I had no intention of writing about Charles Darwin. But when I read about Syme Covington, Darwin’s assistant during the long voyage of the Beagle, I was compelled into the story.

A dimly lit photograph survives from the 1850s, a man with the look of a stoic, embattled survivor — with a deaf man’s look of waiting to be surprised, with an air of almost spiritual expectation. I found myself searching Darwin’s letters, diaries, and notebooks for hints of this shadowy, unsung companion.

Here was a person of little importance, it seemed, a humble crew member, a walk-on extra in the life of a young gentleman naturalist. Charles Darwin was only 23 and Symes Covington barely 15 when the Beagle’s voyage started at the end of 1831. The vessel’s papers listed Covington as ship’s fiddler and boy to poop cabin. In a short time, however, references to a “servant” appeared in Darwin’s letters and diaries. This was Covington. He’d found himself signed over permanently to Darwin by the captain, Robert FitzRoy. Whether Covington volunteered, urged for the job, or was just available is not known. In my novel, I have him urging for it — strong with ambition to live life to the full.

From then on, in notes and correspondence, Darwin hardly ever referred to Covington by name, mostly just as “my servant”. Yet they were close. I thought of Covington as Darwin’s “shadow”, an intuition shared (I found when I had finished the first draft) by Darwin’s most recent biographer, Janet Brown. Lodged in Covington was a novel in embryo.

In later years Darwin summarised evolution through natural selection as a process of “numerous, successive, slight modifications”. The same can be said of the writing process, as detail adapts to the needs of the story.

As in life, so in fiction: the beginning point is a mystery. A bubble appears from nowhere, it seems, like fizz in a glass of beer. Why Covington? Something that was nothing comes into existence — an idea that won’t let go. Sometimes an annoyance (a bad idea still having to be served), sometimes a blessing. In time, with work, the first image shifts into action, into character, into plot, and becomes a novel.

Darwin said nothing about what preceded life as we know it, except to make tactful noises (to keep Mrs Darwin happy?) about a Creator breathing life into “a few forms or even one”. Elsewhere in The Origin of Species he made repeated scathing attacks on creationism. In the fiction-universe, the curtain can more easily be pushed back.

Even mysteries have their own shape. A repeated dream in my own childhood was of a perfect sphere in space that was somehow doubled, one part smooth as a billiard ball, the other rough and stippled like a quondom seed or the surface of a brain. They were two moons overlapping against the deep blackness of space. Both were equally desirable to touch, yet struggling awake I could never decide which of the two was most satisfying.

If this is an obvious early memory of breast feeding it explains nothing away. Now I think it could just as easily be the end-point of psyche as the start. Whatever, a longing for reconciliation of opposites spilled over into personality and shaped my engagement with language, words struggling before the ebb and flow of feeling. In the character of Covington, similar longings occur. Here is where the historical record invites rather than unfolds an interpretation.

Midway through the voyage of the Beagle Darwin wrote to his sister back in England:

“Tell my father how much obliged I am for the affectionate way he speaks about my having a servant. It has made a great difference in my comfort; there is a standing order, in the Ship, that no one, excepting in civilised ports, leaves the vessel by himself. By thus having a constant companion, I am rendered much more independent, in that most dependent of all lives, a life on board.”

But: “My servant is an odd sort of person,” Darwin continued, “I do not very much like him; but he is, perhaps from his very oddity, very well adapted to all my purposes.”

I read on in the archive, looking for clues as to why Darwin did not like Covington, why he was “odd”. None emerged.

Perhaps we all resent those we come to depend on absolutely … Maybe this was just a class thing … If so, did Covington buck against his lowly station in life? … Make himself uppily to the upper-class Darwin? … Was it his looks, like Billy Budd in Herman Melville? … His beliefs? … An over-willingness to please? … A stickiness of manner? … Was it his sexuality?

What might it have been in Covington’s presence that evoked this negative but needful prickliness in Darwin?

Fiction comes out of just this vacuum of explanation, charting a relationship whose inner life begs to be imagined.

At the same time, as Isaac Bashevis Singer has observed, a novel must be full of detail just as music must be full of notes. Fiction comes out of just this vacuum of explanation, charting a relationship whose inner life begs to be imagined.

