PREFACE

Hardly anyone needs an introduction to Charles Darwin, the great nineteenth-century British naturalist who formulated far-reaching ideas about the way in which living beings evolve by natural selection. He is known worldwide for the proposal that all organisms—ourselves included—originate through processes that are entirely natural, without the intervention of any deity, and the label "Darwinian" is habitually used to describe the theory underlying all modern evolutionary biology. This fame is based on his magnificent book, *On the Origin of Species*, which was first published in 1859 in London, amid a storm of controversy, and still stands as one of the foundational texts of the modern world.

But Darwin did much more than publish *Origin of Species*. Earlier in life—aged only 22 at the outset—he traveled on the *Beagle* surveying voyage to South America during the years 1831–36, both as a naturalist and collector and also as a scientific companion to Captain Robert FitzRoy. On his return, he continued to carry out

natural history researches and observations, work he would pursue for the rest of his life. He was to become recognized as the author of several important scientific publications and an appealing travel book about his experiences on the voyage, called *Journal of Researches,* modeled on the *Personal Narrative* of Alexander von Humboldt. Also on his return he began privately to speculate on evolutionary ideas. He did not arrive at any concrete theory until he read the book published by Thomas Robert Malthus on human population and natural checks to its continual increase. From this Darwin developed his ideas about the struggle for survival and natural selection. Other thinkers at much the same time were proposing evolutionary ideas too, most notably Alfred Russel Wallace, whose work in this area was unsuspected by Darwin until a dramatic moment in 1858 when Wallace wrote to him enclosing an essay about his ideas. The story of the simultaneous announcement of the theory of evolution by natural selection in July 1858 is enthralling. With this announcement Darwin accelerated his plans to publish and produced his big book, *Origin of Species,* the year after.

The debates that followed pushed Darwin and his book into the limelight. These heated discussions also drew in long-standing specula-

tions about the relations between the natural world and its presumed creator, as well as contemporary philosophical inquiries into species and their origins, alongside increasing religious uncertainty, public criticism of the established social order, and rapid industrial and commercial advances in the newly expanding British empire, all of which were reflected in contemporary literature, poetry, and the arts. In a way, Darwin's book crystallized the wide range of issues already in everybody's minds. Indeed, in later decades the book, and the fundamental reassessments it inspired, came to symbolize an important intellectual revolution, helping to make the world modern.

At the center of the storm, Darwin tried to maintain a quiet life. He spent much his time acquiring additional support for the idea of evolution by natural selection—or as he called it, descent with modification—through experimentation on different groups of animals, birds, and, especially, plants, as well as extensive reading and library research. He wrote and published constantly, his work including a series of outstanding later books and articles that elaborated and extended on the theme of evolution by natural selection. Throughout, he responded to reviews and questions, and generated a very large scientific correspondence,

eventually stretching across the globe. Without question, he was one of the major authors and thinkers of the period and the catalyst for many people—from all walks of life—to review and perhaps revise their existing vision of the natural world and the place of humankind within it. By the time of his death, he was celebrated as a hero of science. He was buried in Westminster Abbey in London.

What made this extraordinary man tick? Although his books were embedded in public controversy, and his private scientific thoughts were daring, his personal life was extremely conventional. He lived as an independently wealthy Victorian gentleman in the English countryside with a large family and extensive household. After those adventurous years on the *Beagle* voyage, he adopted an unremarkable daily routine, although plagued by continued ill health. He married his cousin Emma Wedgwood in 1839, and together they had ten children, three of whom died before becoming adults. In a series of recollections that he wrote in old age, Darwin described many of the circumstances of his life with great personal modesty. He made it clear that he hated public appearances and was always relieved to let his friends promote his ideas while he stayed quietly at home. Even so, he constantly wrote letters and can perhaps best be seen as participating in the evolutionary con-

troversies by remote control. Luckily for us, the transformations in thought that were shaped by his views mostly took place through the written word.

This volume of quotations from Darwin's writings digs into the historical records to show the remarkable contrasts of his life and times in his own words and in the words of his friends, contemporaries, and family. In print, Darwin was not much given to aphoristic turns of phrase, and he was cautious in the way he expressed his scientific ideas. There are examples of this caution here. However, his private letters and notebooks reveal his thoughts as bold and incisive. His affection for his friends and family is very evident in his correspondence, and he experienced many of the same upsets, family concerns, joy, and grief that other Victorians shared.

The "Quotable" format pioneered by Princeton University Press allows a fresh sort of insight into the individuals chosen as subjects and reflects modern emphasis in historical circles on revealing people fully in the round. As one of the most famous of scientists, Darwin well deserves a volume like this. It provides ready access to the most important ideas that he proposed, the difficulties and criticisms that he encountered, and insight into his personality and family life, all in his own words or those of

contemporaries. Included are his time on the *Beagle* voyage, his pleasure in natural history observation, his interest in the question of design in nature, the exciting years when he first stumbled on the idea of evolution, and the composition and reception of his celebrated *Origin of Species*.

Darwin was also a lively letter writer: a man who enjoyed family life and appreciated his friends. Readers will find, for example, that he liked to play billiards because "it drives the horrid species out of my head." His personality shines out from his words, both private and public. Taken as a whole, this book provides a picture of the man as a deeply thoughtful scientist, a talented writer, a loving father, friend, correspondent, and husband.

Perhaps some readers will find that I have overlooked their favorite remarks by Darwin, for which I apologize. Yet I hope that the extracts given here will lead readers further to explore Darwin's letters, notebooks, and published writings; and that he will come alive for them from the written word, as he has for me.

A Note on the Text

The quotations are arranged in short thematic sections for easy access, and the overall format

of the volume is broadly chronological. The whole aims to be something more than a comprehensive assemblage of Darwin's best quotes: instead I hope to provide a structured overview of his achievement, set in the context of his own day, along with the responses of his contemporaries—a small volume that will show the trajectory of his thinking on key topics and his public impact. The final pages give Darwin's own reflections on his character and religious beliefs, and remarks about him made by contemporaries and family members. Throughout, the extracts are given verbatim, in Darwin's own spelling and with his own idiosyncratic punctuation and capitalization, without the use of "sic." Very occasionally, I have silently made minor changes to help clarify his meaning. Quotation marks have been regularized according to modern usage. Extracts from letters in the Darwin Correspondence online resource are listed with the abbreviation DCP and the letter number. Dates supplied in square brackets are not actually in the letter but are given as established by the research of the Darwin Correspondence Project. Other sources are given in full at the end of the book.