
Preface

Charles Darwin is well known, and his name is associated in the public mind with the idea of evolution. What is less well known is the background for his decision to embrace the idea of evolution. This book makes the history of the idea of evolution, from its inception to its acceptance as a scientific theory, accessible to undergraduate students. The story begins in the 1780s, when the question of evolution began to gain shape and urgency, and it ends with Charles Darwin's death in 1882, by which time the idea of evolution had become an established theory in science. But the primary focus of this volume is on the events leading up to and immediately following the 1859 publication of Darwin's seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*.

This book takes a broad view of the history of evolutionary theory and reveals how it is intertwined with other aspects of human history and culture. Taken together, the introductory essay and the documents in this volume help students understand how evolution as a theory depended on the exploration of new lands—especially the New World—which in turn depended on political expansion. Many of the figures discussed in this book were travelers who were in one way or another supported by their home governments. Further, the collecting of exotic plants and animals, living or fossilized, required the creation of museums to house the new specimens. All of these developments took place in a global context involving the relationship of peoples of many lands. Hence the subject of evolution became entangled with such political issues as the contemporary campaign to abolish slavery. This book allows students to unravel the skein of these entanglements.

This book is intended for use in university classrooms in courses that deal with history and science. Part One's thorough introduction provides students with the context needed to understand the world in which Charles Darwin launched his theory. It outlines the intellectual and personal connections Darwin had with the theorists who came before him. Part Two provides primary sources for students to engage

on their own. The twenty-nine documents contained in this book display the wide variety of materials on which historians customarily draw in interpreting the past. They include intimate letters, sketches and illustrations, and photographs of objects as well as formal scientific texts. The first group of documents (Chapter 1) represents the period from the 1780s through the 1830s, when the idea of evolution in its modern form was first broached. The second group of documents (Chapter 2) focuses on the development of the idea of evolution among Darwin and several of his important contemporaries. Each document is introduced with a thoughtful headnote that helps students understand the item's overall importance as well as its specific connections to Darwin and his theory. Footnotes clarify references within documents that may be unfamiliar to students.

Additional pedagogical aids support students' synthesis of the materials in this volume. A useful chronology charts the development of the theory of evolution over several decades. Questions for consideration ask students to think critically about the documents. Finally, the selected bibliography contains an abundance of sources for further student research.

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Sandra Herbert

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