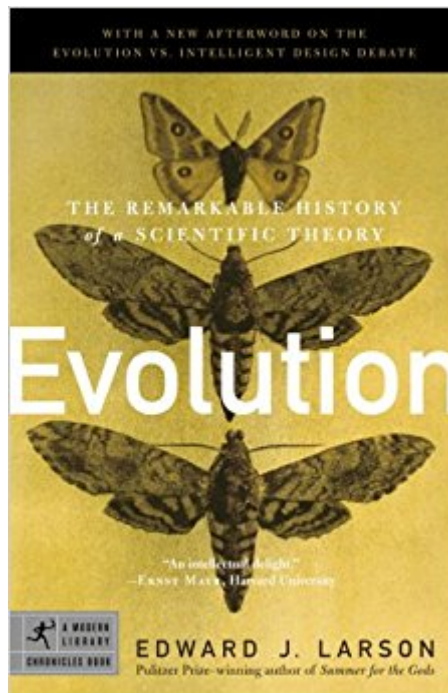




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# Evolution: The Remarkable History Of A Scientific Theory (Modern Library Chronicles)



## Synopsis

“I often said before starting, that I had no doubt I should frequently repent of the whole undertaking.” So wrote Charles Darwin aboard *The Beagle*, bound for the Galapagos Islands and what would arguably become the greatest and most controversial discovery in scientific history. But the theory of evolution did not spring full-blown from the head of Darwin. Since the dawn of humanity, priests, philosophers, and scientists have debated the origin and development of life on earth, and with modern science, that debate shifted into high gear. In this lively, deeply erudite work, Pulitzer Prize-winning science historian Edward J. Larson takes us on a guided tour of Darwin’s “dangerous idea” from its theoretical antecedents in the early nineteenth century to the brilliant breakthroughs of Darwin and Wallace, to Watson and Crick’s stunning discovery of the DNA double helix, and to the triumphant neo-Darwinian synthesis and rising sociobiology today. Along the way, Larson expertly places the scientific upheaval of evolution in cultural perspective: the social and philosophical earthquake that was the French Revolution; the development, in England, of a laissez-faire capitalism in tune with a Darwinian ethos of “survival of the fittest”; the emergence of Social Darwinism and the dark science of eugenics against a backdrop of industrial revolution; the American Christian backlash against evolutionism that culminated in the famous Scopes trial; and on to today’s world, where religious fundamentalists litigate for the right to teach “creation science” alongside evolution in U.S. public schools, even as the theory itself continues to evolve in new and surprising directions. Throughout, Larson trains his spotlight on the lives and careers of the scientists, explorers, and eccentrics whose collaborations and competitions have driven the theory of evolution forward. Here are portraits of Cuvier, Lamarck, Darwin, Wallace, Haeckel, Galton, Huxley, Mendel, Morgan, Fisher, Dobzhansky, Watson and Crick, W. D. Hamilton, E. O. Wilson, and many others. Celebrated as one of mankind’s crowning scientific achievements and reviled as a threat to our deepest values, the theory of evolution has utterly transformed our view of life, religion, origins, and the theory itself, and remains controversial, especially in the United States (where 90% of adults do not subscribe to the full Darwinian vision). Replete with fresh material and new insights, *Evolution* will educate and inform while taking readers on a fascinating journey of discovery. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Larson, a Pulitzer-winning historian (*Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*), traces the history of the contentious concept of evolution from Darwin's predecessors, like Cuvier and Lyell, to his early advocates, like Asa Gray (who tried to keep God in the mix) and Thomas Huxley, and "postmodern" advocates such as Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins. Larson reminds readers that Darwin hasn't always been held in as high esteem as he is today, even among scientists: at the beginning of the 1900s, the concept of evolution was widely accepted, but natural selection was not. Larson demonstrates that only through advances by mid-century population geneticists like Haldane, Fisher and Wright and sociobiologists like the late William Hamilton have most scientists come to accept all of Darwin's theories. Larson devotes chapters to dark episodes in evolution's history like the early 20th-century eugenics movement and the Scopes trial, where, Larson proposes, Clarence Darrow's theatrics may have done the cause more harm than good. This latest entry in Modern Library's Chronicles series isn't "evolution for dummies" — "it requires concentration and some effort" — but Larson's survey should make valuable reading for young people going into the sciences and other science buffs. Illus. not seen by PW. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Infectious good reading. The prose is limpid, the chapters are luminous." —James Moore, co-author of *Darwin* — "The history of evolutionary science from the 18th-century to the

present is a history of controversies and seemingly incompatible views. It takes an author like Ed Larson to provide an account of this crucial history. . . .The reader will be rewarded by an intellectual delight.

