
How dangerous was Darwin?



Activity 2: Reporting events
50 Minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[How dangerous was Darwin?](#)

What do I need?

- [Letter 2852: Joseph Hooker to Charles Darwin](#)
- [London Weekly Press, 7 July 1860; report of the meeting](#)
- [Evaluating historical sources table](#)
- [Blank postcard](#)
- [Who's who?](#)

When Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, it received lots of attention. A meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was held in Oxford in 1860 to discuss the book. See how the meeting was reported by the press and in a letter sent to Darwin, and then compare each account of the event.

What do I do?

1. Read through the *London Weekly Press* report and the letter from Joseph Hooker and answer the letter questions.
2. Use the 'Evaluating historical resources' table to describe both historical sources in terms of their readability, reliability and usefulness.
3. Write a postcard to a friend giving an account of the event from either the perspective of the Bishop of Oxford or one of Hooker's supporters (use the 'Who's who' to find out more about both men).

Letter 2852: Joseph Hooker to Charles Darwin

2 July 1860
Botanic Gardens Oxford

Dear Darwin,

...The meeting was so large that they had adjourned to the Library which was crammed with between 700 & 1000 people, for all the world was there to hear Sam Oxon [Bishop of Oxford]— Well Sam Oxon got up & spouted for half an hour with inimitable spirit ugliness & emptiness & unfairness, I saw he was coached up by Owen & knew nothing & he said not a syllable but what was in the Reviews— he ridiculed you badly & Huxley savagely— Huxley answered admirably & turned the tables, but he could not throw his voice over so large an assembly, nor command the audience; & 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 I would smite that Amalekite Sam hip & thigh if my heart jumped out of my mouth & I handed my name up to the President (Henslow) as ready to throw down the gauntlet— I must tell you that Henslow as president would have none speak but those who had arguments to use, ...it moreover became necessary for each speaker to mount the platform & so there I was cocked up with Sam at my right elbow, & there & then I smashed him amid rounds of applause— I hit him in the wind at the first shot in 10 words taken from his own ugly mouth—& then proceeded to demonstrate in as few more 1. that he could never have read your book & 2. that he was absolutely ignorant of the rudiments of Bot. Science— I said a few more on the subject of my own experience, & conversion & wound up with a very few observations on the relative position of the old & new hypotheses, & with some words of caution to the audience— Sam was shut up—had not one word to say in reply & the meeting was dissolved forthwith leaving you master of the field after 4 hours battle.....



Account of the Oxford meeting from the London Weekly Press, 7 July 1860

...The theory of Dr Darwin, however, on the origin of species by natural selection, gave rise to the hottest of all debates. Here again the men of science were the aggressors, or if you will, the reformers, while the divines defend the ancient bulwarks.

Professor Huxley, it appears had somewhat facetiously remarked that they had nothing to fear even should it be known that apes were their ancestors. The Bishop of Oxford on a subsequent day, taking the hint, asked the professor whether he would prefer a monkey for his grandfather or his grandmother. To this the man of science retorted that he would much rather have a monkey for his grandfather than a man who could indulge in jokes on such a subject.

The Bishop then of course had a right to the answer that the commencement was not made by him. In the debate the Bishop brought all the well-known powers of his eloquence to substantiate the permanence of species. On the other hand eminent men of science, falling under the direct influence of facts, probably, moreover, in some overwhelmed and confounded by the indefinite and all but infinite multiplication of species, gave at least a provisional and partial adhesion to the hypothesis of Dr Darwin, which may possibly relieve them from an ever-increasing perplexity. In the midst of the discussions... it has been pleasant to mark, for the most part, a spirit of wise and wide toleration, – as if truth and not any narrow party-victory were the earnest search of all!

