

Evolution delivers relative greatness

Born into the orbit of Charles Darwin, CHRIS DARWIN speaks from a rare perspective about the great scientist's legacy and how he is working to redress his great, great grandfather's only regret.

WEB BYTE

For more on Charles Darwin Symposium 2009, visit [W: www.cdu.edu.au/cdss2009](http://www.cdu.edu.au/cdss2009).

TEXT

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IMAGE

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Sitting down with Chris Darwin offers an opportunity for rare insight into the man who can be both overlooked and noticed by virtue of his rich heritage. He is one of only a handful of direct descendants of Charles Darwin, and Australia's only. Despite failing biology and being known as "missing link" at school, Chris shares more with Charles than the famous last name.

Chris is exceptional company, asking as many questions as he answers. He came to Australia in 1986 and lives with his wife, Jacqui, and three children in the Blue Mountains, where he works as a canyoning and rock climbing guide. As a hint of the Darwin character continuing across time: in 1989, Chris and a group of friends claimed a Guinness World Record, climbing 6700m to the world's highest dinner party. It was not an unmitigated triumph, however, with the wine freezing and two guests suffering hypothermia. They were, he says, "just a bunch of inspired amateurs".

Immersed in stories of Charles all his life, Chris remembers surreal moments as a child being dragged to countless re-enactments to shake hands with some man posing as his great, great grandfather.

Asked when he became conscious of living in direct descent from one of the 19th Century's most revolutionary thinkers, Chris says: "There was no epiphany, just a gradual awakening." The same could be said for the development of Charles' thinking about evolution: "Basically, he was saying you are a very charming, very intelligent ape.

"I love his particular way of thinking, which is just as relevant in the 21st Century as it was in the 19th. He managed to remove emotion. For instance, when he was considering marriage to his future wife, Emma, he wrote down a list of all the pros and cons, and ended with the words: 'Q.E.D. (signalling the completion of proof) Marry! Marry! Marry!'," he says.

The idea of evolution, encapsulated in Charles' work, *On the Origin of Species*, had been in the family for 50 years or more. The great scientist's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had spoken about it at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Chris believes that Erasmus is a far more interesting figure than Charles, who merely published the theory and only did so because someone else was planning a book saying much the same. Chris thinks Charles was terrified of going public with his ideas. "He was still going to church every Sunday. He had a wife who believed he was going to hell. He had friends who were vicars... Every age suppresses the unthinkable. Darwin expressed it."

He likened the young Charles, the one who went around the world on *HMS Beagle*, to "the person you meet in youth hostels who's reading a thick text on botany while everyone else is talking about where they got drunk last night".

Despite his surname, Chris grew up in an environment far removed from the scientific realm of his ancestor. Born in London, he worked in advertising and television commercial production before moving to Australia. But his most recent venture proves that biology is more than a remote interest.

In 2002, Chris received a large inheritance through the Darwin family. "Shortly before he died, Charles Darwin said he had no sense of having sinned by publishing his theory of evolution, but he did regret 'not having done more good for his fellow creatures'," he says. Inspired by his ancestor's wish to do good, Chris spent the best part of a year considering which significant cause should receive his inheritance.

Chris bought 68,000 ha at White Wells, Western Australia, and handed it over to the Bush Heritage Foundation. Some 25 per cent of the world's threatened species are in Australia, with half these running in a belt across WA. The former sheep station is now the Charles Darwin Reserve. "Charles Darwin collected bugs, beetles, birds and other unknown species on his quest for the origin of species. To a certain extent, I've begun my quest for the weird, wonderful and previously unknown creatures."



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During a survey of plant and animal species at the Reserve, Chris recalls feeling unparalleled excitement at the discovery of a new species of pseudo scorpion. “Let me tell you, I felt like we had just won the lottery!”

With 2009 marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of his work *On the Origin of Species*, Chris believes that debating and even challenging his findings is imperative until a “consensus” is reached.

“We have to decide whether he is right or wrong, and until that is done dialogue such as that to be generated at the Charles Darwin Symposium needs to continue,” he said. “How can we, as a civilisation, possibly decide where we want to go when we can’t even agree on where we came from?”

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He believes that thinking has become a lost art, with modern education focusing so heavily on information and learning facts and figures almost no time is spent on learning how to think. “Today, information is all around and it’s easily accessible; kids don’t need it at their fingertips.”

He believes that Charles’ thinking is of more use in the 21st Century than it would have been in 19th. “He had a beautiful brain, and was involved in something really interesting. There is something incredibly attractive and powerful about his particular style of deep thought, which I definitely try to use.”

He describes being a part of the Darwin legacy as a fantastic experience, providing an interesting twist to his life, even if he feels somewhat overwhelmed by it for the most part.

“In some ways, I feel a bit embarrassed because what am I? I’m just a normal person and it just so happens that my great, great grandfather was someone special. People treat you in a certain way and hope that you’ll be the source of something equally as profound. Do I deserve it? No, I don’t. A person should be judged on the merits of what they’ve achieved in their life rather than who their ancestors were. The best thing I’ve got out of the experience is that it’s given me a way of thinking, the perspective to think slowly and carefully and not just jump to conclusions.”

