



Mr. Darwin's Shooter

Roger McDonald

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In this richly detailed novel based on the life of Syms Covington, Charles Darwin's hard-working shipboard assistant and later his house-servant, Roger McDonald shines a light on a man forgotten by history, capturing the breathtaking excitement of the historic voyage of the Beagle and brilliantly illuminating the scientific, religious, and social controversies that exploded around Darwin's watershed theories. As "Darwin's shooter," Covington collected and preserved invaluable specimens; as the scientist's clerk in London, was he the first man to grasp the full import of their research -- the seeds of Darwin's theory of natural selection? Twenty years later, Covington awaits his copy of *The Origin of Species* with mixed emotions. Embittered by Darwin's failure to acknowledge him, he is also profoundly troubled by his own role in the discoveries that subverted sacred doctrines and shook the Victorian worldview to its very foundation.

Mr. Darwin's Shooter Details

Date : Published February 1st 2000 by Penguin Books (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780140288599

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Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Australia

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From Reader Review Mr. Darwin's Shooter for online ebook

Aaron says

If this book is any indication the lack of interesting events provided Darwin with plenty of time to think up a theory of evolution.

Dana says

Mr. Darwin's Shooter written by Roger McDonald told of the tales of Covington, Mr. Darwin's assistant. The unique novel shows all the untold work of the forgotten assistant. The book does not focus on just the discoveries for Darwin's research, but the knowledge learned and tested as these discoveries were made. As time goes on, Covington struggles with the true meaning of life and creation. The more science he discovers, the less religion becomes believable. Every voyage brings Covington closer to life's true meaning. As Covington helps MacCracken turn into a better person, the story gets even more interesting. The intricate workings of Covington's mind is revealed with each move he makes. The adventures of the book intrigued me, though some stories of Covington's adventures seemed to have no relevance to the main idea of the book. The end seemed fitting in that Covington found a balance between his religious beliefs and the science he discovered. The beginning years of his life merging with his life's work in science.

Steve Daykin says

Richly written - and that drew me in - although it lost its narrative drive in the final third of the book.

Sarah says

For the most part, very readable and believable.

(Just the briefest, to me superfluous, touches of character's philosophising or soliloquising, would be my only complaint)

This novel was an enjoyable portrayal of our, (white, British/Australian,) recent history. It brought to life a way of life, a time of set standards and beliefs in social strata and religion. A time of discovery which challenged those beliefs and opened men's minds and opportunities. (-Without which we would probably never have achieved the socially democratic world we are so lucky to have known).

trishtrash says

An historical novel based on the seafaring life of Sym Covington, servant to Charles Darwin, on his remarkable *Beagle* journey.

Startlingly likely, Covington's character is not merely well illustrated from McDonald's research; he is

compelling and as fine a companion on a reader's journey as he was to Mr. Darwin... that is to say, irritatingly large in character, touching and alarming in faith, fine in his ambitions and thorough in his work.

A butcher's boy turned clerk, turned deck-hand, turned servant, Covington burned to better himself during his younger years and, during his last, burned with smouldering consideration at the betrayal of his faith by his master, or of his faith itself, whichever he could bear to believe false for a moment. McDonald asks the reader to consider – what do you do with your faith when science asks you to put it away? Nor is this the only philosophical thread, for Covington is as unsettling in his thoughts as his manner.

Covington's richness, however, lies in the constancy of adaptability; his search for greater fortune than begat him is but a foreshadowing for the truth he later seeks in the people and world around him.

Forthright and dirty, Sym Covington and the young, proper Charles Darwin make an odd coupling; rather than bring them together in harmony in the text, McDonald expounds on their differences and sources of complaint with one another, groaning and settling like a ship's boards in a storm.

Ian Pindar says

I loved this book. It is in my top ten, I recently wrote a review for Oscar and Lucinda, and for me this is much better. I concede that it could well be the fact I have studied Darwin in detail at university and school, and this included aspects and knowledge I did not know. I felt I was on the Beagle and looking at the voyage from a different POV. We are rarely given the POV of anyone except Darwin and Fitzroy (The Captain), but we see the world through Syms Covington's eyes, and what a view it is. If you want to know more about Darwin, evolution and the voyage of the Beagle, this is a must. I also found it quite uplifting, even though I often find reading about dead people tinged with a little sadness. Covington comes from poverty, and undergoes a spiritual and knowledge enlightenment, and it had a feel good factor as well. The fact that both him and Darwin remained friends and correspondents is just lovely. Love Dickens, you will love this.

