



## **Charles Darwin - the man and the scientist**

*Darwin's humanity*

Graphic: A Humane Naturalist

Graphic: Haunted

### **Ruth Padel:**

Darwin disliked his school so at 16 his father sent him to Edinburgh to study medicine, but the one thing he could not stand about this – apart from some rather boring lectures – was watching the operations, and this I think was one of the most important things behind a lot of Darwin's thought: he could not bear the idea of suffering.

Poem – Haunted

He tried numb. He was good at that once. But the assault  
of the operating theatre was off the Richter scale  
of self-deception. The amputation table: a drawn-out sobbing  
yell. The smells – bowels opening, sawn bone,  
'Long before the blessed days of chloroform.'  
Next time it was a boy, screaming. Blood fell  
from an opened brain. 'I rushed away before the operation  
was completed, nor did I ever attend again.'  
Pity – all those boring Greek lessons – and Fear  
pounding up from earth's tragic cord  
with no skin in between. Outside, in iron rain  
and the scent of dogshit, he leaned against bricks  
of the hospital and stared at a torn-up world.  
At the phantasmagoria of unbearable.  
'The cases fairly haunted me for many a long year.'

Graphic: He Hangs Out with a Taxidermist

### **Ruth Padel:**

In Edinburgh, up, the same street he was living in was the first black person he had ever met. He was called John Edmonston and he was a freed slave from Guyana and Darwin paid him a guinea an hour to teach him how to stuff birds.

He Hangs Out with a Taxidermist

John Edmonstone, the first black gentleman  
he's ever seen; and in the same street,  
number thirty-seven. 'I used to sit with him

often, for he was a very pleasant intelligent man.'  
Sublimate of mercury, brittle feathers, avian  
anatomy. The scalpel tease-and-settling of wings.

As he leaves for number eleven  
he sees a harvest moon. A shadow-bruised melon  
as over the Amazon.

Fade to black and up again

### **Ruth Padel:**

One of the things that marked him out very much which I was very intrigued to notice as I went through the letters and the diaries is how he did not believe in hierarchy. And when he was at Edinburgh he went out with the oyster fishermen and asked them questions about all the marine life, which is really when he began interest in marine biology at Edinburgh when he was supposed to be doing medicine. Also at Edinburgh a few doors up the road in Lothian Street, where he lived, was John Edmonstone, who's ranked actually as one of the first great black Britons, and he was a freed slave from Guyana. He'd gone with Charles Waterton, who had inherited his uncle's plantation in Guyana and who's gone ornithologising and exploring in the jungles of Guyana and who'd taught John Edmonstone to taxidermy, to stuff birds, because it was very important when you were collecting to be able to stuff the birds on the spot, otherwise they'd rot, and then Waterton brought John Edmonstone to Edinburgh and freed him. And so there, there was this man up the road and Darwin went to him and said I used to sit with him often, he was a very pleasant intelligent man, and it must have been from him that he first heard about jungles, tropical jungles at first hand, what it was like to walk in jungles, and I'm sure that that actually stirred his excitement to go to tropical, tropical places and be a naturalist there.

Graphic: A Quarrel in Bahia Harbour

When Darwin first came to Brazil on the Beagle, he was absolutely horrified at the slavery he saw there, and this was the cause of his first big quarrel with Captain Fitzroy. They were sharing a very small cabin and Fitzroy felt fine about slavery. Darwin was appalled.

A Quarrel in Bahia Harbour

He heard how it felt to walk in jungle first  
from John Edmonstone. His teacher, the freed slave.  
Now, in this city on a pink-lit bay, lightning snaps beneath his feet. He sees the slaves  
themselves. Auctions. Blows. Humanity betrayed.

His waistcoat crackles with static. In the marl  
of a river crossing, to make sure the ferry-pilot,  
a tall black slave, knows where he needs to go,  
he explains a little louder – as you do –  
and waves his hands. Terrified, the fellow shuts his eyes.

'He thought I was in a passion and meant to strike!  
I shall never forget my shame and my surprise  
at seeing a great, powerful man afraid  
even to ward off a blow  
directed, he thought, at his face. He was trained

to degradation lower than the most helpless animal!  
But Captain Fitzroy thinks different.  
He's seen a plantation-owner ask his slaves  
If they wanted to be free – 'And they said "No!"  
Does saying it to their master's face prove anything?

'We cannot live together if you doubt my word!  
The Captain bangs out of the cabin  
and curses him, on deck, all evening.  
Will he have to leave the boat? Fitzroy sends apologies.  
They never speak of slavery again.