

# Darwin's Body-Snatchers?

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**For decades creationists have claimed that Charles Darwin sought the skulls of full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian people when only four were left alive. It is said that Darwin letters survive which reveal this startling and distasteful truth. Tracing these claims back to their origins, however, reveals a different, if not unfamiliar story.**

As a Darwin scholar, I thought I had heard all the myths concerning Charles Darwin but one of my students surprised me with one that was new to me. She had been debating evolution with a Christian creationist friend who told her that Darwin was partly responsible for the extermination of the Aboriginal Tasmanian people! This startling claim had the apparent sheen of credibility because it was accompanied by a purported quotation from a letter by Darwin. Could this be true? As the Director of *Darwin Online* it is my responsibility to track down any unrecorded appearance of unique Darwin words in print, especially those made during his lifetime. I had no record of this one.

Here is the quotation I was sent: 'Darwin wrote asking for Tasmanian skulls when only four full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigines were left alive, provided his request would not 'upset' their feelings.' This quotation turned out to come from a creationist newsletter from 1992.<sup>1</sup> Although it attributes only one word to Darwin himself, it suggests the existence of a real Darwin letter to this effect and only the word 'upset' was quoted from it. If this were true, then the letter must have been written around the 1860s when there were only four known full-blooded Tasmanians left alive, including the well-known individual named Truganini (c. 1812–1876), who was supposedly the last survivor.

As I dug a little deeper, the scale of this creationist claim became apparent. Indeed the full quotation above is given in many creationist books, articles and websites.<sup>2</sup> The exact phrase 'Darwin wrote asking for Tasmanian skulls' appears about 1000 times in a Google search, suggesting that creationists have few if any qualms about plagiarising one another. The phrase is even repeated verbatim in a book by the notorious Turkish creationist Harun Yahya, and furthermore,<sup>3</sup> a Google search for the phrase 'Darwin's

body snatchers' returns over 8000 results. All of this ink, or pixels, are spilt or spent on claiming that evolutionary theory has had terrible humanitarian consequences.

I suspect that many readers interested in science and evolution will have a strong sense of déjà vu here. There have been so many attempts to discredit Darwin, the founding father figure of modern evolutionary biology. It's been variously argued that he recanted his evolutionary views or that he converted back to Christianity on his deathbed. Both of these imply that if Darwin did not stick to his convictions, then they cannot have been true. Since at least the early nineteenth century it has been claimed that if human beings are descended from other species, then they will behave like immoral animals. Similarly, the acceptance of evolution has even been blamed for catastrophic world events including the First World War, and the atrocities of the Nazis and the Holocaust, to name a few. Indeed, worse alleged consequences would be difficult to name.

It is well known that people have a natural tendency to think ill of those they disagree with. And the more profound the disagreement, the easier it seems to be to make things subjective and personal, rather than objective and based on evidence. I have seen this many times in academia. Critics and opponents are often said to be less intelligent, less well informed and less sophisticated in their approaches, and possibly inspired by nefarious motives. Ad hominem attacks can then become hard to resist, not to mention the spreading of rumours to match. In such circumstances, given how common this type of behaviour is, surely the wise man should be suspicious of unsavoury stories about opponents.

Blaming Darwin for the fate of the Tasmanians or the Holocaust might be hard to resist if one hates the theory of evolution, but this cannot change the fact that such arguments, even if they were historically accurate, have no bearing on the truth of evolution. As every undergraduate philosophy student can recognise, it is a logical fallacy to argue that something is untrue because it supposedly has bad consequences. Perhaps desperation drives some to grasp at (any) straws.

