



Darwin in context

Darwin's global impact

But what about the reaction to Darwin's theories outside Britain?

Jim:

Books were the material conduit by which Darwin's theories spread across the world, and who translated them, when they were published, where they were published, who read them, who could afford them, how they were read – all of these were factors in the Darwinising of the globe, you might say. What did people make of these theories? In other words, how did they read these books? We don't know very much about that. We know a lot about how Europeans read Darwin's books, a lot about how the Americans do, some about South American countries, some about China, very little in the Arabic speaking world, in the Islamic world. All of this remains to be discovered. What I think we can safely say is that Darwin's theories were almost always interpreted; that is to say his texts were interpreted in the light of pre-existing assumptions about nature, human nature and society. Where there were already theories of organic diversification, even if they involved God, people were able to claim, "Ah, Darwin is at last discovering what we've always known." Or they could say, "Darwin is just one of a number of authorities now for believing something that we want to believe in about human progress or human history." Some would say, "Darwin is a member of an English intellectual elite who are exporting their understanding of the world, along with their culture, along with their material goods, and they are taking over and colonising our minds. And this must either be resisted or this must be cooperated with because this represents progress." There's no simple global generalisation for what Darwin's theories meant to human beings.

Rissa:

We'll be exploring the global response to Darwin in another podcast. But even as he was amassing his evidence for publication, Darwin was cannily aware that he was potentially addressing audiences far beyond his native shores.

Jim:

The world was Darwin's oyster. He was not theorising about one place, one country, one continent at a certain time. He had a global vision of geological processes and life within those processes.

Darwin had to consider all of the possible exceptions to his arguments for evolution, taken from every part of the world, because there were Englishmen, primarily, everywhere, just about everywhere in the world, many of them missionaries, many of them religious people, army, doctors, think of India, who could throw objections in his teeth and say, "Ah but in Bengal we have this, ah but at the Cape we have that." When Darwin turned to put together his big book called *Natural Selection* he threw his net over the whole world. He developed a correspondence network that touched every little England and many of the other emerging colonies, and even people who lived in yet to be colonised areas.

He had specific questions for them. Not about evolution, they were about evolution for him, but what sorts of animals do people keep there. Can you describe it, can you send me an example? I want pigeons from China, I want rats from West Africa. He developed a whole menagerie or a museum, you might say. Animals dead and alive. Plants the same. He asked people what they could remember having seeing on islands, remote islands. He needed to understand how animals and plants had diversified everywhere around the world. So you might think of Darwin as a kind of spider sitting in the centre of a great network that he had spun around the world. Darwin used this network to build up the evidence that would make his theories irrefutable.