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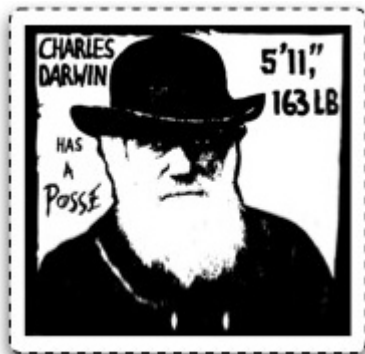
[Home](#) > The Darwin bicentennial in the news

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02.11.2009

## [The Darwin bicentennial in the news](#) [3]



In recognition of Darwin's 200th birthday, February 12, 2009, the mass media are again taking notice of Darwin's life, accomplishments, and importance and influence. [Writing](#) [4] to Charles Lyell in 1860, Darwin was wryly amused at the sort of newspaper coverage he was receiving in the wake of the publication of the *Origin of Species*: "I have received in a Manchester Newspaper a rather ... good squib, showing that I have proved 'might is right', & therefore that Napoleon is right & every cheating Tradesman is also right." Fortunately, today's journalists exhibit a higher degree of accuracy than their Victorian colleagues at the *Manchester Guardian*! Herewith a sampling of the recent coverage of the Darwin bicentennial.

The January 31, 2009, issue of *Science News* contained a number of articles about Darwin and evolution; a special [web edition](#) [5] contains expanded versions of articles from the print edition plus two additional features. Included are Tom Siegfried on "Darwin's Evolution," Rachel Ehrenberg on "Evolution's Evolution," Tina Hesman Saey on "Molecular Evolution," Sid Perkins on "Step-by-Step Evolution," Patrick Berry on "Computing Evolution," and Susan Milius on "A Most Private Evolution." Also of interest are three stories about Darwin and evolution aimed at kids: Susan Milius on "[When Darwin Got Sick of Feathers,](#)" [6] Tina Hesman Saey on "[Hitting the Redo Button on Evolution,](#)" [7] and Tom Siegfried on "[The Man Who Rocked Biology to its Core.](#)" [8]

On February 1, 2009, National Public Radio launched a Darwin 200 series, beginning by [interviewing](#) <sup>[9]</sup> Keith Thomson, the author of [The Young Charles Darwin](#) <sup>[10]</sup> (Yale University Press, 2009), about the influences on the young naturalist. Science Friday's Ira Flatow [interviewed](#) <sup>[11]</sup> Matthew Chapman, a great-great-grandson of Darwin, about the ongoing battle over teaching evolution in public schools and how Darwin's legacy continues to evolve on February 6, 2009. A story [comparing](#) <sup>[12]</sup> the Darwin anniversary celebrations in the United States with their counterparts in Britain was broadcast on February 8, 2009. A story about [Evolution Weekend](#) <sup>[13]</sup> was [broadcast](#) <sup>[14]</sup> on February 11, 2009. And there is apparently more to come, so stay tuned!

Observing that "nearly 150 years after Darwin published his groundbreaking work *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Americans are still fighting over evolution. If anything, the controversy has recently grown in both size and intensity," the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life unveiled a useful [collection](#) <sup>[15]</sup> of on-line resources on February 4, 2009. Included are discussions of the social and legal dimensions of the evolution debate in the United States, a brief explanation of Darwin and evolutionary theory, a listing of the positions of various religious groups and their members on evolution, and a sampling of controversies over the teaching of evolution across the country.