James says

Roger McDonald is a noted Australian novelist however this is the first of his books that I have had the pleasure of reading. Like The Moor's Account by Laila Lalami that I read earlier this year, this is a book based on the life of a real person. Syms Covington, the titular protagonist of this story was a person like most people who have lived and were forgotten. Now his life has been impressively reclaimed from history's notorious dustbin in this novel by Roger McDonald.

Syms Covington was 15 years old when he joined the crew of H.M. S. Beagle for a journey that would change forever both his own life and humanity's view of our place in the world. As collector and shooter and all-around assistant, young Covington accompanied Darwin throughout the five-year voyage and for two years of wrap-up work after the return to England. The Darwin biographer Janet Browne describes Covington as the unacknowledged shadow behind Darwin's every triumph. McDonald's fictionalized account of Covington's life is a well-researched book, rich in the complicated issues that surround Darwin and his work, especially its shock to Victorian religious sensibilities. But this novel is genuinely about Syms Covington, not about Darwin. It is about his adventurous life, which happens to accompany for a time that of

a man destined to become the most influential scientist of his era.

McDonald imbues his story with the textures and assumptions of 19th-century life including religion, work, clothes, food, even shipboard floggings. The result is a well wrought tale of a man who embodies the milieu of his generation. It is the story of a daring, courageous, passionate man who is troubled by his own small role in the shocking changes going on about him. When we first meet Syms he is 12 years old, the religion-drenched son of a butcher. We accompany him as he and Charles Darwin and the natural sciences grow up. As readers we follow him into a contentious, disappointed middle age.

McDonald constantly surprises. His prose is ebullient, at times boisterous, holding the interest of the reader with language so vivid and original, alternately comic and tragic, that it reminded me of the novels of Dickens. McDonald makes his history come alive by refusing to stray from the sweaty, angry, sad, and sometimes violence of reality. This is one of the better historical novels I have read.

Nicole says

Great premise, unengagingly delivered.

Deb Potter says

I still think of this book - I read it several years ago. The main character is a man - we follow him from young to old - who is on board with Darwin. This man has been brought up a christian - but he has moved from one faith to another and been influenced by different strands of christianity. Through Darwin and their shared journey he sees the evidence of evolution and grapples with his own faith. That is the deeper part of the book but its also a detailed and interesting tale of a 19th century life, of a time when the world held so much newness and sailing a boat into foreign shores presented them before you. The botanists and explorers of that time were like astronauts - travelling unimaginable distances to alien shores and bringing back talismans of that journey and thier strange detinations.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘No, a man does not have to be just as he seems. He can be more, in the light of understanding.’

This novel has been crafted around the life of Syms Covington, who was servant and assistant to Charles Darwin on the second voyage of the Beagle (December 1831 to September 1836). Covington was 15 when this voyage set sail, Darwin was 23.

There are two time periods to this narrative: the first focuses on the early life of Syms Covington and his travels with Darwin; the second focuses on him as an aging man living in Australia and awaiting a copy of Darwin’s ‘On the Origin of Species’. The young Covington is an eager participant in Darwin’s discoveries, the older Covington is concerned that Darwin’s conclusions will reveal his own role in what he sees be a crime against his religious faith.

This is a fascinating novel. The contrasts and conflicts in the novel between the old and the new are not

confined to religion and theories of evolution. Consider the phases of Covington's life: a narrow, circumscribed life in England; then his part in the voyages of discovery on the Beagle, followed by the wider possibilities afforded him by life in colonial Australia. There are many such as Syms Covington in history: often shadowy footnotes in the better known lives of men such as Charles Darwin and Robert FitzRoy. I have read quite a bit about Robert FitzRoy and Charles Darwin and the voyages of the Beagle. This novel adds a different perspective to these voyages and to those who were part of them.

The Journal of Syms Covington is available online:

<http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/bsparc...>

for those interested in reading his own words.

‘It was a life ended, all its days stolen.’

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Jill Gross says

I can not force myself to finish this book. There are too many out there to continue wasting my time

Roger Brunyate says

Whither Creation?

Syms Covington, the protagonist of this magnificent novel, was a real person. A seaman on board the *HMS Beagle*, he became the personal servant to Charles Darwin, helping him gather specimens in South America, tending him in England, and maintaining a correspondence even after his emigration to Australia. He might have remained a mere footnote to history, mentioned in Darwin's letters but not acknowledged in either *The Voyage of the Beagle* or *The Origin of Species*, had Roger McDonald not given him an intensity of life that, in this book, quite eclipses the reticent Darwin.

One thread of the novel begins with Covington as a knacker's apprentice in Bedford, England, a latter-day follower of the Christianity of John Bunyan and his *Pilgrim's Progress*. Meeting a charismatic sailorman-preacher, he goes with him to sea, both ending on *HMS Beagle*, where Covington strives to get noticed by Darwin. Through strength, skill, and sheer persistence, he eventually succeeds, and embarks on a series of adventures, both scientific and amatory.

