While the *Black Victorians* exhibition has opened up our understanding of the variety of the black presence in nineteenth-century Britain, a problem remains. There are no works by black artists or, as far as we can tell, photographers in the exhibition, and no extant paintings have been identified by the one black artist whose name has come down to us from this period, the Philadelphian, Robert Douglass. As Marsh points out in her introduction to the catalogue, "Except in the case of celebrity sitters, whose participation in the image-making may be assumed, those seen in these paintings, photographs and sculptures had limited or no power over the depictions" (14). Although we have slave narratives, poetry, and autobiographies to give us alternative black voices, we are bereft of Victorian imagery produced by black artists. *Black Victorians* inevitably presents white points of view, but it is diversity, rather than stereotype, that is most apparent in the exhibition.

University of Birmingham

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THE DARWIN EXHIBITION

By George Levine

WHICH VICTORIAN WRITER has had the greatest impact on modern Western culture? And which is the best known in contemporary America? Of course, this is a trick question, and the trick is in the word "writer." It is not a famous novelist like Dickens, despite many dramatizations on BBC and PBS, and it certainly is not George Eliot or Tennyson. It is

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a scientist. If evidence were necessary, the wonderful Darwin exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City that ran from November 2005 through August 2006 provides it: it's that other Charles, Darwin. He too was a writer, perhaps of the most important book of the century, and he continues to make headlines and create controversy, while his name is recognized everywhere. At the exhibition, the lines were amazingly long, sufficiently long that the show was held over for an additional two months. Crowds continued to come, respectfully, fascinated, and the word from virtually everyone was that it was "wonderful."

The visitors were not all academics and scientists, by any means. Waiting on a very long line for a 1:30 session, I watched and listened to the children and their parents and the very mixed crowd, many of whom were even fascinated by the displays in the waiting area, of serpents and lizards and anatomical relations. The subjects there prepared us for what was to come in the exhibition proper, at the entrance to which was a display of a live Galapagos tortoise, of the sort that Darwin describes and on which, his narrative of the voyage of the *Beagle* tells us, he tried to ride – and which he also ate. But every display – the tortoise, the iguana, the model of the *Beagle*, the finches – reverberated with the presence of Darwin himself, very much the Victorian superstar.

Of course, it was not because he was an eminent Victorian that he attracted so much attention; indeed, I suspect that very few people came to the exhibit thinking about him as a Victorian, or a Victorian writer. Darwin, like Einstein and Newton, is widely perceived as an icon of scientific genius, and in that respect, both timeless and directly relevant to our modern condition. But for the visitors to the exhibit, part of the fun must surely have been the discovery of the domestic and very Victorian Darwin, the recognition that this world-historical figure was also and pre-eminently a representative upper-middle-class Victorian, located homily in England's green and pleasant land, not far from the Wedgwoods, with whose family his would intermarry for several generations, and then at Down, sufficiently outside of London to avoid its hubbub and to get thoroughly domesticated.

The humanizing and historical placing of Darwin did not depend only on the contemporary pictures–Darwin as a little boy standing near his younger sister, Catherine, or Darwin very much the paterfamilias, looking a little awkward but loving, with his first son William in his lap. There, too, was his famous study, meticulously reconstructed to look very much like the room I saw in his house at Down, some years ago. Darwin's modesty and his status as a gentleman who worked entirely at home make this show an odd mixture of scientific explication, natural history displays, and marks of domesticity: the very mixture that characterized Darwin's career. But there was no disappointment that I could detect in the fact that Charles Darwin, superstar, spent most of his working life at home, and played with his children, and was (probably hypochondriacally but very painfully) ill much of the time – it was just the sense of placing, of giving to the idea of "Darwin" a habitation and a name, that made the exhibition so fascinating, even to people who from long years of study knew almost all of the "facts" the exhibition featured.

Seeing the large and extremely interested crowds thrilled and delighted me. When the show opened I expected the kind of religion-oriented fuss that greets almost any public discussion of Darwin in America, and there is evidence in the exhibition that so too did its creators. According to various polls, as we have all heard, Americans are far more likely to believe in the virgin birth than in evolution. But you could not tell that from the crowds, who kept coming to the exhibit and who seemed genuinely interested in Darwin's ideas, in the

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way natural selection works, and in the nature of the life that allowed Darwin to come up with his "theory." At the foundation of virtually all the exhibits and all the interest of the crowds – perhaps most forcefully where Darwin is shown as a homebody – was the assumption of Darwin's greatness. That assumption, I think, is what gave the domestic details in the show their particular appeal. I visited the exhibition twice, the second time, virtually two months after it was originally scheduled to close, and the crowds were still coming in, even at 4:30 on a Sunday afternoon.

