



Charles Darwin - the man and the scientist

Darwin's great grand-daughter

Ruth Padel:

My mother's mother, Nora Barlow, was one of the grandchildren of Charles Darwin. She was the daughter of Horace Darwin, his 9th child. And she was very, very interesting because she was trained as a biologist and she got very, very interested in the archive and in editing the letters, editing his journals. She also edited his autobiography. And, you know, she was a great influence on my life. We loved going to her house, Boswells, which was very consciously modelled on Down House, Darwin's house in Kent, which all the family revered. I'm one of 72 great grandchildren, and you know, he had 10 children, six of them had a lot of children, so there are a hell of a lot of us. I'm not alone.

Fade to black, then up again

Ruth Padel:

I did classics at Oxford. I did a PhD. I used to teach Greek at Oxford. And I remember looking after my grandmother, Nora Barlow, in Cambridge one rainy summer when I was doing my PhD, and she asked me politely what I was working on. So I told her about emotions and Greek tragedy, how they were represented, and she responded by talking about Darwin on the expression of the emotions, and then of course she'd forgot what she'd said and what I'd said and she's ask me again what I was doing because she wanted to know what her granddaughter was working on. And I told her, and she told me about something completely different, also to do with Darwin. It was like talking to a very intelligent drunk ghost who had memories not of Charles Darwin directly but who knew his work and his mind really, really well.

Graphic: Birth of a Biography

Ruth Padel:

I always wanted to write something about Charles and Emma, ever since my grandmother, Nora Barlow, had talked about them, and this year I was commissioned by the Bristol Festival of Ideas to write 20 poems about Darwin, and I thought okay, maybe I can do that, and then the Natural History Museum commissioned me to write about the expression of the emotions for a, an exhibition that will happen in the second part of 2009 in London in Kensington, and I began then to link his own expression of emotion as a child which came out after his mother died, in collecting, in a passion for natural history, I thought I could connect that to his book on the Expression of Emotion and that would be an interesting way to do that.

Music: Andante from Em Flute Sonata, composer: Handel arr. Merrin, played by David Merrin – duration: 00:15

Ruth Padel:

And then I suddenly found I was writing a whole book. It seemed natural that I could suddenly write what turned out to be a biography in poems.

Graphic: Parallel Journeys

Ruth Padel:

For five years, it really took me five years, I journeyed around Asia into the jungles, talking, going into jungles, forests with scientists and conservationists, asking them about the survival of tigers, how, what's happening to wild tigers and it was when I was in Laos. I took, of course, the Origin of Species with me, and that was when I really first started to make a sort of parallel. I thought, my God, he was going on his journey, a journey of understanding how

species all fit together and evolve. I'm going on this journey understanding how they disappear and go extinct because that is what wild tigers will do, go extinct.

Ruth Padel:

And that's one of the things I try to bring out in my book, Darwin – A Life in poems, because it's through extinctions that nature goes forward. That was one of Darwin's great insights and of course it was exacerbated for him in 1851 when his 10-year-old daughter Annie died. That gave his theory of The Origin of Species and the importance of extinctions a much more personal, bleaker twist.

Graphic: Creative Seeds

Ruth Padel:

When I was growing up, I, the books that we found at Boswell's, my grandmother's house, and also my mother's books, which we inherited, children's books, they were, a lot of them were about animals and naturalists, and I grew up with a natural idea that the naturalist or the animal was the hero of the story. There's a kind of interest in looking at beetles under stones if you like, knowing the names of the butterflies, knowing the name of the plant or the name in the plant, which is part of my background automatically. There is a sort of meticulousness and working from detail which I think comes out of poems. I think poetry and science are very, very close.

People think of poetry as something very vague and loose, but actually it isn't. It's very, very fierce and very precise, and, you know, it's not palliative, it's not, it's not woolly, it is fierce, precise and exact, and you can't be a good poet unless you're not those things and you know that is what a scientist, a good scientist is too.