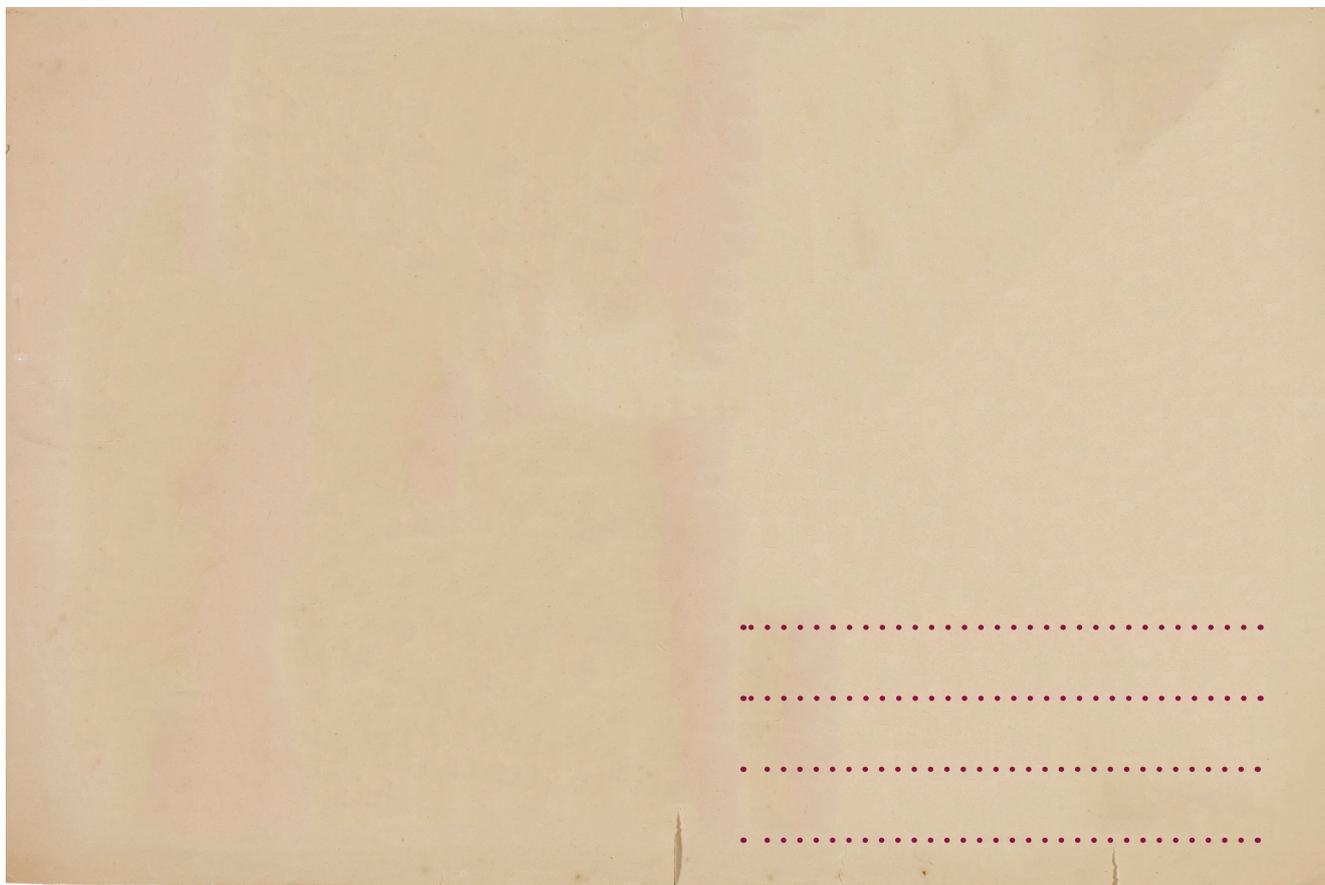
Letter questions: Reporting events

1. Give a summary of what happened at the Oxford meeting, according to the *London Weekly Press*.
2. Give a summary of what happened at the Oxford meeting, according to Joseph Hooker in his letter to Darwin.
3. What are the differences in tone in the account of the Oxford meeting between Hooker's letter and the *London Weekly Press* report? How could you explain these differences?
4. What do the number of people who attended the Oxford meeting, and the heated debate that ensued, tell you about the level of interest in Darwin's ideas? Why might that be?

Evaluating historical sources

Historical source	How easy is the source to understand? Are there any issues with comprehension?	How reliable is this source?	How useful is this source?
<i>London Weekly Press</i> report of Oxford meeting			
Letter 2852: Joseph Hooker to Charles Darwin			

Blank postcard



How dangerous was Darwin?

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.



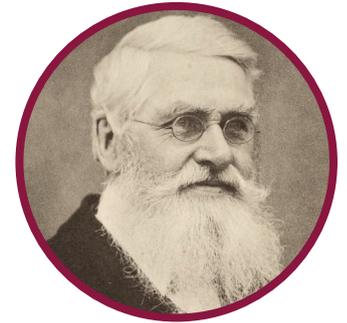
Image of Adam Sedgwick ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG D5929. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

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.

