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Road Trip

The top of Mount Darwin is 13,831 feet above sea level at 37°10.02′N, 118°40.22′W. Getting to Mount Darwin from my small college in San Diego requires a six-hour drive veering slightly west of straight north. At the town of Bishop, the route turns southwest climbing to Lake Sabrina (elevation 9,128' and pronounced by the locals: sabr-eye-na). The hike from Sabrina to Mount Darwin is a little over ten miles. A three-day weekend offers enough time for the excursion.

Six of us were to go up Mount Darwin, but then the Anaheim Angels won the American League playoffs. The first two games of the World Series would be on the Saturday and Sunday of our trip. My two students from Orange County dropped out. So we were four: two history teachers, forty-four and thirty-one years old, and two boys, thirteen and ten years old. The boys, Matthew and Steven, are mine. David Nieman, the fourth, teaches high school history at Santa Fe Christian School in San Diego.

Our excursion party left at nine, lunched at Astro Burger in the High Desert, and got to the ranger station in Bishop a little after three. By 4:30 pm we were at Lake Sabrina. Matt and Steve sat in the far back of the station wagon facing backwards. They read books and passed CDs up to the front for the stereo. Dave and I talked. The temperature was in the low seventies for most of the trip, and since the car's air conditioner did not work, we drove with windows down. Few things are more fun than speeding down a two-lane desert highway, elbow in the breeze, backpacks loaded on top, mountains off in the distance. Having a window down—combined with the drone of the diesel engine—meant that conversation could not be dignified. Dave and I bantered back and forth mostly about teaching ancient world history and our methods for handling wild questions from our students about popular mysteries. Dave, after a minute of looking off to the row of huge signal dishes operated by the Owens Valley

Radio Observatory, turned back toward me, yelling: "So! What do you think of UFOs?"

There is serious academic work on UFOs by scientists, psychologists, and historians.[1] Any report of past events is grist for a historian's mill. Part of our job is handling the wild stories that get reported. The classroom goal in such cases is not so much a conclusion about what did or did not happen; rather, the goal is methodical and consistent thinking about reports of wild happenings. Historians working within the longest traditions of their academic discipline have an obligation to be open-minded, hear the evidence, take into account context, apply scales of reliability, and come to tentative conclusions that are socially acceptable. Being reasonable about history is always negotiated. The goal is a "best explanation" or set of "best explanations"—with "best" being a general agreement among respectable people.

Dave and I discussed the evidence for UFOs flown, presumably, by extraterrestrial life forms, that we have heard about from TV shows, grocery store magazines, and a few books. The problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is in methodical and consistent thinking about the evidence.

David M. Jacobs is a model historian on the subject. He teaches at Temple University and wrote *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions* (1992). In the first chapter, he explains his method of inquiry and argues for the academic reasonableness of his conclusions. He gathered a large number of abduction accounts and analyzed the diverse testimonies for consistencies. He then assessed the character and bias of the testifiers. Consistent with the Aristotelian-humanist tradition, he advocates that readers should not dismiss hard-to-believe testimony of abductions without first seriously looking into the character and circumstances of the testifiers. The most dubious aspect of his method is that he uses hypnotism to get into the subconscious of the testifiers. He justifies using hypnotism by noting it is increasingly used in jurisprudence and other academic fields such as psychology. (The book is endorsed by a professor of psychology at Harvard University.) After making a case for the reasonableness of his methods and the reliability of his sources, he sticks his neck out to say that the evidence warrants belief that alien abductions are occurring.

1. See also Sagan and Page, *UFO's: A Scientific Debate*.

Frankly, I don't think his case is persuasive or even offers a probable account for the evidence. Deep in the argument is the speculation that the aliens want to keep their presence secret, thus justifying the need for the researcher to use hypnotism to get the needed evidence. I am willing to believe a lot of weird things. I think history is wilder than is presented in textbooks. However, I draw the line at secret conspiracies where the lack of evidence is evidence. We have a hard enough time getting at what people want to flat-out tell us. If an alien conspiracy of silence requires the use of hypnotism to be revealed, I am not convinced. On the other hand, I liked the book, learned a lot, and appreciated the methodical inquiry. Books like his make it exciting to be a historian.

Dave and I teach world history to people who often have wide-angle openness to information, theories, and assertions. We ourselves want to be such people. We want to encourage such openness. But we also have a duty to teach students to think in well-disciplined, methodical ways.

The story of Noah's flood comes up in our history classes because it is the wildest reported event of natural history that comes down to us as an ancient oral tradition eventually written down in our ancient written sources. Along with the Genesis account of Noah's flood, we have an account with striking similarities found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that, like the Bible, is the story written from the perspective of a survivor saved by divine mercy. Natural historians have long sought confirmation in geology for the written reports. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries some of the most important natural philosophers of Europe worked to harmonize the Bible's story with what was known by geology, astronomy, and archeology.[2] Scientists today at the Institute for Creation Research in San Diego still work to find connections between natural history and the ancient accounts. The trouble with the project is that it is harder to do than it should be. Explaining the event is one thing; explaining why the event is not more geologically evident is even harder.

