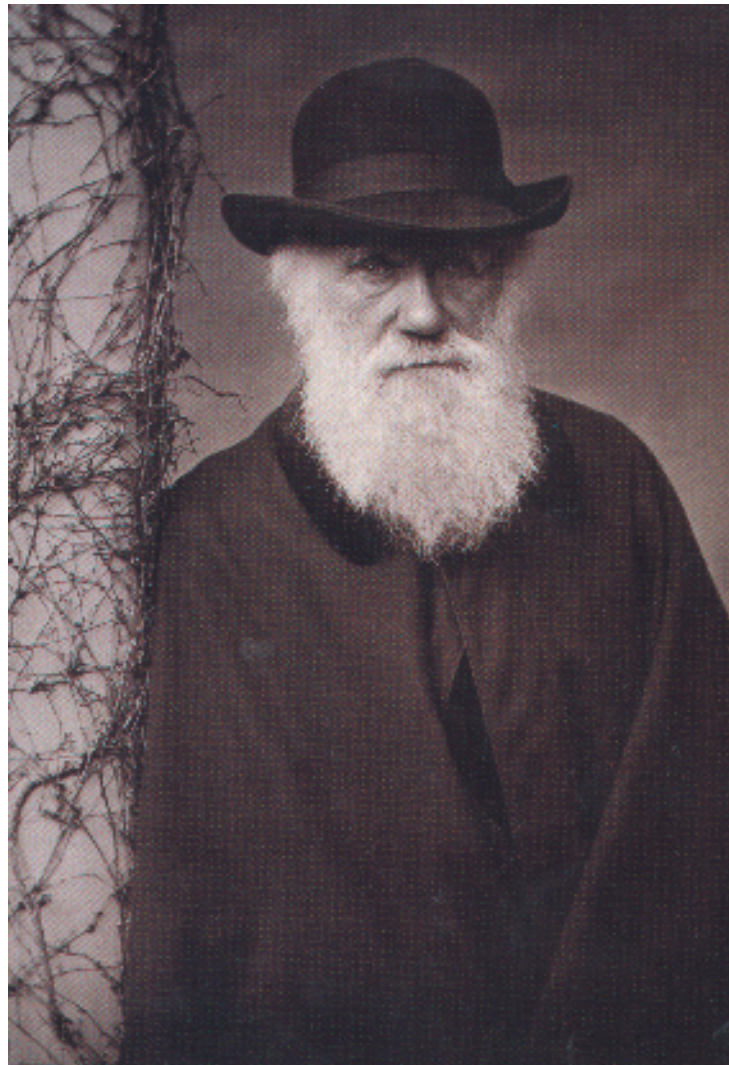


In Search of Charles Darwin



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CHAPTER 1. IN WHICH I BEGIN MY JOURNEY

Saturday. I am sitting with my brother John in the Thai International Executive Class lounge at Bangkok airport. The late Douglas Adams, author of the exhilarating “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, would have described this place as the waiting room in the centre of the universe. All the flotsam and jetsam of life seems to pass through here. It’s like the intergalactic bar in Star Wars. There are snoring Indians, busy Thais, loud Americans, inscrutable Chinese and not-too-embarrassing Australians. I am trying to read. My book is “Darwin” by Adrian Desmond and James Moore. It is a huge work, some 808 pages. We have over five hours to kill here. But it is hard to concentrate. It is hot, humid and there seems to be no air conditioning. My mind and body seem detached and can’t focus on my mission, should I decide to accept it. I am on a pilgrimage, a quest. A search for the spirit of Charles Darwin. I have made a mental list -

36 Great Marlborough Street
 The Natural History Museum
 Macaw Cottage, 12 Upper Gower Street
 Down House
 Westminster Abbey

These are the sacred sites. Where he lived as a bachelor after returning from his 5 year voyage around the world on the Beagle; where I’ll find the fossil of the giant sloth he dug out of the cliff in South America and see his famous Galapagos finches; where he lived in London after marrying his first cousin, Emma; and where he lived and worked for forty years surrounded by idyllic English countryside and a loving family, and wrote *On the Origin of Species*, or as we call it, *The Origin*; and where in the greatest of life’s ironies, he was finally buried.

