

## THE DARWIN CENTENARY CONFERENCE

*Evolution of Molecules and Men, The Darwin Centenary Conference 27 June to 2 July 1982*

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In 1982 the College ran what the journal *Science* called ‘the most official of the multiplicity of conferences to commemorate the centenary of Darwin’s death’. This was a fair verdict; for as Moses Finley said in his Master’s Preface to *Evolution from Molecules to Men*, the conference volume edited by Derek Bendall and published by CUP in 1983, ‘no other conference took so wide-ranging a view of the present state of Darwinism’. That indeed was our intention, for only so, we thought, could we make the occasion worthy of its subject and of the College. Its success depended primarily of course on our galaxy of speakers who, as the papers in the conference volume attest, did Darwin and his legacy proud. The thirty topics listed in the programme (shown in Figure ?) covered everything in the conference title and more: from the evolution of molecules to that of Darwinism itself, and of its implications for ethics and the human and biological sciences. The range and quality of the papers, and the standard of discussion in the sessions, made this as absorbing and enlightening a conference as I ever expect to attend.

Today the College routinely runs large events, like the Annual Darwin Lecture Series. But in 1982 organising a conference on this scale seriously taxed a new and none-too-rich graduate college. (To take but one example: the year-round residence of its graduate students prevented Darwin housing the conference’s many eminent external participants.) Fixing the programme, travel and accommodation kept many Darwin staff, Fellows and students busy for months if not years; not least Derek Bendall, the indefatigable editor of the 600-page conference volume, which he brought to publication the very next year. But Moses made helping out the College in these ways feel more like a privilege than a chore. He certainly made me feel that when, while walking into lunch in Hall in the spring of 1980, he did me the honour of hi-jacking most of my spare time for the two years it took us to make the conference happen.

The mostly routine and time-consuming preparatory work did however present a few unexpectedly interesting challenges. One was coping with the acoustics of our venue, the West Road Concert Hall, which then as now were better suited to music than to speech. Our pre-conference tests showed that most speakers mistakenly felt they needed to raise their voices to be clearly heard, which they didn’t: on the contrary, raised voices merely awoke an unhelpful echo from the back of the hall. The solution, we found, was to place a prominent microphone on the lectern – and then turn it (almost) off.

A less serious but more enjoyable challenge was prompted by my remarking, at the opening reception, that I thought the photograph of Charles Darwin on the programme cover (Figure ?) cried out for a *Private-Eye* speech bubble. This provoked the idea of a competition, which I announced at the first session, the winner’s prize being some claret, kindly donated on behalf of Cambridge University Press by Jeremy Mynott (later to be CUP’s Chief Executive and a Fellow of Wolfson College). Few of the submitted suggestions were any good, the easy winner, announced at the closing session, being ‘Have you read my book?’. It’s a pity, though, that the only one *Private Eye* might actually have published – ‘Fuck the fittest!’ – wasn’t put to me by Tim Clutton-Brock (later to be the Prince Philip Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology in the University) until the post-conference party. But even if it never made a *Private Eye* cover, it wasn’t wasted: Pat Bateson (later to be the Professor of Ethology in the University and Provost of King’s College) tells me he used it shortly afterwards ‘in a keynote address at a conference in Boston and a lot of people at the conference were rather shocked!’. I doubt if Darwin’s core message would have shocked any of us.