We Christians believe the Holy Spirit played a role in the writing and compilation of the Bible, but we have never agreed on the intent of the Holy Spirit in all the parts of the texts. Much of the Bible is intentional history, but much isn't. History, myth, and legend sometimes mix fact and metaphor to tell us things that are not exactly meant to be taken as reli-

2. See Cohn, *Noah's Flood*.

able reporting of events. Noah's flood, the dialogs of Job, and the book of Esther all point in historical directions, but may not be meant for the teaching of actual history.

The most interesting historian who inquired into the historical Noah is John Warwick Montgomery, who published *The Quest for Noah's Ark; a treasury of documented accounts from ancient times to the present day of sightings of the ark & explorations of Mount Ararat with a narration of the author's successful ascent to the summit of Noah's mountain* (1972). Montgomery gathered all the written and oral testimony available with the archeological goal of finding a piece of Noah's ark high in the Caucasus Mountains. He gathered together local oral traditions, narratives of earlier exploration, and possible sightings such as a 1916 speculative report by a Russian pilot. Most of the work for Montgomery, as always for historians, was in dusty archives. Making this all the more exciting, Montgomery was working during the Cold War in the borderlands with the former USSR.

Montgomery is a spark plug of a scholar. I met him at a conference of Christian historians in 1996. *The Quest for Noah's Ark* is a good book by an adventurous historian. That he is searching for something stuffy professors might laugh at makes the book all the more edgy. The problems he faces only get more complex as he digs deeper. He struggles with getting evidence, frustrated about the weakness of so much of it. He wrestles with all sorts of problems—even that we are not sure which mountain is the traditional Mount Ararat. Leaving the libraries, he picks one of the mountains, dons his climbing boots and trudges up into the ice to see if he can, himself, find the ark. Even better: he takes his son along with him for the trek, and the investigation becomes a family adventure.

That the book concludes with the ark unfound and the evidence still weak makes it all the more an example of a conscientious scholarly project. The academic world is better off because Montgomery has clarified some issues, organized and analyzed some evidence, done his best, and left it up to the next inquirer to take the adventure a step further. Montgomery himself believes that remnants of the ark are probably somewhere up high in the mountains because of his trust in the authority of the Genesis account; however, his religious commitments do not make him play false with his evidence or conclusion.

Montgomery and I were presenting papers in 1996 on the academic handling of reports of miracles. I felt honored to sit next to him. When I was a freshman in college I read his book *History and Christianity* (1965),

which emphasizes the academic historian's role in affirming Jesus' resurrection. He obviously feels called as a historian to justify Christian history to the professional academic guild. To do so requires reminding the historical profession of its tradition of open-minded listening and inquiry into wild stories.

With my elbow in the breeze and a long, straight, high desert highway ahead, Dave and I were free to think about all sorts of historical issues. The classrooms we work in are also places where freedom rings. If it is reported to have happened in the past, then it is fair game for historical investigation. There are few things more enjoyable than a serious academic discussion in which students and faculty lose themselves in strategies pursuing understanding. The discussion is not free in the sense that anything said is equally valid; rather, the discussion is free because all reasonable options are assessed for their weaknesses and strengths. Much of any academic inquiry will move quickly into the realm of speculations based on assumptions. Such flights are to be expected. The work is in assessing the persuasiveness of these flights, pursuing the award of "best explanation available," and always humbly recognizing what we don't know. The university is at its best when it encourages such freedom. It is at its worst when it tries to restrict reasonable methods and conclusions.

I claim the freedom of my reasonableness. I also extend that same freedom to Darwin. I find Darwin to be a reasonable scientist whose methods and evidence support his speculations. It would be fun to have Darwin in the back seat with his elbow in the breeze. I hope that as we climb his mountain we will be able to feel close to him. He enjoyed climbing mountains in South America during his years on the *Beagle*. Like many of his class, he enjoyed rambling through the Alps on vacations.

Mount Darwin was named thirteen years after Charles Darwin (1809–1882) died. Darwin was born into a family that had little devotion to traditional Christianity. Both his grandfathers were famous for progressive thinking in science, industry, and theology. After graduating from college, Darwin found himself stuck in a career path leading toward the church because it was respectable. Darwin escaped entrapment in a church career to which he had no calling. He found, instead, adventure as a naturalist

and captain's dinner companion on a five-year, round-the-world cruise from 1831 to 1836. Evident throughout his *Voyage of the Beagle* is a serious young man, diligent and humble. Also evident is a young man with very little interest in God. The Christian church appears in the book as an oppressor of Indians, and his accounts of camping and climbing adventures don't include outbursts of praise for the creator. On climbing a Chilean mountain he wrote, "Everyone must know the feeling of triumph and pride which a grand view from a height communicates to the mind." A little later he wrote of camping out: "The night was cloudless; and while lying in our beds, we enjoyed the sight (and it is a high enjoyment) of the multitude of stars which illumined the darkness of the forest."[3] He loved the mountains, the stars, and the forests, but never showed in his writings a love for God.

