

Why there was no ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’: Thomas Henry Huxley’s Famous Nickname



John van Wyhe FLS

*Department of Biological Sciences and Tembusu College, National University of
Singapore, 14 Science Drive 4, Singapore 117543, Singapore*

*University Professorial Fellow, Charles Darwin University,
Darwin, N.T., Australia*

e: dbsjmvw@nus.edu.sg

‘**D**arwin’s bulldog’ is one of the most famous nicknames in the history of science. Virtually every mention of the Victorian zoologist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) includes this pithy epithet. Equally ubiquitous is the claim that Huxley was known by this name during the 19th-century debates over Darwinism. Adrian Desmond’s racy 1997 biography of Huxley uses the phrase many times, but never mentions where it comes from although the back cover of the book states that Huxley was “often referred to as ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’” (Desmond 1997). In a popular history of science, historian William Bynum wrote that by 1863 Huxley “had already assumed his mantle as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’” (Bynum 2012). Figuratively speaking this is no doubt true, but most references to this famous sobriquet indicate that this is not just what Huxley *was*, but what he was *known as*. For example, the primatologist Frans de Waal noted that, during his lifetime, Huxley “had gained a reputation as ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’ owing to his fierce advocacy of evolution” (de Waal 2009: 7). Jonathan Miller wrote in his illustrated beginners guide to Charles Darwin (1809–82), “Huxley ... devoted so much of his life to defending & popularizing the theory of descent with modification that he earned the name of ... Darwin’s Bulldog” (Miller 1982: 4). In a popular biography for juvenile readers, Anna Sproule wrote: “Huxley sprang to Darwin’s defense whenever necessary and was soon known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’” (Sproule 2002). The biologist Tim Berra attributed the nickname to a specific event: “[Huxley] earned nickname of ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’ for his staunch defense of Darwin at an Oxford debate with Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1860 and in published articles” (Berra 2013:36; also Henderson 2013). More recently, journalist A. N. Wilson has written that Huxley “often so referred to himself in the 1870s” (Wilson 2017). This has been repeated by countless writers. It has probably been repeated in tens of thousands of student essays. And its popularity is still increasing.

Huxley is one of the most famous characters in the so-called Darwinian revolution (Fig 1). Apparently few today remember his actual scientific work in comparative anatomy. He was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society in December 1858 and awarded the Linnean Medal in 1890. But he is most celebrated for his pugnacious defence and promotion of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory after the publication of *On the origin of species* in 1859.

To the Curs which will Bark

After reading an advance copy of the book, Huxley wrote to Darwin on 23 November 1859 about the impending attacks and objections that were likely to come. "And as to the curs which will bark and yelp, you must recollect that some of your friends, at any rate, are endowed with an amount of combativeness which (though you have often and justly rebuked it) may stand you in good stead. I am sharpening up my claws and beak in readiness." (F. Darwin 1887, vol. 2: 232). In this oft-quoted passage, Huxley refers to the critics as dogs (a cur is a worthless, low bred dog) and himself as a bird of prey. ('Combativeness' may be an allusion to the phrenological organ of that name, with its associated character. Phrenological language was often used by those who did not prescribe to it for humorous effect.) On some occasions Darwin himself referred to Huxley as "My General Agent" (F. Darwin 1887, 2: 251).

Huxley's combativeness is most widely remembered today for his part in the infamous Huxley-Wilberforce 'debate' at the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Oxford. According to one account, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce taunted Huxley "if it 'was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey?'" Huxley is said to have replied:

a man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for his grandfather. If there were an ancestor whom I should feel ashamed in recalling, it would rather be a *man*—a man of restless and versatile intellect—who not content with success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric, and distract the attention of his hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to religious prejudice. (Judd 1910, 140)

