
How dangerous was Darwin?



Activity 1: Unexpected news
50 Minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[How dangerous was Darwin?](#)

What do I need?

Letter 2285: Darwin to Charles Lyell, 18 June 1858

Letter 2294: Darwin to Charles Lyell, 25 June 1858

Letter questions: Unexpected news

Who's who

In 1858 Darwin received a letter from Alfred Wallace that threatened to undermine years of his own research. Read about his dilemma in his letters to his friend Charles Lyell. Write a diary entry that expresses his concerns.

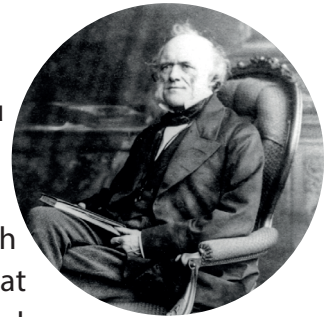
What do I do?

1. Read through the letters sent from Darwin to his friend Charles Lyell and answer the questions.
2. Imagine you are Darwin and write a diary entry outlining how you might be feeling.
3. Discuss what insights letters can give us into historical events compared to other types of sources. What might the advantages and disadvantages of using letters in historical research be?

Letter 2285: Charles Darwin to his friend Charles Lyell

My dear Lyell

Some year or so ago, you recommended me to read a paper by Wallace in the Annals, which had interested you & as I was writing to him, I knew this would please him much, so I told him. He has to day sent me the enclosed & asked me to forward it to you. It seems to me well worth reading. Your words have come true with a vengeance that I shd. be forestalled. You said this when I explained to you here very briefly my views of "Natural Selection" depending on the Struggle for existence.— I never saw a more striking coincidence. if Wallace had my M.S. sketch written out in 1842 he could not have made a better short abstract! Even his terms now stand as Heads of my Chapters.



Please return me the M.S. which he does not say he wishes me to publish; but I shall of course at once write & offer to send to any Journal. So all my originality, whatever it may amount to, will be smashed. Though my Book, if it will ever have any value, will not be deteriorated; as all the labour consists in the application of the theory.

I hope you will approve of Wallace's sketch, that I may tell him what you say.

My dear Lyell
Yours most truly
C. Darwin

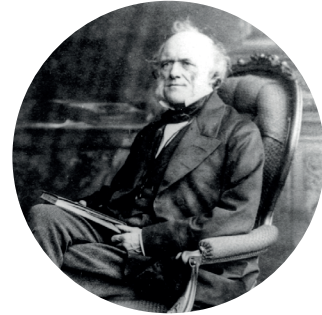
A large, elegant handwritten signature of Charles Darwin in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a circular portrait of Darwin.



Letter 2294: Charles Darwin to Charles Lyell, 25 June 1858

My dear Lyell

I am very very sorry to trouble you, busy as you are, in so merely personal an affair. But if you will give me your deliberate opinion, you will do me as great a service, as ever man did, for I have entire confidence in your judgment & honour.—...



There is nothing in Wallace's sketch which is not written out much fuller in my sketch copied in 1844, & read by Hooker some dozen years ago. About a year ago I sent a short sketch of which I have copy of my views (owing to correspondence on several points) to Asa Gray, so that I could most truly say & prove that I take nothing from Wallace. I shd. be extremely glad now to publish a sketch of my general views in about a dozen pages or so. But I cannot persuade myself that I can do so honourably. Wallace says nothing about publication, & I enclose his letter.— But as I had not intended to publish any sketch, can I do so honourably because Wallace has sent me an outline of his doctrine?— I would far rather burn my whole book than that he or any man shd. think that I had behaved in a paltry spirit. Do you not think his having sent me this sketch ties my hands? I do not in least believe that that he originated his views from anything which I wrote to him...

...This is a trumpery affair to trouble you with; but you cannot tell how much obliged I shd. be for your advice.—

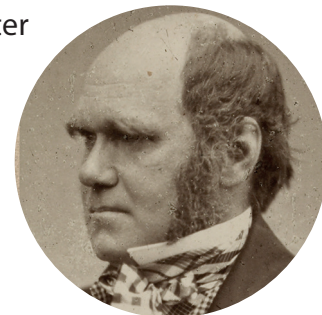
By the way would you object to send this & your answer to Hooker to be forwarded to me, for then I shall have the opinion of my two best & kindest friends.— This letter is miserably written & I write it now, that I may for time banish whole subject. And I am worn out with musing.