Coming from a family of no great Christian piety or biblical rootedness, Darwin easily slipped into vagueness about God and allowed his science increasingly to define his religion. Rich enough not to have a paying job, Darwin devoted himself to rigorous study of orchids, barnacles, worms, and all sorts of living things even though he was chronically ill. His diligence was rewarded by a rising reputation, but neither his illness, nor professional success, nor the deaths of beloved children brought him closer to God. His science seems to have simply encouraged his antagonism to traditional Christianity. Adrian Desmond and James Moore describe him in his later life as "an old Unitarian who had fallen off the feather bed. He was holding to a semi-respectable theism and packaging it under a designer label. . . . But his God was an absentee landlord, and nature self-sufficient."[4]

Darwin was a genteel, retiring man who loved the outdoors. He was a good man over whom the Bible's accounts of Jesus had no hold. His greatest achievement was a description of a theoretical mechanism of species creation that had no apparent need for a designer. If there was a God involved in the evolutionary process, Darwin wrote in *On the Origin of Species*, then it was "presumptuous" to think that God acted in the way taught by the churches.[5] Darwin himself began the academic tradition that evolution demands a new understanding of Christianity.

3. Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 298, 311.
4. Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, 479.
5. Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 188–89.

Darwin's book became the catalyst for new ways of thinking about God. Some Darwinians want to get rid of God altogether. Some want to keep a spiritualized creation without an active or communicating God. Some just want an intellectually respectable theism in which God is kept vague and distant. Kenneth Miller, a cell biologist at Brown University, has written a good book called *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (1999). Miller declares his Christianity and his love of university research and appreciation of science. But the God in his title is too vague. Early in the book he defines God by the "great Western monotheistic traditions" and further distinguishes God for "truth, love, and knowledge."[6] But that definition and those characteristics don't fit traditional Christianity. Still, Miller is more traditionally Christian than Intelligent Design, a lawyerly movement that studiously avoids defining God by anything other than intelligence.

Christianity, if it is to be defined by its biblical foundation, has to be rooted in a relational God, immune to being abstracted, who came to earth as a human who suffered, died, and bodily rose as part of a plan of salvation. The tensions between Christianity and Darwinism can't be clarified by adopting an abstract, generic, creator God. Christians give away the store if they start that way. I have read too many books supposedly about Christianity and science that make no reference to the Bible and no mention of Jesus. Can a book really be about Christianity with no reference to the Bible and no mention of Jesus? A robust dialog between Christianity and Darwinism has to have the Christians standing on traditional foundations, not some vague, cookie-cutter monotheism. Christians believe in a God who became a man, was reported to have walked on water, redirected the weather, killed a tree, and made himself a nuisance to the laws of nature.

The peaks of the Evolution Group—Mount Darwin, Mount Haeckel, Mount Wallace, Mount Fiske, Mount Huxley, and Mount Spencer—were named by a twenty-five-year-old aspiring writer and member of the Sierra Club named Theodore Solomons (1870–1947). In 1895 he named a valley and contiguous basin "Evolution," and the major peaks bounding the east side of the valley and basin after those whom he called "the great evolu-

6. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God*, 267.

tionists."[7] The names he chose to attach to mountains were not just those of famous scientists; rather, he chose the names of promoters of evolution, especially promoters of the spiritual implications of evolution. Solomons' mother was a theosophist—a believer in vital spiritual truths communicated in the wisdom of many ancient religions. She taught her son to be skeptical of modern, organized, institutionalized religions. His sister became a theosophist and astrologer. Solomons liked the way Darwin's evolution had opened the way to thinking about spiritual influences in natural history. He named the mountains of the Evolution Range after personal heroes. Wallace was the most prominent scientist in the world doing systematic observations of séances and other communications with spirits. Fiske was the Darwinist who was probably closest to Solomons' personal model. A famous writer and lecturer, Fiske promoted modern thought while debunking Christianity.

Hiking into the Evolution Range of the Sierra Nevada is for me as much about young Solomons' mind and goals as it is about Darwin's methods of natural history. Solomons turned this region of the High Sierra into a cartographical monument to religious progress as much as scientific progress. I come to these mountains as a traditionalist wary of progress. But I am not an antagonist. I can appreciate what young Solomons was doing.