I filled myself with seafaring lore and combed through Darwin’s letters and diaries catching hold of clues. Covington learned collecting, preserving, shooting and packing skills from Darwin, slitting open birds’ stomachs, poking through half-digested contents, digging bones of prehistoric animals from Patagonian river banks, hefting, carting, sorting, storing. Seeking a language for Covington to represent an older, more trusting religion, and to stand against Darwin’s “modern” pattern of thought, I delved into Pilgrim’s Progress. This is perhaps the most anxiety-ridden book I have ever read, and as a homeopathic against its potential to swamp Covington with dampness of soul I gave him a vigorous libido and an honest heart. Strength of character emerges naturally from such a doubling. It gave Covington a trump card to play against his master, even if unconsciously.

I gained a picture of Darwin enjoying himself and always collecting ahead of his ideas — as when he desperately wanted to bag a particular small ostrich he’d heard about, then thoughtlessly cooked and ate one, realising too late it was the rare species he sought. Later it was named after him, the rhea Darwinii. Novels get written the same way, I reflected. Action precedes the idea, otherwise no life.

I had started with poetry, as a younger writer, but became impatient with the narrow range of life that arrived in my work. Twenty years ago I turned to novels seeking a wider canvas. After writing six, plus an autobiographical work, Shearers’ Motel, using fictional technique to grasp the essence of an experience, certain patterns become clearer. Even the novels that are full of social and historical detail, like Mr Darwin’s Shooter and my first novel, 1915, are slaves to fictional demand just as surely as more
A novel is like an individual in this sense. We can plot our personal histories, but can only guess beyond them. Despite our deepest psychologies we cannot say why we are who we are. We are mysteries to ourselves. We can plan our lives and see intention thrown by the wayside almost as a joke. Lying in the gutter we reach for the stars.

In another sense the novel itself is not like an individual at all: it is in the hands of an attentive god, the author, and invested with purpose — call it meaningful redemption of its mystifying beginning.

To say this about our own lives is an assumption that most of us including Darwin are reluctant to make, though like a novelist Darwin saw far and wide jumbled up with close and grainy. Also like a novelist he was guided by a formative image — late in life he recalled a childhood memory: locked in a room as punishment, he ran around trying to break the windows to get out. Complementing this, I invented a formative image for Covington: a young man leaping a stile in a stained glass window, John Bunyan’s Christian glimpsed from his mother’s lap in his earliest memories.

The two young men, servant and master, were to remain as close as man and wife (metaphorically speaking in their cluttered lodgings on land and sea) almost constantly from 1832 to 1839, during the entire voyage of the Beagle and for the two and a half crucial years following. “Servant” was a term covering many duties in their time together.

Covington was taxidermist, valet, trusted house-servant, clerk and copyst. He pickled fish, prepared botanical specimens, and became expert with insects and all manner of wriggling, fluttering, crawling life. As the voyage proceeded he emerged as a prodigious collector, shooting most of Darwin’s birds (including the famous finches taken on the Galápagos islands) and being responsible, it seems, for all of Darwin’s insects collected during his brief sojourn in Sydney. By the end, Covington was badly deaf from all the shooting.

Darwin’s archive is an immense resource: he remains the most thoroughly documented scientific genius of the nineteenth century. The voyage of the Beagle was a period of adventure and travel forcibly linked to an intellectual drama “far more thrilling” (as Stephen Jay Gould has observed) than the voyage itself, thanks to “the impact upon human history” of the religious and scientific conflict aroused by Darwin.

I wondered about that conflict cutting deep into an individual’s psychological sense of himself. Covington’s, that is.

He was born obscurely in Bedford, the home town of John Bunyan and religious non-conformity. Building from this lone early established fact, I created him imbued with trusting faith from childhood, coming from an older England, a stranger to the Anglicanism of the ruling order. Darwin was the son of the richest man in Derbyshire, and was halfheartedly planning to serve as a curate when he returned to England, if only he could find a parish with scope for nature study.

It was not to be. Even the sketchiest reading of The Origin of Species will reveal, Darwin became remorselessly and even aggressively atheist as time went on.

While I invented no facts around the Darwin archive, I interpreted Covington for fictional purposes by taking the known facts of his life into the realm of speculation. This applies particularly to the parts of Covington’s life pre-Darwin, and to episodes in South America where an older woman urged his passion into Covington’s life with later consequences for the plot. Also to the last year of his life, 1869 through to early 1861, as Covington awaited the arrival in Australia of The Origin of Species and I strove for some sort of reconciliation between science and religion in the spirit of this one person, Covington.

