

FOREWORD

One hundred and fifty years past its publication, I believe we can safely say that the *Origin of Species* is the most important book of science ever written. Indeed, given its importance to all of humanity and the rest of life, it is the most important book in any category. No work of science has ever been so fully vindicated by subsequent investigation, or has so profoundly altered humanity's view of itself and how the living world works. The theory of natural selection continues to gain relevance to the things that matter most to humanity – from our own origins and behavior to every detail in the living environment on which our lives depend. Little wonder that the adjective "Darwinian," sometimes lowercased to "darwinian" as a tribute to its fixity, far outranks "Copernican," "Newtonian," and "Mendelian" in the frequency of usage.

The *Origin* won the day quickly for such a revolutionary proposal, so much so that Darwin could confidently publish *The Descent of Man* only twelve years later. It succeeded not just for the mass of evidence adduced to support evolution but because of the clarity and authority of its text. The quality of the mind that erected it did not come from the blue. For nearly three decades, extending from the departure of *HMS Beagle* from Plymouth on December 31, 1831, to the day in 1859 the *Origin* was sent to press, Darwin remained almost continuously absorbed in scientific natural history. He inhabited this subject, and he lived it. And fortunately, the middle of the nineteenth century was a time that so little was known about nature in the rest of the world, so few unifying concepts existed to guide the collection of data, that every fact, every specimen was valued. Darwin's mind was an open vessel. By absorbing with little

discrimination those domains of natural history most relevant to geology and evolutionary biology, he became enormously learned.

In preparing my recent anthology entitled *From So Simple a Beginning* (2006), I read for the first time in chronological order all four of Darwin's greatest books, *Voyage of the Beagle* (1845), the *Origin of Species* (1859), *The Descent of Man* (1871), and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). These are, I can assure you, the four to read, and straight through if you can. It is impossible to imagine a higher quality of original intellectual exposition. Taken in sequence, the four books reveal the development of a mind priming itself to address the greatest of subjects during the most opportune of times to do so. Darwin must have been continuously exhilarated by what he had come upon. Galileo had his telescope. Leeuwenhoek had his microscope. Darwin had his idea.

Charles Darwin is the most written-about scientist in history. The reader may well ask, in picking up the present Companion, whether we need more: do we need more, even as part of a centennial celebration? The answer is yes! Light continues to be thrown by evolutionary thought on more and more subjects. The human self-image continues to grow in depth and clarity as a result. All this is worth an ever-evolving commentary. The history, provenance, and impact of the *Origin* and Darwin's other great books deserve repeated rounds of assessment.