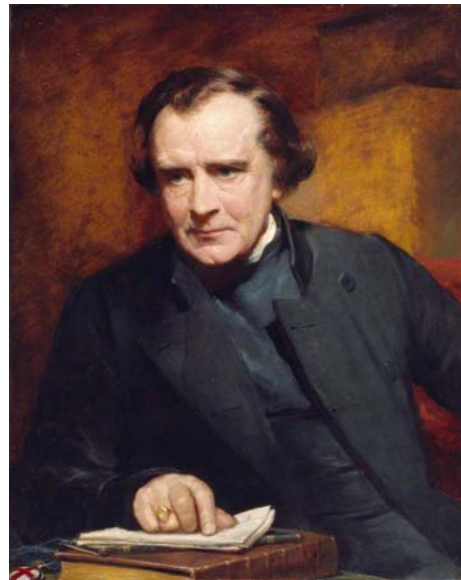


Huxley-Wilberforce Debate



Dr. George W Benthien

August 16, 2014

E-mail: george@gbenthien.net

The Huxley-Wilberforce debate is often given as an example of the warfare between Science and Christian faith. Here is the usual telling of the story [1]

On Saturday, 30 June, Samuel Wilberforce, the powerful Bishop of Oxford, debated Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwins friend and chief scientific defender. Wilberforce, known as “Soapy Sam” for his smoothness and rhetorical slipperiness in debate, offered a lengthy denunciation of Darwins theory, ridiculing it and declaring it to be at odds with Scripture. As he closed his remarks, Wilberforce turned to Huxley and sneeringly asked him if it was through his grandfather or grandmother that he claimed descent from apes. The audience cheered. Huxley turned to the man seated next to him and whispered, “The Lord hath delivered him into mine hands.” Rising to his feet, Huxley responded that he would rather have an ape for an ancestor than a bishop who distorted the truth. This rebuke brought the audience around to Huxleys side, their laughter and roars of approval greater than for Wilberforces jibe. Huxley had won an audience mostly hostile to evolution to his side. It was a turning point not merely in the fortunes of Darwinism but in the history of science, the day when Darwins theory earned the right to a fair hearing and science threw off the shackles of religious authority.

Most historians now agree that the traditional telling of this story is largely myth. The legend was developed in the 1880s and 1890s, more than 20 years after the event. It was constructed almost exclusively by supporters of Darwin. Key portions of the story appeared in the biographies of Darwin and Huxley written by their sons Francis Darwin and Leonard Huxley [2][3]. An eye-witness version, entitled “A Grandmother’s tales” appeared in the October 1898 issue of Macmillan’s Magazine [4]. Here is a portion of that article

I was happy enough to be present on the memorable occasion at Oxford when Mr Huxley bearded Bishop Wilberforce. There were so many of us that were eager to hear that we had to adjourn to the great library of the Museum. I can still hear the American accents of Dr Draper’s opening address, when he asked ‘Are we a fortuitous concourse of atoms?’ and his discourse I seem to remember somewhat dry. Then the Bishop rose, and in a light scoffing tone, florid and he assured us there was nothing in the idea of evolution; rock-pigeons were what rock-pigeons had always been. Then, turning to his antagonist with a smiling insolence, he begged to know, was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey? On this Mr Huxley slowly and deliberately arose. A slight tall figure stern and pale, very quiet and very grave, he stood before us, and spoke those tremendous words words which no one seems sure of now, nor I think, could remember just after they were spoken, for their meaning took away our breath, though it left us in no doubt as to what it was. He was not ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor; but he would

be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth. No one doubted his meaning and the effect was tremendous. One lady fainted and had to be carried out: I, for one, jumped out of my seat; and when in the evening we met at Dr Daubeney's, every one was eager to congratulate the hero of the day.

The remark “The Lord hath delivered him into mine hands” is not mentioned in any of the contemporary articles, papers, and letters, even those by Huxley. It appears to have been a later addition to the story. The fact that this story was developed by Darwinians long after the event doesn't prove that the story is false, but it does raise doubts about its accuracy and objectivity.

So what do we actually know about this encounter. It wasn't an actual debate, but occurred during the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science that was held in the newly constructed Oxford Science Museum.



