jennings Bryan did. This author once approached the afore-

mentioned teacher, Mr. Barrow, about the claim that Darwin renounced his theory of evolution. Mr. Barrow's response did not betray whether he himself believed this story, but he simply stated that this was irrelevant; the evidence that Darwin found, and by implication, those that succeeded him also discovered, supports the theory of evolution by Natural Selection. Another high school teacher of mine, Mr. Lenhart was probably the first person to teach this author the difference between objective (scientific) source reliable sources and apologetics.

12 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 124–25.

13 Simeon James Bole, *The Battlefield of Faith* (University Park: College Press, 1940), Preface; Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 130; William Jennings Bryan "Archive Record." Nebraska State Historical Society Manuscript Collection, <http://nebraskahistory.pastperfectonline.com/archive/A8879A0B-3E29-4CEE-8E15-823224893044>.

The summary states that Bryan requested Bole, then at Wheaton College, to appear as an expert witness at the Scopes Monkey Trial; Wheaton's History. Given the liberal arts history of this institution, it is no wonder why Bole felt "persecuted" and left for John Fletcher College.

14 Bole, *Battlefield of Faith*, 166–69.

15 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 26, 36.

16 Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1992*. Edited by Nora Barlow (New York: Norton, 1993), 72.

17 Darwin, *Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Preface, 72–73.

18 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 52.

19 Henrietta Litchfield, "Charles Darwin's Death-Bed. Story of Conversion Denied," *The Christian*, (London), February 23, 1922, <https://esc.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=8651>; Emma Darwin, *Emma Darwin, A Century of Family Letters, 1792-1896*. Edited by Henrietta Litchfield, Vol. I-II (London: John Murray, 1915), 251–54. <https://archive.org/stream/emmadarwincentur01litc#page/n7/mode/2up>.

There is no mention of any religious conversion or transformation, just the memories Emma cherished with her husband. There is also no references to Hope or any female evangelist.

20 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 61–63.

21 Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 148.

22 This does not account for the conflicting versions of exactly, and in what order, mankind was created throughout Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis.

23 Moore, *Darwin Legend*, 94.