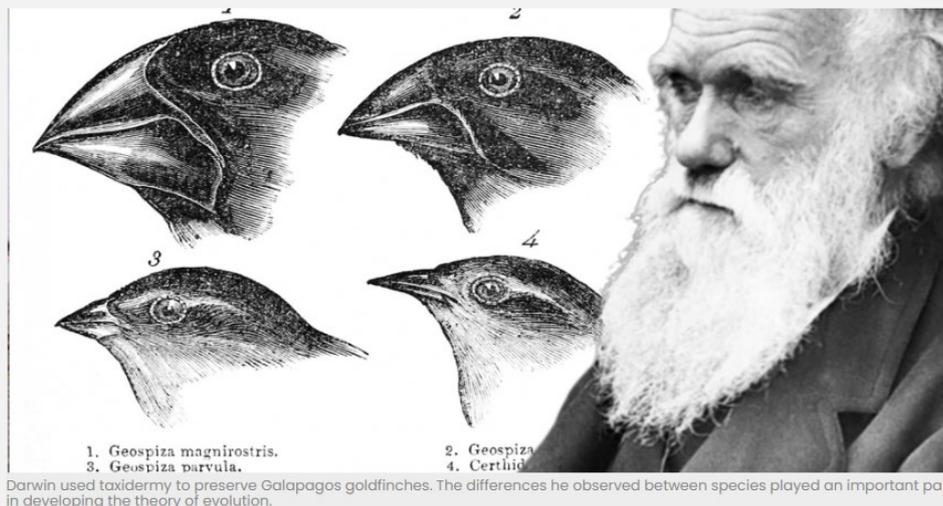


JOHN EDMONSTONE – THE MAN WHO TAUGHT DARWIN



John Edmonstone was born into slavery in British Guiana in the late 1700s but died a free man in Britain having taught and influenced one of the greatest men in the history of science, Charles Darwin.

John's early years were spent on a plantation in Demerara, a region in present-day Guyana, South America. Due to its cultural, political and historical ties with Caribbean countries, Guyana is often considered part of the Caribbean region.

Scottish politician Charles Edmonstone owned the plantation on which John lived. During the early 1800s, Charles was visited by his friend and future son-in-law Charles Waterton, who would go on to become a renowned naturalist and explorer.

Waterton took John under his wing and taught him taxidermy or in his own words, 'the proper way to stuff birds.' The two would travel together on expeditions into the rainforest and John would learn the skills he would go on to teach Darwin.

In 1817, shortly after travelling to Glasgow with his master, John gained his freedom. In the years that followed, John moved to Edinburgh and settled there, earning a living stuffing birds at the Natural Museum and teaching taxidermy to students at the University.

In 1825, a 16-year-old Darwin came to Edinburgh University to study medicine. He lived with his brother Erasmus on Lothian Street, which happened to be a few doors down from John's house. It wouldn't take long for Darwin to realise that medicine wasn't his calling, struggling to sit through surgeries, which in those days were still performed without anaesthesia.

Whilst pondering his options, Darwin decided to take lessons from John on bird taxidermy to supplement the courses available from the University. To quote from Darwin's memoirs:

'...HE GAVE ME LESSONS FOR PAYMENT, AND I USED OFTEN TO SIT WITH HIM, FOR HE WAS A VERY PLEASANT AND INTELLIGENT MAN.'

That payment was one guinea a lesson and it would take 40 daily one-hour long sessions for Darwin's taxidermy training to be complete. During those sessions, John also filled Darwin's head with stories from his homeland about lush tropical rainforests and exotic flora and fauna. It could well be argued that John sparked Darwin's interest in naturalism and inspired him to explore the tropics.

Within five years, medicine was a thing of the past and Darwin had secured a place aboard the H.M.S. Beagle as the ship's naturalist, during its famed voyage in 1831. Certainly, Darwin would not have been aboard that ship had he not been equipped with the skills that John had taught him.

Those skills would prove indispensable throughout the historic voyage and help Darwin form his theory of evolution by natural selection. Whilst exploring the Galapagos Islands, Darwin noticed distinct differences between the finches on each island, with the main difference being beak shape, which he deduced had been influenced by the food offerings on each island.

He collected and preserved specimens of each finch using the taxidermy skills he had learnt from John. The specimens were sent for further analysis and it was concluded they represented 12 distinct species. Darwin would later use those finches as an example of his theory of evolution, arguing they had all evolved from a common ancestor that had somehow arrived on the Galapagos Islands from mainland South America. Via the process of natural selection, the birds then diversified into a variety of species adapted to the food supply on each island. John had therefore been instrumental in facilitating the pioneering scientific research of Darwin.

DARWIN HATED SLAVERY; HE WAS VEHEMENTLY OPPOSED TO IT

Indirectly, conversations about John's years as a slave might also have been instrumental in forming Darwin's theories. Darwin hated slavery; he was vehemently opposed to it. This hatred could well have stemmed from his time spent with John, whom Darwin believed, demonstrated such intellect that it could have convinced him to reject the racist presumptions of the time. Darwin's ground-breaking theory of evolution traced all races and species back to a common ancestor, which certainly challenged the mainstream theory of the time that whites had a different origin from blacks and were, therefore, a separate and more superior species.

As for what happened to John, little is known about his later years, death and burial. In fact, if it weren't for an aside in Darwin's autobiography, we might never have even learnt of his existence.

In 2009, a plaque honouring John was commissioned and unveiled in Lothian Street, close to where he once lived in Edinburgh. A small but important reminder of the memory of an unsung hero, whose teachings and mentorship shaped the future of our world. For without John Edmonstone, Darwin might never have become a naturalist or at least never have had the tools to think of or prove his theory of evolution.

That's quite some contribution to our nation's history.