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A good Darwinian? Winwood Reade and the making of a late Victorian evolutionary epic



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ABSTRACT

In 1871 the travel writer and anthropologist W. Winwood Reade (1838–1875) was inspired by his correspondence with Darwin to turn his narrow ethnological research on West African tribes into the broadest history imaginable, one that would show Darwin's great principle of natural selection at work throughout the evolutionary history of humanity, stretching back to the origins of the universe itself. But when *Martyrdom of Man* was published in 1872, Reade confessed that Darwin would not likely find him a very good Darwinian, as he was unable to show that natural selection was anything more than a secondary law that arranges all details. When it came to historicising humans within the sweeping history of all creation, Reade argued that the primary law was that of development, a less contentious theory of human evolution that was better suited to Reade's progressive and teleological history of life. By focussing on the extensive correspondence between Reade and Darwin, this paper reconstructs the attempt to make an explicitly Darwinian evolutionary epic in order to shed light on the moral and aesthetic demands that worked to give shape to Victorian efforts to historicise humans within a vastly expanding timeframe.

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1. Introduction

On 12 September 1871, the explorer and anthropologist W. Winwood Reade wrote to Charles Darwin that he was completing a 'sketch of the history of Africa in connection with Universal History' that would explicitly apply Darwinian principles to its understanding of human development.¹ Reade had been inspired by his correspondence with Darwin, beginning in 1868, to turn his rather narrow anthropological research on West African tribes into the broadest history imaginable. Eventually published in 1872, *The Martyrdom of Man* would tell the evolutionary story of human history from within the larger context of the origins of the universe. While Reade initially referred to his project as a 'universal history,' he ended up producing something more in line with what historians of Victorian science have identified as an 'evolutionary epic,' a genre that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century

following the publication in 1844 of the immensely popular *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, written anonymously by the Scottish publisher Robert Chambers.²

Vestiges told a romantic story of all creation, beginning with the origins of the solar system in the nebular hypothesis down to the birth of the human species and the evolution of the human mind, synthesising a wide array of sciences under the framework of a developmental theory of evolution. Several popularizers of science such as Grant Allan, David Page, Arabella Buckley, and Edward Clodd followed Chambers' lead in writing evolutionary stories of life, helping to establish the evolutionary epic as a legitimate genre of science writing. And even though such work appeared after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, authors of the evolutionary epic typically looked to non-Darwinian theories of evolution to tell their romantic and purposeful stories of all life.³

In this regard, the making of Reade's evolutionary epic is an interesting story in its own right because Reade explicitly set out to write a Darwinian universal history seemingly against one of the main conventions of the new genre. He believed, at least initially,

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that Darwinian evolution would offer a general consilience that could link together not just the human and life sciences but the physical sciences as well under the guise of a truly grand narrative.

This was, of course, an incredible undertaking but it was one that was originally conceived quite narrowly as a study of African human history that continued to expand as Reade found it difficult to make sense of any seemingly mundane fact without placing it in a universal, evolutionary context. And it was a project that very much took shape in correspondence with Darwin himself. As we will see, before Reade embarked on his trip to West Africa in the late 1860s, he was at a turning point in his vocational trajectory. He had been forced to resign from the Council of James Hunt's Anthropological Society of London (ASL) in 1865, and he was quite literally searching for a master. He eventually came into contact with Darwin and while pursuing many of Darwin's ethnological queries in Africa he found himself more and more convinced by Darwin's hypothesis as it related to the history of humanity. *The Martyrdom of Man*, therefore, began as an attempt to show natural selection at work within human and cultural history.

As Reade kept expanding his frame of reference to include wider, longer, and distinct timeframes, however, he was confronted by the possibility that Darwinian evolution, or natural selection at least, did not offer the best explanatory solution for a narrative beginning in the cosmic fire-mist of the nebular hypothesis and ending with the future perfection of man. In the final stages of writing his book, therefore, Reade determined that the primary law that governed the history of life was not natural selection but that of development itself, the very theory of evolutionary change that Darwin found so unsatisfactory in the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. In eventually turning away from the implications of natural selection for the history of life, Reade instead embraced a theory that could be much more readily imbued with a meaning that was conducive to late Victorian desires while allaying fears about a future absent human life—a future that Darwinian evolution could not promise.