—Ernst Mayr

Larson masterfully takes us from the 18th century French enlightenment to the 21st century evolution wars. From Buffon and Cuvier, through Darwin and Wallace, to Dawkins, Gould, and Wilson, he provides a scholarly, readable history of the ups and downs of the theory of evolution. Larson shows us how firmly this theory is established, as firmly as Einstein's theory of relativity.

—Duncan M. Porter, Director of the Darwin Correspondence Project

Larson has written a brilliant introduction to the history of evolution, equally sensitive to scientific, religious, and social factors. It is, hands down, the most readable and reliable account available.

—Ronald L. Numbers, Hildale and William Coleman Professor of the History of Science and Medicine, Department of Medical History and Bioethics, University of Wisconsin

"Ed Larson is both a historian and a writer who knows how to bring his subject alive. In *Evolution: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory* he combines the latest historical scholarship with an understanding of recent issues in science, religion and social debate. This powerful book will help everyone understand the foundations of modern evolutionary ideas and the origins of the latest controversies."

—Peter J. Bowler, Queens University Belfast

An indispensable guide to the sometimes weird, but always wonderful, world of Evolution. Every species inhabiting this contested territory is here: Darwinian materialists, Lamarckian progressivists, hopeful-monster mutationists, theistic evolutionists, neo-vitalists, six-day creationists, mathematical geneticists, intelligent designers, molecular reductionists and on and on. Yet this is no monochrome chronicle of disengaged scientific ideas. It is a rich and compelling narrative portrayed in glorious technicolour, as grand and sweeping in scope as the theory of evolution itself. In the struggle for shelf-life among publications on evolution, Edward Larson's book is superbly fitted for long-term survival.

—David N. Livingstone, author of *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought*

"Larson's acclaimed gifts as a writer who can make the history of science exciting to a wide audience are visible again. The story, which takes seriously the cultural meanings of new science, has many twists and turns and is told with humor and vivacity."

—JOHN HEDLEY BROOKE, Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion, University of Oxford

From the Hardcover edition.

This is an intellectual history of thought on evolution in Europe and the United States. It is logically sequenced and accessible to the non-biologist reader. I plan to read it again sometime because I personally have trouble wrapping my mind around the many variations of evolutionary thought; I feel

I will gain from the re-read by picking up new things in it and by making connections so far unmade. I thoroughly believe in evolution and consider it an obligation to defend evolution as science as opposed to superstition or fake science-- but I would like to be able to defend it in depth and with greater certainty in my assertions. This book has helped.

This book was very well done. The author has a nice style that was clear and engaging. It put the history of the evolutionary theory in perspective over time and how it has changed from the beginning. It wasn't overly technical but the author had enough knowledge to explain how technology and society has influenced the theory. I learned some things I didn't know previously about people and ideas relative to evolution. The section about eugenics gave me a little better understanding of the Nazi regime. I wished there was a little more about the current genetic research but it is changing so fast that it is hard to keep up with and incorporate in a book format.

The book is a good analysis of the development of the theory of evolution itself, showing the reasonableness of ideas that didn't pan out and are no longer discussed. There is also much discussion of the personal views, including religious ones, of many of the scientists involved. A nice philosophy of science text in this way. The author is a little smug in the beginning, but this fades away and is easy to just ignore in any case.

I thought this book was interesting, but a bit slow. It worked very well for class, though, and it came in great condition.

Mr. Larson has written a fine overview of the history of evolution. The book does not dwell endlessly on every skirmish between different scientists or the backlash from religious groups. If Mr. Larson had taken that approach, the size of "Evolution" would have made "War & Peace" look like a flimsy bookmark. Instead, the author effectively shows how and why Darwin's theory became and continues to be the backbone of all biological research. It is absolutely amazing that we are into the 21st century and, still, a large portion of the populace doesn't understand or accept evolution. This book is a great, entertaining start for people who believe knowledge is power and have the courage to take their brains out for a little fresh air. If you are looking for a more detailed account of some of the topics skimmed over in this work, I'd humbly suggest Mr. Larson's "Summer for the Gods" about the Scopes Monkey Trial; "Monkey Girl" by Edward Humes which is about ignoramuses trying to sneak creationsim into Dover, Pennsylvania's high school science curricula; and "War Against the

Weak" by Edwin Black that documents America's frightening, misguided flirtation with eugenics. All three of them are also excellent reads.

