

BOOK REVIEW

DARWIN'S ISLAND – THE GALAPAGOS IN THE GARDEN OF ENGLAND

BY STEVE JONES

Little Brown Books Group £18

It is rare when reviewing a book to read it twice before putting pen to paper but that I have done. *Why?* This is a fascinating book which deals with the work of Charles Darwin following his Beagle excursion and observations in the Galapagos. We learn of his work on barnacles, insects, orchids and inbreeding amongst other subject areas as he criss-crosses great Britain. His description of how some plants capture their prey will fascinate any general reader and further explains the changes in carnivorous plant life over time. Jones updates many of his observations with a discussion of how DNA sequences ally with the concepts of evolution, natural selection of species and the questions we still ask about the function of many DNA sequences and without doubt their evolutionary significance. He points out the need for more research into DNA function at cell organism and population level.

Two other examples show how Darwin led the way in asking questions about dog evolutionary pathways and how that might give us an understanding of human mental illness as we begin to understand the protein receptors in brain cells. The fascination of human emotions and their basis in animals was another of Darwin's triumphs and Jones shows how much we gain from Darwin in our study of autism.

A lively chapter on the variation of animals and plants under domestication shows how our own evolution depends on the nature of farming and its products. Jones relates these studies to obesity and its causes and moreover how it might be addressed with evolutionary principles in mind.

Orchids and worms dominate in two later chapters in the book where Jones describes how Darwin again identified the mysteries of natural selection species preservation and evolution. Jones senses the acuity in Darwin's observations and makes sure the relevance of the experimental work is made meaningful to modern day problems in a practical way. Bees and their role in pollination, their decrease in numbers and the influence of climate change correlate with species disappearance and the emergence of new species demonstrate the author's appreciation of Planet Earth.

Jones is an engaging thoughtful writer with a wicked sense of humour and turn of phrase. But I finish with two pieces of fine writing in which he explains different concepts. Children once made necklaces from cowslips and in particular those with a long 'pin' which protrude from the flower and through which they could then thread plants together. "Cowslips or primroses with a short protrusion ('thrum' plants) were no use for juvenile jewellery" as Jones puts it. The 'purpose' of the pin structure is that it accepts pollen from certain male flowers. Similarly with thrum flowers. Plants accept certain pollen and there are therefore genetic implications. Like mates with unlike so this means that a sexual filter reduces the chances of interaction between plants that bear similar genes. It is a precaution against inbreeding. Nature thereby rejects the number of individuals with which genes can be shared.

This book is an excellent read beautifully written and researched. His final words say it all "The Earth as a result is a far less interesting place than it was when HMS Beagle set sail. Whether it becomes less so and whether it survives at all depends on the talents of the only creature ever to step beyond the limits of Darwinian evolution." It is good to see an author thinking beyond the small event and viewing the overall picture.

Dr Ian Gibson MP

PARLIAMENTARY AND SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE NEWS

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

ELECTION OF OFFICE-HOLDERS

At the Committee's Annual General Meeting on Tuesday 21st April Dr Doug Naysmith MP retired as Chairman; Dr Desmond Turner MP and Mr Robert Key MP retired as Deputy Chairmen; Dr Evan Harris MP retired as Hon Secretary; Mr Andrew Miller MP, Mr Philip Greenish and Mr Ian Taylor MP retired as Vice-Presidents and Professor Alan Malcolm retired from the Advisory Panel.

The following office-holders were elected:

Chairman:	Mr Ian Taylor MBE MP
Deputy Chairmen:	Mr Andrew Miller MP Dr Evan Harris MP
Vice-Presidents:	Dr Douglas Naysmith MP Dr Desmond Turner MP Robert Key MP Professor Alan Malcolm
Advisory Panel:	Mr Philip Greenish