This article, therefore, focuses on the making and unmaking of Reade's 'Darwinian' evolutionary epic. By exploring the diverse influences of Reade's broad conceptions of historical development—from Hunt and the ASL to Darwin and on to non-Darwinian forms of development such as that offered by E. B. Tylor and Robert Chambers—the article shows the way in which one Victorian intellectual was able to synthesise a diverse array of scientific and social theories in order to construct an evolutionary story of all life. While it is possible that Reade's eventual and sudden shift of evolutionary allegiance says something about the independence of his intellectual development, it may also more importantly say something about the centrality of developmentalism in the evolutionary epic genre itself, a theory of evolution that Reade found himself forced to embrace. Twentieth and twenty-first century iterations of the evolutionary epic, from H. G. Wells to Edward Wilson and on to David Christian and big history, tend to confirm that the evolutionary epic is a decidedly non-Darwinian genre of evolutionary history.

2. In search of a master and a purpose

W. Winwood Reade tried out several vocational personas before finally embracing one that seemed to suit both his ethnological observations and his broadly historical views along with his outspoken secularist ideology.⁴ In this regard, he came into contact with Charles Darwin and other scientific naturalists at a fortuitous turning point in his life. He was just about to embark on his second trip to West Africa and he was offering up his services to a select group of men of science who he deemed were at the forefront of scientific knowledge: Henry Walter Bates, Assistant Secretary of the

Royal Geographical Society of London, Joseph Dalton Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens, Thomas Henry Huxley, Professor of Natural History at the School of Mines, and Charles Darwin, the gentlemanly naturalist of the village of Downe.

Before approaching these masters, however, Reade had been alienated from James Hunt's Anthropological Society of London, which he had previously embraced as an exciting new society devoted to achieving practical results in the new Science of Man. He joined the ASL after returning from his first trip to Africa in 1863—a self-funded journey, the purpose of which was to establish himself as a first-rate explorer modelled on the celebrated and controversial travels of Paul du Chaillu.⁵ There was much excitement surrounding the newly-formed ASL, which originated as a break-away group from the Ethnological Society of London (ESL). While the reasons for this split are many and not worth detaining us here,⁶ Hunt argued in his opening address to the new society that it would be quite unlike the ESL whose leading members such as John Lubbock and Thomas Henry Huxley extended their claims far beyond what a truly Baconian induction could allow, such that monogenic theories and evolution were paraded around as proven facts rather than as hypotheses. Hunt called on his fellow anthropologists to abandon unfounded theories and mythologies and task themselves with the difficult work of discovering and examining observable facts.

At the time, what Reade found attractive about Hunt's vision for anthropology was likely his claims that 'Anthropology is ... the science of the whole nature of man.' Hunt argued that it was in a sense the most important science because it included 'nearly the whole circle of sciences' in its purview. 'Biology, anatomy, chemistry, natural philosophy, and physiology must all furnish the anthropologist with materials from which he may make his deductions.'⁷ Hunt also promoted the practical contributions that anthropology could make to society, arguing that 'there is no science which is destined to confer more practical good on humanity at large than the one which specially investigates the laws regulating our physical nature.'⁸ A few days after this address Reade excitedly wrote to Rosina Bulwer-Lytton about the new society that had 'sprung up ... for the study of man.' It was finally time, according to Reade, for 'the highest form of creation' to receive the attention it deserves. Reade argued that the older sciences such as botany and geology focused far too much on 'flowers and stones' rather than on the 'world's troubles,' and he hoped the new society would help rectify this problem.⁹

Reade eventually found, however, that his views differed from Hunt's racial theories in important ways. He at some point decided that Hunt's concept of polygenism did not mesh with his own observations of African tribes, even while he admitted that those observations were made not by an ethnologist but by a *flâneur*.¹⁰ This difference was brought into the open during the discussion period that followed Hunt's reading of a paper based on his book *On the Negro Place in Nature* (1863), as Reade challenged Hunt's central thesis that the Negro ought to be classified as a distinct species from that of the European by arguing that the Negro had in fact degenerated due to disease and climate.¹¹ But, ultimately, Reade found the ASL too beholden to conservative religious forces. This became apparent when Reade read a paper on the 'Efforts of Missionaries among Savages,' efforts that Reade argued were doomed to fail, largely because of the African practice of polygamy, which could not simply be undermined by promises of a future paradise. It was Reade's view that the 'Mohammadans' were more successful at actually converting 'savages' because of their lax approach to supposedly immoral activities.¹² Even though Hunt's own scepticism about the Christian missionary movement was well known, he challenged the empirical basis for Reade's 'vague assertions' and chastised Reade for the tone of his presentation, which relied on

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