## Darwin and the Tasmanians

I searched through all of the materials available to me and could find nothing to fit nor support the claim that Darwin wrote asking for human skulls. The claim is, on the face of it, quite bizarre. Darwin did not collect human skulls and gave them no more attention than any other anatomical feature in his discussion of humans in the *Descent of man* (1871, vol. 1, pp. 146–8) and elsewhere. Similarly the

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<sup>1</sup> C. Wieland, 'Darwin's bodysnatchers' *Creation Ex Nihilo* 14(2) (March–May 1992):16–18.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Ken Ham, Don Batten and Carl Wieland, *One blood: the biblical answer to racism*. (Master Books, 1999), chapter 9 'Darwin's body snatchers'. Daniel Jappah, *Evolution: a grand monument to human stupidity*. (Morrisville: Lulu, 2007). Ken Ham, A. Charles Ware, Todd A. Hillard, *Darwin's plantation: evolution's racist roots* (2007), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Harun Yahya, *The social weapon: Darwinism* (Istanbul: Global Publishing), p. 104. Available online 21 December 2016

validity of the Darwin–Wallace theory of evolution by natural selection or human descent from earlier primates in particular did not depend on the features of any supposedly ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ races. So the claim that early Darwinians were somehow in desperate need of Aboriginal bodies makes no sense.

Darwin’s only relevant discussion of Tasmanians occurs in the second edition of his *Descent of man* (1874).<sup>4</sup> Skulls or other anatomical features are not discussed, but rather the conditions that might explain the decrease of the Tasmanian population. He supports the view, published by others long before, that it was the result of being removed from their native homeland, way of life and food sources that caused their disappearance. He quoted with approval one authority who argued that it was the attempt to ‘civilise’ them rather than allowing them to be free that caused their deaths.

But, what about the purported letter by Darwin? I wrote to the staff at the Darwin Correspondence Project. They had no record of any such letter. Moreover, they found no trace of *any* Darwin letter requesting human skulls. Indeed, the most relevant letter they did find was one by Darwin writing to the Australian zoologist J.L.G. Krefft in which Darwin remarked ‘I have never attended much to skulls.’<sup>5</sup>

Historian Paul Turnbull has shown that human anatomical specimens had been taken from Australia since the late eighteenth century, decades before Darwin’s birth.<sup>6</sup> The largest collections of human skulls in the nineteenth century were created by phrenologists, also long before Darwinism.<sup>7</sup> One of the last of these, Joseph Bernard Davis, did not accept evolution even after Darwin’s *Origin of species* (1859) was published. In his *Thesaurus craniorum: Catalogue of the skulls of the various races of man* (1867), Davis argued that while Tasmanian skulls could be distinguished from those of Australian individuals, there was no evidence to suggest that the two peoples were derived from other races. The anthropologists concerned with human races and hierarchy in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries were, in part, the intellectual descendants of these phrenological practitioners. But racism, alongside cultural and racial arrogance, were around long before Darwinism.

Darwin’s friend and collaborator Alfred Russel Wallace, another sometime devotee of phrenology, commented in his *Malay Archipelago* (1869):

‘A few years ago it was thought that the study of Crania offered the only sure basis of a classification of man. Immense collections have been formed; they have been measured, described, and figured; and now the opinion is beginning to gain ground, that for this

special purpose they are of very little value. Professor Huxley has boldly stated his views to this effect; and in a proposed new classification of mankind has given scarcely any weight to characters derived from the cranium.’<sup>8</sup> It is certain, too, that though Craniology has been assiduously studied for many years, it has produced no results at all comparable with the labour and research bestowed upon it. No approach to a theory of the excessive variations of the cranium has been put forth, and no intelligible classification of races has been founded upon it’.<sup>9</sup>

In his 2004 book *Bones of contention: a creationist assessment of human fossils*, the American creationist Marvin L. Lubenow even claimed that Darwin letters about body snatching were found in ‘a Hobart, Tasmania, archive in the 1970s’.<sup>10</sup> This is intriguing. Could there be a basis for this after all? However Lubenow’s book cites creationist Jerry Bergman as his source.<sup>11</sup> Consulting Bergman we find his only source was the same as that given by several other creationist writers who repeat these stories. They all cite the Australian journalist David Monaghan’s 1991 article *The body-snatchers*.<sup>12</sup> There are no earlier written sources connecting Darwin and body snatching other than this article. Monaghan’s rather sensationalist piece claimed:

