

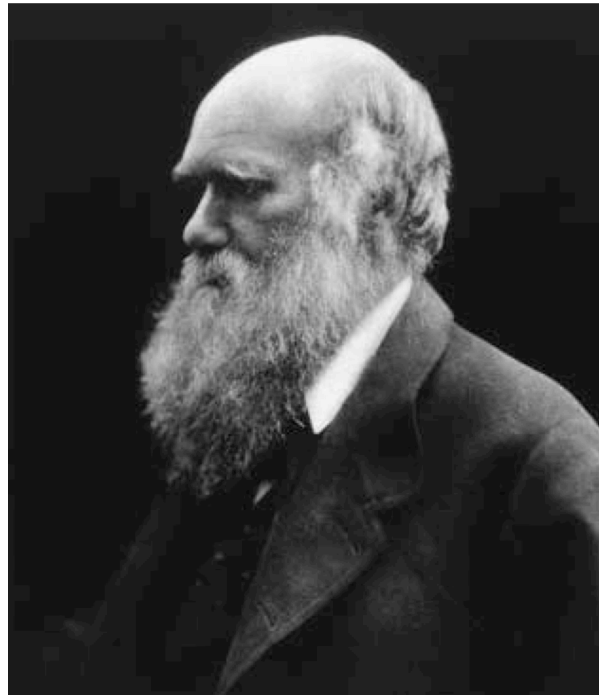
DARWIN SHAVES!

The most recognized beard in science is gone for good.

LONDON, FEBRUARY 21, 1880

After nearly two decades of wearing the most famous facial hair in science, Charles Darwin has shaved his beard. He first began growing the esteemed beard during summer of 1862 to soothe his eczema,ⁱ so imagine our surprise when a trusted source revealed late last evening that the eminent evolutionist has in fact been beardless for almost one month now. “Well, he doesn’t get out much these days,” admitted his wife Emma, “so I and perhaps his close friends are the only ones who would know he’d gotten rid of the beard.”^{*} Darwin allegedly suffers from a very weak and sensitive stomach, making him prone to frequent vomiting, retching, and severe bouts of wind.ⁱⁱ Daily meals and train rides are especially taxing on his condition, providing reason enough for the admired scholar to avoid dinner parties and other social events where his bare chin would have been noticed.

Now that Darwin’s new look has attracted attention from the press, what does this mean for the face of science and the image of the scientist?

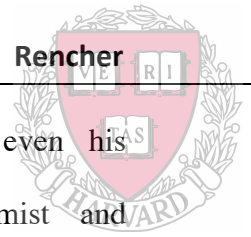


THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING BEARDED

Although the beard was grown nearly three years after Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published, it had quickly become essential to the image that marks Darwin as a sacred icon of wisdom and scientific authority. It was a philosopher’s beard, reminiscent of great thinkers such as Aristotle and Socrates combined with the religious semblance of Moses or God himself. “He would joke with us about it sometimes, saying things like ‘Do I not look reverent?’ⁱⁱⁱ He really seemed quite delighted with his new appearance,” claims his son, Francis Darwin. “It’s a shame that he’s now shaved it off.”

Even his friends and colleagues commented on certain religious connotations that the beard evoked, and various letters show that they were also fans of the beard and what it represented for Darwin as a scientist. Upon seeing a photograph of Darwin with his new beard, botanist Joseph Hooker exclaimed in an 1864 letter, “Glorified friend! Your photograph tells me where Herbert got his Moses for the fresco in the House of Lords.”^{iv} The very next month, Asa Gray responded to a letter and enclosed photo from Darwin exclaiming, “Your photograph, with the venerable beard gives the look of your having suffered, and, perhaps from the beard, of growing older.”^v

^{*} This is a partially fictional article and as such, some quotes are fictional as well. All real quotes are properly cited in the endnotes.



The significance of a wearing a beard in the scientific community goes far beyond a matter of style, as evidenced by an early letter from Darwin to Hooker where he anticipates arrogance from Professor Joseph Beete Jukes, a colleague having recently grown a beard. “Jukes has since read, what was considered a very valuable paper,” he wrote. “The man not content with moustaches, now sports an entire beard, and I am sure thinks himself like Jupiter tonans...What wretched doings come from the ardor of fame.”^{vi}

Darwin now finds himself in a position of bearded fame and members of the scientific community cannot help but wonder how the absence of his beard will affect his scientist persona. “That beard—so luxurious, so full—was undoubtedly his most distinguishing feature so I highlighted it as much as possible,” noted Julia Cameron, Darwin’s photographer. Popular news-papers and magazines such as *The Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, and *Vanity Fair* have featured Darwin and they all insist that the photos accompanying their articles display him in full beard. Professional magazines such as *Nature* and *Lancet* do as well,^{vii} for his beard symbolizes his status as a not only a gentleman, but also a scientific revolutionary. The beard was just as much a part of his identity as was his work, so much to the point that he could be identified by it alone. Emma Darwin remembers the issue of nailing down Darwin’s features in portraits before photography made exact portrayals possible. “In some of the paintings, the likeness is so indefinite,” she sighed. “Yet, people still somehow recognize that it’s him in the picture.”^{viii} Now that the beard is gone, she and others close to Darwin worry that his public image will suffer.

