

Editorial

JAK KELLY

A WELL KNOWN MEMBER

It is not often that one of the members of The Royal Society of New South Wales has an ‘International Year of ...’ devoted to them. Even the Pinhole Camera only rates a day (www.pinholeday.org). However, 2009 is such a year and Charles Darwin is the member. In the vast Darwin literature little is made of his visit to Australia on his voyage in the *Beagle*. He is locally commemorated by having Darwin Harbour, named after him in 1839, as was the town, now the capital of Australia’s Northern Territory, established there in 1911. Most people would however be unaware of his membership of our society. His gracious letter accepting membership of the RSNSW is reproduced for the first time ever in this issue as our original contribution to this year’s joint celebration of his birth in February 1809 and his publication of ‘On the Origin of Species’ in November 1859.

He was well aware of the trouble that his ideas could cause in religious circles and in ‘Species’ he intentionally minimised discussion of men and apes. In vain, as it turned out. It is difficult to believe that disputes about creation and natural selection are still with us 150 years on but they are. Creationism has become Intelligent Design. This recent change of title was clearly intended to sound like a scientific subject rather than a dogma confined to religious extremists. Most countries have given up burning heretics and most of us believe in the freedom to publish what we like, subject to a few restrictions. Why worry about the teaching of ID?

The problem is the push to have ID taught as a science. This movement is largely confined to some US states but there are a few Australian schools attempting it. If you think ID in Australia is dead, Google ‘Intelligent Design in Australia’. I got 1,240,000 entries. The ID claims that the world is 6000 years old and men and dinosaurs coexisting will not stick for most students but it will waste their time and

make a scientific career less likely. I am unaware of any moves to have Fred Flintstone or the Wiggles banned for supporting our coexistence with dinosaurs. As for the age of the earth, on his way to Bathurst Darwin is said to have looked out over the valleys of the Blue Mountains, which are clearly eroded from the plateau and remarked that this must have taken aeons longer than the biblical 6000 years.

The powerful US text book industry has modified some science books so as not to offend the ID people, many of whom are on state boards such as the Kansas State Board of Education. To avoid the expense of printing different versions, some of these books are used in other states and in other countries. History shows that even if most people don’t believe in an idea a few determined and fanatical people can do serious damage to a society. The Nazi eugenics theories are a recent example. They were falsely claimed to be supported by Darwin’s ideas.

International Years are great for publishers, perhaps they invented them, and Darwin’s year is no exception. The current deluge of articles and books, for and against Darwin, is overwhelming. We are all familiar with evolution and natural selection but you may wish to know what the ID people are claiming. A useful guide is to look for any that mention Darwinism. They usually take the ID side and the term implies that evolution is an evil cult activity based on the Godless teachings of Darwin. Nobody calls Relativity Einsteinism or DNA studies Crick & Watsonism and we have Newton’s Laws rather than Newtonism.

Darwin died in April 1882, not an atheist but as an agnostic far from being the evil, godless scientist the creationists claim him to be. He intended to be buried in his local church yard at Downe in Kent but he was too famous and highly regarded to be allowed such a humble ceremony. Following a state funeral he now lies near Isaac Newton in Westminster Abbey.

Jak Kelly, May 2009

DOWN,
BECKENHAM, KENT.
RAILWAY STATION
ORPINGTON. S. E. R.

Oct 28. 1879

Dear Sir,

I beg leave to acknow-
- ledge the receipt of your
courteous letter of Aug 7th, in
which you announce to me
that the Royal Society of
N. S. Wales has conferred
on me the honour of electing
me one of their honorary

Page 1 of Darwin's letter of 28th October 1879 to our Society accepting honorary membership.

G. W. G. G.
 THE S. MANNING
 RAILWAY STATION
 BRISTOL 2 1/2

members. I request that you
 will be so good as to express
 to the Council my acknowledgements
 & thanks for this honour.

I remain, dear Sir
 Yours faithfully, obliged
 Charles Darwin

To A. Liversidge Esq
 Hon Sec
 Royal Soc

Page 2 of Darwin's letter to our Society accepting honorary membership.