

Samuel Butler: Victorian Atheist and Controversialist

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When I decided to write an intellectual history of the mid-19th century I knew from the outset that it would be impossible without a consideration of Samuel Butler. He was much discounted and even derided in his time. But he was a man who, while spectacularly wrong about some things, was spectacularly right about others. That is the nature of the controversialist – to provoke, but to be right just often enough to force people to listen to what you say. And Butler was in many ways the leading controversialist of the last third of the 19th century, even if his most famous work of controversy, the attack on Christianity and Victorian morals that is *The Way of All Flesh*, was not published until after his death in 1902, in the high summer of Edwardian England.

His main acts of controversialism were directed at the Church of England in particular, and at Christianity in general. He felt the Victorian age had been undermined by a form of religious mania, in response to the awesome changes in society and technology with which the average Victorian had had to come to terms, and to which there were no ready answers. Novelists before Butler, such as George Eliot, had undermined religion; and the most popular novelist of the era, Charles Dickens, had little to say in any of his novels about the benefits of organised faith. In Butler's case *The Way of All Flesh* aggressively portrayed religion as sustaining Victorian hypocrisy. Doctrinal disputes such as highlighted by the Anglo-Catholic Oxford movement caused the Anglican church to appear divided and inward looking, helping reduce its relevance to the masses and making it appear the private property of prelates, dons and theologians. As Butler wrote in *The Way of all Flesh*, the age just before he was born in 1835 had been one when "Dr Arnold had not yet sown that crop of earnest thinkers which we are now harvesting, and men did not see why they should not have their own way if no evil consequences to themselves seemed likely to follow upon their doing so."

No writer in the second half of the 19th century articulates social radicalism better than Butler; or illustrates better the reaction against early Victorian values. As with John Stuart Mill in the generation before him – and Bentham in the generation before Mill – he advanced secularisation in the contemporary mind, stripping away religious bigotries, prejudices and superstitions seen as a brake on progress. However, whereas the Utilitarians used rationalism to combat God, Butler used a mixture of bitter satire and hostility. His deconstruction and demolition of the Victorian religious mindset was effective, but not entirely rational: which was largely true of other aspects of Butler's life and character. He was deeply cynical, including about himself: "When I was a boy at school at Shrewsbury," he recorded in his *Note-Books*, "old Mrs Brown used to keep a tray of spoiled tarts which she sold cheaper. They most of them looked pretty right till you handled them. We are all spoiled tarts."

His tone can be blamed upon his father. Butler was born in the rectory at Langar in Nottinghamshire in 1835 under the almost crushing weight of parental expectation. His father was a clergyman in the mould of Archdeacon Froude, and

his reward was to become one of the great monsters of Victorian fiction when depicted as the Reverend Mr Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh*. Butler, who in his private expressions as in many of his public ones was unacquainted with understatement, recorded that "MY MOST IMPLACABLE ENEMY from childhood onward has certainly been my father." He also observed of family that "more unhappiness comes from this source than from any other – I mean from the attempt to prolong family connection unduly and to make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so. The mischief among the lower classes is not so great, but among the middle and upper classes it is killing a large number daily."

His grandfather, also Samuel Butler, was headmaster of Shrewsbury and then, in 1836, Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. Butler went to Shrewsbury, in the family tradition, and then similarly here to John's. Writing to tell his father, in 1853, that he had won a scholarship at John's, (one of just five awarded to freshmen) Butler said "I shall not make any bones about the oaths" that he had to swear in those days of the religious tests. His friend and first biographer, Henry Festing Jones, noted that, when he was at John's, "Butler had been taught to accept the Christian miracles as self-evident propositions and to believe in a personal anthropomorphic God. He had, at this time, never met any one who entertained a doubt on the matter."

His single-mindedness was clear as an undergraduate. In notes he made on 31 March 1855 he wrote that "There are only 10 good men in John's; I am one; reader, calculate your chance of salvation." He quoted the observation of another Johnian, Bishop Selwyn, made a few months earlier in a series of addresses to the University, that "the University church is a place too much neglected by the young men up here" and added: "How far better would it be if each man's own heart was a little University Church, the pericardium a little University churchyard, wherein are buried the lust of the flesh, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; the veins and arteries, little clergymen and bishops ministering therein, and the blood a stream of soberness, temperance and chastity perpetually flowing into it." A "Puseyite playing upon an organ" in the College "playeth his own soul to damnation". Simeonites he dismissed as "an acknowledged humbug".

