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The original of the species

A marvellous show at the Natural History Museum which pays bicentennial respects to Charles Darwin is stuffed with eureka moments, says **Simon Barnes**

harles Darwin's book On the Origin of Species shattered a vast collection of cherished myths. The truths he showed us are so difficult to consider that we still haven't got round to taking them on board. Instead, we have created a new mythology to cover up the gaping hole Darwin has left in our species-pride.

It was Freud who suggested that history had given three insupportable blows to human self-esteem. The first was the revelation that the Earth was not the centre of the Universe after all. The second was Darwin's: that humans are just one more species of animal. The third, Freud modestly suggested, was his own work, which robbed humans even of the consolation that we at least possess rational minds.

It is precisely because of our less than fully rational natures that we have created the false Darwinian myth. Yes, all right, evolution exists, but it is a ladder, a form of progression in which good leads to better, while better, with serene inevitability, leads to best. The myth is best explained visually: the creeping monkey, the knuckle-walking ape, the stooping proto-hominid and at last, wondrously, triumphantly, fully erect Man. (Fully erect Woman is never shown on this diagram; no doubt she fails the test of perfection.)

Perfectibility. The purpose of evolution is to produce the supreme animal, an animal so wonderful that he is hardly an animal at all. We may be part of creation, but we are its crown.

This is a pleasing bit of mythology, but it's got nothing to do with Darwin. It was with wonder, then, that in

the Natural History Museum I gazed at the open page of one of Darwin's notebooks. It's a nice notebook, a sort of policeman's notebook, like the one I use for jotting notes in the field.

But Darwin jotted down the explanation of life. The page towards me was the one of the most significant doodles in the history of science, in the history of human thought. There are two words: "I think." Underneath is a rough sketch of a branching tree. This is how life works: the stem is the common ancestor, the branches are different species. Not a ladder: a bush.

There is no purpose, no great goal, no race for perfection: just the one ambition of all living things, which is to become an ancestor. Every living thing on the planet is the result of this process: every single living thing, then, is equally triumphant, equally perfect. Humans are just one of

the crowd, created not by Nature's crazed ambitions but by Nature's reliance on chance.

History Natural Museum is one of London's and the world's great buildings, and, in the place of honour, looking down across the great Central Hall, Darwin offers his mild gaze in stone across to the prancing dinosaur Diplodocus. On Friday the museum is opening an exhibition on Darwin that will take in his 200th birthday, February 12, and end on the 127th anniversary of his death. Next year is also the 150th anniversary of the publication of Origin, the book that shook the world — and is still shaking it.

It is a marvellous exhibition, not least in that it is full of marvels. Another Darwin myth: he went to the Galapagos Islands and shouted "Eureka." But no, the process took years. The first inkling came with two mocking birds: and there they are, just as you go in, flat on their backs on a cushion, each bearing a little hand-written label, very much alike but subtly and unquestionably different. Separate bits of divine creation? Or do they share a common ancestor?

Thus the worm of questioning entered tender of his wife's untrou-Darwin's mind. The exhibition tracks the bled faith; because he was

worm's progress and catches some of his extraordinary meticulousness, his certainty that God dwells in the details — and if you are about to give voice to a heresy, you need all the details you can muster.

I was particularly glad to see a collection of the pigeons he worked with so painstakingly. Darwin became a pigeon fancier, breeding pouters and tumblers and fantails at Down House, his home in Kent. If humans can change the shape of a bird by selective breeding — artificial selection — then nature can do the same thing by means of natural selection. These stuffed birds are as eloquent to the visitor as they were to Darwin: a hymn to the polymorphous powers of life.

Once Darwin had cracked it, he did the oddest thing: he did nothing at all. He was silent until he was forced into going public because some one else had caught up with him. There are a million suggestions as to why he did so

lion suggestions as to why he did so — out of fear of the furore he would create, because he was tender of his wife's untroubled faith: because he was Modest genius
"You feel Darwin
might drop in at
any moment for a
chat about
earthworms"

inside today:

