

# Thomas Huxley, a pioneer in a still-raging scientific debate

**HUXLEY: FROM DEVIL'S DISCIPLE TO  
EVOLUTION'S HIGH PRIEST**

By **Adrian Desmond**

Addison Wesley, \$37.50,  
820 pages, illus.

REVIEWED BY **PHILLIP E. JOHNSON**

**A**drian Desmond is an esteemed intellectual historian of the "sociology of knowledge" school, which emphasizes the role of scientific ideas in cultural and political conflicts. No individual better fits this mold than Thomas Henry Huxley, who used Darwin's theory as a battering ram to champion the cause of professional scientists against the aristocratic patronage system, and thus to make "what you know" more important than "who you know." In the process, Huxley effectively disestablished the Church of England and replaced it with a new priesthood whose creed was evolutionary naturalism.

The subtitle and chapter headings of Mr. Desmond's new biography, "Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest," indicate the primacy of Huxley's role as religious revolutionary. The biographer introduces his subject at the beginning as "The Apostle Paul of the New Teaching," and leaves him at the end as "Pope Huxley," whose agnosticism (paradoxically) was "the last act of the Protestant Reformation."

One whole section is titled "The New Luther," and the comparison is

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Detail from the cover

# HUXLEY

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instructive. Luther undermined the power of the medieval clergy by encouraging the common people to read the Bible for themselves. Huxley lectured on science to packed audiences of working men, who saw that they could use the new knowledge to challenge the power of the aristocracy and the industrialists. Both revolutionaries were displeased by the radical inferences that some drew from their teaching: Luther took the side of the nobility when the peasants revolted and Huxley used his authority as Pope of Darwinism to defend competition and meritocracy against the radical socialists.

The crowning irony is that Huxley was a Darwinist only in the broadest sense of the term. He believed in evolutionary naturalism, and in the exclusive authority of scientists to answer questions like how we came to be created, but he had little regard for Darwin's mechanism of natural selection except as a weapon to fend off the clergy. According to Mr. Desmond, "Where Darwin had nature select from tiny variations, Huxley had been happy with larger jumps; where Darwin transported his species to islands by wind and raft, Huxley had invoked drowned continents. At times all they seemed to share was a faith in evolutionary naturalism."

The continuing split between the Darwinists and the Huxleyists, who are united only in their mutual hatred of creationism, came to the surface again this year when the Huxleyist Stephen Jay Gould launched a furious attack on "Darwinian Fundamentalists" (especially Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett) in the *New York Review of Books*. Mr. Gould was particularly offended that Dawkins ally John Maynard Smith had written that "the evolutionary biologists with whom I have discussed [Gould's] work tend to see him as a man whose ideas are so confused as to be hardly worth bothering with, but as one who should not be publicly criticized because he is at least on our side against the creationists."

Mr. Gould retaliated by

describing Mr. Dawkins' version of evolution as a "caricature," and scoffing that "if T.H. Huxley truly acted as 'Darwin's bulldog,' then it is hard to resist thinking of Dennett . . . as 'Dawkins's lapdog.'" After finishing his barrage of insults, Mr. Gould appealed for unity among evolutionists, because "We will not win this most important of all battles [against the creationists] if we descend to the same tactics of backbiting and anathematization that characterize our true opponents."

Mr. Desmond's insight is thus confirmed. Faith in evolutionary naturalism is what unites the different factions of evolutionists, not agreement on any concrete scientific propositions. As Mr. Gould's ally Richard Lewontin wrote, also in the course of disparaging Mr. Dawkins, "we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." That very factor also explains, however, why Darwin's

name and not Huxley's is practically synonymous with "evolution," and why Mr. Dawkins can trump Mr. Gould's arguments whenever he has to. Huxleyism lacks a credible mechanism for explaining the immense complexity of even the simplest organisms, and the complexity-building mechanism is essential for shutting out the persistent Divine Foot.

The interaction between Huxley's scientific rationalism and Mr. Desmond's sociology of knowledge illustrates the most profound conflict now going on in the university world — the conflict over who studies whom. Scientific materialists want to explain everything, including the mind and its ideas, as the products of physical interactions. Sociologists of knowledge want to explain the cultural forces, and financial incentives, that cause ideologies like scientific materialism to prosper. As Mr. Desmond explains it,

"Temporal benefits were the prize as a sectarian science contrasted itself with the wealthy Church . . . The new science was deliberately made to tell against the clergy's supernatural sanction."