He graduated 12th in the first class of the Classical tripos, sufficiently high to be considered for a fellowship. He was expected to enter the church: but it was quickly apparent that his doubts – to use the popular euphemism – would make that unfeasible. He worked for a few months in the slums of the parish of St James's Piccadilly, where he realised that seeking to improve the very poor by spiritual means was a waste of time: they needed money. One of his biographers has summed up Butler's problem with Christianity as being that "he could not accept a religion that based itself upon the fundamental wickedness of humanity, whose practice was centred on the injunction 'Thou shalt not', and whose doctrine pointed to the eternal divide of heaven and hell." Men such as Canon Froude and Canon Butler certainly took this view of doctrine; it was Butler's misfortune to have been brought up by one of them. "Is there any religion," he asked, "whose followers can be pointed to as distinctly more amiable and trustworthy than those of any other?...I find the nicest and best people generally profess no religion at all, but are ready to like the best men of all religions."

To his father's dismay he abandoned the idea of holy orders. Other ideas for his future vexed his parents. He had to be talked out of growing cotton in Liberia, but finally settled on being an artist even though "for two or three years I could make no money by it" – as he said he wouldn't, either, by going into the law, a possibility his father held out to him. By the late summer of 1859 the Revd Mr Butler had had enough. "If you choose to act in utter contradiction of our judgment and wishes and that before having acquired the slightest knowledge of your powers which I see you overrate in other points you can of course act as you like. But I think it's right to tell you that not one sixpence will you receive from me after your Michaelmas payment till you come to your senses." He refused to fund him to go abroad: still angry at his son's refusal to pursue ordination, he yelled: "God give you a seeing eye some day".

Butler told his mother that "if I am the pigheaded fool you think me the best school for me is adversity." He told his father he would make his own living. He started to insist that he be allowed to become an artist. He had some talent for this, but his father was outraged. Father and son had a negotiation about Samuel's emigrating. Once all other avenues – diplomacy and the Army were also suggested – were exhausted, Canon Butler agreed to let his son go and learn sheep farming in New Zealand: and to advance him the capital to do so. It was a business transaction: and Samuel kept his word, making a profit after applying himself to learn the mechanics of agriculture. His father advanced him £4,000, a fortune, and Butler sailed from Gravesend in September 1859. He sat on deck as his ship headed down the Thames. When he went to bed that evening he failed, for the first time in his life, to say his prayers, an event so tumultuous that he recorded it in his notebook. In retrospect, it was more surprising that the ritual had lasted that long. On arrival in New Zealand, he learned that a ship on which he had originally intended to sail had sunk with the loss of all on board.

He found some virgin land that would make excellent pasture, and this was the basis of the commercial success of his venture. This was not his only enterprise. He also explored the country, and in proper Victorian fashion sought to improve the cultural climate of the colony by organising art exhibitions. Perhaps more significantly, he lost what remained of his faith: he told a friend in 1862 that "he no longer considered himself a Christian". He studied the gospels and was exercised by their inconsistencies. Since he could find no evidence that Christ died on the cross, he decided there had been no resurrection.

He returned to England in 1864, his success having created an investment that would pay him £800 a year, liberating him from his father. However, some injudicious business decisions in the 1870s made him dependent again, until his father's death in 1886 left him with an inheritance. He was also liberated from his father's doctrines, and made no secret of his own apostasy. This led to a rebuke from his aunt, Anna Russell, who suspected he had been trying to wean her son away from Christianity: she complained about "the influence you are exerting on other[s], younger, and less skilled in argument than yourself – leading them. It may be, to make the same shipwreck of faith and hope that you have made." This only provoked Butler to write to her at length about his conception of God, causing more shock and dismay. So settled were his family in their beliefs that to find him so resolute against them – more resolute than they knew, given the anonymity of Butler's writings on the subject at that time – prevented them from grasping his radical course.

He set himself up in London and sought to make a career as a painter, enrolling as a student at several art schools successively over a period of seven years. He was heavily under the influence of Ruskin, having read *The Seven Lamps* at John's. He then read his writings on painting. At this time he painted his best-known and perhaps best picture, *Family Prayers*, a representation of the grim domestic life at Langar that in its suffocating sense of order and closed-mindedness displays his feelings about his family and his upbringing better than words could. At Heatherley's art school in Newman Street he befriended a fellow student, Eliza Savage, who became a muse to him, and urged him to write fiction. Charles Darwin, no less, had congratulated Butler in 1865 on his "rare powers of writing". Butler was a man of strong, almost comically polarised, likes and dislikes, and one of the latter was the novel. However, Miss Savage persisted; and when Butler failed to achieve his ambition to become a student at the Royal Academy, he had a change of heart.

