

The Darwin Legend

James Moore, historian of science at the Open University (Milton Keynes, UK)
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994; 218 pp.

Deathbed conversion stories have long been part of the lore surrounding debates about the existence of God, the strength (or weakness) of agnostic and atheistic philosophies, or the persuasive force of theism and Christianity. For many theists, so-called “last minute conversions” provide some evidence that, in the end, atheism collapses before the reality of death, as an unbeliever suddenly realizes that his existence will continue beyond the grave. Skeptics, however, have their own roster of stories, replete with atheists considering their final end with imperturbable calm (e.g., David Hume). In the origins debate, many participants have heard that very near the end of his life, Charles Darwin himself returned to the Christian faith of his early years (or became a Christian for the first time). “Lady Hope,” a suspiciously apocryphal-sounding character, is typically credited with providing this information. She is said to have discovered during a visit to Down House (Darwin’s home), that Darwin embraced Christianity

just before he died. (In fact, in the story, Lady Hope visits Darwin not strictly speaking on his “deathbed,” but in the fall of 1881, about six months before Darwin died.)

Many creationists (not to mention evolutionists) grimace on hearing this story. The Darwin of the *Autobiography*, they point out, is the Darwin of historical reality: he lost his faith inexorably, its last traces probably obliterated long before 1881 (in 1851, at the death of his beloved daughter Annie). By the time of his death Darwin was a confirmed agnostic. In any event, what difference could Darwin’s religious views possibly make to the truth of evolution? The theory must be considered on its merits. Suspiciously vague and ill-documented conversion stories belong in the dumpster of historical hokum.

Now James Moore, historian of science at the Open University (Milton Keynes, UK), has emptied that dumpster and perhaps several hundred other heaps of rubbish to get at the “truth” about the legend. (“Truth” belongs in quotations marks here, for Moore, a hard-core cultural relativist, is skeptical about its very existence. Richard

Dawkins has joked that a social constructivist at 30,000 feet — i.e., in a modern jetliner — is a hypocrite. We might paraphrase that remark to include Moore: a social constructivist who throws himself for years into pursuing documents — actual pieces of paper whose existence genuinely matters — doesn't take his social constructivism very seriously. Maybe “truth” exists after all?) In his new book *The Darwin Legend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994; 218 pp.), Moore argues that the mysterious “Lady Hope” was quite real, and left a wide trail in historical documents and other evidence. Furthermore, she almost certainly *did* visit Darwin near the end of his life. However, Moore doubts that Darwin underwent any sort of conversion (which indeed, he points out, Lady Hope never claimed).

Moore's book is documented with a rigor completely unbecoming a cultural relativist — who ought to care, as Richard Rorty argues, only about what his colleagues will let him get away with. For twenty years, Moore has run down the legend of Darwin's conversion:

My sleuthing has taken me to three continents; through acres of decaying newsprint and reams of domestic correspondence; over mountains of monographs and even on a wild goose chase into the Alleghenies....I have located over one hundred occurrences of the legend in manuscript and print, including eleven original sources, at least two of which may be unconnected with Lady Hope. I have also compiled the Darwin family's angry reaction to the conversion story in ten private and published letters. All this evidence is transcribed or fully documented in the appendixes (p. 24).

Moore establishes definitively that Lady Hope existed. Born Elizabeth Reid Cotton on December 9, 1842, in Tasmania, she lived for most of her life in England, marrying into the title she proudly claimed in public writings and appearances. After emigrating to the United States as a penurious do-gooder, she died returning to England on March 8, 1922. Furthermore, Moore concludes, Lady Hope probably did meet with Darwin in the autumn of 1881. Her story contains “startling elements of authenticity” (p. 94) and “has the ring of truth about it” (p. 97), in providing details that only an actual visitor could know. Moore, who as the leading biographer of Darwin may know more about the minutiae of the Sage of Downe's life than anyone now alive, draws on a fund of details about Darwin's family life and the physical setting of Down House. The particulars of Lady Hope's account could be known only to someone, Moore believes, who actually visited the house and conversed with Darwin.

It is unlikely however, argues Moore, that Darwin changed his views of Christianity. From the 1840s to his death, Darwin abjured Biblical revelation, regarding the doctrine of eternal damnation as “damnable,” and privately encouraged his atheistic correspondents to avoid direct attacks on religion — not because Christianity was true, however. There were better tactics to employ. “The gradual illumination of men's minds,” Darwin claimed, followed best “from the advance of science” (p. 49). Moore finds it incredible that these entrenched views could be overthrown as Darwin saw the end of his life approaching.

In a recent lecture at Wheaton College (on April 1, 1995), Moore observed that his friend Fred Burkhardt, an editor employed in

the Darwin Correspondence project at Cambridge, worried that Moore's book would revive the legend of Darwin's conversion. There seems little doubt that Moore's meticulous documentation has proved beyond question the reality of Lady Hope. Yet the weight of evidence — for those who value the evidence, and trust James Moore to the extent that such evidence actually exists (thus, who are *not* social constructivists) — still weighs against Darwin's "conversion." In any case, the theory of evolution has a life of its own. Its truth or falsity must be considered even if Darwin was taken up to heaven by a crowd of angels.