Let’s Drink a Toast to Charlie?

February 10, 2009 By Paul Dalton

Thursday marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin?s birth. Today?s Science section of the New York Times has several articles dedicated to aspects of old Charlie- from the logistical difficulties of compiling an exhaustive family tree of all the plants on Earth, to Darwin as man ahead of his time, to Charlie the comedian.

The most provocative article for me was one that basically called for the abandonment of the term, ?Darwinism.? The argument says basically that the over association of something as important as evolution to one man in inaccurate and harmful.

Inaccurate for sure. The article, and others in the NYT section, point out that evolution was a well established theory long before Darwin, and the discovery of heredity and genetics were as crucial to science as Darwin?s main contributions: the ideas of natural selection and reproductive selection.

The larger point however is of the distinction between the norms of science and other areas of scholarship like political science. Science builds, tests, refines, and retests theories- it does not create isms, or schools of thought. By reducing evolution to the brilliant work of a single man, the real contributions of others as well as the deficiencies of that man are lost.

Fair enough; but it is harmful? I am of two minds on this. On one hand, we Atheists have very few widely recognized historic figures to celebrate. On the other hand the punk rock slogan, ?Kill Your Idols,? rings very true to me.

Whatever the truth, Charles Darwin should be celebrated. Here is to you Charlie, for all you have done for us.

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