He wrote his anonymous novel *Erewhon*, about a utopia based on his experience of New Zealand, and a society in which religion is rejected but in which the Church appears, to be satirised, as a bank. The cult of Ydgrun, a goddess of pragmatism and common sense, has replaced old deities. The truly successful worship her; she is based on Thomas Morton's character Mrs Grundy, a byword for an arbiter of respectability and good sense in society. Butler also undermines parenthood, attacking the notion that parents inevitably know best. *Erewhon* was a critical success when published in 1872. When it was reported that Butler was the author, and word reached Langar, its godlessness shocked his family. His father took his advice not to read it, but word about it caused great unhappiness: so much so that his sister Harriet wrote and ordered him to write a letter of regret, which he did – but later destroyed. His father was forced to admit, in a letter of 12 June 1872, that "I know that there is a great deal of scepticism in the world"; but he added: "That unbelief is the badge of the wise and excellent of the earth or of great array of them I totally deny." To this Butler has added: "Who ever said it was?" His father professed to be distressed at his son losing the faith that he held so strongly: but the wound went even more deeply. He asked Butler not to visit Langar "at present" while he and his wife took in the fact that they had a heretic for a son.

Butler had an unconventional approach to novel-writing as he did to everything else, and derided the views of literary society. He wrote to Miss Savage in March 1873: "I have finished *Middlemarch*. It is very bad indeed." Nearly two years later, he told her: "I have been reading a translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Is it good? To me it seems perhaps the very worst book I ever read. No Englishman could have written such a book. I cannot remember a single good page or idea, and the priggishness is the finest of its kind I can call to mind. Is it all a practical joke?" She said she had read it in her teens and found it "tiresome...I shall not read *Wilhelm Meister* again."

In June 1873 Lord Pembroke sent Gladstone, his Godfather, a copy of Butler's next work, *The Fair Haven*, describing the author as "a modern freethinker of the most thoroughgoing sort, and all the defence of religion and dogma and the refutation of doubt are written in a spirit of carefully concealed irony". He continued: "It is a satire of almost repulsive bitterness. Yet its real nature is so cleverly disguised that more than one church paper has treated it to a solemn and favourable review." He described Butler as being of a school of

freethinker “whose glory and pride is their recklessness of consequences...I hope you will forgive me [for sending him the book]. I feel horribly guilty.” Gladstone was duped, but soon corrected himself. “Dear George, since I wrote to you on Sunday I have learned that the ‘The Fair Haven’ is the work of a writer who does not believe in Christianity. It took me in.” A few days later he added: “It is rather deplorable that he should bear the name of Butler, but I hope he may grow to be more worthy of it.”

In 1865 Butler had written articles on the resurrection, which he had sent to Darwin, who had regarded them as “written with much force, vigour, and clearness”. These developed via a pamphlet entitled, with Butlerian irony, *The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, into *The Fair Haven*. Miss Savage had been consulted on the manuscript and pronounced it “wonderful”. When the book was published anonymously in 1873 he sent Darwin a copy. “It has interested me greatly and is extremely curious.....it will be a curious problem whether the orthodox will have so good a scent as to detect your heresy.” He told him that “Leslie Stephen, a regular reviewer, who was lunching here, knew you were the author” and added: “I have been surprised at the strength of the case which you make for Jesus not having died on the cross.”

The book purports to be a justification of Christian faith, published posthumously with a memoir of the author by his equally fictional brother. Butler felt he had given an intellectual view of the resurrection in his earlier pamphlet: but he knew such matters had an emotional side, and in this book sought to display that too. When we are told the author died of a brain disease after years of mental indisposition, we should take the hint. The book does indeed purport to be a defence of Christianity: but it is a defence launched by so third-rate a mind that it destroys the very thing it allegedly sought to protect. By taking in various reviewers Butler proved his main point, that the intellectual quality and percipience of many churchmen was deplorably low, and their determination to be convinced in the face of evidence against them was deeply depressing. As the “author”, John Pickard Owen, says, “Never was there a time when such an exposition [of the foundations of belief] was wanted so much as now. The specious plausibilities of pseudo-science have led hundreds of thousands into error; the misapplication of geology has ensnared a host of victims, and a still greater misapplication of natural history seems likely to devour those whom the perversion of geology has spared.”

Owen goes on, in a bravura display of the very temper Butler was so determined to expose and ridicule: “Not that I have a word to say against *true* science: true science can never be an enemy of the Bible, which is the text-book of the science of the salvation of human souls as written by the great Creator and Redeemer of the soul itself, but the Enemy of Mankind is never idle, and no sooner does God vouchsafe to us any clearer illumination of His purposes and manner of working than the Evil One sets himself to consider how he can turn the blessing into a curse; and by the all-wise dispensation of Providence he is allowed so much triumph as that he shall sift the wise from the foolish, the faithful from the traitors.”

This blundering attitude permeates the book: had Gladstone not been offended by its mocking of his faith, he would doubtless have been by the extended nature of the single joke upon which the book is based: that proselytisers are so intellectually inept that they inevitably wreck their own case.

