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# 'HIS OVERWHELMING FEATURE? HUMANITY'

Behind Charles Darwin's contribution to science lay an insatiable appetite for family life – despite the sorrow it brought him, his descendant Ruth Padel tells Jackie McGlone

Photograph by Simon Murphy

**W**ith its colourful, bohemian furnishings and luxuriant profusion of greenery, the Hampstead house of the writer Ruth Padel could only be the home of a dedicated bibliophile and a passionate lover of wildlife. Books silt up every corner of the prize-winning poet's terrace home, shelves filling the walls and piles teetering on every surface – chairs, sofas, tables, even the piano – nudging the glossy green leaves of a jungle of lovingly tended indoor plants.

The rooms are also filled with artefacts and artworks from Padel's travels around Europe and the Far East, from Greece to the jungles of India, from thorn-forest to snowy taiga and mangrove swamp – journeys she began in 2002 and which have taken her to Nepal, Bangladesh, Russia, China, Bhutan, Sumatra and Laos.

On the floor of the room where we're drinking coffee beside a crackling fire there is a bright rug depicting a roaring tiger, burning bright in the magical forests of the firelight, a vivid memory of her search for tigers and the subject of her acclaimed travel book, *Tigers in Red Weather* (2005).

Despite her love of literature, Padel, who is 62, slender and sooty-haired, took only one book on her trip to south-east Asia to walk where tigers walk – apart from the poems in her pockets and those in her heart and her head. It was a copy of her great-great-grandfather Charles Darwin's most famous book, *The Origin of Species*, one of the most important and revolutionary works ever published, and of which there are several leather-bound editions on the shelves above the cushiony sofa where I'm sitting.

"It was during that tiger journey that I began to feel most kinship with Darwin," says Padel,

who spent most of last year working on a new book, *Darwin: a Life in Poems*. "It did dawn on me that on the five-year voyage of HMS Beagle, in the 1830s, he had been trying to understand how species came into existence and, tragically, here I was 170 years later learning how an animal comes to the brink of extinction, for I had stepped into the worldwide battle for the wild. That works as a kind of shorthand biography of Darwin's life and thought."

Her intimate and moving sequence of poems, in which she set out to capture Darwin's unique, gentle voice, is published to mark his 200th birthday – February 12 – and the 150th anniversary of the publication in November, 1859, of *The Origin of Species*.

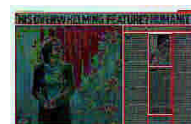
"The Origin sold out in one go," says Padel, adding that public debate fastened instantly on human origins, although there is not a word about them in the book. (He tackled them later, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), when public opinion was ready to accept the idea that we evolved alongside apes.) What the Origin does show is how natural selection is the mechanism by which species adapt and change. "It is a book that is the product of 20

years' thought, honest questioning and experiment. It is also deeply felt," says Padel.

Now, the whole country – indeed, the world – is about to do the scientist proud, with exhibitions, academic debates and literary festivals and events, some of the most notable being at Glasgow's *Aye Write!* festival. Darwin will also be profiled in television and radio

programmes, and two Hollywood movies are being made about his life and times. In addition, an armada of new books is embarking on a voyage around Darwin.

"Of course we are proud of him, but we are



especially proud of his ideas, his thought – particularly those of us who are members of his enormous family,” says Padel, who grew up surrounded by Darwiniana since she’s one of Charles and his wife Emma’s 72 great-great-grandchildren, many of whom she’s never met. “I really know only my first cousins,” she says.

Born at the home of his well-off family in Shrewsbury, Charles Robert Darwin was the son of the town’s leading physician – his mother, Susanna, died when he was only eight. He remembered his father crying, then silence, his sisters not speaking her name. He had no memento of her face.

In 1825, Darwin’s father sent him to read medicine at Edinburgh University, where he himself had studied. He was revolted by the carnage of the operating theatre and the amputation table, and was bored by the lectures, but it was in Scotland that Darwin fell in love with marine zoology, read a scientific paper on it and went to natural history lectures.

“Scotland was incredibly important in the shaping of Darwin as a scientist and naturalist,” says Padel. Darwin and his brother Erasmus, also a medical student, shared lodgings at 11 Lothian Street. (There is a commemorative plaque on the building, now occupied by the Natural World Gallery of the National Museums of Scotland.) In the same street, at number 37, lived John Edmonstone, who had been a slave on a Guyana plantation. He was the first black man Darwin had seen.