Early in the book I found myself writing the following, the first notes of an overture demanding an entire relationship to unfold, with implications for plot and character throughout: “Entering the Heads of Port Jackson just after dawn the captain found Covington utterly stricken. His eyes were open, watchful, but he uttered not a word. With sails slack and the schooner steady on the tide the sufferer was offloaded forthwith and rowed to a Dr MacCracken’s cottage in an arm of the harbour at Watson’s Bay.”

(To allow readers interested to see where fact and fiction vary, I appended a list of sources and acknowledgements in an author’s note at the back of the book.)

Covington’s archive by comparison with Darwin’s is tiny. It consists of a contested birth-date, a scrappy diary held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, a few watercolours, a photograph, and scattered mentions in Darwin’s letters and diaries.

Involved in the writing process, for me, is something closely related to formative imagery — a kind of abstraction hovering just ahead of me, the feeling of a cat’s cradle or a spindly constellation, an odd-shaped map of lines and connections. It is almost like a pre-apprehended form, an image of where the novel’s growth has to go before it will stop, and enough light has been shed. Morphology is the name of the subject in natural history, its most interesting department, according to Darwin, “its very soul.” It sometimes feels as if each book has a pre-existing soul and the only duty of the writer is to bring it up in colour, shape, and extent.

Beforehand, with a novel, I have what might be roughly described as a subject area (war, flight, horses, water divining, fire, evolution) but no idea where I will go in terms of character, incident, and detail, except that thrown far ahead of me is the feeling I have to reach and satisfy. This feeling is almost the definition of impossibility, the crux to me personally, though it might pass almost unnoticed by the reader (because when I get there, an inner knot dissolves, its shadow fades against the texture of the whole).

In Mr Darwin’s Shooter the point I aimed to reach was a reconciliation of science and religion. Where could this happen except in the dramatised life of an individual?

The letters Darwin wrote to Covington later in life were especially useful clues to work backwards from. Blandly friendly on the surface, wearily nostalgic, they cannot be described as warm-hearted. Whimsically envious of Covington’s financial success and improved station in life, and of the health of Covington’s children, they are none the less condescending, in my view — the letters of a distant master to a stolid old servant. Darwin sent Covington a silver ear trumpet and asked him to collect barnacles from nearby rocks, and wrote congratulating him on how well they were packed. Was there a touch of guilt in that ear trumpet? Darwin still wanted favours from Covington, and was never known for his gratitude.

I based my story on such slender threads, perhaps, but I wanted more from this relationship than was there on show. I wanted love, maybe as an antidote to Darwin’s spiritual bleakness. I wanted redemption. For this Covington’s nature had to be passionate all through.

When I looked at Covington’s photograph I saw that stoic, embattled survivor, that deaf man’s look of waiting to be surprised. What was Covington holding in? I wanted this man bursting into bloom behind Darwin’s back for his whole life. And so the real Covington and the fictional Covington travel parallel but not together in my pages.

In my other books, these knots of being have involved depicting a son’s meeting the gloomy, zombie-like father who died before he was born (Rough Wallaby); the unrestrained flight of heavy objects (The Slap); death by fire as the complete expression of a life (Water Man); a moment of rebirth expressed through repeated live burial (The Slap); boys overcoming the physical nightmare of war (1915).

Transformation of self, severely frustrated, seems to be a guiding light in my fiction. Facing, and somehow overcoming, a prospect of live burial (actual or metaphorical) is in every book I have written. Perhaps this will change. The other pattern obvious to me is that the main male character in every book is inarticulate in some sense. In Rough Wallaby the spindly constellation, an odd-shaped map of lines and connections. It is almost like a pre-apprehended form, an image of where the novel’s growth has to go before it will stop, and enough light has been shed. Morphology is the name of the subject in natural history, its most interesting department, according to Darwin, “its very soul.” It sometimes feels as if each book has a pre-existing soul and the only duty of the writer is to bring it up in colour, shape, and extent.

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As for the famous finches, which play a small but crucial part in the novel, Darwin had assumed, when they were on the Galápagos, that as the islands were close together “no reason was possible for their harboring different species true to their own islands”, and so, as a creationist (still) he had not labelled them by island. But the real Covington had labelled by island the birds he had shot for his own private and potentially saleable collection. When they were back in London Darwin called for these birds to be examined by John Gould at the Zoological Society.

There at 36 Great Marlborough Street Darwin sorted, listed, and wrote up the immense haul of material with Covington at his side. It was during this time that he first admitted to natural selection in private notes. Thus I propose that my fictional Covington, alone, and excluding Darwin’s more illustrious contemporaries in this period after the voyage, had not just an instinct for but a knowledge of what Darwin was grappling with in his understanding.