Tackling those who doubt the gospels, Owen says that “if it could be shewn that the belief in Christ’s reappearance did not arise until after the death of those who were said to have seen him, when actions and teachings might have been imputed to them that were not theirs, the case would be different; but this cannot be done; there is nothing in history better established than that the men who said that they had seen Christ alive after he had been dead, were themselves the first to lay aside all else in order to maintain their assertion.” To compound his projection of Owen’s stupidity, Butler has a friend write to Owen (and the letter is reproduced in the book) begging him to desist from his defence of Christianity, precisely because it is so weak in relying on disregarding the discrepancies in the gospels. The friend refers him to the weaknesses in Paley’s *Natural Theology*, one of the best selling books of the 19th century and a vigorous defence of Christianity, and urges him to expose them: but Owen cannot.

The other necessary element in Owen’s idiocy is his lack of understanding of ordinary people in the industrialised, and increasingly secularised, mid-19th century. How wonderful, he surmises, must be the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard to those who have lost their jobs: “Few but those who have mixed much with the less educated classes, can have any idea of the priceless comfort which this parable affords daily to those whose lot it has been to remain unemployed when their more fortunate brethren have been in full work.”

Owen is reduced to assertion, as he must be: since there is no proof of the bases of faith. Butler rubs this in. The resurrection, he says, “is proved externally by the most solid and irrefragable proofs, such as should appeal even to minds which reject all spiritual evidence, and recognise no canons of investigation but those of the purest reason.” The absence of self-awareness, as well as of intellect, is glaring: “The fact is, that both we and our opponents are agreed that nothing should be believed unless it can be proved to be true. We repudiate the idea that faith means the accepting historical facts upon evidence which is insufficient to establish them. We do not call this faith; we call it credulity, and oppose it to the utmost of our power.” The ultimate assertion is when he writes: “As long as we can be sure that our Lord died and rose from the dead, we may leave it to our opponents to contend about the details of the manner in which each event took place.”

Owen has no doubt, as he has repeatedly told his readers: but nor does he understand that his opponents do not dispute the manner of the resurrection, but refuse to believe there was a resurrection at all. The conclusion to his work is similarly absolute, and preposterous: “In an age when Rationalism has become recognised as the only basis upon which faith can rest securely, I have established the Christian faith upon a rationalistic basis....Christianity and Rationalism are not only ceasing to appear antagonistic to one another, but have each become essential to the very existence of the other. May the reader feel this no less strongly than I do, and may he also feel that I have supplied the missing element which could alone cause them to combine. If he asks me what element I allude to, I answer Candour. This is the pilot that has taken us safely into the Fair Haven of universal brotherhood in Christ.” It proved Butler’s point that some churchmen, both Anglican and Catholic, felt he made such a good rebuttal of the rationalist arguments against Christianity that they commended the book highly. Miss Savage, indeed, sent the book to religious acquaintances purely to see their response; many were taken in. When people realised they had been duped,

Butler was in the doghouse. In his lifetime, his subsequent works sold poorly, and were ignored by all but a small *cognoscenti*.

When he was plotting *The Fair Haven* he wrote to his friend the Revd F S Fleay, on 2 July 1872, telling him frankly of his intention to get “good useful truth into quarters which it is never otherwise likely to reach: if I could only make an artificial fly with a hook in it so cunningly that the church shd rise at it (and I think I could) I fancy good might come of it.” In terms of duping his pious potential readers, he promised that “no rat can be smelt – it is deodorised thoroughly through my method.” Two days later he wrote again to Fleay saying he had slightly revised the deodorised method: “I had written the first chapter in the character of one who had never doubted: I shall write it now in the character of a converted sceptic, it will make my insisting on people’s understanding our side less suspicious.” He also made the shocking admission that when he had completed the book “I shall take it...to Chapman and Hall or Macmillan and give my name and say that I have been converted and have written in consequence – indeed I think I shall let it be known among my friends (except at home – where I shall say nothing) that my opinions are undergoing a change – it will not be published as the author of *Erewhon*, but simply as ‘by one who has been reconverted’ – or something of that sort.”

After publication he told Fleay: “I am told I have made the satire too quiet, and that it would have been better to have been broader. I don’t know. I wanted to be broad enough to be able to turn round on my reader and say ‘what a fool you were for not seeing it’ – yet I wanted a great many not to see it all the same. I thought it would be far more provoking thus than if broader. If more open the church papers might have passed it over as they do any serious attack, but now the unwary really go in danger by it. I feel pretty sure that I have taken the course which is most likely to make a row, and that is what I want.” He admitted he still doubted what had happened at the “resurrection”. “If any reliance could be placed upon the gospel narratives of the resurrection – then I should think the resuscitation view most probable: but unfortunately we cannot depend upon a single word of them, and so all becomes conjectural. However, the hallucination theory is too great a jump for the average British mind.”