What the crowds found inside the exhibit, after the tortoise, and along with a live iguana, were Victorian objects, Victorian letters, Victorian photographs and drawings, stuffed Darwin's finches from the Galapagos, explanatory notes, a model of the *Beagle*, videos designed partly to explain (very simply and briefly) how natural selection works but, it seems, largely to anticipate arguments of creationists and supporters of intelligent design. The peculiar pleasure (and strangeness) of Darwin studies is his very Victorian ordinariness (or apparent ordinariness). As the crowd filed through the various sections of the exhibit, wanting primarily, I suppose, to learn more about the development of his theory – which attentive viewers certainly did – they picked up not only many of the facts of Darwin's life, but a sense of the texture of Victorian upper middle class living.

The exhibition was full of objects looking ordinary but somehow also involved in the development of evolutionary thinking. The excitement most people felt about the exhibit had to do not only with its educational function, and success, but with the aura that surrounded the object. Most of us have experienced such aura. A big moment in my life came when the curator of the Darwin collection at the Cambridge University Library placed in my hand the copy of the first volume of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* that Darwin took with him on the *Beagle*. It wasn't that I felt a strong urge to open and read it (I had, after all, read it in a modern reprint), but I felt a Darwinian presence, and would have been happy just to stand there in the stacks, feeling the solidity of the book. The weight I was feeling was the weight that Darwin felt. If they did a DNA test, would they have found Darwin's DNA on the cover? I tried to imagine what it might feel like to look at that now almost two hundred year old book and feel that it was crisply off the presses and full of news and looking fresh. The feeling came back to me as, entering the exhibit, I noticed first a little case displaying a magnifying glass that Darwin had regularly used in his study. It looked very old and very crude. But with it came that amazed sense that this dead object connected me immediately and directly to a figure of world-historical importance.

The magnifying glass had long survived Darwin; so had the geological hammer that he apparently used on his excursions with Henslow during his Cambridge years. What could a visitor learn from these objects? What was their attraction? The dead objects were thick with the aura of Darwin. For students of Darwin, the objects turned language into material phenomena, and the Museum's explanatory notes made otherwise common kinds of things seem alive and rich with meaning. Readers of Darwin's correspondence know the letters that were on display, but here were the letters themselves, in *his* handwriting, letters scratched out on the *Beagle* or during his long land excursions away from the ship; and here were letters written and notes by the young Darwin before he became a world-historical figure: he talks of "a wife, that most interesting specimen"; there are his first notes on evolution; "ornithological notes" on mockingbirds; there is Emma's letter to him trying to get him not to give up his religion; manuscript sheets of his first extended account of evolution in 1844; a letter to Lyell asking if he should write up his thoughts on evolution; Darwin's letter

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indicating that he and Wallace "never felt any jealousy towards each other though in one sense rivals." What is it that makes the letter itself, not just the transcription of the words, so powerful? Is it that we can sense in the scratchings the living hand of the man writing? The objects are what the Museum has of the man, and we turn them into life.

For most people, Darwin is the figure who appears on all the gear I or my family bought at the show – a t-shirt, a sweatshirt, a cap – picturing a long-bearded and somewhat weary looking Darwin, sagelike and sad; but the exhibit gives us the Darwin who geologized with Henslow and who won a berth on the *Beagle* – in a "tropical glow" – as naturalist and companion to the difficult Captain Fitzroy. The young Darwin humanizes the old and implicitly builds the argument that descent by modification through natural selection was a young man's exuberant discovery rather than an old man's gloomy vision. It is not only Darwin who is humanized by the exhibit, but natural selection itself, as it takes us meticulously through Darwin's thought, describing, in exhibit after exhibit, how the pieces of evidence all came together, in particular, in that scratchy little tree-like design that Darwin drew into his notebooks. The little things here, as in Darwin's theory itself, come to seem amazingly interesting and important.