Figure 1: Oxford Science Museum

It occurred during a discussion period following a paper by John Draper entitled “Darwinism and Human Society.” There had been great public interest in Darwin's “On

the Origin of Species” that was published 8 months prior to the meeting. A large crowd of more than 700 had assembled since it was rumored that Samuel Wilberforce, a well known public speaker, would present a rebuttal to Darwin’s ideas at this meeting. There was no written proceedings of this meeting so we must rely on outside sources for any information on what actually happened. There were two journalistic accounts of the meeting. Neither of these articles mentioned the Bishop’s question to Huxley. The following is a portion of one of the journalist’s account that appeared in the Athenaeum [5]

Yet the main interest of the week has unquestionably centred in the Sections, where the intellectual activities have sometimes breathed over the courtesies of life like a sou’wester, cresting the waves of conversation with white and brilliant foam. The flash, and play, and collisions in these sections have been as interesting and amusing to the audiences as the Battle at Farnborough or the Volunteer Review to the general British Public. The Bishop of Oxford has been famous in these intellectual contests, but Dr Whewell, Lord Talbot de Malahide, Prof. Sedgwick, Mr Crawford, and Prof. Huxley have each found foemen worth of their steel, and have made their charges and countercharges very much to their own satisfaction and the delight of their respective friends. The chief cause of contention has been the new theory of the Development of Species by Natural Selection — a theory open — like the Zoological Gardens (from a particular cage in which it draws so many laughable illustrations) to a good deal of personal quizzing, without, however, seriously crippling the usefulness of the physiological investigation on which it rests. The Bishop of Oxford came out strongly against a theory which holds it possible that man may be descended from an ape — in which protest he is sustained by Prof. Owen, Sir Benjamin Brodie, Dr Daubeny, and the most eminent naturalists assembled at Oxford. But others conspicuous among them Prof. Huxley have expressed their willingness to accept, for themselves as well as for their friends and enemies, all actual truths, even the last humiliating truth of a pedigree not registered in the Herald’s College. The dispute has at least made Oxford uncommonly lively during the week.

It appears that it was a lively discussion with both sides skillfully presenting their arguments to the delight of their followers. If Wilberforce did put a question to Huxley concerning his ancestral preference and Huxley did make a witty reply, it didn’t seem that the journalists present took much notice.

There were several letters, written shortly after the meeting, that provide some hints on what actually took place. The first was a letter written by Joseph Hooker, the Assistant Director of the Kew gardens, to Darwin on July 2, 1860. He wrote the following

Well, Sam Oxon got up and spouted for half an hour with inimitable spirit, ugliness and emptiness and unfairness . . . Huxley answered admirably and

turned the tables, but he could not throw his voice over so large an assembly, nor command the audience; and he did not allude to Sam's weak points nor put the matter in a form or way that carried the audience. The battle waxed hot. Lady Brewster fainted, the excitement increased as others spoke; my blood boiled, I felt myself a dastard; now I saw my advantage; I swore to myself that I would smite that Amalekite, Sam, hip and thigh if my heart jumped out of my mouth, and I handed my name up to the President (Henslow) as ready to throw down the gauntlet . . . Then I smashed him amid rounds of applause.

It is obvious that Hooker thought that he was the champion of the day. He didn't think that Huxley got through to the audience.

A second letter was from John Richard Green to Sir William Boyd on July 3, 1860. Commenting on Wilberforce he said

Up rose Wilberforce and proceeded to act as the Smasher. The white chokers (clergymen) who were present cheered lustily . . . as Samuel rattled on — 'He had been told that Professor Huxley had said that he didn't see that it mattered much to a man whether his grandfather was an ape or no! — Let the learned Professor speak for himself' and the like.

and commenting on Huxley he said

Huxley — young, cool, quiet, sarcastic, scientific in fact and in treatment gave his Lordship such a smashing. . . . This was the exordium 'I asserted, and I repeat, that a man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for a grandfather. If there were an ancestor whom I should feel shame in recalling, it would rather be a man, a man of restless and versatile intellect, who, not content with an equivocal success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric, and distract the attention of the hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to religious prejudice.

Some of Green's comments are confirmed in a letter from Balfour Stewart to David Forbes on July 4, 1860. He wrote *The Bishop said he had been informed that Prof. Huxley had said that he didn't care whether his grandfather was an ape*

Here is part of a letter that Huxley wrote to Henry Dyster on September 9, 1860.

Samuel thought it was a fine opportunity for chaffing a savan [sic] However he performed the operation vulgarly and I determined to punish him

— partly on that account and partly because he talked pretentious nonsense. So when I got up I spoke pretty much to the effect — that I had listened with great attention to the Lord Bishop’s speech but had been unable to discover either a new fact or a new argument in it — except indeed the question raised as to my personal predilections in the matter of ancestry — That it would not have occurred to me to bring forward such a topic as that for discussion myself, but that I was quite ready to met the Right Revd. prelate even on that ground — If then, said I, the question is put to me would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence and yet who employs those faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion — I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape. Whereupon there was inextinguishable laughter among the people — and they listened to the rest of my argument with the greatest attention. . . . I believe I was the most popular man in Oxford for full four and twenty hours afterwards.

Huxley’s wording “If then, said I, the question is put to me” seems to imply that the question wasn’t put to him. Clearly, Huxley thought he had put the Bishop in his place.

