

# Darwin's life of contrasts, 200 years later

There is still much to explore about this legend, says **Fazlur Rahman**

Charles Darwin's discovery of evolution is common knowledge, but Darwin the person is barely known. Even 200 years after he was born — on Feb. 12, 1809, in England — much has been said about his works but little about his inner life of contrasts.

Darwin loved the natural world from childhood. He roamed the wilderness to study insects while neglecting Greek and Latin. No wonder he did poorly in classes. "I was considered by all my masters and by my father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect," he said.

Sent to medical school at age 16, he quit after seeing an operation on a child. Anesthesia was not yet introduced, and frightened patients stayed awake while surgeons

sawed through their legs. His father was upset he left medicine, and Darwin was warned he would be a disgrace.

He then went to Cambridge to be a minister. There he found a mentor who would change his life: the Rev. John Henslow, professor and botanist. He and a geology professor taught Darwin how to observe and interpret nature.

After Cambridge, while Darwin was still pondering the ministry, Henslow recommended him as a naturalist for a British survey ship, HMS Beagle, which planned an around-the-globe voyage. Darwin's father was opposed to his wasting time on this, but the young man prevailed with the help of his maternal uncle. Ironically, Darwin was prone to seasickness, and he became quite ill as soon as the Beagle sailed. Still, he was determined to stay and learn about nature.

After four years, in 1835, the Beagle landed in the Galapagos

Archipelago in the Pacific. What Darwin saw there changed our concept of biology. For millions of years, the animals and birds in these isolated islands had evolved in their unique way to survive and propagate. And they had no fear of humans. How and why did these creatures become the way they did? These questions germinated the idea of evolution in Darwin's mind.

At 29, Darwin married his first cousin Emma Wedgwood. An educated woman, she spoke French, German and Italian. And despite their differences in belief — she was a devoted Christian, while he turned agnostic — she read Darwin's papers before they were sent out. Emma too often is not given the recognition she deserves for wholeheartedly supporting her husband's works and accepting the demands of his frequent illness. Moreover, she bore 10 children; the last one, born when she was 48,

had Down syndrome.

Fearing the church's hostile reactions, Darwin waited for about 20 years before publishing his seminal book, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859. Its poetic conclusion pictures our kinship to nature: "Contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and ... reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other ... have all been produced by laws acting around us."



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excerpt from his presentation at a recent Darwin seminar at Austin College. His e-mail address is [frahman@wtmedical.com](mailto:frahman@wtmedical.com).