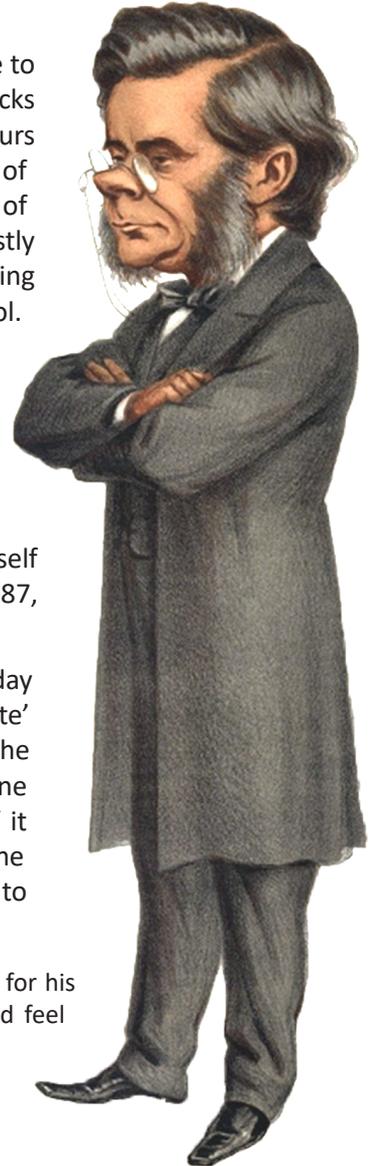


Fig 1 T. H. Huxley in 'Men of the day' *Vanity Fair*, January 1871

This is based largely on a 3 July 1860 letter from J. R. Green to W. Boyd Dawkins. (Stephen 1901, 44–45).

A bulldog seems like the perfect title for Huxley. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the definition: “Applied to persons: One that possesses the obstinate courage of the bulldog.” Bulldogs had been traditionally used in bull baiting, in which the small snub-nosed dogs would chase, harass and bite a massive bull many times their size. Hence bulldogs had a reputation for courage and ferocity. Phrenologists used them as an example for their mental faculty of Firmness. In his *The variation of animals and plants under domestication* (1868), Darwin noted that the breed was known for “courage and indomitable perseverance” (Darwin 1868, vol. 1: 41). The clergyman and novelist Charles Kingsley described the hero of *Water-babies* (1863) in like manner: “Tom was always a brave, determined little English bull-dog, who never knew when he was beaten.” (Kingsley vol. 4: 138). A writer in the *Journal of Horticulture* in 1873 noted: “We say of a bold plucky orator, ‘Ah! he has so much of the British bulldog in him’” (Anon 1873: 52). Thus Huxley surely could have been called this since it was widely agreed that he was a plucky and courageous orator.

What Bulldog?

It should come as a surprise then to discover that, in fact, Huxley was *not* widely known as or indeed *ever* referred to as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ during his lifetime. The name occurs in no 19th-century newspapers, magazines or books. It has never been quoted from a contemporary diary or letter.

The nickname first appeared in a lecture by the American palaeontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn in 1895 (Fig 2), shortly after Huxley’s death in June that year. As Osborn later wrote, “I had the privilege of listening to [Huxley’s] great course of lectures on comparative anatomy and evolution during the winter of 1879–80, of working in his anatomical laboratory in South Kensington, and of forming his personal acquaintance in his own home.” (Osborn 1925: 654). Osborn was then a 22-year-old student. One day in 1879 Huxley brought Darwin for a tour of the laboratory and Osborn was introduced to him. Sixteen years later, Osborn reflected on the differences between the two naturalists.

There was the widest possible contrast in the two faces. Darwin’s grayish-white hair and bushy eyebrows overshadowed the pair of deeply set blue eyes, which seemed to image his wonderfully calm and deep vision of nature, and at the same time to emit benevolence. Huxley’s piercing black eyes and determined and resolute face were full of admiration and at the same time protection of his older friend. He said afterwards: ‘You know I have to take care of him—in fact, I have always been Darwin’s bull-dog,’ and this exactly expressed one of the many relations which existed so long between the two men. (Osborn 1896: 32)

Osborn gave almost the same lecture later that November before the biological section of the New York Academy of Sciences, repeating the bulldog sentence verbatim (Osborn 1895).



Fig 2 Henry Fairfield Osborn, *The American Museum Journal* (1916) XVI

Thirty years later still, Osborn told the story again, but what had at first been represented as a single utterance was now increased to a frequent saying. “Huxley was solicitous of Darwin’s strength, and often alluded to himself as ‘Darwin’s bull dog.’” (Osborn 1924: 58). Osborn told this story on at least one further occasion, in 1925, using almost the identical wording: “Often alluding to himself as ‘Darwin’s bull-dog,’ he took the brunt of the fighting.” (Osborn 1925: 660). It is interesting to note that the first two accounts represent Huxley as protective and shepherding Darwin whereas only the latter represents the nickname as connected with fighting.