Wilberforce also thought that he was the winner in this confrontation. Here is what he said in a letter to Sir Charles Anderson on July 3, 1860

On Saturday Professor Henslow . . . called on me by name to address the Section on Darwin’s theory. So I could not escape and had quite a long fight with Huxley. I think I thoroughly beat him.

Little is known about how the audience as a whole viewed the event. However, it is doubtful that it represented an overwhelming victory for Darwinism as is sometimes portrayed. First of all, the audience contained a large number of clergy who were opposed to Darwinism. In addition, it is known that one of the early converts to Darwinism, Henry Baker Tristram, de-converted as a result of the discussions following Draper’s talk. Alfred Newton, who was responsible for converting Tristram to Darwinism, said that Tristram “waxed exceedingly wroth as the discussion went on and declared himself more and more anti-Darwinian.”

The traditional account implies that Wilberforce based his arguments largely on scripture. That is not likely. Five weeks earlier Wilberforce had written a review of Darwin’s *Origin of species*, which was published in the July issue of *The Quarterly Review* [6]. In this review he states the following

Our readers will not have failed to notice that we have objected to the views with which we are dealing solely on scientific grounds. We have done so from our fixed conviction that it is thus that the truth or falsehood of such arguments should be tried. We have no sympathy with those

who object to any facts or alleged facts in nature, or to any inference logically deduced from them, because they believe them to contradict what it appears to them is taught by Revelation. We think that all such objections savour of a timidity which is really inconsistent with a firm and well-intrusted faith.

Wilberforce spoke for about 30 minutes following Draper's presentation and his talk was likely a condensed version of his paper in the Quarterly Review. Darwin himself spoke favorably of Wilberforce's article. In a letter to Hooker he stated *I have just read the 'Quarterly.' It is uncommonly clever; it picks out with skill all the most conjectural parts, and brings forward well all the difficulties. It quizzes me quite splendidly. . . .*

If indeed the traditional story about the debate is largely myth, why has it endured so long? The reason most often given is that there was a change taking place in the way science was done. At the beginning of the 19th century, as in previous centuries, science was not really a profession. It was more like a hobby for some of society's elite, many of whom were members of the clergy. By the 1860s there were a few young men, like Huxley, who were trained in science and wanted to make science a career. They resented amateurs like Wilberforce speaking out on matters of science. Thus, they saw that the story of Huxley getting the best of the famous Bishop could serve their ends of creating a closed scientific community where only those trained in science were welcome. Huxley himself had no love for the clergy and took every opportunity to diminish their role in science. In fact, later on he refused to believe that some members of the clergy actually accepted evolution. In the twenty years following the debate there was a changing of the guard in science, and science did become a legitimate profession. It was certainly beneficial to science to have scientists committed full-time to scientific inquiry. However, to exclude interested parties outside of science is not necessary or desirable. Thus, the quarrel with Wilberforce was not so much over what he said as with what he represented. To classify this event as a battle between science and religion is far too simple a view. For a more extensive treatment of the Huxley-Wilberforce debate I would recommend the papers by Lucas [7], Brooke [8], and Smith [1] as well as the article in the American Scientist [9].

References

- [1] Smith, Jonathan, *The Huxley-Wilberforce 'Debate' on Evolution, 30 June 1860*, BRANCH: Britain Representation and Nineteenth-Century History, Ed. Dino Franco Felluga, available on the web at http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=jonathan-smith-the-huxley-wilberforce-debate-on-evolution-30-june-1860.
- [2] Darwin, Francis, **The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin**, 3 vols, London: Murray (1887).
- [3] Huxley, Leonard, **Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley**, 2 vols, London: Macmillan (1900).
- [4] Sidgwick, Isabello, *A Grandmothers Tales*, Macmillan's Magazine, LXXVIII, no. 468, October (1898) .
- [5] The Athenaeum, p.19, col i.
- [6] Wilberforce, Samuel, *Darwin's Origin of Species*, Quarterly Review, 108 (1860).
- [7] Lucas, J.R., *Wilberforce and Huxley: A Legendary Encounter*, The Historical Journal, 2, pp 313–330 (1979), it can be found on the web at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~jrlucas/legend.html>.
- [8] Brooke, John H., *The Wilberforce-Huxley Debate: Why Did It Happen?*, Science and Christian Belief, **13**, No. 2, 127–141 (2001), it can be found on the web at https://www.scienceandchristianbelief.org/serve_pdf_free.php?filename=SCB+13-2+Hedley+Brooke.pdf.
- [9] Thomson, Keith, *Huxley, Wilberforce and the Oxford Museum*, American Scientist (2000), available on the web at <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/huxley-wilberforce-and-the-oxford-museum>.