That section of Butler’s intellectual energy not devoted to exposing organised religion to ridicule and obloquy was used more and more from the 1860s to the 1880s to attack Darwin. Darwin and Canon Butler had known each other at Shrewsbury and at university. Darwin had stimulated the Canon’s lifelong interest in botany on an undergraduate reading holiday in Wales in 1828. Samuel Butler was acquainted with Darwin’s children. A copy of *The Origin of Species* – published while Butler was on his ship to New Zealand – had been sent to Butler. He read it intently. He wrote an article for a Christchurch newspaper about evolution in 1863. He noted at the end of his life that “*The Fair Haven* got me into no social disgrace that I have ever been able to discover. I might attack Christianity as much as I chose and nobody cared one straw; but when I attacked Darwin it was a different matter. For many years *Evolution Old and New* and *Unconscious Memory* made a shipwreck of my literary prospects.”

When *Erewhon* appeared Butler, who then was merely sceptical about Darwin rather than hostile to him, conciliated him about his suspicion that it contained a satire on *The Origin of Species*. He twice visited Darwin at Down, and met other members of the family: relations were cordial. However, the more

Butler reflected on Darwin's work, and the more he read elsewhere on the subject, the more his natural perversity drew him into conflict with Darwin. Butler may have been content that he had dealt, by 1877, with the fallaciousness of Christianity. He now decided to deal with the fallaciousness of the cult of Darwin. He did this despite – or, perhaps in his view, because of – his having had no scientific training: and when Darwin's supporters, many infinitely more expert than Butler, turned on him, he bore the wounds as a self-righteous martyr should.

Butler's first serious assault was *Life and Habit*, published in early 1878. He seems to have been motivated to write out of fear that someone would get there before him. "Charles Darwin is being a good deal discredited," he reflected, "and if I do not bring my book out soon it may easily be too late to be effective." Francis Darwin, the great man's son, was on good terms with Butler, and they corresponded. In November 1877 Butler warned Francis that his imminent book "has resolved itself into a downright attack upon your father's view of evolution, and a defence of what I conceive to be Lamarck's." He added, probably not disingenuously: "I neither intended nor wished this, but was simply driven to it....reading your father more closely, and, I may add, more sceptically, the full antagonism between him and Lamarck came for the first time before me." Butler claimed that "I have always admitted, and in such way as to leave no sense of *arrière pensée*, the inestimable service which he [Darwin] has conferred upon us by teaching us to believe in evolution; though maintaining that he has led us to believe in it on grounds which I, for my own part, cannot accept." Butler concluded by observing "how sorry I was that your father should have been at school under my grandfather, inasmuch as I myself should dislike an attack from a son or grandson of Kennedy's, when I should not care twopence about it from any one else."

The younger Darwin criticised Butler for arguing that, with the exception of the theory of natural selection, his father had simply lifted all of the *Origin* from Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, the 18th century French zoologist who had initiated the serious study of invertebrates. "I went through the earlier part of my book and cut out all support of "natural selection" and made it square with a teleological view – for such I take it Lamarck's is." Francis replied: "I confess to feeling lost in astonishment at your saying that you have cut out all support for Natural Selection, and also that you consider it a rope of sand. I suppose from this that you deny any effect to Natural Selection? If so you must find it rather a hard position to hold I should guess. Because of course you have to deny that such a thing as variations occur. For if you allow that variations occur you must allow that heredity is the rule, variations being only occasional lapses in perfect heredity. I suppose I am stereotyped from my education and association, but it does seem to me that if you grant this it is logically impossible to say that natural selection has no effect."

This hit its target, for when Francis read Butler's *Life and Habit* over Christmas 1877 it was "with great pleasure. I think all the analogy or identity between memory or heredity is very well worked out." Butler had sent two copies, one of which – if Francis thought it wise – was to be passed on to Darwin. Francis recommended to him the writings of Huxley, notably articles in the *Contemporary Review* entitled "Animal Automation", in which "he tried to show that consciousness was something superadded to nervous mechanism, like the

striking of a clock is added to the ordinary growing parts.” However, Francis added that “I don’t think I quite understand what your objection to Natural Selection is”. Darwin’s letter came as a “relief” to Butler, who had been “afraid you might have considered *Life and Habit* unpardonable”. He continued: “Pitch into it and into me by all means. You cannot do me a greater service than to bundle me neck and crop out of my present position; this is what I try to do to those from whom I differ, and this is what I wish them to do to me if they think it worthwhile.”