Meet Charles Darwin in Young Times

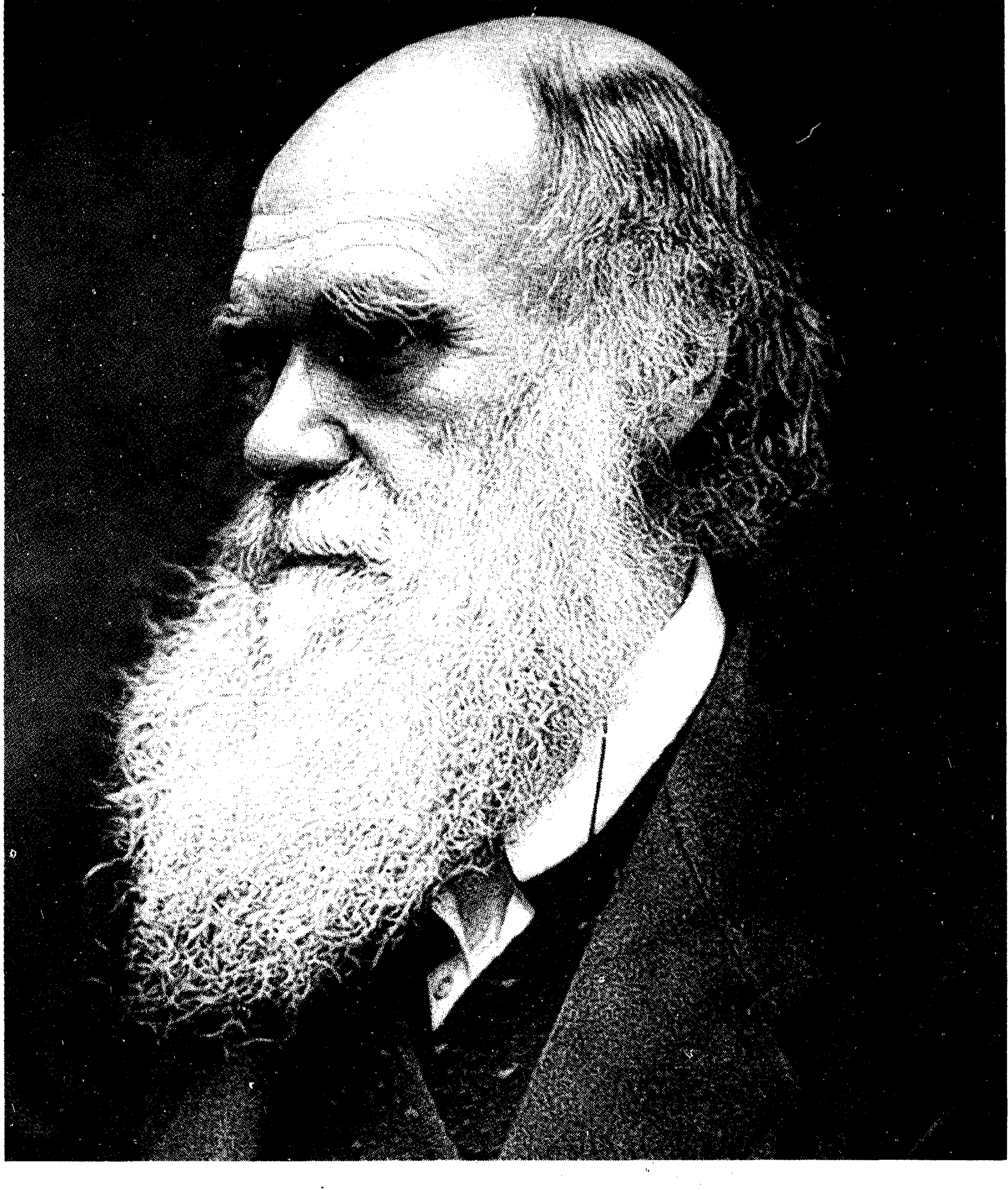
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always ill; because he wanted to perfect his theory; because he wanted more and more evidence; because he was waiting until he had got it right about human evolution, or because he needed to establish his own scientific street-cred. But sit on it he did, occasionally taking fellow scientists into his confidence, "like confessing to a murder", as he said. He added, with the confidence and the modesty that marked him: "I think I have found out (here's presumption!) the simple way by which species become adapted to various ends".

There was one species in particularly that troubled the world: one species in particular that is notable by its absence in *Origin*. It is humans. Darwin was at pains not to mention the war, as it were, but the implications for humans shouted from

The Descent of Man 12 years later, however, the controversy had burnt itself out. Our apishness was now established.

The exhibition displays hominid skulls against a timeline, again demonstrating that life is not an irreversible tide of progress. Homo sapiens co-existed



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