Then came the day in 1839 when Darwin announced his impending marriage. He presented Covington with a golden disemiss, dismissed him from his service, and Covington (somewhat stung, as might be imagined, but stoical) took ship for New South Wales.

In Australia Covington married, had the same number of children as Darwin, prospered financially, became innkeeper and postmaster at Pambula, in southern New South Wales. He maintained his police correspondence with Darwin over more than twenty years. (Covington’s side of the correspondence has been lost.)

Looking back over his life I have Covington obsessively ask a question: Had Darwin on their voyage found proof of natural selection as a theory able to explain life on earth as completely as creationism? More importantly, had Covington himself handed the proof over to Darwin — willingly and blindly? Had he thus committed, as he puts it to Wales. He maintained his polite correspondence with Darwin over more than twenty years. (Covington’s side of the correspondence has been lost.)

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himself, a crime against God and his own good nature?

Had there been a violation of good will? Worse — insult from the arrangement of reality itself?

On the eve of publication of *The Origin of Species* Darwin wrote to his former servant:

“Dear Covington, I have for some years been preparing a work for publication which I commenced twenty years ago, and for which I sometimes find extracts in your handwriting! The work will be my biggest; it treats on the origin of varieties of our domestic animals and plants, and on the origin of species in a state of nature. I have to discuss every branch of natural history, and the work is beyond my strength and tries me sorely.”

It was a lot of work they had done together, so much that Darwin’s latest biographer, Janet Brown, in *Charles Darwin: Voyaging* (1995) names Covington as “the unacknowledged shadow behind Darwin’s every triumph.” It is no mere whim therefore to elevate him somewhat in character from the plain, worthy, and dutiful picture that emerges by reflection in Darwin’s letters to him, and in Covington’s own rather scrappy and unimaginative diary. Luckily fiction is able to do that, and go where history cannot tread.

The reconciliation of science and religion is a metaphysical question that is often written about as an aspect of sociology, ready to happen “out there”. Yet where can it happen except in this unique universe of one? Because plot is one of the requirements of fiction, a “when” as well as a “who” is demanded. Writing this novel I had to be patient until the moment of reconciliation materialised, dramatically speaking, and then I could bring the pages to a close.

Roger McDonald, Edgecliff, NSW. *Mr Darwin’s Shooter* was published in 1998 by published by Alfred A. Knopf. This essay was funded by the Literature Fund of the Australia Council.

Roger McDonald was [interviewed on Radio National](https://www.abc.net.au/rn/1998/09/21/mr-darwin-shooter/) in relation to *Mr Darwin’s Shooter*.

In the Australian Humanities Review, see also: [Issue 12, December 1998](https://www.anu.edu.au/ahr/), *McDonald, Roger, Target Essay*.

If you would like to contribute to this discussion, please email [ahr@anu.edu.au](mailto:ahr@anu.edu.au).

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Mr Darwin’s Shooter is a 1998 novel by Roger McDonald. It describes the life of Syms Covington, manservant to Charles Darwin during Darwin’s voyage aboard HMS Beagle. The book deals with three periods of Covington’s life: childhood, adolescence whilst on HMS Beagle, and middle age, where Covington is struggling to deal with the conflict between his religious views and his role in the formulation of the theory of natural selection. Among the many animals Syms Covington shot and prepared for Charles Darwin were the Galápagos finches, which became crucial for his theory. McDonald, Roger. Primary Category: Literature / Fiction. Genre: Novel. Annotated by: Coulehan, Jack. This novel recounts the fictional life of Syms Covington, an historical character who was Charles Darwin’s servant during the voyage of the Beagle (1831-1836) and for two years thereafter in England. Covington then moved to New South Wales, but remained in correspondence with Darwin for the rest of his life. (He died in February 1861.) The theory of evolution rocks Covington to the core. Has his work played a part in helping Darwin to develop this godless theory? Mr Darwin’s Shooter is a persuasive argument for history with a (fictional) human face. The challenge posed by Darwin’s theory of evolution to the spiritual values of his day could hardly be more tellingly evoked than it is in its impact on the far from cerebral Covington. McDonald’s novel is a stirring reminder that the Beagle sailed on a voyage into the unknown, and that beliefs now central to the way we see the world were once almost beyond imagination. Ian Brunsfield THE TIMES. A sustained piece of imagining. Novel-writing never follows a path of logical intention. Once on the move, character, plot, and underlying meaning take their own course, following imperatives that come from the page itself.