From February 5 to February 9, 2009, the BBC's Radio 4 broadcast "Dear Darwin," in which "[f]ive leading scientists address letters to Charles Darwin, expressing their thoughts on his work and legacy." Featured were Craig Venter, telling Darwin "about his own experiences as a collector, medic and geneticist"; Jonathan Miller, describing "the huge advances in the understanding of genetics that have filled the holes in Darwin's understanding of inheritance"; Jerry Coyne, telling Darwin about the evidence amassed since the publication of the *Origin* that supports evolution; Peter Bentley, explaining the emerging field of evolutionary computing to Darwin; and Baruch Blumberg, telling Darwin "about his work with the hepatitis B virus and his later work at NASA searching for life on other planets." All five letters are available via Radio 4's [Darwin website](#) <sup>[16]</sup>.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Quirks and Quarks show, hosted by Bob McDonald, devoted its program for February 7, 2009, to "a discussion of the life and work of Charles Darwin, and to a discussion of his impact on modern science, with three special guests," namely the science journalist David Quammen, the author of [The Reluctant Mr. Darwin](#) <sup>[17]</sup> (W. W. Norton, 2006); the geneticist Steve Jones, the author of [Darwin's Ghost](#) <sup>[18]</sup> (Random House, 2000); and the science journalist Olivia Judson, the author of [Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation: The Definitive Guide to the Evolutionary Biology of Sex](#) <sup>[19]</sup> (Holt, 2003). The whole show is [available](#) <sup>[20]</sup> in MP3 format; segments are available in MP3 as well as Ogg formats.

"Charles Darwin would no doubt be surprised to learn that, 127 years after his death, people around the world will be celebrating his 200th birthday on Thursday," Dan Vergano [writes](#) <sup>[21]</sup> in *USA Today* (February 9, 2009). Describing Darwin Day as "part birthday bash, part thumb-in-the-eye to creationists, part opportunity for publishers rolling out Darwin books like sausages," he proceeds to ask, "who and what are evolution's fans celebrating?" After a summary of Darwin's life and accomplishments, the story turns to the controversial reception of evolution in the United States — "Public debate over evolution has bounced from the statehouse to the schoolhouse to the courthouse since the Scopes trial" — before ending with a reminder from NCSE Supporter Sean B. Carroll that "[t]oday we live in a second golden age of evolution."

The February 10, 2009, issue of *The New York Times* contained a suite of articles on Darwin and

evolutionary biology: Nicholas Wade's "[Darwin, Ahead of His Time, Is Still Influential](#)" [22] (arguing that "[i]t is a testament to Darwin's extraordinary insight that it took almost a century for biologists to understand the essential correctness of his views"), Carl Safina's "[Darwinism Must Die So That Evolution May Live](#)," [23] Carol Kaesuk Yoon's "[Genes Offer New Clues in Old Debate on Species' Origins](#)," [24] Carl Zimmer's "[Crunching the Data for the Tree of Life](#)," [25] and Cornelia Dean's "[Seeing the Risks of Humanity's Hand in Species Evolution](#)." [26] Additionally, in "[Darwin the Comedian. Now That's Entertainment!](#)" [27] John Tierney discussed Richard Milner's one-man musical, "[Charles Darwin: Live & In Concert](#)." [28]

*US News & World Report*, which recently featured NCSE's Glenn Branch's February 2, 2009, [op-ed](#) [29] (along with one from the ICR's Henry Morris III) now features four more authors writing op-eds (February 10, 2009) on the topic of teaching evolution. Included are Americans United for Separation of Church and State's Richard Katskee, [arguing](#) [30] "Should we teach creationism in public-school science classes? Of course we should — if we want to violate the Constitution, dumb down our students, and make our nation an international laughingstock," and Michigan State University's Robert T. Pennock, who after reviewing the evolution of the creationist attempts to undermine the teaching of evolution in the public schools, [concludes](#) [31], "Creationism, in whatever guise it has taken to get into the schools, has proven itself to be fundamentally deceptive."

Reporting from Downe, the *Los Angeles Times* (February 11, 2009) [discusses](#) [32] how, despite Darwin's isolation in Down House during the latter part of his life, "200 years after his birth on Feb. 12, 1809, Darwin seems to be everywhere in his native land," with "a yearlong series of 300 events that make up one of the most extensive national commemorations of a single person ever to be held in this country." "It's difficult to overstate how pervasive Darwin's work is," said Robert M. Bloomfield, coordinator of the umbrella organization [Darwin200](#) [33] and head of special projects at London's Natural History Museum. In celebration of the Darwin anniversaries, the story explains, [Down House](#) [34] itself "has undergone a three-month, \$1.3-million makeover for the bicentennial and is to reopen to local residents on Darwin's birthday, Thursday, and the general public Friday."