Being able to assign an irrational cause for the other person's beliefs is a powerful weapon in a cultural conflict. As I drafted this review, I read in my morning paper of a neuroscience conference where brain researchers announced that they had discovered a "God module," meaning a part of the brain that affects the intensity of religious belief. "It is not clear why such dedicated machinery . . . for religion may have evolved," the researchers reported.

You may be sure that scientific materialists will never discover a "materialist module," meaning a brain part that causes people to fantasize that they can explain the mind in strictly materialist terms. Sociologists of knowledge do something like that, however, when they explain the very material incentives that can lead scientists to get carried away with their methodology.

Mr. Desmond's book will tell you a lot about Thomas Huxley, probably more than you really want to know. This meticulous, detailed history is well worth the effort, however, because it carries an important lesson for the present time. In 1981, the National Academy of Sciences resolved that "Religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief."

Probably some of the Academy members who voted for that resolution were so naive as to believe it, while others cynically saw it as a useful stick with which to beat the creationists. The life of Thomas Huxley is the best answer to such nonsense. In reality scientists (like other people) are obsessed with the God question, and the whole point of evolutionary naturalism is to keep that Divine Foot, and the people gathered behind it, from getting inside the door.

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## BEST SELLERS

Hardcover bestsellers compiled from data from large-city bookstores, bookstore chains and local bestseller lists across the United States. (The first number in parentheses is the book's previous week's ranking; the second is the number of weeks the book has been on the bestseller list.)

### FICTION

1. **Cold Mountain.** Charles Frazier. Atlantic Monthly, \$24 (1, 27)
2. **The Ghost.** Danielle Steel. Delacorte, \$25.95 (3, 7)
3. **Cat & Mouse.** James Patterson. Little, Brown, \$24.95 (2, 7)
4. **The Christmas Box.** Richard Paul Evans. Simon & Schuster, \$24.95 (9, 19)
5. **The Letter.** Richard Paul Evans. Simon & Schuster, \$15.95 (5, 8)
6. **The Winner.** David Balducci. Warner Vision, \$25 (6, 3)
7. **A Certain Justice.** P.D. James. Knopf, \$25 (4, 4)
8. **Another City, Not My Own.** Dominick Dunne. Crown, \$25 (7, 6)
9. **The God of Small Things.** Arundhati Roy. Random House, \$23 (8, 21)
10. **Violin.** Anne Rice. Knopf, \$25.95 (11, 10)
11. **Comanche Moon.** Larry McMurtry. Simon & Schuster, \$28.50 (10, 9)
12. **Wobegon Boy.** Garrison Keillor. Viking, \$24.95 (13, 6)
13. **Memoirs of a Geisha.** Arthur Golden. Knopf, \$25 (12, 7)
14. **Survival of the Fittest.** Jonathan Kellerman. Bantam, \$24.95 (14, 5)
15. **The Matarese Countdown.** Robert Ludlum. Bantam, \$27.50 (-, 9)

### NON-FICTION

1. **Midnight in the Garden of Good & Evil.** John Berendt. Random House, \$23 (1, 151)
2. **Joy of Cooking.** I.S. Rombauer, M. Rombauer Becker & E. Becker. Scribner, \$30 (2, 7)
3. **Angela's Ashes.** Frank McCourt. Scribner, \$24 (3, 66)
4. **Simple Abundance.** Sarah Ban Breathnach. Warner, \$20 (6, 91)
5. **Citizen Soldiers.** Stephen E. Ambrose. Simon & Schuster, \$27.50 (5, 7)
6. **The Dark Side of Camelot.** Seymour M. Hersh. Little, Brown, \$26.95 (4, 6)
7. **Into Thin Air.** Jon Krakauer. Villard, \$24.95 (8, 35)
8. **The Perfect Storm.** Sebastian Junger. Norton, \$23.95 (7, 27)
9. **Dirty Jokes and Beer.** Drew Carey. Hyperion, \$22.95 (10, 10)
10. **Diana: Her True Story. A Commemorative Edition.** Andrew Morton. Simon & Schuster, \$22.95 (13, 11)
11. **The Man Who Listens to Horses.** Monty Roberts. Random House, \$23 (11, 20)
12. **Tuesdays with Morrie.** Mitch Albom. Doubleday, \$19.95 (9, 9)
13. **Making Faces.** Kevyn Aucoin. Little Brown, \$29.95 (14, 7)
14. **Sources of Strength.** Jimmy Carter. Times Books, \$23 (12, 5)
15. **Conversations With God, Book I.** Neale Donald Walsch. Putnam, \$19.95 (-, 46)