Edmonstone, who stuffed birds for Professor Jameson’s Museum, taught Darwin taxidermy. He paid Edmonstone one guinea (£1.05) an hour for the lessons – and the National Museums of Scotland has two birds stuffed by Darwin in the permanent collection. “It was from Edmonstone that he must have heard direct accounts of the tropical forest for the first time,” notes Padel.

He also spent time with oyster fishermen he had befriended, and they took him out collecting marine specimens on the Firth of Forth. “At 18 he fell in love with marine invertebrates,” says Padel. “So it was in Scotland that he made his first scientific discoveries. He even heard John Audubon lecture on North American birds in Edinburgh.”

But, after two years, Darwin abandoned his medical studies and went to Christ’s College,

Cambridge, with the intention of becoming a clergyman. It was there that his interest in natural history was piqued, leading him to set sail on the surveying ship HMS Beagle, in 1831 – a voyage that was to produce the book that changed the way we think about life.

On his return, Darwin married his first cousin, Emma Wedgwood, and they moved to Down House, in the village of Downe, in Kent. Both came from very large families ►

### **SHE THINKS THE HAIRS UNDER HIS ARM GROW LIKE A CRESCENT MOON**

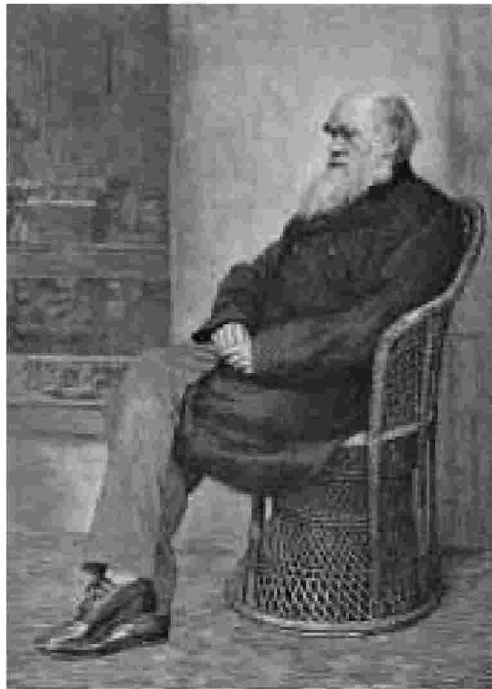
By Ruth Padel

*He lies with his face away from her, one hand  
on her belly where the next child’s grown.  
Mary – she’ll be born this autumn  
and buried three weeks later, in  
a family plot he will pick out  
by the west door of St Mary’s church at Downe.  
She’d like to get up and tell the kitchen  
about the rabbit for tonight, but he is still  
inside her. (“Above any woman,” they will  
say afterwards, “she comforted.”) He leads  
with his chin when he sleeps. The galaxies  
of orange freckles on his upper arm  
like fleckings on the inner bell of a foxglove.  
She knows their clustering by heart. He seems  
to be putting God further and further off.  
This is what it is, to love. To lie, not moving,  
staring at light half-hidden by a curtain.  
Every morning he vomits in the basin  
in his study. His illness lives with them now  
like another child. That’s Willie waking up.  
Now little Anne. This sheet is a rising tide  
of snow, above her eye. He’s heavily asleep.  
Black sparrows cheep  
like rusty nails in Gower Street, outside.  
London 1841*

This poem is published in *Darwin: a Life in Poems*. It was commissioned by Bristol Festival of Ideas as part of the *The Lost World Great Reading Adventure*.

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Ruth Padet is one of Charles Darwin and his wife Emma's 72 great-great-grandchildren

► and they in turn had 10 children, of whom seven survived. At least five of these had large families, but he and Emma lost three adored children of their own, watching them die in unalleviated suffering.

“The more I studied his notebooks,” says Padel, “the more I felt that pain was the factor that particularly swayed him against the idea of a benevolent creator.” In 1838, Darwin wrote: “Disease and pain in the world and they talk of perfection?” He saw too clearly the waste involved in the way nature worked – and this acquired a tragic resonance in the decade before he wrote *Origin*. In 1852, his much-loved daughter Anne, aged 10, fell sick with what was probably TB. (Emma was just about to have their seventh child, Padel’s own great-grandfather.) After Anne died, Darwin no longer entered the village church.