The *Christian Science Monitor* (February 12, 2009) took Darwin Day as the occasion to [summarize](#) [35] the ongoing fights over antievolution legislation going under the misleading banner of "academic freedom," with the American Institute for Biological Science's Robert Gropp explaining, "They've gotten crafty about arguments they make. 'Academic freedom' sounds very all-American, but the problem is it sets aside the way science is done, the way we teach science." Referring to the so-called [Louisiana Science Education Act](#) [36], so far the only such bill actually enacted, NCSE's Joshua Rosenau told the newspaper, "This is very, very, watered down from the earlier generation of strategies, and it's harder to deal with that on [a] legal level because it's not about the legislation" but rather about how individual teachers choose to interpret the legislation.

Carl Zimmer, writing in *Time* magazine (February 12, 2009), [noted](#) [37] that amid the anniversary hoopla, "there's a risk to all this Darwinmania: some people may come away with a fundamental misunderstanding about the science of evolution. ... Today biologists are exploring evolution at a level of detail far beyond what Darwin could, and they're discovering that evolution sometimes works in ways the celebrated naturalist never imagined." Yet, discussing some of the ways in which modern evolutionary biology is still in a creative ferment, Zimmer concluded, "Time and again, biologists are finding that Darwin had it right: evolution is the best way to explain the patterns of nature."

In *The New York Times* (February 12, 2009), Olivia Judson began her anniversary op-ed with, "My fellow

primates, 200 years ago today, Charles Darwin was born. Please join me in wishing him happy birthday!" She [urged](#) [38] that Darwin is admirable not only as a scientist but also as a man, describing him as "one of those rare beings, as likeable as he was impressive." In the same issue of the *Times*, Verlyn Klinkenborg of the newspaper's editorial board reflected on Darwin's life as a scientist, [concluding](#) [39], "Darwin recedes, but his idea does not. It is absorbed, with adaptations, into the foundation of the biological sciences. In a very real sense, it is the cornerstone of what we know about life on earth."

A special twelve-page Darwin 200 section of the February 2009 issue of *BBC Focus*, [available](#) [40] in a special Flash format, features a welcome by Richard Dawkins, a profile by Carl Zimmer of Michigan State University's Richard Lenski (including a brief discussion of the amusing incident in which a creationist demanded data from Lenski; see [Zimmer's blog](#) [41] and [The Panda's Thumb blog](#) [42] for further details), a sidebar on industrial applications of evolutionary theory, a spread on what Darwin didn't know (about inheritance, the evolution of eyes, human evolution, and the origin of new traits), a debate between Steve Jones and P. Z. Myers on whether human evolution is at a halt, and Richard Dawkins interviewed on the topic of "How to Win an Argument with a Creationist."

The February 2009 issue of *Smithsonian* contains Thomas Hayden's "What Darwin Didn't Know" — coincidentally the phrase used by *National Geographic* for its [February 2009 issue](#) [43]! Despite advances in biology since Darwin's day, Hayden [writes](#) [44], "even the most unanticipated discoveries in the life sciences have supported or extended Darwin's central ideas — all life is related, species change over time in response to natural selection, and new forms replace those that came before." In the same issue is Adam Gopnik's essay [comparing](#) [45] Darwin and Lincoln, based on his new book [Angels and Ages](#) [46] (Knopf, 2009). The *Smithsonian's* website also features a [collection](#) [47] of articles on Darwin and evolution appearing in previous issues of the magazine.

Michael Shermer's column in the February 2009 issue of *Scientific American* [offered](#) [48] "A Skeptic's Take on the Public Misunderstanding of Darwin," in which he debunks "two myths about evolution that persist today: that there is a prescient directionality to evolution and that survival depends entirely on cutthroat competitive fitness." (The latter topic allowed him charmingly to quote Lincoln on "the better angels of our nature.") *Scientific American* further celebrated the Darwin bicentennial by posting a [collection](#) [49] of its previous articles, as well as a few articles originally published in the magazine's German version *Spektrum*, on Darwin and evolution in a special section on its website.