Of the people Solomons awarded a mountain, the two I am least sympathetic to are Huxley and Spencer. Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) died the summer Solomons named a mountain after him. He was "Darwin's bulldog" and is, to me, the least appealing of the "great evolutionists." He was the kind of one-sided person who clamps onto an idea and won't moderate in any way. Paradoxes, conundrums, uncertainties, and a humble furrowing of the brow were not his cup of tea. He was in his glory when in debate—the art of pushing an opponent into a corner—and he often targeted Christians. He coined the term "agnosticism," unwillingness to commit oneself to doctrines about God, but he did so as a debating ploy rather than in a spirit of true humility. There is a long tra-

7. Solomons, "Beginnings of the John Muir Trail," 34. After finishing his 1895 survey, he wrote articles on his work in *The Sierra Club Bulletin, The Traveller, The Overland Monthly,* and *Appalachia: The Journal of the Appalachian Mountain Club.* These articles helped popularize the names Solomons bestowed on natural features. The names were also supported by Sierra Club members who further surveyed the trail, most importantly Walter A. Starr and Joseph N. LeConte. Solomons himself soon left California for Alaska, then New York. See the obituary by Farquhar in *Sierra Club Bulletin* 33, no. 3:117-18. The only full biography is Sargent's, *Solomons of the Sierra*.

dition in Western philosophy going back to Pyhrro of Elis (c.360–270 BC) of humble doubt coupled with refusal to affirm one position or another. Many agnostics conscientiously struggle with belief in the resurrection. Huxley, however, was an evangelist for Darwinism using agnosticism in religion as a means to undermine his enemies.

Huxley liked things simple. As a member of the London School Board, Huxley was against the traditional curriculum's diversity. He wanted schools to teach science as a progressive and single-minded truth system. "As our race approaches its maturity," he wrote, "it discovers, as I believe it will, that there is but one kind of knowledge and but one method of acquiring it."[8]

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was, like Huxley, a grand unifier of all things physical, social, and intellectual under the umbrella of Darwinian evolution. Spencer saw a profound simplicity in Darwin's theory that could be applied widely, even into the social sciences, especially sociology. Spencer coined the term Social Darwinism. Richard Hofstadter in *Social Darwinism in American Thought* noted that Spencer became fashionable among intellectuals because he promoted a Darwinism "large enough to be all things to all men."[9]

Solomons apparently appreciated this style of over-hyped Darwinism, but unlike Huxley and Spencer, Solomons was intensely interested in the interaction between material and spiritual nature. Solomons' choices for other mountain names were men who promoted progressive religion founded on facts from the natural sciences.

Probably the most famous Darwinian of Solomons' era was Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919). Unlike Huxley, Haeckel wanted nothing to do with debating ploys. He had all the fire of Huxley but added the endearing quality of not being a calculating orator or narrow thinker. He had big ideas full of his own version of intellectual hope. Haeckel was Germany's most famous Darwinist when Solomons named a mountain after him in 1895. As professor of zoology at the University of Jena, he had become famous for creating his own theory of everything: *Monism*. He taught that old traditions of God as creator needed to be swept aside. "Anthropism," he preached, needed to be destroyed. Anthropism was the "powerful and world-wide group of erroneous opinions" that assert that humans are spe-

8. Huxley, "Advisableness," 21.

9. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 24, 31.

cially created with a special purpose.[10] Like many scientists, he merged his scientific research with a professorial sense of responsibility to teach what he believed to be the philosophic and religious implications of his research. He believed that by "courageous effort to attain the truth, and by a clear view of the world" scientists can persuade people to give up the superstitions of traditional Christianity and embrace his truth that the cosmos is eternal and infinite and made up of matter and energy. "Eternal motion runs through infinite time in an unbroken development."[11]

Solomons, a young man of the Sierra Club, was much taken with Haeckel's courage and intellect. It was Haeckel who invented the term *ecology*. Haeckel's monism assumed a type of psychic energy at work in cosmic evolution. He apparently was encouraged in this by the early work of Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829). Haeckel believed Lamarck's ideas were the foundation upon which Darwin developed the theory of evolution. Darwin himself said no such thing and often criticized Lamarck. Solomons did not name Mount Lamarck, but the name fits the interwoven science and spiritualism of the area.

