

# Pithiest quotes survive, no matter their inaccuracy

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Even the guardians of Darwin's flame got it wrong.

Charles Darwin, born 200 years ago last Thursday, single-handedly shapeshifted our understanding of the natural world.

But his powerful insights into evolution were written in a wordy, Victorian style and did not always emerge in compact, haiku-like nuggets of wisdom.

"His writings can be quite hard going," notes Darwin scholar and Cambridge professor John van Wyhe. "Often you have to read a whole chapter to know what he is talking about."

Which may be why no single sentence is cited more frequently as a distillation of the great man's ideas than this one: "It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change."

It's etched in marble at the California Academy of Sciences and was cited last week by the Cite de Sciences in Paris.

A close runner up: "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment."

The British Natural History Museum website singled out that gem for a massive celebratory exhibit.

Together, they appear in countless books and

## QUOTES BY AND ABOUT CHARLES DARWIN:



Darwin

▶ "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family."  
— Darwin's father, despairing at his son's lack of interest in his university studies.

▶ "Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work worthy of the interposition of a deity. More humble and I believe truer to consider him created from animals."  
— Darwin's notebooks, 1838

▶ "If, as I believe ... my theory is true, and if it be accepted even by one competent judge, it will be a considerable step in science."  
— Note to his wife, Emma, in 1844, on leaving a secret manuscript

magazines, as well as tens of thousands of websites in dozens of languages.

But both quotations are spurious, according to top Darwin scholars.

"These sentences do not appear anywhere in Darwin's work," says Patrick Tort, a Darwin expert at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris who said he has spent the last decade "combatting the endless distortions of Darwin's ideas."

To make matters worse, neither quote is faith-

ful to his ideas about natural selection.

▶ "This preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest. Variations neither useful nor injurious would not be affected by natural selection ..."  
— On The Origin of Species, 6th edition

▶ "Is it on your grandfather's or grandmother's side that you claim descent from the apes?" — Samuel Wilberforce, bishop of Oxford, at an 1860 debate on evolution to Darwin's champion, Thomas Henry Huxley. According to legend, Huxley replied: "I would rather be descended from an ape than a bishop."

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ful to his ideas about the role of natural selection in evolution.

"These pithy little sayings try to encapsulate Darwin," Wyhe said by phone, amused and annoyed in equal measure.

"Unfortunately all of them are actually rather wrong."

It is not the species that are most responsive to change that are likely to survive, he explained.

"It is the ones that are lucky, or already have the

right features that can be passed on to the next generation."

The Natural History Museum, which holds many of the specimens that Darwin collected on the five-year voyage that triggered his insights, could not account for the erroneous citation, prominently highlighted in an online biography.

"Our web team are currently looking into the source of the copy in question and will address any errors of misleading information," Sam Roberts, the museum's media relations manager, said by e-mail.

"Darwin is particularly likely to get these false citations. Everyone has heard of him, but almost no one has read him," said Wyhe.

Wyhe suggested the fake Darwin quotes may be inspired by the marketing and business milieu, which distorted his ideas to make a point.

That seems to be the case for Darwin Airlines, a small regional carrier based in Switzerland.

"We can adapt, we are flexible," said Vincenzo Cammarato, the company's deputy head of communications, who cites one of the contested quotes in explaining the company's unusual name.

When informed that the motto was wrong, Cammarato did not seem too concerned, pointing out that not many people know the difference. A bigger problem for the tiny airline, he explained, is that some consumers associate Darwin with extinction. For Darwin scholars, the great man's entire opus is available online in a searchable format ([www.darwin-online.org.uk](http://www.darwin-online.org.uk)).