



ANZTLA Keynote Address: “Evolution in the Antipodes”


by Tom Frame

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In the prologue to the first part of his novel *Don Quixote*, Cervantes tells an ‘imaginary friend’ of fearing that his book – which does not have margin comments, footnotes or even a bibliography – will not be taken seriously by readers accustomed to such embellishments, even in works of fiction. Cervantes’ friend waves away his concerns, saying these deficiencies are easily remedied. He suggests a series of enhancements to give the book the appearance of education and erudition before coming to the bibliography which the friend explains serves to locate his work in the wider body of extant scholarship. This is his advice: “The remedy is simplicity itself, because all you have to do is look for a book listing authors cited from A to Z, then copy this list into your own book and even if your deception is plain to see, this won’t matter in the slightest, because you hardly need to use the authors anyway, and there could always be someone stupid enough to believe that you have used them all in this simple, straightforward story of yours. Even if it serves no other purpose, your long list will at least lend your book an instant air of authority. Besides, people aren’t going to take the trouble to check whether you follow your authors or not, because they haven’t anything to gain from doing so’. These words were published in 1605.

Nearly three centuries later, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who set himself implacably against Christianity, outlines his life’s work in a very small book called *Ecce Homo*. In the context of discussing his central project – the reevaluation of all values and the importance of someone becoming what they are – Nietzsche turns on those who refuse to face life and themselves by retreating into books and authors. He claimed that the scholar who is preoccupied with books ‘finally loses altogether the ability to think for himself’. Why? Because ‘he replies to a stimulus (a thought he has read) when he thinks – finally he does nothing but react’. Nietzsche goes on: ‘the scholar expends his entire strength in affirmation and denial, in criticising what has already been thought – he himself no longer thinks ... The instinct for self defence has in this case become soft; otherwise he would defend himself against books. The scholar – a decadent. This I have seen with my own eyes: natures gifted, rich and free already in their thirties ‘read to ruins’, mere matches that have to be struck if they are to ignite – emit ‘thoughts’.’ Shortly after completing *Ecce Homo* (translated: *Behold the Man*), Nietzsche was committed to an asylum and remained there until his death in 1900.

I expect to see the burning of effigies of both Cervantes and Nietzsche later this evening!



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In scholarly work and particularly in academic publishing, the challenge is finding the balance between reading too little and reading too much. It is important to be conscious of what previous writers have produced and where one’s own work is situated but not to become preoccupied with what others have said, leaving no space for one’s own thought and ideas. This is not easy even for the accomplished scholar. If there is a tendency among students, even PhD candidates, they are rather undisciplined in their reading (and why not, it is a pleasurable activity) ... on the one hand, believing they are the first to hew the ground or, on the other, thinking they need to dig deep in order to find a speck of gold. I have published several books over the last few years which you might say have explored uncharted territory on the one hand, and covered ground already trampled flat on another. My history of Mount Stromlo Observatory and even my biography of Harold Holt drew on vast quantities of primary source material that had never been consulted by scholars. My account of the loss of HMAS *Sydney* and my ethical critique of reproductive technologies (*Children on Demand: The Ethics of Defying Nature*) needed to carefully stake out the particular contribution I was trying to make as so many have ventured into print on both these subjects.

My most recent book, *Evolution in the Antipodes: Charles Darwin and Australia*, is difficult in this sense to locate. An enormous amount has been written about Darwin’s life and times. There are more than twenty major biographies, including Janet Brown’s two volumes which are probably the benchmark. Darwin himself published millions of words in books, pamphlets and papers. There is also the Darwin correspondence project hosted by Cambridge University which aims to make every letter Darwin wrote and received available electronically, including a letter from Darwin to an Adelaide researcher recently ‘rediscovered’ in the State Library of South Australia.

Charles Darwin is, then, an illustration of the problem facing contemporary scholars and students. There is so much material (masses of it, in fact) that one wonders whether there is anything left to say that hasn’t already been said or whether anything accurate can be said about Darwin and his work without familiarity with all of these sources. With so much material available where or how are fresh insights to be found? Notwithstanding the library of books dealing with the great naturalist that already existed when my attention turned to Darwin in 2007, I felt there was still a great deal yet to be said depending, of course, upon your purpose and interests. I decided to devote my energies to looking closely at three things.

The first was Darwin’s evolving religious beliefs and the extent to which the natural sciences determined his theological convictions. I wanted to devise a chronology that showed why he questioned and then set aside orthodox Christianity, when he shifted from a form of rationalist theism and drifted into a fairly abstract deism, and what



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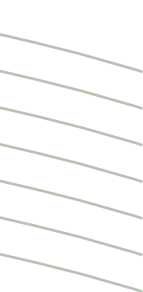
led him into agnosticism but not atheism. Given the claims made for the religious impact of Darwin’s scientific work, I wanted to explore their impact on his life and thinking.

The second area of interest for me was Australian reactions to Darwinian thinking – both secular and religious – in an attempt to determine whether Australians were more or less sympathetic, and more or less open to accept evolutionary thinking, than were the British and Americans in the period to 1900. I was also keen to see whether clergy and laity had differing views, and whether denomination was an operative factor in receptivity to the conclusions of natural history.

My third special interest was in the longer term application of evolutionary theory and its appropriation by disciplines far removed from biology. From what I could detect, evolutionary theory is the new metanarrative, the big story that replaced the Christian account of human history, although most Australians think it is synonymous with progress and the inexorable upward and onward march of human civilisation.