By naming the mountain just south of Haeckel after Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), Solomons was honoring an evolutionist well known for his attempts in England and America to promote the evidence for communication with dead people. Wallace had lectured in San Francisco in 1887, and it is possible that Solomons had attended the lectures as a teenager. Wallace wanted nothing to do with traditional Christianity, yet he thought natural selection could not account for the human mind and the communications with spirits that he experienced in séances. Wallace comes down to us in history as outdoing even Darwin as a gentle and dedicated gatherer of observational evidence. His gentleness is best known in his willingness to let Darwin preempt his announcement of his own theory of natural selection. Wallace came up with the theory in 1857 while fighting a fever in Malaysia. He quickly dashed it off in the mail to Charles Lyell (1797–1875), who has the highest peak in Yosemite National Park named after him. Lyell alerted Darwin and eventually a deal was struck that Darwin's and Wallace's papers would be read together at the Linnean Society on July 1, 1858. Wallace had generated his theories independently, but he always told people that Darwin deserved the greater

10. Haeckel, *Riddle of the Universe*, 11.

11. Ibid., 13.

credit. Wallace wrote of Darwin: "His name should, in my opinion, stand above that of every other philosopher of ancient or modern times. The force of admiration can no further go!!!"[12]

But Wallace did not think his and Darwin's theory of natural selection could account for the human mind and was suspicious of putting too much emphasis on mere sexual selection. He was convinced of the existence of a spiritual world and a spiritual nature in humans. He lectured widely on the human mind, communication with the spiritual world, life after death, and miracles. Wallace made his living and his fame by being a keen observer, and no amount of giggling or scoffing could make him deny that he had observed and experienced spiritual activity. In 1887 Wallace lectured in San Francisco, met John Muir, and visited the Calaveras grove of giant sequoias on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. "Of all the natural wonders he saw in America," notes his biographer, "nothing impressed him so much as these glorious trees."[13]

Theodore Solomons, deep in one of the most isolated areas of the Sierra Nevada and apparently moved by the power of Darwinism to bring new understanding to everything, named the peaks overlooking his Evolution Valley not after the most famous geologists of the world; rather, he named them after the most famous proponents of how Darwinism should change humanity's way of thinking about religion. Religion could never be the same after Darwin. Huxley attacked tradition. Haeckel advocated a universal, non-personal, psychic force at work in the cosmos. Wallace had become a stump speaker for spiritualism. Spencer promoted a social Darwinism. And although Spencer avoided religious matters in his writings, John Fiske promoted what he thought was Spencer's religious version of social Darwinism.

John Fiske (1842–1901), another non-scientist, may be the key to understanding all Solomons' choices. It is easy to imagine that when Solomons was sitting on the valley floor naming the peaks he had in his knapsack a copy of Fiske's collection of essays, *Excursions of an Evolutionist* (1883). It makes perfect sense—though there is no evidence, just pure speculation—that Solomons was reading Fiske when he looked up and named the peaks. *Excusions of an Evolutionist* not only includes Fiske's praise of Spencer as one whose work is of the caliber of Aristotle

12. Raby, *Alfred Russell Wallace*, 151.

13. Ibid., 245.

and Newton, but also has a long essay, "*In Memoriam:* Charles Darwin," written on the day of Darwin's burial in 1882 as a "tribute to the memory of the beautiful and glorious life that has just passed away from us."[14]

John Fiske was in college at Harvard when he discovered the expansive power of evolution in a book by Spencer. He wrote home to his mother that Spencer "has discovered a great law of evolution in nature, which underlies all phenomena & which is as important & more comprehensive than Newton's law of gravitation."[15] Unable to gain an academic post in Harvard's history department, Fiske first became a librarian and then a popular writer and traveling speaker. There is a good chance Solomons heard Fiske speak in San Francisco in 1892, just three years before naming a mountain in honor of him. Fiske wrote that he met John Muir at that time.[16] Fiske was most famous for the two-volume *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* (1874), in which he stretched Spencer's evolutionary ideas into religion in ways similar to Haeckel's monism. In his memorial essay, Fiske insisted that "Mr. Darwin's work" has been "to remodel the theological conceptions of the origin and destiny of man."[17] Conceptions of God and religion, for Fiske, had been reformed root and branch because of Darwin:

> No religious creed that man has ever devised can be made to harmonize in all its features with modern knowledge. All such creeds were constructed with reference of theories of the universe which are now utterly and hopelessly discredited. . . . Is not the belief in God perhaps a dream of the childhood of our race, like the belief in elves and bogarts which once were no less universal? and is not modern science fast destroying the one as it has already destroyed the other?[18]

If I understand Solomons right, when he said he named the mountains after "the great evolutionists," he was not really thinking much about science. He was not a scientist; he was an aspiring writer and progressive from a theosophist family. He was thinking about religion, the cosmos, what Douglas Adams called "Life, the Universe, and Everything."

14. Fiske, *Excursions*, 22.
15. Quoted in *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Fiske, John."
16. Winston, *John Fiske*, 107.
17. Fiske, *Excursions*, 368.
18. Quoted in Winston, *John Fiske*, 81–82.

