

Deepening Understanding

UKS2 Non-fiction Text

Biography of Charles Darwin by Laura Curtis



Charles Darwin was a British naturalist, explorer and scientist whose ground-breaking discovery revolutionised science and changed Victorian society forever. Inspiring a whole new generation of scientists, his 'Theory of Evolution' by natural selection became the foundation of current evolutionary studies. So, how did Darwin become one of the world's most influential scientists?

Early Life and Education

On 12th February 1809 in Shrewsbury, England, Charles Darwin was born into a wealthy family. He was descended from a long line of brilliant minds, many of whom had been scientists. Being part of a proud and successful family, his father Dr R. W. Darwin had a highly-respected job as a physician. Darwin and his siblings (he was the second youngest of six) had a happy, privileged childhood and this allowed him the freedom to explore nature - this was an activity which he loved. Unfortunately for Darwin, his mother (Susanna) died when he was only eight years old.

Before he went on to attend Shrewsbury School for Boys, Darwin was tutored at home by his older sister up until the point of his mother's death. However, he was not a very accomplished student and it is noted by Darwin himself in his autobiography that he was a poor scholar. At the age of 16, he followed in his father's footsteps and enrolled in Edinburgh University - along with his brother Erasmus - to study medicine. After two years,



Darwin decided to leave university as he was not comfortable with the sight of blood. Abandoning plans to become a doctor, he considered a career in the Church and at the age of 18 went to study Divinity at Christ's College in Cambridge. He was unconvinced life as a vicar was for him but wishing to still have the time to follow his love of nature and biology, he pursued his studies. Darwin graduated in 1831 but before he could take a job as a clergyman he received an offer from John Stevens (his Botany professor at university) that was to change the direction of his life forever.

Voyage of a Lifetime

Having just graduated from Christ's College, Darwin was offered an opportunity of a lifetime: a five-year voyage around the world working on a ship as a naturalist. Darwin immediately accepted. On December 27th 1831, Darwin boarded the HMS Beagle and set sail. Little did he know, the trip would not only revolutionise his own world but the whole wide world too.

During his expedition, he visited many countries and habitats (including Brazil, Chile, Australia and the Falkland Islands) where he collected a vast variety of different species of birds, insects, plants and fossils. The Pacific and Galapagos Islands were of particular interest to Darwin and he spent a great deal of time meticulously observing, recording and thinking about all of the unique natural flora and fauna he found there. The trip had a significant impact on Darwin's view of natural history and he began to develop a revolutionary theory about the origin of living organisms - this ultimately led him to reconsider our place within the world.

Upon his return to England in 1836, he married his cousin Emma (a member of the prestigious Wedgewood family). Three years later, they moved to Down House in Kent, where they created a loving family home. They went on to have ten children, yet sadly three of them died at a young age; Charles was to suffer from multiple losses for the rest of his life. Darwin's beloved home provided him with a place to quietly research and examine his vast collection of specimens from all over the globe. He even had a particularly large collection of pigeons which he observed and studied intently.

His Revolutionary Theory

After years of dedication to his study, Charles Darwin's theory was irrefutable. His collection of fossils proved that there had been life on earth before humans; this contradicted what religion had taught him since childhood. Significantly, he noticed that species of creatures shared



characteristics but also had distinct variations depending on their habitat; this led him to believe they had evolved from a common ancestor. Darwin also believed that species had evolved to adapt to their surroundings, where only the strongest survived through a process called 'natural selection'. When commenting on his discovery, he later wrote, "I feel like a blind man given sight".

After over twenty years of intense research, Darwin was ready to publish his findings - he was fully aware that they would have monumental religious implications and would arouse a great deal of intense controversy. On November 24th 1859, Darwin finally published a detailed explanation of his theory in his best-known book 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection'. Supporting his findings, another scientist called Alfred Russel Wallace had also reached the same conclusions. Darwin knew that his book may be met with ridicule from the strongly religious Victorian society at the time and indeed some other naturalists refused to believe his idea: they maintained that all species either came at the start of the world or were created over time. However, the majority of academics and the population accepted Darwin's scientific discovery.

Later Life

Darwin worked late into old age and, after completing a lifetime of research, died in London on 19th April 1882 (at the age of 73). The cause of his death is unknown yet it is suspected that he contracted a virus or was bitten whilst travelling. Darwin was so revered and respected by the British public and the politicians of the time that he was deemed worthy of a burial amongst other great Britons. He was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey near another momentous scientist called Sir Isaac Newton.

Legacy

Charles Darwin literally changed the world and the way we regard all living organisms. In the century since his findings were published, DNA studies have revealed evidence to support his theory of evolution. Regarded by the majority of people world-wide, his theory of natural selection is now accepted as scientific fact. His ground-breaking research and ultimate courage to follow what he knew to be true makes him one of the greatest Britons our country has ever produced. He is a national treasure and such was his importance in British culture and history that, until recently, his face could be found on the back of £10 notes. Charles Darwin is truly a remarkable man, whose theories changed the outlook of the world forever.