My good dear friend forgive me.— This is a trumpery letter influenced by trumpery feelings.

Yours most truly

C. Darwin

I will never trouble you or Hooker on this subject again.



Letter questions: Unexpected news

1. In letter 2285, why is Darwin worried that Wallace has ideas so similar to his own?
2. In letter 2294, how does Darwin show that he has already produced and shared ideas similar to those of Wallace?
3. Why does Darwin say that receiving Wallace's sketch 'ties his hands'?
4. From both letters, what does Darwin feel that he should do and what does he fear the outcome will be if he does?

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Who's who?

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) was a naturalist who established natural selection as the mechanism for the process of evolution. He joined the voyage of HMS *Beagle* when he was 22, a journey he described as the 'most fortunate circumstance in my life'. He wrote to around 2000 correspondents all over the world as a means to inform his research. Most famously he published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, but he researched and wrote extensively on natural history throughout his life.



Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot)

Mary Ann Evans (1819-80) was a celebrated Victorian novelist who wrote under the name George Eliot. Darwin and his family enjoyed her novels. She met Darwin and exchanged letters with him regarding a visit by his daughter and son in law.

Image of Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG 1405. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0



Joseph Hooker

Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817–1911) was a botanist who worked chiefly on taxonomy and plant geography. Hooker accompanied James Clark Ross on his Antarctic expedition (1839–43) and later publishing the botanical results of the voyage. He was appointed palaeobotanist to the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1846. He travelled in the Himalayas (1847–50) and introduced many plants to Britain for the first time. He became Assistant director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew from 1855 to 1865 and was made director in 1865. He held the post for 20 years and was knighted in 1877. He was a trusted colleague, close friend and confidant of Charles Darwin for most of his life.



How dangerous was Darwin: Who's who?

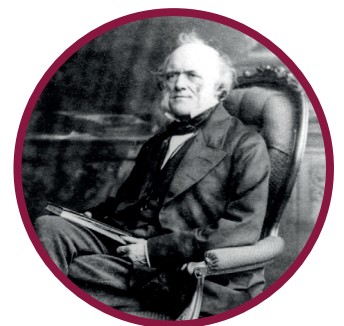
Thomas Huxley

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) was a zoologist and professor in natural history. He was appointed naturalist to the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1855 and was president of the Royal Society of London (1883–5). He was a friend and staunch supporter of Darwin who became known as 'Darwin's bulldog' for his defence of Darwin's ideas.



Charles Lyell

Charles Lyell (1797-1875) was a Scottish Uniformitarian geologist. His publications, *Principles of Geology* (1830–3), *Elements of Geology* (1838), and *Antiquity of Man* (1863) appeared in many editions. He was Professor of geology, King's College, London. He was appointed President of the Geological Society of London, and president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He travelled widely and published accounts of his trips to the United States. He was knighted in 1848 and created a baronet in 1864. He was a scientific mentor and close friend of Charles Darwin.



Adam Sedgwick

Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873) was a Geologist and clergyman. He was Woodwardian Professor of geology at Cambridge University for 55 years. He became President of the Geological Society of London and president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a mentor to Darwin and remained in contact for many years.



Image of Adam Sedgwick ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG D5929. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

How dangerous was Darwin: Who's who?

Alfred Wallace

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) was a Naturalist. He went on expeditions to the Amazon, between 1848 and 1852 and to the Malay Archipelago, from 1854 to 1862. He independently formulated a theory of evolution by natural selection in 1858. He was a lecturer and author of works on protective coloration, mimicry, and zoogeography. He was made President of the Land Nationalisation Society in 1881. He wrote widely on socialism, spiritualism, and vaccination.

Image of Alfred Russel Wallace © University of Manchester. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



Samuel Wilberforce

Samuel Wilberforce (1805 –1873) was a Church of England Bishop who was nicknamed 'Soapy Sam' for his slippery and evasive qualities, and for his habit of wringing his hands together. He was Bishop of Oxford from 1845 to 1869. He is most remembered for his strong opposition to Darwin's theory of natural selection.