**T**heir 10th child, Charles Waring, who Padel believes suffered from Down’s syndrome, died in agony from scarlet fever at 18 months. The *Origin of Species* was written in great sadness and, in some ways, is a very sad book. “Although I come from a long line of scientists, I am no scientist and I know my poems miss out whole, huge sophisticated areas of thought,” says Padel. “But what anyone can love in him is his love of ideas and his enthusiasm; the way he wonders about connections and processes as well as origins.”

Darwin was a man, she continues, with a great sense of the intricacy of human relations, as well as wonder at the complexity of the natural world. “He also had a huge capacity for affection; an endearing modesty; a naivety people often called childlike; a great anxiety not to give other people trouble; a lively interest in their doings; and a keen enjoyment of tiny things,” she has written, urging that we do something more than celebrate Darwin this year. “He did not believe in an afterlife and needs no pats from us.”

The *Origin of Species* swept the mild-mannered, self-effacing Darwin to international fame, but he found it unbearable, says Padel. He loathed being the centre of attention. “It’s a very Darwinian trait,” she sighs, acknowledging that she too is hesitant of walking into the limelight. Padel, who has made a series of radio programmes for the

BBC’s Darwin season, says, of course, her forebear was a great man of science, a pioneering naturalist who gave us the groundbreaking theory of evolution and discovered the law of natural selection, and it is right and proper that his bicentenary should be marked. It is as an extraordinary human being and a loving father, though, that she also wishes him to be remembered.

Darwin adored his children. “He played with them as babies, involved them in madcap experiments, let them rampage all over his study. So to me, his overwhelming feature is his humanity,” says Padel, adding that in his thousands of letters – now available online in Cambridge University Library’s Darwin Correspondence Project (see page 10) – you see everywhere his curiosity about every life form, and his wonder at its complexity. Padel suspects his granddaughter, her grandmother Nora Barlow, then transmitted these characteristics to her children, including Padel’s mother, Hilda, who passed it on to her five children, of whom Padel is the eldest. (Her father, John Hunter Padel, was a classics teacher who became a psychotherapist.)

Now 89, Hilda was a biologist working on cancer research until she had a family. A few years ago, she took her children and grandchildren on a memorable trip following in Darwin’s footsteps to Galapagos, where he spent five weeks during the *Beagle* journey, although presumably he didn’t go swimming with young killer whales, as his descendants – including Padel’s daughter Gwen, 23 – did. “You can see his theories about survival of the fittest there – on one island, for example, all the finches have big beaks, the others having been winnowed out,” remarks Padel.

Padel, a classics graduate of Oxford University, cherishes memories of her grandmother, “a wonderful woman who lived in a magical house with a jungly garden”. Nora Barlow

edited several of Darwin’s books, including the first unexpurgated version of his autobiography. Written in 1876, it was first published after he died by his son Francis who, at his mother’s request, removed a key passage, in which Darwin wrote that he could “hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true”. He went on to call it “a damnable doctrine” that seemed to show that the men



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who do not believe, “and this would include my Father, Brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished”.

When Nora edited the book she put this passage back. Thirty years ago, when she was 95 and Padel was looking after her, Nora talked to her granddaughter about Darwin's ideas and his sense of how they affected the faith of his wife, who remained a Christian. She spoke of how difficult it was for Charles and Emma that his book, in Emma's words, “put God even farther off”. Despite their divergent views on religion, their relationship was a very intense, intellectual partnership, with a deep sustaining intimacy, says Padel, who confides it was that conversation she had with her grandmother about Darwin and Emma that made her long to write about them, which she has done beautifully.

Above all, says Padel, Darwin's life is a love story, because he had one of the happiest of marriages. As Emma wrote in 1882, “the last 12 years were the happiest of all, most overflowing with affection”. Padel has written: “She read to him every afternoon and they played backgammon every night, and they finessed the tough passages with humour. I'm not good at feeling proud of things, but being descended from that pair, what I am proud of is that affection – that gentle, funny, endearingly modest humanity.”

“Please don't forget,” urges Padel, “I'm Emma's great-great-granddaughter as well as Darwin's. I think I'm like her in many ways – I too have an inability to put up with humbug and I always want to be kind, just as Charles and Emma were very kind to each other.”

And what has she inherited from Charles Darwin? “Many, many things, but mostly a sense of wonder.” ■

*Darwin: a Life in Poems* by Ruth Padel is published by Chatto and Windus, priced £12.99. The new edition of *The Origin of Species*, with a foreword by Ruth Padel, is published by Vintage Classics, priced £8.99.

