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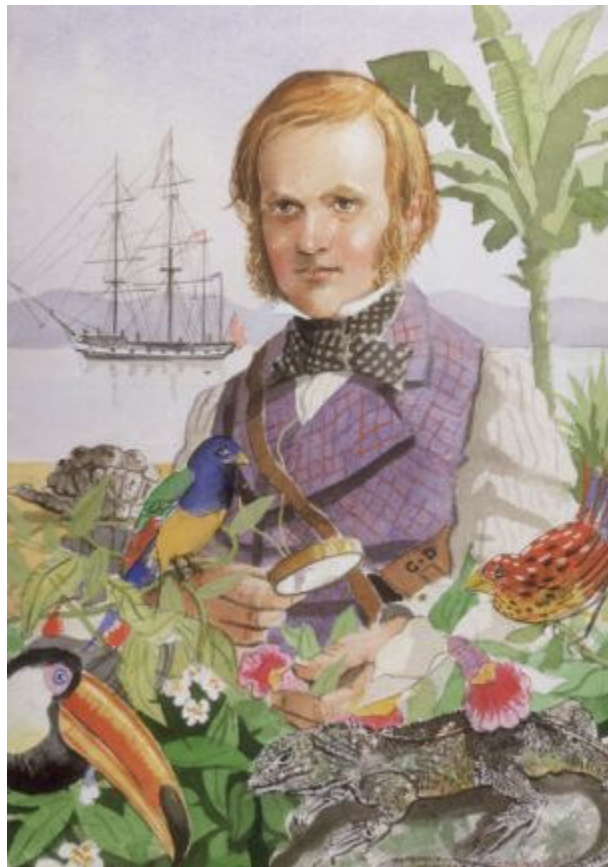
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Origin of life: a voyage round Darwin

DARWIN ROUND-UP

By [Christopher Hudson](#)

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How he'd have hated it. Charles Darwin loathed the limelight. One of our history's greatest men, he scribbled away in a country village, adding to his collections of orchids and earthworms, siring ten children by a wife who loved him but fundamentally disagreed with his views, and leaving his disciples to publicise the most ground-breaking idea of all time.

We are all proud of him, and about to do him proud this year - which is both the 200th anniversary of his birth and the 150th anniversary of his famous book, *The Origin Of Species*.

There is to be a film with the husband-and-wife duo of Paul Bettany and Jennifer Connelly as

Darwin and his wife Emma; the Natural History Museum is staging a massive exhibition. And the annual trickle of Darwin books is becoming a flood.

Hesitant and mild-mannered, Darwin found it painful to watch the battles which erupted and continue to this day. Educated

Victorians had been taught that mankind had ascended from the angels, not descended from the apes. Now they had to accept their kinship to hairy, black-faced, low-brow creatures who went about on all fours and ate shoots.

Creation no longer illustrated the benevolence and wisdom of the Creator. Instead, our forefathers were pitched into a world fashioned by a blind struggle to survive.

For free-thinkers, *The Origin Of Species* came as a liberation. The traditional Christian formula, that the world was created in seven days somewhere around 4004BC, was being exploded by the fossil-hunters. Now, everything they saw and studied could be fitted into a universal plan.

But the general reaction was summed up by Darwin's chief supporter, Thomas Huxley.



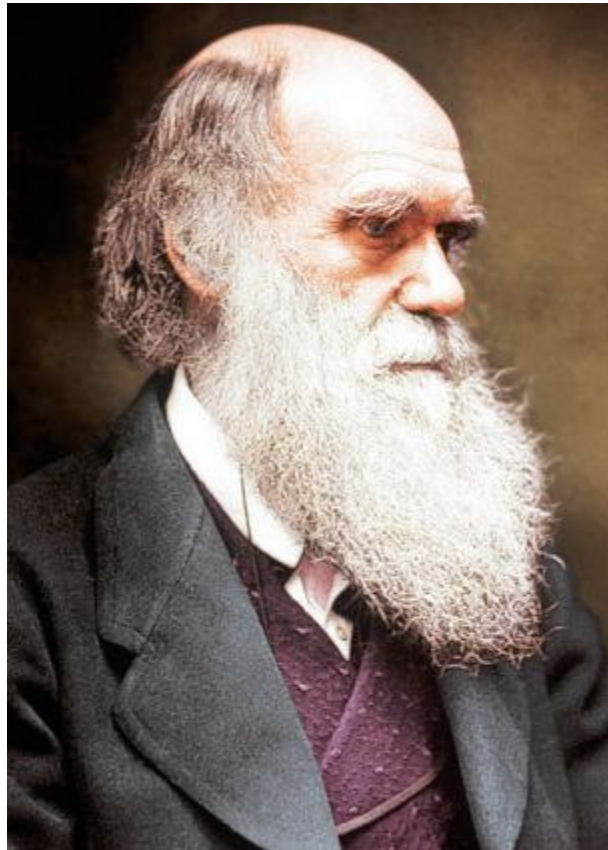
Beagle of the Galapagos by John Chancellor

He wrote in 1860: 'Everybody has read Mr Darwin's book, or at least given an opinion of it... bigots denounce it with ignorant invective; old ladies, of both sexes, consider it a decidedly dangerous book, and even savants, who have no better mud to throw, quote antiquated writers to show that its author is no better than an ape himself.'