But by this time Osborn’s first recollection had already spawned literary offspring. Probably the most influential was that quintessential Victorian biographical monument, Huxley’s *Life and letters* (1900). Edited by his son Leonard, Osborn’s wording

was changed from “I have always been Darwin’s bull-dog” to “‘I am Darwin’s bull-dog,’ he once said”, thus removing the link between a recollection by Osborn and instead coming straight from Huxley’s mouth, although here it was still represented as a one-time statement (L. Huxley 1900, vol. 1: 363). Leonard Huxley did not give a source so his volume has generally been credited for our knowledge that T. H. Huxley called himself and was generally known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ during the controversies over Darwinism in the 1860s and 1870s. Thus from the 1900s onwards the sobriquet ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ has proliferated ever more. By the 1920s it was already commonplace to say that “Huxley was known in his day as Darwin’s bull-dog” (Dietrich 1927: 96). And by that time there were few contemporaries left who would have been able to remember such things.

There seems to be no reason to doubt that Huxley may have once called himself ‘Darwin’s bulldog’, but we should remember that our source is both second-hand and a recollection of a sentence uttered almost 20 years before. And yet, virtually every writer on Darwin and Huxley has noted the commonplace ‘fact’ that during the Victorian debates over Darwinism, Huxley was known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’. He wasn’t.

It is true that Huxley was widely known as a defiant defender of Darwinism. But imagining that he was widely acknowledged as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ obscures some of the historical reality, such as the fact that he had his own (non-Darwinian) ideas about evolution and was long tentative about the efficacy of natural selection. Appreciating that he was not known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ should lead to a more nuanced recognition of who he was and what he really did. If one of the most widely known, enjoyed and unquestioned nicknames in the history of science is incorrect, what other undisputed facts might also be wrong?

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Kees Rookmaker for helpful assistance.

REFERENCES

- Anon. 1873. Dogs in general. *Journal of Horticulture, Cottage Gardener and Country Gentlemen* 25: 52.
- Berra T. M. 2013. Wallace's acceptance of Darwin's priority in his own words. *The Linnean* 29(2) 23–40.
- Bynum, W. 2012. *A little history of science*. Yale.
- Darwin C. R. 1868. *The variation of animals and plants under domestication*. 2 volumes. London: John Murray.
- Darwin F. (Ed.). 1887. *The life and letters of Charles Darwin*. 3 volumes. London: John Murray.
- de Waal F. 2009. *Primates and philosophers: how morality evolved*. Princeton.
- Desmond A. 1997. *Huxley: from devil's disciple to evolution's high priest*. London: Penguin.
- Dietrich J. H. 1927. *The fathers of evolution*. Minneapolis.
- Henderson M. 2013. *50 genetics ideas you really need to know*. London (ebook).
- Huxley L. (Ed.). 1900. *The life and letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*. Volume 1. London.
- Judd J. W. 1910. *The coming of evolution: The story of a great revolution in science*. Cambridge.
- Kingsley C. 1863. *Water-babies*. Volume 4. London.
- Miller J. (Illustrated by Borin van Loon) 1982. *Darwin for beginners*. London.
- Osborn, H. F. 1895. Memorial tribute to Professor Thomas H. Huxley. *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 15: 40–50.
- Osborn H. F. 1896. A student's reminiscences of Huxley. *Biological lectures delivered at the Marine Biological Laboratory of Wood's Hole, in the summer session of 1895*. Ginn & company, Boston, vol. 4: 29–42
- Osborn H. F. 1924. Charles Darwin. In *Impressions of great naturalists*. New York, London.
- Osborn H. F. 1925. Reminiscences of Huxley. *North American Review* 221, No. 827, (Jun.–Aug.): 654–664.
- Sproule A. 2002. *Charles Darwin: visionary behind the theory of evolution*. Blackbirch Press.
- Stephen L. (Ed). 1901. *Letters of John Richard Green*. London: Macmillan.
- Wilson A. N. 2017. *Charles Darwin: Victorian mythmaker*. London: John Murray.
- Wyhe J. van (Ed.) 2002–. *The complete work of Charles Darwin online*. (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>)