And finally, a reminder about the [January 2009 issue](#) [50] of *Scientific American*, which took as its theme "The Evolution of Evolution: How Darwin's Theory Survives, Thrives and Reshapes the World." Featured are David J. Buller on "Evolution of the Mind," H. Allen Orr on "Testing Natural Selection with Genetics," David M. Kingsley on "Diversity Revealed: From Atoms to Traits," Ed Regis on "The Science of Spore," Neil H. Shubin on "The Evolutionary Origins of Hiccups and Hernias," Peter Ward on "The Future of Man — How Will Evolution Change Humans?" and David P. Mindell on "Putting Evolution to Use in the Everyday World." And NCSE is represented, too, with Glenn Branch and Eugenie C. Scott's [discussion](#) [51] of the newest mutations of the antievolutionist movement in "The Latest Face of Creationism."

*Revised on February 20, 2009, to add the paragraphs about Zimmer's, Judson's and Klinkenborg's, and Shermer's articles.*

[General](#) [52]

[2009](#) [53]

[+ read](#) [3]

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## Links

- [1] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/13349>
- [2] <https://ncse.com/users/glenn>
- [3] <https://ncse.com/news/2009/02/darwin-bicentennial-news-004302>
- [4] <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwinletters/calendar/entry-2782.html>
- [5] [http://www.sciencenews.org/view/feature/id/39754/title/Darwin\\_Special\\_\\_Darwin\\_turns\\_200](http://www.sciencenews.org/view/feature/id/39754/title/Darwin_Special__Darwin_turns_200)
- [6] [http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/40648/title/FOR\\_KIDS\\_When\\_Darwin\\_got\\_sick\\_of\\_feathers](http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/40648/title/FOR_KIDS_When_Darwin_got_sick_of_feathers)
- [7] [http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/40649/title/FOR\\_KIDS\\_Hitting\\_the\\_redo\\_button\\_on\\_evolution](http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/40649/title/FOR_KIDS_Hitting_the_redo_button_on_evolution)
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- [9] <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100118047>
- [10] <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/0300136080/nationalcenter02/>
- [11] <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100333722>
- [12] <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100379229>
- [13] <http://www.evolutionweekend.org/>
- [14] <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100597574>
- [15] <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=114>
- [16] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/darwin/>
- [17] <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/039332995X/nationalcenter02/>
- [18] <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/0345422775/nationalcenter02/>
- [19] <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/0805063323/nationalcenter02/>
- [20] <http://www.cbc.ca/quirks/archives/08-09/qq-2009-02-07.html>
- [21] [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2009-02-09-darwin-evolution\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2009-02-09-darwin-evolution_N.htm)
- [22] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10evolution.html>
- [23] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10essa.html>
- [24] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10species.html>
- [25] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10tree.html>
- [26] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10humans.html>
- [27] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10tier.html>
- [28] <http://www.darwinlive.com/>
- [29] <http://www.usnews.com/articles/opinion/2009/02/02/intelligent-design-is-not-science-and-should-not-take-the-place-of-evolution-in-the-classroom.html>
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- [31] <http://www.usnews.com/articles/opinion/2009/02/10/creation-science-and-intelligent-design-different-names-for-religious-theory.html>
- [32] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-darwin-mania12-2009feb12,0,2222602.story>
- [33] <http://www.darwin200.org/>
- [34] <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server.php?show=nav.14922>
- [35] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0212/p01s03-ussc.html>
- [36] <https://ncse.com/news/louisiana>
- [37] <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1879213,00.html>
- [38] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/12/opinion/12judson.html>
- [39] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/12/opinion/12thu4.html>
- [40] <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A113su/FocusMagazine/resources/index.htm>
- [41] [http://scienceblogs.com/loom/2008/06/24/of\\_bacteria\\_and\\_throw\\_pillows\\_3.php](http://scienceblogs.com/loom/2008/06/24/of_bacteria_and_throw_pillows_3.php)
- [42] <http://pandasthumb.org/archives/2008/06/lenski-gives-co.html>
- [43] <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2009/02/table-of-contents>
- [44] <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/What-Darwin-Didn't-Know.html>
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- [49] <http://www.sciam.com/report.cfm?id=darwin>
- [50] <http://www.sciam.com/sciammag/?contents=2009-01>
- [51] <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=the-latest-face-of-creationism>
- [52] <https://ncse.com/general>
- [53] <https://ncse.com/news/2009>