There's almost nothing new left to say about Darwin: it's how you say it that counts. The publishers of the definitive biography of Charles Darwin, by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, are hoping for a similar success with **Darwin's Sacred Cause (Allen Lane, £25)** in which the two writers claim a 'completely new explanation' of how Darwin came to his views on evolution, namely his deeply held beliefs in human brotherhood. Tracking down what unpublished papers exist, they illustrate Darwin's hatred of slavery and his belief in a common descent for mankind.

This is fascinating for Darwin scholars but perhaps less so for general readers, because Desmond and Moore make it perfectly clear in their 1991 biography that Darwin thought slavery was morally wrong and should be outlawed. He read abolitionist stories to his wife and compiled lists of slave-owners' atrocities.

As Professor Keith Thomson reminds us in **The Young Charles Darwin (Yale University Press, £18.99)**, Darwin was born into one of those busy, clever, high-minded families that prosper in every age. His grandfather was a distinguished botanist and poet; his father was a doctor.



Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Nicknamed Gas at school for his love of chemistry, Darwin went through medical school and university without much interest. His father told him: 'You care for nothing but shooting, dogs and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family.'

Thomson gives a straightforward account of a self-absorbed, deeply ambitious young man, and tracks the influences and ideas which shaped his thoughts and led him to the 'mystery of mysteries' - how mankind first appeared on Earth.

Not until he was nearly 23 did Darwin finally settle on the natural sciences and set off on his five-year journey round the world, a journey described in **The Voyage Of The Beagle (Conway, £20)** by James Taylor.

Taylor is an expert on Victorian and maritime art, and he brings both specialisms to bear on this lavishly illustrated book, in which he vividly describes the journey through the letters, diaries and official narrative of the voyage, along with rarely seen sketches and artworks by the shipboard artists and surveyors.

Famously, Darwin was pressured into publishing *The Origin Of Species* by discovering that another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, while shivering with malaria on a volcanic, earthquake-ravaged island in Indonesia, had hit upon the same idea - that nature selects those creatures who are the fittest to survive.

Evolution by natural selection was a gradual process in which nature randomly selected for survival those plants and animals best adapted to their local environment.

When Wallace sent Darwin these conclusions, Darwin got the shock of his life: he had been nursing the same ideas for 16 years, and now this upstart was about to trump him. Friends arranged for a hurried outline essay by Darwin to be read together with Wallace's at a learned society.

Natural Selection And Beyond (OUP, £25) edited by Charles Smith and George Beccaloni is a scholarly compendium of everything one could wish to know about Wallace.

For an easier read about Wallace, Darwin's voyage on the Beagle and much else, seek out Sean Carroll's **Remarkable Creatures (Quercus, £16.99)**. Subtitled Epic Adventures In The Search For The Origins Of Species, it features 12 redoubtable travellers who either set the scene for Darwin's theories or helped to prove them.

One goes in search of the 'missing link' between apes and humans, and discovers Java Man; another finds a trove of dinosaur fossils in the Gobi Desert. Others finally piece together the sequence of hominid fossils which finally prove Darwin right. Enjoyable and instructive, this is one of the best of the anniversary crop.

Steve Jones, who in *Almost Like A Whale* successfully rewrote Darwin for the 21st century, reminds us in **Darwin's Island (Little Brown, £20)** that Darwin did actually write 19 other books which are full of insight into the human condition and into the flora and fauna of Britain - hence his title.



Land iguana - a Galapagos resident

If you were to read one new book on Darwin this year, this should be it, because it shows Darwin in the round, writing about orchids, insects, dogs, barnacles and tunnelling earthworms - not to mention his second best-known book, *The Descent Of Man*, in which Darwin finally admitted that human beings, too, shared their nature with other great apes.

Nothing escaped his comprehensive vision, from the expressions of his dog and his children to determining how the hops in his native Kent found a support and climbed up it.

Darwin (Deutsch, £30) by John van Wyhe is a book with pull-out enclosures for people who want to feel they are holding a piece of history. The text capsules are clear and informative, but several of the others are hard to decipher.

Finally, and surprisingly, **Mrs Charles Darwin's Recipe Book Revived And Illustrated (Glitterati, \$17.99)** really exists. An unnatural selection of cream puddings, cheese custards, buttered eggs, blancmanges, potato rissoles, syllabubs and Yorkshire puddings, its main usefulness in these frugal times is the light it sheds on Charles Darwin's recurring indigestion. With ten children (of whom three died), Emma presumably relied on cook to make the recipes work.

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