THE MAN BEHIND THE BEARD

The concern for the future of Darwin’s public image is valid. Shaving the beard has opened him up to wide speculation about his

personal life, his health, and even his masculinity.

Thomas Huxley, an anatomist and known supporter of Darwin’s theory on evolution, disclosed, “Hooker and I have always been aware of his frequent illness and generally feeble nature, but no one hails the idea of an ailing scientist. Therefore, we thought it best not to let on about his poor health.” However, after his wife’s comment on his inability to socialize went public, questions about Darwin’s true personality came into play. Is he truly the great thinker and scientist he is thought to be? His extreme shyness and tendency to stay behind closed doors now seems more a result of frailty and weakness than of deep intellectual pursuit. To many Darwin supporters, his beard signified the masculinity required of a true man of science and without it, his more effeminate characteristics have become more apparent.

His relationship with friend and colleague Joseph Hooker has been particularly telling in this regard. A series of letters exchanged between the two reveal that beneath Darwin’s scholarly and reverent exterior, lays a quite emotional and sympathetic man [still finding a letter to quote!]. He has a rather low tolerance for pain and suffering, even when he is not directly affected. In fact, he experienced extreme anxiety over his wife in childbirth and shared other pains of illness as a woman would. Gray, likening Darwin’s sickness to that of his wife, wrote, “You will be glad to hear that Mrs. Gray, with whom you sympathise so kindly, is getting to have a very reasonable stomach again, and is gaining strength apace...” In the same letter, he urges Darwin to manage his poor health carefully saying, “I hope there is still much work in you, —but take it quietly and gently!”^{ix} His extreme sensitivity to bodily discomfort made it impossible for him to practice medicine,^x which begs the question “Was Darwin’s work the result of a failed career in medicine?” An indirect pursuit of science, though still novel and revolution-



ary, is difficult to view in the same esteemed light under which Darwin has been placed.

LIFE AFTER BEARD

Darwin's beard started a legacy far greater than a mere facial accessory. Members of The Royal Society are expressing mixed sentiments and reactions to Darwin's new look. "Many of us are quite confused as to what comes next," explained a chemist in the Society. "You see, we grow beards as a rite of passage of sorts, in honor of Mr. Darwin. Now that he's chosen to shave, we are reevaluating what the official look of a scientist should be." Darwin's iconic status helped to transform the beard from an indicator of unkempt wildness to one of gentlemanly scholarship. He showed that men could be intellectually rugged, so to speak, while maintaining a polished appearance, a quality that other scientists appreciated and attempted to emulate. However, now that his more feminine traits—meekness, shyness, frail and gentle nature—are being explored, Darwin may no longer be the poster boy for science.

Darwin himself was unavailable for photograph or comment, so the true motivation behind his decision to shave still remains unknown. For now, loyal fans and supporters from the scientific community will continue to defend his rightful place among the most esteemed thinkers and scientists, past and present. Meanwhile, skeptics will continue to speculate on Darwin's lifestyle, searching for a way to justify his unexpected and jarring removal of the most recognized beard in science.

^v Letter 4558, Asa Gray to Charles Darwin. 11 July 1864

^{vi} Letter 1174, Charles Darwin to Joseph Hooker. 10 May 1848

^{vii} Gapps, "Charles Darwin As an Icon." p. 349

^{viii} Gapps, "Charles Darwin As an Icon." p. 353

^{ix} Letter 4558, Asa Gray to Charles Darwin. 11 July 1864

^x Jim Endersby, "Sympathetic Science: Charles Darwin, Joseph Hooker, and the Passions of Victorian Naturalists." *Victorian Studies*. Vol. 51, No. 2: Winter 2009

ⁱ Suzanne Gapps, "Charles Darwin As an Icon." *Culture and Organization*, December 2006, Vol. 12, pp. 341-357

ⁱⁱ Janet Browne, "I Could Have Retched All Night: Charles Darwin and His Body." *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge*. Ed. Christopher Lawrence and Steven Shapin, University of Chicago Press: 1998, p. 248

ⁱⁱⁱ Browne, "I Could Have Retched All Night." p. 274

^{iv} Letter 4529, J.D. Hooker to Charles Darwin. 11 June 1864