## DARWIN EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

**Darwin: My Ancestor**, written and presented by Ruth Padel, are being broadcast on Radio 4 each Tuesday at 9.30am until

February 17. Tomorrow Sir David Attenborough presents Charles Darwin and the Tree of Life (BBC One, 9pm). Other BBC programmes include The Darwinian Sistine Chapel, which charts artist Tania Kovats's decoration of the Natural History Museum's ceiling based on Darwinian theories, in the manner of Michelangelo's vision of the Creation in the Vatican.

**Events and talks** about Darwin are being staged throughout the year at Edinburgh University's Talbot Rice Gallery, including the exhibition Darwin and Scotland, from October 1-December 31. Visit [www.darwin200.org](http://www.darwin200.org).

**A dramatised reading** of The Context of Origins: 1859, by playwright Peter Arnott takes place at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, at 7pm on February 12, celebrating Darwin's achievements and examining the opposition to his ideas. Call 0131 623 4675 or e-mail [events@nls.uk](mailto:events@nls.uk).

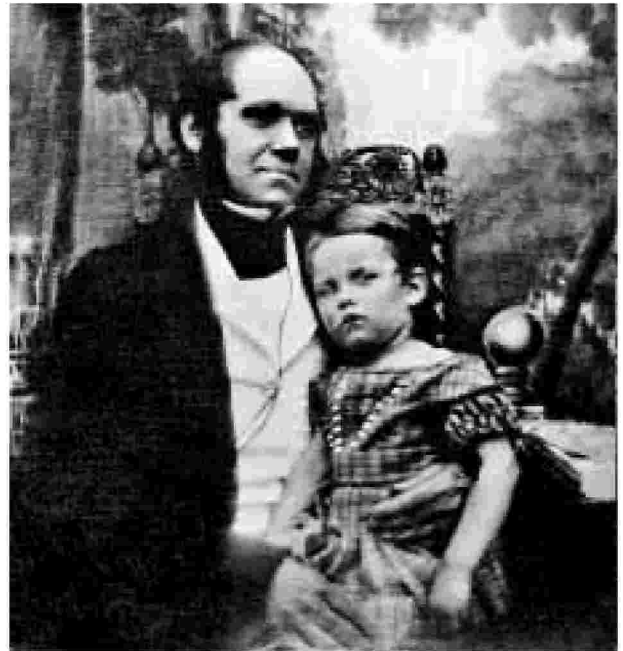
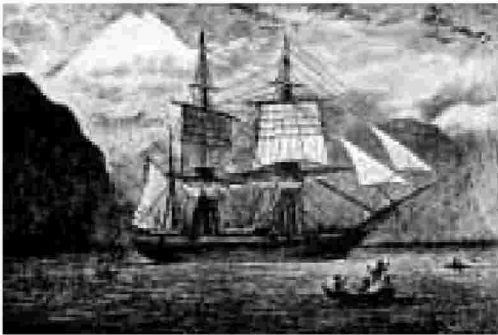
**The Natural History Museum** in London has an exhibition examining Darwin's evolutionary theory and the scientific discoveries made on the expeditionary voyage of HMS Beagle, as well as his personal life. The exhibition runs until April 19; visit [www.nhm.ac.uk](http://www.nhm.ac.uk) or call 020 7942 5000. The museum will also stage After Darwin: Contemporary Expressions, from June 26 to November 29.

**The British Library** in London has an interactive exhibition giving insights into how Darwin developed his ideas, with a replica of his “sand walk”, a route he trod every day with his terrier, observing nature and reflecting

on his experiments and travels on the Beagle. Visit [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk) or call 0870 444 1400.

**Cambridge University's Darwin Festival**, from July 5-10, includes debates on Darwin's impact on human nature and beliefs, plus sessions examining his influence in different fields, from science to the arts. Other events involve tours of the university Botanic Gardens and fringe events by Cambridge Footlights. Visit [www.darwin2009.cam.ac.uk](http://www.darwin2009.cam.ac.uk).

**The Hollywood biopic** Creation, due in September, stars Paul Bettany as Darwin and Jennifer Connelly as his wife Emma. A second film, Mrs Darwin, with Rosamund Pike as the pious Emma and Joseph Fiennes as Darwin, is in pre-production.



**Charles Darwin (left) is best known for his scientific career, which began aboard HMS Beagle (opposite page), but he also enjoyed a rich family life, as captured in 1812 with his sister Catherine (above) and in 1842 with his son William (below)**

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