Solomons was thinking the grandest thoughts possible as he mapped one of the grandest valleys and mountain ranges in America. His mind turned to the people who aspired to put behind them the old religion and propose new religious interpretations of the cosmos. I think it was Fiske that he had in his knapsack. In one of the essays on Spencer and sociology in *Excursions of an Evolutionist*, Fiske praises "the truly philosophic character of Mr. Darwin's method."[19] This is the spirit honored in Solomons' Evolution Range of peaks. He was not honoring scientists as scientists; rather, scientists as philosophers, as professors, as religious reformers.

There are two other people who names on maps of the region enhance the scientific, philosophic, and religious aura of the Evolution Range. Both were founders of the Sierra Club: Joseph LeConte (1823–1901) and John Muir (1838–1914). LeConte led the first group of university students into the Sierra in the summer of 1870. In the fall of 1869, he and his brother John had enrolled the first students into the new land-grant university in Oakland. A story is told that Joseph handed a pen to enroll a young man, saying, "You have the honor to be the first student to register in this institution that is destined to be one of the very greatest in the country."[20] Joseph was the first geology professor in what did become one of the world's great universities: the University of California at Berkeley. He and his son both eventually got peaks named after them, and both did a fair amount of naming mountains themselves. At the end of that first academic year, eight students invited LeConte to join them on a geologizing ramble in the Sierra Nevada. He called the group the "University Excursion Party" and published an account of the trip. LeConte's *A Journal of Ramblings Through the High Sierras of California by the "University Excursion Party"* (1875) begins with the party saddling their horses in Oakland on July 27 and heading east. The journal is most famous for its August 5 entry:

> To-day to Yosemite Falls. This has been the hardest day's experience yet. We thought we had plenty of time, and therefore started late. Stopped a moment at the foot of the Falls, at a saw-mill, to make inquires. Here found a man in rough miller's garb, whose intelligent face and earnest, clear blue eye, excited my interest. After

19. Fiske, *Excursions*, 175.

20. Shenk, "Introduction," to LeConte, *Journal*, viii. This story is not attributed to a source and does not appear in LeConte's autobiography.

> some conversation, discovered that it was Mr. Muir, a gentleman of whom I had heard much about. . . . We were glad to meet each other. I urged him to go with us to Mono, and he seemed disposed to do so.[21]

It is hard not to like Joseph LeConte. Muir remembered the day in Yosemite Valley when he met LeConte and his students: "I gladly left all my other work and followed him. This first LeConte excursion, with its grand landscapes and weather and delightful campfire talks, though now far back in the days of auld lang syne, still remains in mind bright and indestructible, like glacial inscriptions on granite."[22]

LeConte was a soft-spoken man who believed that Darwin's discoveries and theory of a completely natural mechanism that could account for the creation of diverse species required every person who aspired to be intellectually respectable to reorient their understanding of religion. He did not want to press the issue. He was not bombastic. He was confident that a religious reorientation would evolve slowly as society progressed. Two years after Solomons named the peaks of the Evolution Range, LeConte published a set of public lectures called *Evolution and Its Relation to Religious Thought* (1897). LeConte was sure that the theory of evolution would soon be incorporated into the Christian mind in the same way that the sun-centered view of Copernicus was eventually accepted by Christians. What LeConte could not abide was the notion that Darwinism would be used to undermine God's active role in creation. "God," LeConte wrote in 1884, "is ever present and ever working in nature."[23] LeConte believed that truth would prevail and that science and Christianity would not be found contradictory in the long run. Christianity and Darwinism,

21. LeConte, *Journal*, 41. Solomons in 1895 was surveying what would become the John Muir Trail when he named the Evolution Group. The John Muir Trail runs south from Yosemite Valley through Evolution Valley to Mount Whitney over 212 miles in the most rugged region of the High Sierra. Muir Pass is 11,955 feet and separates Evolution Basin from LeConte Canyon—named for Joseph's son, Joseph Nisbet LeConte who, as a new graduate of UC Berkeley in 1890, spent the summer packing through the High Sierra with some school buddies. In 1908, "Little Joe" LeConte and two friends from the Sierra Club attempted to be the first to pack their way through the trail Solomons had begun a decade before. Muir died in December of 1914 and the state legislature named the trail in 1915 at the request of Sierra Club.

22. LeConte, *Journal*, 109.

23. Stephens, *Joseph LeConte*, 169. Matthew S. Abajian, in a student paper, alerted me to this passage.

rightly understood, were compatible and eventually people would wonder what the fuss was about.