The book had occupied almost two years of Butler’s life. He stopped painting and concentrated on literary and intellectual endeavours, spending most mornings in the British Museum reading room. He developed a liking for Disraeli and spent much of 1878 reading his novels, admiring the man “very heartily”. He found some of the early work “rather laborious reading” in spite of “the many brilliant sayings”. Although he discussed some of his ideas with certain friends – notably, and usefully, Francis Darwin – he was seldom up-to-date on scientific progress. *Life and Habit*, as with other works where Butler tries to undermine Darwin, is a book of debating points rather than serious research.. It shows something about the intellectual currents stirred up by Darwinism in the generation after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. When Francis pointed out elementary mistakes, Butler accepted them and protested that he knew his work would require refinement. This led to three further attempts to outline why Darwin was wrong, none any more successful than the first.

Far from causing him to be taken seriously by Darwin and his supporters, each new work caused them to despair. Butler entirely failed to make them revise their views. By 1880 Darwin was writing that Butler considered him “a rogue of the deepest dye”, though his dismay was confined to his private letters: in public he made no reference to the dispute. Butler could not drop the notion that Darwin was not the great original thinker others claimed: but their dispute (which Butler continued after Darwin’s death in 1882) was only about means, not ends. It says much for the bizarre nature of Butler’s character, and his almost autistic lack of self-awareness, that he persisted. The more the scientific world ignored him, the more determined he became to make them see how important his voice was.

His next attempt was *Evolution Old and New*, which he started as soon as *Life and Habit* was out of the hands of the reviewers. As well re-heating arguments from the earlier book, the new work introduced a more *ad hominem* tone: not because Butler wished to insult Darwin, but because his own desire for recognition for the value of his ideas was starting to override normal considerations of good manners. Matters took an even more unpleasant turn, unfortunately, because Butler believed he had discovered plagiarism. He accused Darwin, always been the most upright of men, of failing to credit earlier scientists for their contribution to his theory. This entailed him not merely standing up for Lamarck, but for Darwin’s own grandfather, Erasmus.

In February 1879, three months before the publication of *Evolution Old and New*, Dr Ernst Krause, a German biologist, published an article on Erasmus Darwin in a German scientific periodical, *Kosmos*. Darwin wrote to Krause in March 1879 proposing to have his article translated, accompanied by an introductory biographical sketch he would write himself. Butler’s book was sent to Krause and, he alleged, “Darwin expressly asked Dr K not to notice it”. Butler’s

evidence was a letter from Krause to *Nature* on 27 January 1881, in which he said: "Mr Darwin expressly solicited me to take no notice whatever of Mr Butler's book." Butler then alleged Krause recast his article before translation using material from *Evolution Old and New*. "He wound up with an angry attack on *Evol O&N* leaving the book as a pistol pointed at my head, but never (in consequence no doubt of Ch Darwin's request) mentioning it by name."

Darwin's work on his grandfather appeared in November 1879, with the amended edition of Krause's article. The preface claimed it was an accurate translation of what had appeared in *Kosmos*, which it was not: this began to stoke Butler's ire. It said Butler's book had appeared after the *Kosmos* piece, but made no mention that it had been re-written before translation "with an eye" to *Evolution Old and New*. Darwin said nothing about the article being "modified into an attack on it". Butler said he wrote "very civilly" to Darwin on 2 January 1880 ask him to explain himself. Darwin immediately conceded the point and said that, when and if a second edition was called for, he would acknowledge what had happened. Butler wanted a letter to *The Times* or *The Athenaeum*, which Darwin did not offer: Butler wished the record to be set straight at once, and not at some indeterminate point in the future.

Darwin was shocked by Butler's vehemence: no wonder he thought himself perceived as a "rogue of the deepest dye". Butler – whose obsession seemed to suggest an unbalanced mind – wrote to *The Athenaeum* about Darwin's academic practices. "I was so angry," he said, making an interesting comparison, "at finding Darwin treat [sic] me exactly as he had treated Erasmus Darwin, Buffon, Lamarck and the Vertiges, that I wrote to *The Athenaeum* at once and stated the facts."

Unfortunately for all concerned, the magazine published it. Darwin – who had made a rare and genuine mistake in not attributing the reason for a revision to his theory - was outraged and wished to repudiate Butler equally publicly. Huxley warned him against it, as it could only give credit to a man the scientific establishment regarded as something between a joke and a charlatan. Francis Darwin and other members of the family thought Huxley wrong, and that Darwin's intellectual force could have crushed Butler once and for all had he chosen to do so. Francis had a point. Butler's own notes on the affair record that "there was no reply from any one, which I took to mean no reply was possible." As a result, yet another book was written. "Knowing that C Darwin did not care about a newspaper letter, I wrote my book *Unconscious Memory* and stated the facts in full. It appeared November 1880."