In setting myself these three principal areas of inquiry, I found there was plenty of scope to produce a work that made some contribution to the evolving field of Darwin studies ... and in this bicentenary year of his birth, which is also the sesquicentennial of the first release of *Origin of Species*, I was not the only author to think they had ideas worth publishing in a book. But in publishing a book on evolutionary theory I also felt the need to include a few caveats and qualifications. I explained to readers that I am neither a biologist nor a geologist, so in coming to understand the ideas, concepts, theories and objections associated with evolutionary theory I have relied upon my academic colleagues in the Faculty of Science at Charles Sturt University. In most of my conversations with scientists concerning explanations of human life and its origins, I confess to some surprise at the lack of familiarity of academics in one discipline with the interests and insights of those in others. Nor am I immune to this myself. It was a revelation to find that biologists, geologists and psychologists are turning their minds to questions of equal interest to philosophers, sociologists and theologians.

If there was one discipline group that particularly disappointed me, it was the theologians. Apart from those scholars who are interested in the interactions between science and religion, questions and debates about evolution seem to bypass most theological colleges and their curricula. Those seeking ordination and a vocation that includes public discussion of ideas about the origin and destiny of human life can easily ignore and even avoid any consideration of the continuing ‘Darwinian controversy’. It is considered a ‘non-core’ issue in some religious communities, although there are contemporary interpretations of evolutionary theory that leave no room for God and little scope for religion. At St Mark’s, evolutionary theory, ‘Creation Science’ and ‘Intelligent Design’ have been included



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in an ‘apologetics’ module undertaken by ordination candidates. This is manifestly inadequate but it is a necessary start if religious leaders are to discern what is at stake in community discourse and contribute responsibly to issues that influence belief and doubt. I thought that providing readers with this background might help them to appreciate my extended treatment of the interactions between Darwinian theory and theistic religion.

Let me quickly cover the contents of the book. The first two chapters are essentially contextual and biographical.

They depict the mood of the period in which Darwin was born, particularly its nautical, religious and scientific elements, and the major events in Darwin’s life. In chapter 3 I explain the context of HMS *Beagle*’s three great expeditions before turning to Darwin’s involvement in the second of them. I offer some detailed comment in chapter 4 on the young naturalist’s response to what he observed in Australia. The fifth chapter deals with the development of Darwin’s theories on evolution and the production of his most wellknown work, *On the Origin of Species*. I provide a crosssection of his contemporaries’ reactions to his theories in the Australian colonies and outline early efforts to extend their application in chapters 6 and 7. I have devoted chapters 8 and 9 to an extended discussion of Darwin’s own theological views and his religious disposition, because Darwin’s admission of agnosticism has played a significant part in reactions to his work, especially more recent claims that accepting evolutionary theory means embracing atheism. Chapter 10 tracks the longrunning debate on what has been called ‘Creation Science’ – the most strident religious reaction to Darwinian theory – as it has been played out principally in the United States. In chapter 11 I deal with some more recent religious views on the origin and forms of life and explain why Australia has never hosted its own version of the infamous trial (Tennessee ‘Scopes’ of 1925), drawing on recent personal correspondence with the leaders of the ‘Creation Science’ movement in Australia and their principal opponents. Chapter 12 is essentially a survey of the inclusion (or exclusion) of Darwinian theories in Australian primary and secondary schools’ science curricula, and the emergence of the ‘Intelligent Design’ movement – another response to Darwinism – in the United States, and reactions to it in Australia. In chapter 13 I briefly examine the work of neoDarwinians and the influence of Darwin’s work beyond the natural sciences. Chapter 14 assesses the overall influence and enduring impact of Darwin and his writings on Australian life.

In a postscript, I offer my personal view of evolutionary theory. Briefly, I find the theory of evolution by natural selection to be a compelling and persuasive account of the origin and forms of life. That said, I cannot make sense of this world and my own life without recourse to a belief in the existence of God and the operation of providence. I believe that God works through natural processes rather than apart from them, and is actually revealed through those



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processes.

It would not have been possible for me to produce this book within a very tight research and writing schedule without the assistance of the St Mark’s Librarians – particularly Kaye Malins. Kaye was not only able to find the obscure articles I wanted, she was able to locate some that were even more obscure. The experience of this book, and the others I have written since arriving at St Mark’s in late 2006, lead me to make some general observations with which I will close.

The first is this: the primary assets of a theological college are its staff and its library. I was once heard to say that if the buildings burnt down the staff could continue to teach. I am not sure that this is really true. The library is indispensable to our operations and we need to ensure it is esteemed and appreciated, protected and preserved.

My second observation is this: scholars in the discipline of theology rely increasingly on librarians for advice and assistance to fight their way through the deluge of dross to find the gold. A lot of books are published and a lot of information is accumulated. Librarians are crucial to the future of theological scholarship.

To my third observation: theology is a specialist subject requiring specialist insight into the subtle distinctions of the discipline of theology. I am constantly surprised (although I shouldn’t be) by the capacity of librarians to get a feel for the names of the accomplished authors and an acquaintance with the quality works in a raft of subdisciplines. In addition to becoming familiar with the collection and the finding aids, I have found theological librarians establish a rapport with the main debates and the latest texts worth consulting.

My final observation is this: in gaining expertise through the accumulation of experience, librarians need to remain in the discipline. They might be better paid elsewhere but service in a theological library is a calling. I want to commend it and encourage those who are theological librarians. Given this is meant to be a keynote address, I hope that these remarks might have struck a chord with the ANZTLA conference delegates. I hope your time in Canberra is both productive and blessed.