The trouble with LeConte was that both his Christianity and his Darwinism were a bit vague. In his autobiography, LeConte wrote that he tithed to all the churches in his neighborhood without regularly attending any of them. "So far as churches are concerned," he wrote, "I could never take a very active part in any, because it seemed to me that they were all too narrow in their views."[24] When attacked by a local minister for leading the young astray with his classes on evolution, LeConte did not reply. The university newspaper, *The Berkeleyan,* defended him, declaring that "the attacks on the teachings of our beloved Professor LeConte by certain barbarians in the world of thought, deserve no more than a passing reference."[25]

At forty-five, LeConte had come to San Francisco to find personal peace and hope after the rancor of teaching in South Carolina and Georgia in the years surrounding the Civil War. Temperamentally unsuited to controversy, he returned every summer to the Sierra Nevada with his students and his friends in the Sierra Club. During the last decades of his life, he published more than ever before and found California to be his land of peace and plenty. From 1903 to 1904, the Sierra Club erected a chapel-like memorial lodge dedicated to LeConte in Yosemite Valley. Between John Muir, the exuberant controversialist, and LeConte, the optimistic quietist, the Sierra Club had their two founding saints. Both scientific and both spiritual, they exemplify the way evolution and Christianity can be one when neither the science nor the religion is taken too seriously. Here is a typical quote from LeConte's *Evolution, Its Nature, Its Evidences, and Its Relation to Religious Thought* (1897):

> Infinite space and the universal law of gravitation; infinite time and the universal law of evolution. These two are the grandest ideas in the realm of thought. The one is universal sustentation, the other universal creation, by law. There is one law and one energy pervading all space stretching through all time. Our religious philosophy has long ago accepted the one, but has not yet had time to readjust itself completely to the other.[26]

24. LeConte, *Autobiography*, 265.
25. Stephens, *Joseph LeConte*, 183.
26. LeConte, *Evolution*, 282–83.

Around the campfire, LeConte, Muir, and the Berkeley students could wax eloquent about infinite time and the universal law of evolution that created the mountains they camped beneath. I am not so romantic. As much as I would love to share a campfire with LeConte and Muir, I am distrustful of scientific claims to universality—let alone appeals to infinite time. I think being reasonable about science and religion is more complicated and certainly requires a greater sense of the limits of what we know and how we know.

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Christianity is not supposed to be romantic. Christianity is prosaic. Darwinists can wax eloquent about near-infinite time, universal laws, and the ultimate beauty of development, for Darwinism is a big theory about long history. But biblical Christianity is irritating and unpleasant. Abraham is a cowardly liar. David is a murderous adulterer, leader of a severely dysfunctional family. Most of the main characters we meet in the Old and New Testaments would be hard to work with. Laws and judgments are unstable in the Bible. God relents to negotiations. Jesus seems to recommend whiny petitioning that will wear God down. The whole story of the Bible pulls together as a history of undeserved salvation. As for nature, even though the Psalms wax eloquent about creation, apparently the whole thing is going to be rolled up in the end. Some form of new creation is indicated for the future. As for people, many bystanders die horrible deaths. Children are killed. Children suffer.

History is not a romantic discipline. Historians in general are best at causing intellectual problems, not solving them. We find the flaws in heroes and the problems with grand public policies. Historians rarely find or preach the simplicity of it all. Ours is one of the few academic disciplines that do not believe that the simplest answers are probably the truest. We thrive in complexity, disorder, and the general messiness of human life.

What could be less romantic than a Christian historian?

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The ranger station in the town of Bishop is a multi-gabled Western ranch house. Inside, Dave, the boys, and I stood in line waiting for the young woman ranger to give us a wilderness permit and tell us the trail regula-

tions. I asked the ranger about the boys being able to climb Mount Darwin. She said it would be a push but was pleasant and smiled at the kids.

Leaving Bishop, the road to Lake Sabrina climbed fast while the temperature dropped. It is a minor matter of joy to me that, upon arriving at a campsite near Lake Sabrina, I can now, as a father, get out of the car and say, "Boys, you set up the tent and lay your sleeping bags out while I go look around." This of course does not mean that they won't be goofing around by the creek with no tent in sight when I come back; however, there is joy in the idea that the kids can carry some of the weight of the trip.

After dinner, the temperature was in the 30s on its way to the 20s. The boys and I went to bed early to keep warm. Three of us in a two-man tent was cozy. Around midnight I got up. The sky was crisp with sparkling stars. Standing out on a rock at high altitude looking into a clear night sky, I sensed the complexity of time. What I see with my eyes are reports from millions of separate instances ranging over millions of years. Multiple times are registering at what is to me present time. "Nothing puzzles me more than time and space; and yet nothing troubles me less."[27] I know nothing of the quote's context, but shouldn't I be troubled by what I was looking at?

Time is a wonder. It is not a line. It is not a circle. Time and distances shrink with acceleration and lengthen with deceleration. Speed, not time, is a constant in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. Time is something wholly different than any analogy we use to try to describe it. The Bible pictures past, present, and future as entwined with Jesus at the fullness. Time isn't a line. It is like a cup overflowing. It lays back on itself like bread being kneaded. John the Baptist declares that the one who comes after him was before him.[28] Maybe the sun standing still for Joshua was actually God speeding up the time surrounding Joshua.