It prompted "a savage attack in the *St James's Gazette*", (which pointed out, quite fairly, the lack of scientific research underpinning Butler's effusions), followed quickly by a "coarsely vituperative" one by George Romanes, the evolutionary biologist and disciple of Darwin, in *Nature*. Romanes began his review: "Mr Butler is already known to the public as the author of two or three books which display a certain amount of literary ability. So long therefore as he aimed only at entertaining his readers by such works as 'Erewhon', or 'Life and Habit', he was acting in a suitable sphere."

Romanes deplored Butler's attempts to write about "philosophical discussion". He continued: "To this arena, however, he is in no way adapted, either by mental stature or mental equipment; and therefore makes so sorry an exhibition that Mr Darwin may well be glad that his enemy has written a book.

But while we may smile at the vanity which has induced so incapable and ill-informed a man gravely to pose before the world as a philosopher, we should not on this account have deemed 'Unconscious Memory' worth reviewing." In the torrent of abuse, one of the most notable gems was "the only good thing in it is the writer's own opinion of himself." Romanes admitted it was the "vile and abusive attack upon the personal character of a man in the position of Mr Darwin", actuated, he thought, by "petty malice", that had spurred him to have Darwin's revenge for him. Butler did himself no favours by writing to *Nature* to justify himself, referring to the "vile and abusive attack" remark as being, he supposed, "Mr Romanes' way of saying that I have had made a vile and abusive personal attack on Mr Darwin himself." This assault on Romanes's command of the language, and other complaints, only propelled him to write yet another brutal attack on Butler's lack of scientific understanding.

Butler's notes were made in the late 1880s, for they include a reference to the grudging (and in Butler's view, plainly inadequate) clarification in the second edition of *Erasmus Darwin*, published in 1887 and edited by Francis Darwin. The wound would not heal. Darwin told Huxley that "the affair has annoyed and pained me to a silly extent; but it would be disagreeable to anyone to be publicly called in fact a liar. He seems to hint that I interpolated sentences in Krause's MS, but he could hardly have really thought so. Until quite recently he expressed great friendship for me, and said he had learnt all he knew about evolution from my books, and I have no idea what has made him so bitter against me." Bitterness seems to have been in Butler's DNA, and was not diluted by poor Darwin apologising, as he did in a letter to Butler, for having caused such offence.

Festing Jones contended that "one of the objects of this book was to show that the idea of descent with modification did not originate with Charles Darwin; and another was to restore mind to the universe, for Butler thought that the tendency of Charles Darwin's writings was to give too much prominence to accident at the expense of design in the theory of evolution." Butler, wounded by the lack of serious response to *Life and Habit*, was now even more upset, and lashing out. *Unconscious Memory* was the final nail in his coffin as a serious thinker about science. His last book on the subject, *Luck or Cunning?*, was an extended act of score-settling. It appeared in 1886. Darwin was dead, but his adherents remained to be abused and reviled, and to hold Butler in contempt. Butler went to his grave believing he had made a distinguished contribution to the theory of evolution. However, in a remark that gives us the measure of the man, he also said that "I am the enfant terrible of literature and science. If I cannot, and I know I cannot, get the literary and scientific big-wigs to give me a shilling, I can, and I know I can, heave bricks into the middle of them."

Perhaps Butler concentrated on scientific matters because he doubted his worth in the debate on Christianity. Sending an acquaintance "one of the many unsold copies" of *The Fair Haven* in 1877, he said it was "what is called the 1st edition, i.e. without the preface, because it is better without it, the preface being written without due thought and in fact a mistake". He wrote his assaults on Darwin while developing other aspects of a considerable artistic talent: having done with painting, he took up photography, and worked on translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and on travel writing. However, his crowning achievement was another work he wrote at Miss Savage's instigation, but could not bring

himself to publish in his father's lifetime and then, after Canon Butler died in 1886, his own: *The Way of All Flesh*.

Butler wrote it from 1873 until 1884, contemporarily with his writing on evolution. At the start he spent his days painting, and wrote in the evenings, instead of practising the piano. He knew the offence the novel would cause his family. A discarded title-page, found in his papers after his death, bears the motto: "*Quand on fait des omelettes [sic] il faut croquer des oeufs*". Miss Savage, who read it as Butler wrote it, told him early on, in August 1873, that "I read the novel two more times – once to find fault and once for complete enjoyment. As far as it goes it is perfect (at least it is to my mind) and if you go on as you have begun (and I daresay you will) it will be a beautiful book." In July 1878 he was still sending her the latest instalments of "Ernest Pontifex". He told her "It is so much less readable than I yet see my way to making it – and it is full of little contradictions." She loved it and longed for further instalments.

