



THE WINGS OF EVOLUTION

One of the original birds which led Charles Darwin to his theories on natural selection has resurfaced in an Australian museum, Nigel Hawkes writes. Photographs by Ross Bird

THE BEST PLACE for an archaeologist to dig is the basement of the British Museum. Or almost any museum, a cynic might say. Unable to resist new acquisitions which they don't have time to catalogue or space to display, curators consign them to the basement. There they lie forgotten, almost as inaccessible as before they were discovered.

The Museum of Victoria in Melbourne appears to have proved the cynics right. Tucked in cedar crates in its basement it has found more than 4,000 stuffed birds, bought in the middle of the last century from the British ornithologist and taxidermist John Gould. They include 18 specimens from Alfred Russel Wallace, who independently of Charles Darwin originated the idea of evolution by natural selection, and at least one that appears even more striking.

A small, green-brown finch, it carries a tag from the Zoological Society of London bearing the legend: "C. Darwin Esq, Jan 4, 1837".

This is rather like stubbing your toe on the cannon balls which Galileo dropped from the Leaning Tower of Pisa — in legend only, alas — or, as Frank Sulloway, a Darwin scholar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, puts it, "stumbling on a crate of old apples in the Cambridge University Library — you open up the box and there's a little note from Isaac Newton saying, 'These apples all fell on my head'".

The label on the Melbourne bird could hardly ring a clearer bell. It was on January 4, 1837, that Darwin, recently

returned from his voyage on the *Beagle*, presented all his bird skins to the Zoological Society of London. At the next meeting of the society, Gould declared that he was especially excited about the ground finches, "so peculiar in form that he was induced to regard them as constituting an entirely new group containing 14 species, and appearing to be strictly confined to the Galapagos Islands".

That a finch collected by Darwin has turned up in Australia is testimony to the ambition of the first director of the Melbourne museum, Sir Frederick McCoy. Born in 1817 in Dublin and trained as a doctor, he spent four years in the 1840s arranging all the British and foreign fossils in the geological museum at Cambridge. He went to the University of Melbourne in 1854 as professor of natural sciences — teaching chemistry, botany, mineralogy, zoology, geology and palaeontology — and soon annexed the contents of a small natural history museum, until then part of the government office.

He became its director in 1858, and in 1863 persuaded the government to construct a proper museum building in the university grounds. This became the passion of his life. Despite the obstacles placed in his way by the museum trustees, he bought and bought and bought.

"He was determined to set up a museum in Australia every bit as good as the Natural History Museum in London," says Dr Les Christidis, curator of ornithology at

the museum. "So he purchased major collections wherever he could find them, including 4,500 birds from Gould alone. He bought so much that nobody had time to look at it. You know what museums are like — they said, 'We'll look at it one day' and then they never did." Christidis should know: he made the crates "a priority" when appointed in 1987, and got round to it in 1995.

The birds cost McCoy £400, and the irony is that he didn't even believe in evolution. Among his other purchases was a gorilla, one of the first specimens ever displayed in a museum. McCoy had this mounted and stuck in a glass case in a posture designed to make it look as unlike a human being as possible. "He wanted to use it to show that man couldn't be related to the apes," says Christidis.

OF COURSE, AT THE time that Darwin took his Galapagos specimens to the Zoological Society, he wasn't really an evolutionist either. He had collected the birds and other specimens diligently, but not in order to prove a preconceived theory. In his diary he had recorded that the birds were almost tame, thinking them "as innocent as their countrymen, the huge tortoises". One of his shipmates caught a finch hopping around on the ground by throwing his hat over it. As Sulloway has

shown, Darwin did not even realise that so many of the birds he had caught were finches. Some he believed to be blackbirds, wrens or warblers; he guessed — wrongly

— that there were plenty more of them on the South American mainland. Assuming that the birds were identical on all the islands of the Galapagos archipelago, he did not trouble to separate them according to island.

"I never dreamed that islands, about 50 or 60 miles apart and most of them in sight of one another, formed of precisely the same rocks, placed under a quite similar climate, rising to a nearly equal height, would have been differently tenanted," he wrote.

Later, sailing home with the Galapagos finches and mockingbirds sharing his cabin under the forecabin of the *Beagle*, Darwin began to think more deeply. Aware by now that the mockingbirds did differ from island to island, he speculated that they might be more than simply variants; they might be different species. "If there is the slightest foundation for these remarks, the zoology of archipelagos will be well

worth examining; for such facts would undermine the stability of species," he wrote.

By mid-March, 1834, Gould had categorised all Darwin's birds. He told Darwin that almost all the land birds ►



Charles Darwin (left) and the finch found in a Melbourne museum with a tag bearing his name (above)