

# Charles Robert Darwin (1809 – 1882)

Charles Darwin was born at the family home in Shrewsbury, England, on 12 February 1809, the son of doctor and financier Robert Waring Darwin and his wife Susannah, née Wedgewood, and was already collecting natural history objects when he attended day school as an eight-year-old. After his mother's death in 1817 he joined his older brother Erasmus as a boarder at the Anglican Shrewsbury School. In 1825 he entered the University of Edinburgh medical school, but hated it and neglected his work. His father then sent him to Christ's College, Cambridge, for pre-theology studies. His botany professor John Stevens Henslow encouraged his scientific pursuits, and after he took his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1831, recommended him for a place as gentleman naturalist on a surveying expedition to chart the coast of South America. His father reluctantly agreed to fund his participation.



## ***Cladonia darwinii***

*Cladonia* (Greek *klados* 'twig' or 'young branch' – "branched") is a genus of 450 known species of reindeer moss and pixie-cup lichens found in both Northern and Southern hemispheres. It is the largest lichen genus in New Zealand, with around 70 species currently recognised. Characterised by its distinctly "shaggy" appearance, *Cladonia darwinii* appears on damp soil, old logs, clay banks and other damp habitats in coastal and inland areas from sea level to 1500 m. It is known also from eastern Australia and Tasmania.

PHOTO: Allison Knight

The voyage of HMS *Beagle* under Captain Robert Fitzroy left England on 27 December 1831 and during the five-year expedition Darwin gained a first-hand knowledge of the flora, fauna and geology of the many places visited. Despite suffering badly from seasickness he wrote copious notes of his observations and theories, and periodically sent specimens, letters and a copy of his journal back to England. Undoubtedly his five weeks stay in the Galapagos Islands was the highlight for him and for science. In comparison, his nine-day stopover at the Bay of Islands, New Zealand, 21–30 December 1835 (four years after setting out) was brief and unspectacular. He visited local settlements and collected insects, shells, fish, rocks and a gecko, but wrote that apart from the Waimate Mission Station, which he found an oasis of English civilisation, he was disappointed in the country and glad to leave.

While he was away, some of his letters dealing with scientific matters were published. He returned to Falmouth and fame on 2 October 1836 and shortly afterwards was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In January 1839 he married his cousin Emma Wedgewood, with whom he had ten children; two did not survive infancy and devastatingly, his daughter Anne died at the age of ten. From 1842 Darwin lived as a country gentleman at Downe House, Kent, and despite continual ill health devoted himself to science, publishing his detailed observations of the voyage, documenting his theories on the origin of species by means of natural selection (published in 1859) and working on other treatises. He did not leave England again, and died at Downe House on 19 April 1882.

Darwin's legacy to New Zealand was not what he recorded on his short visit towards the end of a long, exciting but uncomfortable journey (he was similarly negative about Australia and South Africa), but his continued interest in the country and the correspondence he maintained with resident naturalists. William Colenso, Julius von Haast, Walter Buller, Frederick Hutton and Thomas Cheeseman were all stimulated by his work. Professor Samuel Hammer of Boston University visited New Zealand several times from 1999 to study the Southern Hemisphere lichens in the family Cladoniaceae; he recognised eight new taxa, including an Australasian species he named *Cladonia darwinii*. The South American shrub *Berberis darwinii*, introduced for ornamental and hedging purposes, has naturalised and is now considered a pest plant in New Zealand.