

An Appetite for Wonder – the Making of a Scientist
Richard Dawkins

Dawkins writes beautifully, and he has a marvelous story to tell.

The British system, with its castes, private schools, and the intimacy of an intellectual class concentrated in London and the not-at-all distant Oxford means that important people know each other. More than that, they marry one another. Dawkins recitation of his genealogy reminds me of that of Charles Darwin, the Huxley's, the Mill family and other comfortable middle-class families that managed to spawn generation after generation of bright and/or brilliant minds. Francis Galton, the scion of one such family, wrote a book entitled *Hereditary Genius* in which he documented the phenomenon in family after family.

Dawkins knows his lineage going back at least to the 16th century, and it is a mixture of minor nobility, people of distinction one way or another, a scoundrel here and there, but generally a quite good class of people. Though he says his parents never had a great deal of money, their habits of mind were of people who had the conviction that they mattered. One of the many delights of the book are the illustrations. Dawkins has a number of pictures of his childhood, and even out of his parents' and grandparents' childhoods. Many were posed in a way that makes you think they had the conviction that posterity would be interested in them. I offer this observation, as my American ancestors were probably similarly capable, but had a quite different view on life. As an American, I am unusual in that I know their names, but unlike Dawkins, I do not know their biographies. He comes from a unique and one might call privileged tradition. It comes with a noblesse oblige, a sense of obligation to accomplish something, and that is what Dawkins has done extraordinarily well.

Running an Empire required the best and brightest of British society, and Dawkins' parents and grandparents were involved in the colonial administrations of India and Africa. His account of his childhood in Africa is idyllic. Although he does not make conscious mention of the relationship with the native peoples, it comes through very clearly that the British were accepted as natural masters. They had a kind of paternalistic affection for the people who work for them, and in turn felt no fear traveling alone on the dirt roads connecting the far-flung settlements of East Africa.

Dawkins has a delightful gift for telling it like it is. His account is unfiltered, apparently as good as recollection can make it. He talks about bullying in the private schools he attended in a fairly matter-of-fact way. It existed – yes. It could be incredibly cruel. He confesses his shame in not defending his weaker classmates. Yet, he can see that the culture which supported bullying also seems to have brought out some of the better aspects of some people's natures. One may be a better person for having endured a bit of hazing.

The British schools of Dawkins youth also had corporal punishment. His account tallies with my recollections from California. There may have been sadists among the administration, but I never encountered them, and it seemed to me that most of the people who received punishment deserved it

one way or another and survived just fine. It was one of many devices that the school administration used to maintain their authority. Students also dressed more or less appropriately, as young gentlemen in formation rather than above-it-all louts.

Homosexuality was also a fixture in British private schools. Dawkins writes matter-of-factly of the masters and the older boys who came on to him, and also of the civil way in which they accepted his rejections. He makes the observation that when there are no women around, highly sexed young men are likely to turn to whatever is available. This refreshingly commonsensical observation is strongly at odds with current orthodoxies, which tend to paint homosexuality as an all or nothing, inborn orientation. Again, this tallies with my observations growing up in California. I regret to say that nubile young women never came on to me, but gays frequently did. However, they always took "no" for an answer. I'm glad not to have endured prolonged arguments about how uptight and abnormal I was.

Dawkins became aware of his interest in his talents while enrolled in Balliol College in Oxford. Actually, he spent most of his time not at the college but the university, a distinction which is rather lost on me but important to him. He was fortunate to have a genius mentor, later to be Nobel prize winner Niko Tinbergen. He mentions a number of very gifted men with an interest in teaching. There especially credits the course of instruction, which did not follow any fixed curriculum, but instead had students read PhD theses and other up-to-the-minute papers to learn the state-of-the-art in their fields of study, and then discuss it. This has always been one of the hallmarks of the major centers of learning: great minds come together, they encourage, excite, and correct one another.

One of the things the great minds also do is come in conflict with one another. Dawkins is very sparing with his discussion of academic disputes, mentioning only one between Tinbergen and the American Lardner, in which he puts most of the emphasis on the reconciliation and the ability of the men to work together. They were not reconciled to the American Marxist biologists from Harvard, Richard Lewontin and Steven Rose. These were colleagues of Stephen Jay Gould, at Harvard, and by all reports are willing to put their political beliefs above their scientific integrity.

The last autobiographical entry in the book is his publication of *The Selfish Gene* in 1975. He had the idea, received a lot of encouragement and support from his colleagues, actually had publishers chasing him for a first book, and was expresses pleasant surprise that it turned out to be as successful as it was. He was also surprised that the thesis turned out to be so controversial. Within the world of academics, it had seemed rather obvious.

Dawkins's final chapter is an assessment of his life and accomplishments. He acknowledges that he was very favorably positioned, with two biologists as parents. The childhood in Africa may as well have been an asset, though he cannot say. As I noted in my introductory paragraph, I think that he benefited considerably from family history. He had some illustrious ancestors, and there was no doubt some expectation that he would do something of note with his own life.

Dawkins assesses his gifts. He is quite good at picking up music, not very good at all that reading it. He is not a terribly astute observer. He claims never to have mastered higher math, although he turned out to be a genius programmer, a skill which most people would say is closely related. He appears to have benefited from his congeniality, easy-going nature and good looks.

We know that it takes a certain intelligence, probably measurable, to turn out prose as lucid as his books. It takes a collegiality, a level of curiosity, and a great deal of hard work to conduct experiments such as he did during his early research. This brings us to his computer programming, which he undertook just about the very moment that computers became available. I am a programmer, not a bad one, and I stand in awe of the matter-of-fact account that he gives of the things he programmed. He programmed a couple of compilers, a computer language translating program, and a number of real-time applications before the word real-time had even been invented. *The Selfish Gene* focuses more than had I thought that it should have on computer programming. I now understand why, and understand that the algorithms he described in that book were of scientific interest, but from a data processing point of view, other things he was doing at the same time probably demanded greater intellect. In any case, I am impressed.

Dawkins is perhaps best known as an atheist. Only a bit of that comes through. He talks quite a bit about the Anglican influence on his childhood, and the passion reflected in his atheism may be a mirror of the passionate belief to which he was exposed as a child. One of the things I like about this book in previous books is his quotation of poetry and especially hymns. The foreword of one of his other books – I don't remember which – included the great Anglican hymn: "Time like an ever rolling stream bears all for sons away. They die forgotten as a dream dies at the break of day."

I will close with a wry note. His entire thesis is that we are self replicators, and that everything that we do inclines us to reproduce ourselves. Why doesn't he see how important religion is in this? He need look no further than Robert Trivers, who wrote the introduction to *The Selfish Gene*. Irrationality is an important part of our nature. In particular, when it comes to reproduction, having children does nothing of benefit to the phenotype. Children are expensive but both in terms of cash and time. Why would anybody have them? It is an irrational act. Precisely. And it takes the kind of irrationality generally called religion. I would ask that Dawkins at least investigate the fact that it is a paradox. However much religion cannot be proven, it may be essential to our survival. And if he wants his own genome to survive, he should probably have kinder words for Anglicanism.