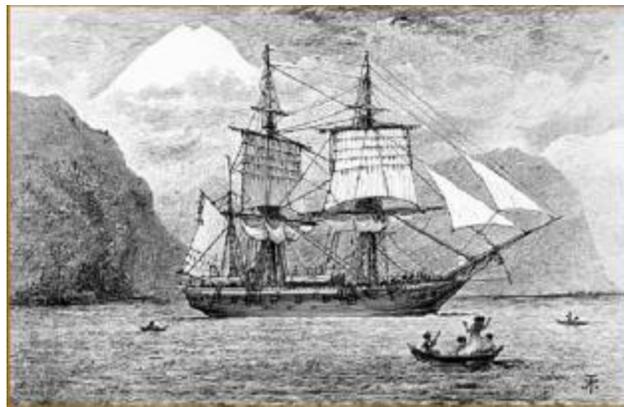


Darwin, Australia and Luck

Dr Patrick Armstrong

Patrick began his talk with the concept of 'chance' as a component in modern Theory of Evolution, and went on to talk about the role of chance or 'luck' in the life and work of Charles Darwin himself. The great Victorian naturalist had said that the Beagle voyage was the most important event of his life and his going on it resulted from the willingness of his uncle to drive the 30 miles to Shrewsbury, and to the shape of his nose! Both outcomes of luck. Earlier Darwin had left Edinburgh Medical School unqualified, to the chagrin of his doctor father: but this led to him being sent to Christ's College in Cambridge with the vague thought that he might become a Church of England parson. It was at Cambridge that he met Adam Sedgwick, who taught him geology, and John Stevens Henslow, Professor of Botany, who enthused him for fieldwork and was instrumental in getting him the invitation to join the Beagle voyage.



The Beagle

Fortune favoured Darwin in his personal life too: he married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, an attractive, wealthy, heiress, who cared for him in illness, bore him many children, and was the centre of Darwin family life until her death in 1896. He might very well have married someone much less suitable. Good fortune allowed Darwin, during his voyage around the world, to experience a wide variety of environments on two continents (Africa and South America) and to visit about 40 islands. Themes and ideas that Darwin generated in comparing these provided the foundation for much of his later work. But luck played a part during his voyage: he was nearly shipwrecked, he experienced an earthquake, he ate fish that may have been poisonous, he confronted bandits and ferocious wild bulls, and was bitten by a species of insect that often carries a disease that might have killed him.



Voyage of the Beagle

Moreover, Charles Darwin was not only fortunate in the number of islands he visited, and their variety, but in the order he visited them. He was able to cut his teeth on the relatively simple geology of the Cape Verde Islands before confronting the geological complexities of the Falklands or the Andes. There are also good grounds for believing that the sequence of islands that he saw as he sailed east to west across the Pacific and Indian Oceans contributed to the generation of his Theory of Formation of Coral Reefs and Atolls, his first flirtation with the notion of gradualism. While the Galapagos Islands are supposed to be of special importance in Darwin's intellectual development, in fact he did not like the archipelago particularly, and there are grounds for suggesting that the visits to the Falkland Islands and Australia were at least as important. In reality, however, he visited a range of islands, in the three oceans, learning how to compare them that so contributed to his success. Were it not for a particular sequence of events, and combination of circumstances, we might have been, over the last 18 months, commemorating the careers of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck or Alfred Russell Wallace.