I have remarked elsewhere (somewhat controversially) that relatively few people, even biological scientists, really understand the Principle of Evolution. You will not become one of those few by reading this book. But what you will learn will be, to use the author's words, "remarkable." I have been a biologist for 30 years now and I learned something new from each page, not about biology but history, just as the subtitle says. The author, Edward Larson is a professor in the School of Law at Pepperdine University. He has a Ph. D. in History from the University of Wisconsin and a J.D. from Harvard. He has several other works on the interaction between science and religion and works on various aspects of the legal history of the United States. His authority on this subject is well established. The book starts in France, in the midst of the enlightenment, with the story of the man who managed to squash any real discussion of evolution throughout his lifetime and for 30 years after, Georges Cuvier, the granddaddy of modern comparative anatomy. He argued against any form of gradual speciation on the grounds that the organ systems of each species were too essentially integrated to allow for any variation. Variation would lead to death, which happens to be right most of the time, and the essence of Cuvier's argument remains at the heart of the objections of the advocates of Intelligent Design yet today. Cuvier spent his career making sure that Lamarck's "ascending escalator" of species never got off the ground and the story of these two men and the changing ideas of the early 19th century is worth the price of the book. But the origins of evolution are more to be found in fossils than finches, so the book turns to the work of Charles Lyell and the other rock choppers of England who founded simultaneously the sciences of geology and paleontology. It was Lyell's book, "Principles of Geology" that Darwin read and reread on that five year journey of the Beagle. It was Lyell that allowed Darwin to see back through the time available and necessary for evolution. Lyell's work was the bedrock on which Darwin eventually constructed his theory using the bricks and mortar supplied by Thomas Malthus. Darwin took his time with this construction and it's unveiling and this makes for a good story. Professor Larson then describes the fanatical proselytizing for the ideas of evolution by "Darwin's Bulldog", Thomas Huxley, and Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, the founder of Social Darwinism. One of the weakest points of the book is the author's failure to explore adequately the fact that the fervor of these men was every bit the equivalent of that of those similarly well-meaning folk who opposed the teaching of evolution insisting on Heavenly mechanisms 60 years later. The acceptance of both God and science by Darwin's American ally, Asa Gray, likewise remains unexplored. Huxley and Galton embraced the

science so they might free themselves from religion, but that embrace is then how science becomes a religion, as it has for many people. That religion of science can lead to the same irrationality sometimes found in other religions. Social Darwinism has killed far more people than the Crusades. The book also struggles in places as it progresses through the 20th century, but then the science does start to get trickier here. The treatment of Mendel (his work was not discovered until the 20th century so it is dealt with here) is appropriately generous and that of Jay Gould appropriately harsh. The appeal here is the description of the scientists who followed Darwin to found modern genetics (lot of founding going on around this, hmmm), their lives and their interactions with each other which slowly lead to the synthesis of genetics and natural selection that we now call evolution. The book regains its stride in its discussion of the rejection of evolution by many in the United States in the 20th century and of the Scopes Monkey Trial. But it should, Professor Larson has written another book on just that subject, "Summer for the Gods", the book that evidently lead him down this historical path. The movie "Inherit the Wind" is a lie and Professor Larson says so. But while the treatment of the deniers of evolution is fair, accurate and measured, the undertone of scorn is unmistakable. For those who do want to know the science before they read this book, the starting point is easy - Darwin. Origin of the Species is easily the best non-fiction book of the 19th century and the corner stone of modern biology. For those who really want to try to understand the science, I recommend Douglas Futuyma's text, "Evolution." For those who just want to know the "remarkable history of a scientific theory" this is your place.

This is the most interesting book on evolution in existence. It's understandable and enjoyable. History and science are much more fun with good writers.

A good book, valuable and interesting. Mostly for beginners in the field of history of science.

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