Unfortunately, there was no real catalogue to the show, but there is an accompanying book by Niles Eldredge, the curator, *Darwin: Discovering the Tree of Life*. Eldredge makes an interesting and extended argument implicit in the materials in the exhibition itself, but of course, despite the many pictures, most of which actually appear in the exhibition, it lacks the aura. It is not the same, hearing an intelligent commentator like Eldredge explain how Darwin came upon his theory and how the theory works, as it is to see the things Eldredge discusses. It is more a book than a catalogue to the show, and it rides one of Eldredge's interesting hobby horses – that by the end of the the *Beagle* voyage Darwin had already developed his evolutionary hypothesis. Like the exhibition itself, Eldredge is very good both at explaining how natural selection works, and at showing Darwin's evidence for coming to his conclusions. But to feel and learn from the aura, I'm afraid, you had to have been there.

The exhibition, however, was designed not only to embody and historicize Darwin. The occasion of Darwin's two-hundredth birthday, to be celebrated by this exhibition as it concludes a trip around the world in London in 2009, is clearly also an opportunity for a broader education of at least that part of the lay public ready to listen, at a moment when, in America at least, evolutionary theory and science are under strenuous attack. That attack, one would have thought, had long since been rejected – even in Darwin's time. But it has been renewed vigorously in contemporary America, in effect not only rejecting evolutionary theory, but the authority of science in such matters. The exhibit, in historicizing Darwin and giving a rich sense of his remarkably modest and basically gentle life, is also engaged, quietly but insistently, in making clear how radically important Darwin's theory was and continues to be for human understanding and human health. The exhibition is peppered with videos that, in different ways, make the case against intelligent design and creationism not by attacking them, but by demonstrating the importance of evolutionary theory for an understanding of the world and for the possibilities of dealing with human biology in a creative and health-producing way. Niles Eldridge and other important scientists explain what "theory" means; that a thing is "only a theory," they argue, means in science that it serves to explain a wide range of facts and to make research into related problems possible. Science works on theories, they claim, convincingly. Elsewhere, a little video makes clear that scientists can believe in and work on evolution and evolutionary biology with no damage

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to their religious faith. And yet elsewhere, in a video that simply and quickly explains the workings of natural selection, viewers see the "theory" in operation.

But my guess is that the most potent aspect of the exhibition, for educational purposes, is just its insistence on placing Darwin back among the Victorians; seeing in some detail artifacts from his domestic as well as his scientific life; watching in some detail, through those aura-imbued artifacts and specimens, the evidence for his theory pile up in his *Beagle* voyage and in the work that followed; and seeing too that Darwin's work was not only compatible with a conventional Victorian family life (for, of course, a comfortably wealthy family), but almost dependent upon it. One of the most striking little pieces of Victorian artifact in the show is a drawing made by one of Darwin's little children. It is not that the drawing is so striking, but that, we are told, it was made on the other side of a manuscript page of the *Origin*. For those who feel the "aura," the revelation that this is a page of a book that transformed the world is shocking, and then delightful. Darwin never quite came to grips with the fact that he had become a world-historical figure and, thus, for obvious reasons of domestic economy would not waste any already used paper.

The Darwin who emerges from the exhibit is, then, just the gentle, modest, probably hypochondriacal, family-loving patriarch, who shared most of his culture's prejudices, but who, working obsessively at home, between bouts of his still not quite explained illness, worked out as fully as he possibly could the theory that transformed the world's way of looking at life. His name and "evolution" have become synonymous and as a result, he is indeed the most famous and most influential of all Victorian writers.

Rutgers University

WORK CONSIDERED

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THE PERFECT MEDIUM: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE OCCULT

By Herbert Sussman

FIERCELY EMPIRICAL AND yet fiercely spiritual, the Victorians inhabited a world in which much was present, but unseen. As the stimulating exhibition *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* made clear, the nineteenth century believed that the invisible could be made visible through the new technologies of light-sensitive plates, that science could clarify what had hitherto seemed occult, mysterious. Just as the spiritualist medium materializes the spirit world into visible and auditory form, so new methods of making images by light provided the "perfect medium" for fixing in visual form what had been apprehended if not seen — the presence of the dead among the living, the existence of unseen fluids and rays surrounding our bodies. Just as the telescope and the microscope had

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