He revised the manuscript continually, though after Miss Savage's death in 1885 hardly touched it again, so important was her critical eye to him: she is immortalised in the book as Ernest's kindly and beautiful aunt, Alethea. As it turned out this great, revolutionary, destructive, modern Victorian novel was not published until 1903, the year after Butler died. He had been right about the outrage it would provoke, not least because the Rev Theobald Pontifex, the father of the hero of the book, is within a few pages dripping with cant and hypocrisy; and his wife, Christina, is not far behind. Ernest, their son, is said in the narrative to have been born in 1835, as was Butler; and Ernest is the son of a clergyman of the same age as Butler's father.

Theobald is a self-regarding, self-pitying sociopath, sadist, bully, hypocrite and prig. His wife is a vacuous, trivial, oppressed fantasist, compliant towards and conniving in the many beastlinesses of her vile husband. When Christina dies, Butler writes of Theobald that "he buried his face in his handkerchief to conceal his want of emotion." Butler's two sisters were horrified. It is no wonder, but it hardly speaks well of them. As well as being something of Archdeacon Froude in Theobald, there is something of a poor man's Dr Arnold in Ernest's headmaster Dr Skinner (though Butler went to Shrewsbury, he clearly understood the type).

As well as undermining the concept of family life, the book also attacks the foundation for it, religion. "If you begin with the Bible", the odious Pryer tells Ernest, "you are three parts gone on the road to infidelity, and will go the other part before you know where you are. The Bible is not without its value to us the clergy, but for the laity it is a stumbling block which cannot be taken out of their way too soon or too completely....a more unreliable book was never put upon paper." That, though, is only one of the related hypocrisies it attacks. "In his eagerness to regenerate the Church of England (and through this the universe) by the means which Pryer had suggested to him, it occurred to him to try to familiarise himself with the habits and thoughts of the poor by going and living among them. I think he got this notion from Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, which, High Churchman though he for the nonce was, he had devoured as he had devoured Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, Dickens's novels, and whatever other literary garbage of the day was most likely to do him harm." The higher classes are, in their way, far more disgusting than the lower, whom they so effortlessly patronise. When Ernest is sent to prison, his louche friend Towneley squares the press not to

write anything. "He was successful as regards all the higher-class papers. There was only one journal, and that of the lowest class, which was incorruptible."

When Ernest suddenly realises, in prison, that Christianity has "humbled" him – how Butler felt during his work in the slums in 1858 - it is because he knows that "the greater part of the ills which had afflicted him were due, indirectly, in chief measure to the influence of Christian teaching". He wishes to save others from "years of waste and misery as he had had to pass himself. If there was no truth in the miraculous accounts of Christ's Death and resurrection, the whole of the religion founded upon the historic truth of those events tumbled to the ground. 'Why,' he exclaimed, with all the arrogance of youth, 'they put a gipsy or fortune teller into prison for getting money out of silly people who think they have supernatural power; why should they not put a clergyman in prison for pretending that he can absolve sins, or turn bread and wine into the flesh and blood of One who died two thousand years ago?'"

Festing Jones described his friend's autobiographical novel as "like the Book of Job and the *Odyssey*, that of the good man passing through trials and coming out triumphant in the end." This does not take into account what must be jettisoned and destroyed before attaining that triumph. The review in *The Times* was typical. Referring to Ernest's childhood, the reviewer noted: "We cannot believe it; we are convinced he exaggerates...all this part of the book is painful to the last degree, and fills an ordinarily kind-hearted reader with maddening wrath. Exaggerated or not, we treat children very differently; and the Rev Theobald and his wife would hear of the SPCC." The reviewer went on to castigate Butler for his "bitter irony", and for expounding a philosophy that was "wholly negative". Butler had told Fleay in 1873, when the work was in its early stages, that it was "getting positively awful as to satire, every time I rewrite the first 3 chapters they come out more bitter and more bitter: yet I imagine – though I hardly dare say so - that the bitterness is not likely to hurt anyone who does not richly deserve it – and these won't be hurt by it."

He did, however, admit that connoisseurs of humour would not be disappointed. The review ended with the pay-off: "We admire Mr Butler almost more in this book than in anything else he did; but we liked him better when he was using his intellect and knowledge to prove that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman." It was probably more of a compliment than that paid by the reviewer in the *Sunday Sun*, who described the work as "not a great novel, but it is unquestionably a deeply interesting book" with a "rather foolish title". We know what Butler himself would have said: he wrote in his note books that "critics generally come to be critics by reason not of their fitness for this but of their unfitness for anything else." He would have been thrilled to think he was courting controversy from beyond the grave.