



Robert M. Young and Darwin Studies

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My thinking about Darwin and his importance was formed by and has persisted from a year (1972-1973) that I spent at Cambridge University attached to the Department of History and Philosophy of Science. I like to joke that I rarely agree with the opinions of the Marxist scholar Robert M. Young, and he never agrees with mine, but I still think that his was the most original mind that turned to the study of Darwin. (Acknowledgements to *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*, 2012)

Bob Young, as the historian of science, Robert Maxwell Young, was universally known, was born in Texas in 1935 and died July 5, 2019. He was a practicing historian of evolutionary biology for less than a quarter of his more than fifty-year career in the history of science. Yet, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that he was, and remains, one of the most innovative and influential people in the field. I can unambiguously say that Bob Young was by far the most important person in my own development as a historian of science, and his influence colors almost all work that I do to this day.

Young came to Darwinism at a good time and in a good place. For the first hundred or so years after the publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, it seems not unfair to say that most that was written on Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution rarely reached the standards of professional historical writing. It was not until the 1950s that the history of science started to get professionalized. Those trained in the field realized that archives had to be opened up and consulted. Work done on the subject had to locate itself in the historical corpus generally, not looking upon Darwin rather like the Archangel Gabriel come to earth for a few decades in the nineteenth century. Professional historians turned their interests towards Darwin and his theory.

Young at Cambridge was perfectly placed to take advantage of the new winds, as one might call them. In major respects he did to the full, although somewhat paradoxically he never ever walked out of the back of his college, crossed Queen's Road and took the elevator to the Manuscripts Room of the UL, to look at any of its holdings. He used to claim that no one had to date looked at most of the published material, so why bother yet with the unpublished material! What he did bring to the field was a super-keen intelligence, an ability and willingness to look at huge amounts of said published material, both around the time of Darwin and later, and a Marxist ideology that demanded that everything be put in social context. This was particularly appropriate for Darwin particularly, for had not Marx, in 1862, written to Engels: "It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers among beasts and plants the society of England, with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, inventions, and the Malthusian struggle for existence."

This willingness led to a huge burst of creative activity, with articles pouring forth, and then – almost as quickly as they had begun – five or six years later, an abrupt end.

Possibly, because Young thought he had all that he had to say. He could see younger scholars coming along who did go to the archives and the like, and that was just not his style. Possibly, because he was already starting to move on to other topics and other fields. Possibly, as noted above, because he was starting to feel disconnected from the style of English – especially Cambridge – academic life. I “left academic life in disgust at the corruption, opportunism, and hypocrisy of certain colleagues and patrons.” (I confess the people in HPS always struck me as rather mild, friendly people. But then, as the radio program warned us: “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!” Apparently, Bob Young did too.)

Since everything about Bob was personal – “corruption, opportunism, and hypocrisy” – let me explain how I got involved and why it made such a difference. I was trained in the 1960s as a philosopher of science. A small group of us – notable leader, David Hull – had turned to biology for subject material, mainly on the excellent grounds that not much had been written on the subject, and this existing work was pretty awful. The 1960s was, of course, the decade of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I don’t think any philosopher – and, to be honest, not many historians – agreed with his thesis about paradigms and the non-rational nature of their change, but Kuhn did have a huge effect on many younger philosophers of science. We agreed with him entirely that, in order to do good philosophy of science, you had to do history of science. No longer was it good enough just to grab a couple of popular accounts and get on with the job. You had to do history as seriously and as well as the historians. Naturally, given that it is the strong belief of every philosopher that we are the brightest people on campus, this was a challenge rather than a threat. Especially, those of us trying to create a modern philosophy of biology were much inspired to turn to the history of the subject, and what juicier topic could there be than Darwin and his Revolution?

My first sabbatical was in 1972 – I then worked in Canada – and what more obvious destination for one so fired up than to make my way to Cambridge. Obviously, on the one hand there was the prospect of working in the Darwin Archives. For me, no less, was the other hand, the prospect of interacting with Bob Young. Why Bob Young? For five years I had been reading the Darwin literature – his own writings, the five volumes of letters published by his son, the works of his contemporaries like Thomas Henry Huxley and Alfred Russel Wallace, and then a huge amount of secondary material. By 1970, younger professional historians were coming on line – Peter Vorzimmer and Sandra Herbert for instance—and other historians like Bob Olby were making related contributions. So I was getting comfortable in the field. Young for me, however, was something special. His writings simply were inspirational. He made you think, he challenged you, and he changed your perspective.

I won’t say I wanted to sit at Bob Young’s feet. I am pretty Oedipal about these sorts of things -- I am quite convinced that a major reason why I am not a Christian is because I couldn’t worship another human being. But I did want to learn from Bob Young. So Cambridge it was. As it happens, although Bob was welcoming, he was already transitioning out of his job, so he was not always the easiest of people to be around. But I learnt enough, and as I said in my quotation at the beginning of this essay, with the added attractions of Martin Rudwick – still the most brilliant historian of geology we have ever had – with Roy Porter – a graduate student (or something of that nature) but

without doubt the most self-confident person I have ever known – the embryologist Sydney Smith, who knew just an incredible amount about Darwin – and add in a couple of philosophers like Mary Hesse (much interested in metaphor), I was in heaven. (Actually, I am not too big on God either. He reminds me too much of my late headmaster. Instant dislike on both sides.)

Why was it that Young had this nigh mesmeric effect on me? Let me focus on what I think was his major and best paper, a long essay published in 1971 in the *Monist*: “Darwin’s metaphor: Does nature select?” The paper is on the revolution brought about by Darwin’s *Origin*. Although there is a reference to Kuhn, the discussion is not set in a particularly philosophical context. It is noted that Kuhn is interesting, but his thesis is brushed aside (without comment) as not very relevant to the Darwinian case. Young focuses on the state of play before the *Origin*, the state of play after the *Origin*, and the central metaphor of the *Origin* – natural selection a phenomenon modeled on the breeder’s practice of artificial selection – and how that played out in what happened – or did not play out in what happened.

Straight off, you can see why a philosopher like myself was going to be so excited. Nearly fifty years later, rereading his seminal article on natural selection, I can still understand fully my excitement. It really is an impressive piece of work, and its pretensions at least are major. Once we understand the social context of Darwin’s thought – the British social context of Darwin’s thought – all else falls into place. We see why it was that people after the *Origin* became evolutionists and yet, almost to a person – including Darwin himself! – rejected natural selection. There was gold in them, thar hills, and Robert Young was the man who found it and mined it. That the gold then turned out to be dross, if anything, adds to the credit of Robert Young.

I hope you can see why the thinking of Bob Young has been so important to me – and to others. He may not have always been right, but he was always interesting, and that is more valuable. And that is why I mourn his passing but celebrate his life.

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