

A double anniversary

2009 is a remarkable anniversary in that it is both the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth, and—on November 24—the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Darwinism in South Africa had an auspicious start as Darwin visited the Cape on the home leg of the voyage of the *Beagle* in 1836. This is chronicled by both Wilmot James (p. 395) and Brian Warner (p. 432) in this issue; the latter develops the earlier thesis of W.S. Barnard (*SAJS* 100, 243–248; 2004) that Darwin's meeting at the Cape with the astronomer John Herschel was critical in developing the theory of natural selection.

Darwin was to mull over the theory of evolution by natural selection for over 20 years before the publication of the *Origin* in 1859—deeply conscious of just how radical it was. But the world was ripe for such a revelation, and the first printing was sold out within days. Although Darwinism continues to attract criticism (albeit only from the lunatic fringe), the irony is that the most remarkable feature of the *Origin* is the extent to which Darwin's explanations hold true, especially as the field of genetics had yet to be founded 150 years ago.

As an extraordinarily rich country in terms of biodiversity—both extant and extinct—South Africa has played an important role in evolutionary biology, which is reviewed by Steven Johnson (p. 403). But despite the best efforts of biologists (*SAJS* 91, 67; 1995), only last year, almost 15 years after the advent of democracy, was the teaching of evolution incorporated into the school syllabus for the first time. May this long-overdue development inspire new generations of Darwinians on the southern tip of this continent. □