I first heard about Darwin and evolution at the surprisingly late age of 17. It was 1965, first year biology at Monash University, and the one-armed professor, Jock Marshall, strides into S7 in a flowing black gown and booms out “What is life?”. And then after a pause and in a low conspiracy mutters “We don’t know”. Whew! That was lucky, because I didn’t have a clue either. And Jock proceeded to outline Darwin’s life and discovery of the theory of evolution, which underpins and gives meaning, or lack of meaning if you like, to all of life. Variation and natural selection. The unifying theory of biology. The Great Man.

I know the story so well that it seems like I’ve read this book before. His failed attempt at medicine at Edinburgh, under the protective wing of his brother Erasmus, and his revulsion at the gore. Beetle hunting at Cambridge, a much more benign pursuit, and a BA, with plans to study theology and prepare for ordination into the Church of England. Destined for a life as a comfortable country parson. And then the opportunity of a lifetime aboard the Beagle, as naturalist and gentleman dinner companion for the temperamental Captain FitzRoy. The five year voyage of discovery, the seasickness, the massive collections, the amazing adventures and journeys, fossil hunting in South America, galloping with the gauchos, journeys into the Andes, the Galapagos, and stop-overs in colonial Australia. Home to England and lodgings in Great Marlborough Street, to deal out his massive collections for description and classification. Marriage, the move to Upper Gower Street, then the final move to Down House, to escape the Malthusian madness of London. And then the thinking, with the weight of the evidence convincing him of the impossible. Evolution was not a new idea, and had even been flirted with

by his grandfather. But nobody knew the mechanism. His great idea, natural selection. The diversion into barnacles, pigeon breeding, worms, carnivorous and climbing plants, the breadth and diversity of his interest, the meticulous obsessiveness, the poor health, (was it Chagas' disease?), the ginormous correspondence. The initial horror that transmutation of species was undeniable. What did he think when he got that letter from Wallace, and the bottom dropped out of his world? Thank goodness that it triggered the speedy publication of *The Origin*. Did I tell you that I've never read it, *The Origin*, from cover to cover? What a confession! But, it is a bit turgid in places. *The Beagle* journal and *Expression of the Emotions*, well, they are much more interesting!.....

At last they call Flight 916 for London and I can leave that tepid waiting room behind, before it extracts more confessions.

CHAPTER 2. IN WHICH I FIND COMFORTABLE LODGINGS

Sunday. I'm sort of drifting in a drug-induced oblivion, melatonin and diazepam, when the telephone rings. It's loud, insistent and right in my left ear. Who has died? My heart races as I grab at the receiver. "This is your wake up call. It is now 5.39. Hang up please". I look at my watch. It is 3.02 pm. God, help me. But that's Melbourne time. It's 6.02 am on my alarm clock. Management must be taking revenge.

I'm fully awake now and remember where I am. I am at my lodgings, the Cricklewood Lodge Hotel. Last night I measured the height of my two pillows and found that their combined fully-fluffed-up height was 42.5 millimetres. I took my life in my own hands and asked the Croatian doorkeeper for an extra pillow. Well, "there might be one in the laundry", and with much fuss I was given the last spare pillow in the hotel. So I now have three pillows! No wonder the phone has tipped me out of bed. Guests can't get too comfortable!

Two and a half hours till breakfast. Time to take stock of my lodgings. My room is simple and has no windows. But it does have an openable skylight for catching grey-sky glimpses. And it does have a pocket-handkerchief-sized ensuite bathroom. If I was six inches longer my feet would touch the wall whilst lying in bed. Speaking of which, the bottom sheet on my bed has a cigarette burn hole in it, and are they suspicious-looking stains? You notice the little things. Like my door lock. The clearance between the lock and the door jamb is about 17 millimetres. It's enough for me to get one thin finger in to rotate the key, but at the risk of severe bruising. There is a rounded wear mark on the jamb where fingers bigger than mine have rubbed here over the last few centuries.



Photograph 1. The view from my lodgings