

## Book Review

### “Darwin’s Most Wonderful Plants: Darwin’s Botany today”

By Ken Thompson

Published by Profile Books, London, 2018.

We tend to think of Charles Darwin only as "the man who came up with the Theory of Evolution". In fact, he had competitors for this honour (especially Alfred Russell Wallace) and he also had many other biological interests as well as investigating how life evolved. This book examines his wide interests in plants, which fascinated him for at least 30 years before ‘On the Origin of Species’ was published.

The book is set out in five chapters, detailing various books (*italicized*) of Darwin's, namely:

- “Room at the Top – *On the movements and habits of climbing plants (1865)*”
- “Slow Learners – *The power of movement in plants (1880)*”
- “The Biter Bit – *Insectivorous Plants (1875)*”
- “Sex and the Single Plant – *On the various contrivances by which British and Foreign orchids are fertilised by insects, and on the good effects of intercrossing (1862)*.  
– *The effects of cross and self fertilisation in the vegetable kingdom (1876)*
- “The mysteries of the Cabbage Patch – *The variation of animals and plants under domestication (1868)*”

We tend to think of Darwin as an old greybeard beaver away in a dusty room somewhere. However, when he was only 22 he joined the ‘Beagle’ expedition which circumnavigated the world over a period of nearly 5 years. Over the course of this voyage Darwin spend much of his time investigating geology and making natural history collections. A versatile scientist indeed, such as we seldom see today!

The opening paragraph of the Introduction to this book reads:

“If you were writing a book about almost any aspect of the natural world, you could do a lot worse than start with Charles Darwin. And not only because he was the author of *The Origin of Species*, a book that – ultimately – explains everything Darwin's consuming interest in evolution fed, and in turn was fed by, an almost obsessional curiosity about natural history.”

I found this a fascinating book, well-written and pleasingly presented, with a variety of black and white photographs and drawings (many are from Darwin's own works). The author, Ken Thompson, is a plant biologist and also a keen gardener. He has written five books on gardening, as well as books on biodiversity and invasive species.

An enjoyable and enlightening read! The review copy came from the Rotorua Public Library.

Nick Miller