

The Ballad of Darwin's Finches

I

If Darwin hadn't voyaged round the islands of Galapagos,
And hadn't found his shipmates enjoyed being chelono-phagous,
The islands might have stayed for ever in their pristine purity;
The finches might have lived their lives in isolated obscurity.

But Darwin went there, and he found iguanas, giant tortoises,
Some mockingbirds, flycatchers, hawks, but not quite what he thought as his
Expectations. They were different, but they clearly seemed to bear
The 'stamp' of South America – did they first come from there?

While on the islands he didn't pay the finches much attention;
Dullish dark birds everywhere seemed hardly worth a mention.
He dutifully collected some and shoved them all together
And only later laid them out and then he wondered whether
He should have been more careful, as what could now be seen
Was some had big beaks, some had small, and most were in between.

“One might” he said “imagine that so few species were here
That one was taken and modified for different ends... Oh Dear –
If that had happened it would overturn much cherished thought
About what species are, and can they change... I really ought
To keep it to myself. I know, when I get back home
I'll study barnacles and worms, and write a learned tome.”

He did that, married, found Down House and studied many things,
The species problem was still there but waiting in the wings
And might have stayed there had he not received that fateful letter
From Alfred Russel Wallace. He said “I could not write a better
Summary of my main idea on species, this central mystery”.
The year was 1858 – and the rest is history.

II

Because of Darwin, David Lack in 1938
Set off to study these dull dark birds, and this sealed their fate.
All the birds excited him, and so completely tame;
They settled on you, pulled your hair, but the finches all looked the same.
He found it horrible to live there, with lava steep and rough
And scorpions forever in his boots; cacti dense and tough.

He stayed for four months only, a single long wet season.
The finches bred and bred and there didn't seem a reason
Why their beaks differed in size; they all ate the common seeds.
This was what had long been thought; for food they'd simple needs.
The beaks allowed for recognition, isolating the species
(No-one had yet heard about non-overlapping niches).

He wrote this up, then war broke out delaying publication -
The struggle that ensued would lead to total alteration,
As after this, seeing his results, he noticed something strange
Two species with the same sized beaks always had a separate range.
“Maybe I only saw them at a time when things were good;
Another year, in times of drought, they might compete for food.”

And so he wrote it up again, this time these birds would clinch his
Idea that competition rules – he called it ‘Darwin’s Finches’,
And in so saying invented evolutionary ecology,
A fruitful subject, nowhere more than Galapagos Fringillology.

Another pause of thirty years, but 1973
Proved auspicious for these birds as coming across the sea
Were two more English scientists most curious to find
The finches, starting then the longest study of its kind.

The Grants, that’s Pete and Rose, were granted grants to carry on
The work that Darwin started, and they found that once they’d gone
The finches did a whole lot more than anyone had realised.
They moved around; they died in droughts; their beaks increased or downsized.
(And thirty-six years later, Peter Grant, so I have heard
Has even got to look like Darwin – big eyebrows, long white beard.)

More than three decades of work has made us understand
That evolution can be fast; those finches that look so bland
Have shown us more than any other group how species evolved
What Darwin started, Lack took on, the Grants’ life’s work has solved...
The origin of species, for Darwin mere surmise.
The Grants have seen it happening before their very eyes.

No, if Darwin hadn’t voyaged, but had simply stayed at Down,
Had married Emma, children, become a parson of renown,
‘Natural selection’ might be simply one more solecism.
We would not honour Darwin’s name; the theory we’d call Wallaceism.

Andrew Lack, March 2009.