‘By the mid-19th century, the scientific interest in the bones of Australian Aborigines was gaining popularity, as early Evolution theorists sought proof for rival ideas. The interest grew to a storm soon after Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. A race began to prove his hypothesis. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin positioned the Australians as crucial proof of his theories. . . . Darwin’s theories had placed Aborigines as a possible evolutionary link between man and ape. Museum curators around the world clamoured to obtain skulls. A complete set of racial crania was essential for any study. Australian Aboriginal skulls, particularly the increasingly rare Tasmanians, were much sought after.’

This depiction of the history of evolutionary theory and of anthropology strikes me as bizarre indeed. Especially since Darwin did not suggest that Aborigines were a link between humans and apes.

These fanciful versions of history aside, here indeed was the source of the creationists’ claims. According to Monaghan’s article: ‘Charles Darwin is also implicated through letters written in the 1870s and found in a Hobart archive in the mid-1970s. . . . Darwin himself wrote, through one of

<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin, *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), pp. 183–184. <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?viewtype=text&itemID=F944&keywords=tasmania&pageseq=206>.

<sup>5</sup> Darwin to J.L.G. Krefft, 17 February 1873. S8768. Thanks to Samantha Evans and the Darwin Correspondence Project.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Turnbull, [http://eprints.anu.edu.au/foreign\\_bodies/pdf/ch04.pdf](http://eprints.anu.edu.au/foreign_bodies/pdf/ch04.pdf) Turnbull’s work is the essential background context to this story. See also Turnbull, ‘British anthropological thought in colonial practice: the appropriation of indigenous Australian bodies, 1860–1880’ Chapter 4 of Bronwen Douglas, Chris Ballard eds. *Foreign bodies: Oceania and the science of race 1750–1940* (ANU E Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the origins of Victorian scientific naturalism* (Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Henry Huxley, ‘On the geographical distribution of the chief modifications of mankind’, *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* (series 2) 2 (1870): 404–412.

<sup>9</sup> A.R. Wallace, *The Malay archipelago* (London, Macmillan, 1869), vol. 2, p. 467.

<sup>10</sup> Marvin L. Lubenow, *Bones of contention: a creationist assessment of human fossils* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2004), p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Bergman, ‘Nineteenth century Darwinism and the Tasmanian genocide’, *Creation research society quarterly* 32, No. 4 (March 1996): 190–6, p. 193. Bergman’s inclinations can be seen in Bergman, ‘Darwinism as a factor in the twentieth-century totalitarian holocausts’, *Creation research society quarterly* 39 (2002), pp. 47–51.

<sup>12</sup> David Monaghan, ‘The body-snatchers’, *The Bulletin* 12 November 1991, pp. 30–38. An abridged version was reprinted in K. Laster, *Law as Culture* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2001), pp. 26–29.

his associate's museums, asking for pure-blood Tasmanian skulls if it would not upset the feelings of the remaining natives. There were then only four Tasmanian Aborigines left.<sup>13</sup> Monaghan's article was connected with his sensationalist Channel 4 documentary of the same title which was first aired in the UK in 1990.

And here the trail of clues comes to an end. Monaghan's article is the source for these stories. I wrote to Monaghan asking for information about any Darwin letters. He kindly replied that, to the best he could recollect, the letters were not by Darwin himself.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to know how to reconcile

this with the article which claimed that 'Darwin himself wrote'. In fact, there are no Darwin letters or manuscripts of any kind in any archive in Tasmania. So much for the extraordinary claims about Darwin, or followers at his behest, snatching the corpses of the tragically dwindling Tasmanians. So rather than body snatchers, what we have here is a case of snatching at straws.

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<sup>13</sup> Monaghan, 1991, pp. 33 and 34.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication 13/04/2011.