Astronomers are awash in the wildness of time. Like historians, astronomers try to domesticate time, to make it into a manageable model, but time refuses to be made easy. Historians and astronomers like to think of themselves as standing on a dock studying the sea, when really there is no dock and everybody is swimming in that sea without a lifejacket.

Physics tells us that light is squirrelly. It can be bent or even sucked into darkness by gravity. The speed of light is a boundary in physics; but, then again, it doesn't work all the time like a boundary. As a believer in

27. Burnham, et. al., *Guide to Backyard Astronomy*, 13.

28. John 1:15.

miracles, I take comfort in reading books by mathematicians and physicists who wonder at the apparent lack of physical or mathematical logic in some of the things we experimentally see that defy common sense.

Time is squirrelly. Roger Penrose, a mathematician willing to contemplate the puzzlements of physical reality, describes the possibility of a *causality violation* in which a signal can be sent from a future event to cause a past event.[29] Of course, the math doesn't justify movies like *Back to the Future* or the *Star Trek* episodes I enjoyed as a kid; however, reading about the amazing possibilities in physics makes it easier for me to read accounts of miracles. The more we know about God from the Bible and about God's creation from the mathematicians and physicists, the less anyone should think that God or nature is known best by formal logic. Certainly logic gets all of us pretty far toward understanding; but logic does not satisfy. Time, space, the very small, and the very fast make crooked the straight ways of logic and common sense. The preacher asks: "Who can straighten what God has made crooked?"[30]

There are Christian astronomers trying to work with alternative physics and astronomy to support their assertion that the universe is much younger than supposed.[31] Hugh Ross is a Christian astronomer who finds much in normal academic astronomy to support the Bible's story of creation. Maybe they are on the right track. I don't know. As for me, I look up at the night sky and wonder.

Carl Sagan (1934–1996) was a professor of astrophysics at Cornell University who became a pop icon of the 70s and 80s with his television series *Cosmos*, his novel (now movie) *Contact*, and his government-funded project to listen for messages from space called SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence). Johnny Carson on late night television had a comedy routine imitating Sagan's way of trying to impress people that there were "billions and billions of stars." To his own huge audiences, Sagan taught that humans should be humbled by the size and age of the universe. Part of his belief that there might be intelligent life on other planets came from a humble insistence that humans should not think themselves too special. If people wanted to feel special, they could remember that they

29. Penrose, *Road to Reality*, 401–10.

30. Eccl 7:13.

31. For a young-earth astronomer's views, see DeYoung, *Astronomy and Creation*, and a less technical book for college students, *Astronomy and the Bible*.

are partly made of atoms that were born in stars that exploded long ago. "We are made of star-stuff," he would say.[32]

I stood out in the cold for a while looking at the sky. I felt humbled by the stars; however, what makes me special is not leftover atoms from stars. The God who created and sustains the universe loves me and communicates with me. Such thoughts are astonishingly cocky by all human standards. Christians are guilty of thinking themselves absurdly special in a vast cosmos. The God of it all wants to communicate with you and me.

William Dembski, in his book *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (1999), points out that SETI shows that when scientists find patterns in nature—in this case some high level of patterned complexity in the radio waves that wash through the universe—they infer intelligence behind the pattern. Dembski further points out that most scientists change the rules of this game when any Christian scientist infers in a similar way the action of an Intelligent Designer. Dembski is right about the double standard; however, looking at the crisp stars, I am not much interested in an Intelligent Designer. Historians wrestle mostly with the individuality of people and human events. I am interested in the human speech and actions of Jesus.

Here in the mountains, away from my classroom, the stars don't inspire me with the natural order and mathematical simplicity of the cosmos. I don't worship an Intelligent Designer. I am overwhelmed by the disorders of time when I look into the night sky. "Nothing puzzles me more than time and space; and yet nothing troubles me less." I worry more about the overconfidence of academic disciplines than about the gullibility of people.

Do I sound jaded about scientific discovery? I don't feel jaded. It would be fun to have Carl Sagan standing with me on a rock looking at stars. He was humble enough to allow himself to promote what people laughed at: the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. He was cocky enough to become a television "personality" preaching the vastness of the cosmos and the lack of any God out there. He was smart and loved the information that his discipline produced. I could learn a lot from Sagan. I flatter myself that he would enjoy having a willing student like me sighting stars down his arm as he pointed into the sky.

32. McDonough, "Star Stuff," Skeptic, 10–17.

I have been blessed in life to work in university settings and further blessed to have had long conversations with very smart people. There are few things more fun than a bunch of faculty sitting around a dinner table. Get everybody away from grant-writing rhetoric, away from textbook simplicities, away from posturing for publication, away from professionalism, and into a friendly conversation about what we know, what we don't know, and the limitations of the ways we do investigations—then you have the makings of not only a great evening, but a great university.