Alternating with these sections are others set thirty years later in Australia. Covington has become an eccentric half-deaf old man, his fortune made, but terrified that Darwin's conclusions in the forthcoming *Origin of Species* will reveal him as an accomplice in disproving the scriptural foundations of the faith on which he has based his life. The unequal relationship between the old hermit and the ambitious young doctor who at first tries to patronize him has an austere fascination as the facts gradually emerge, but I cannot say that it is realized with sufficient clarity to bring Covington's spiritual crisis truly into focus. By contrast, the youthful chapters leap off the page in an incandescence of language that is at once brilliant and strange.

Darwin's vessel called in at Australia on her return voyage; his servant Syms Covington emigrated there; and now an Australian author is writing about both characters. It seems appropriate; Australia, as McDonald's Covington observes, is a country where servants soon become masters. It is also, like the hinterland of South America and the wastes of the Galapagos, a land of strange wonders where even to inhabit it is to partake in a new act of creation. And to match it, McDonald virtually creates a new language out of old ingredients: one part deliberate archaism, one part the scriptural overtones of John Bunyan, one part vernacular slang, and one part sheer invention, the whole making a brilliant verbal coinage that feels new-minted. Take this description of Covington playing his fiddle outside the cabin where the four officers are carousing:

They saw it, the winking curves of walnut wood. And presto Covington was enjoined to render a tune, a merry jig played in the inn near the crowded kennel where Spit and Polish were fart-daniels in his Pa's litter. Pelting over the bridge Covington bowed, raising a fine dust of resin. Soon his four were fox-hunting, with all the tally-hos and tarantaras in their tiny State Room, their sweaty shirts and stitch-busting breeches jerking around in the close air, the smells of their guts thickening the tropic night. Mr Earle went leapfrogging over the back of the gent with neither room to bend nor turn, and Capt deep in his cups was obliged to render Covington invisible to his emotion.

Old beliefs and new discoveries, old language and new; McDonald juggles both brilliantly throughout. But he ends in the simplicity of reconciliation:

He saw Darwin on his knees, and there was no difference between prayer and pulling a worm from the grass. As for Mr Covington, he prayed in the old-fashioned way. It was the last of anything he knew.

Allison says

I was surprised I liked this one, because I don't know anything about science. The book was an interesting examination of the ways Darwinism affected people's beliefs. I liked the characters.

Gordon says

A fascinating fictionalized exploration of the impact of Darwin's emerging theory on his real-life servant/assistant, Syms Covington. The book cleverly intertwines Covington's early life story - from child of a horse butcher to boy-sailor to the voyage of the Beagle - with the concerns of his later years as a successful immigrant in Australia: a family, a complex friendship and business partnership with the neighboring doctor who saved his life, and the tortuous whirlwind of emotions associated with his role in Darwin's discovery. As a person Darwin comes across as bland, all his energies focused within. Covington by contrast is a force of nature bursting with the love of life, and for the most part McDonald imparts that vividness to the book as a whole. Well worth a read.

Maddie says

2.5 stars, or thereabouts, rounded up. The story of Syms Covington, Darwin's right-hand man while travelling on the HMS Beagle and collecting the Australian and South American specimens that would, over time, provide his thinking for the Theory of Evolution.

Mr Darwin's Shooter had themes relevant to my interests - the Victorian age, naturalism, the challenge of Faith - however it wasn't an entirely enjoyable read for me. When I see that it took me ten days to read I'm surprised - it felt like much longer, and I had to break it up by reading other books at the same time.

I have to give it to McDonald, however, and remark how incredibly researched this was. Almost all of the conversations or remarks made by the real-life characters were taken from letters, diaries, and other primary sources. This occasionally meant a semi-broken or odd-sounding conversation, (the sort a historical fiction writer could have smoothed over with modern grammar and wit). It is worth noting that what was written was not necessarily how one spoke out loud - but for the most part this wasn't a *major* issue.

A little dull at times, but then with moments of great interest, *Mr Darwin's Shooter* was a story with a far better premise than anything else. Perhaps because of McDonald's interest to make his characters seem as real as possible, (primary resourced, diary-written real), he also managed to make them appear both stand-offish and unlikeable. Syms himself often acted foolish, unable to empathise far, boorish, and robotic. I doubt the real adventurer was so single-minded.

Then again, perhaps I've just grown used to the romance of characterisation in pure fiction. To be fair however, when I started his novel, that's exactly what I thought it was.
