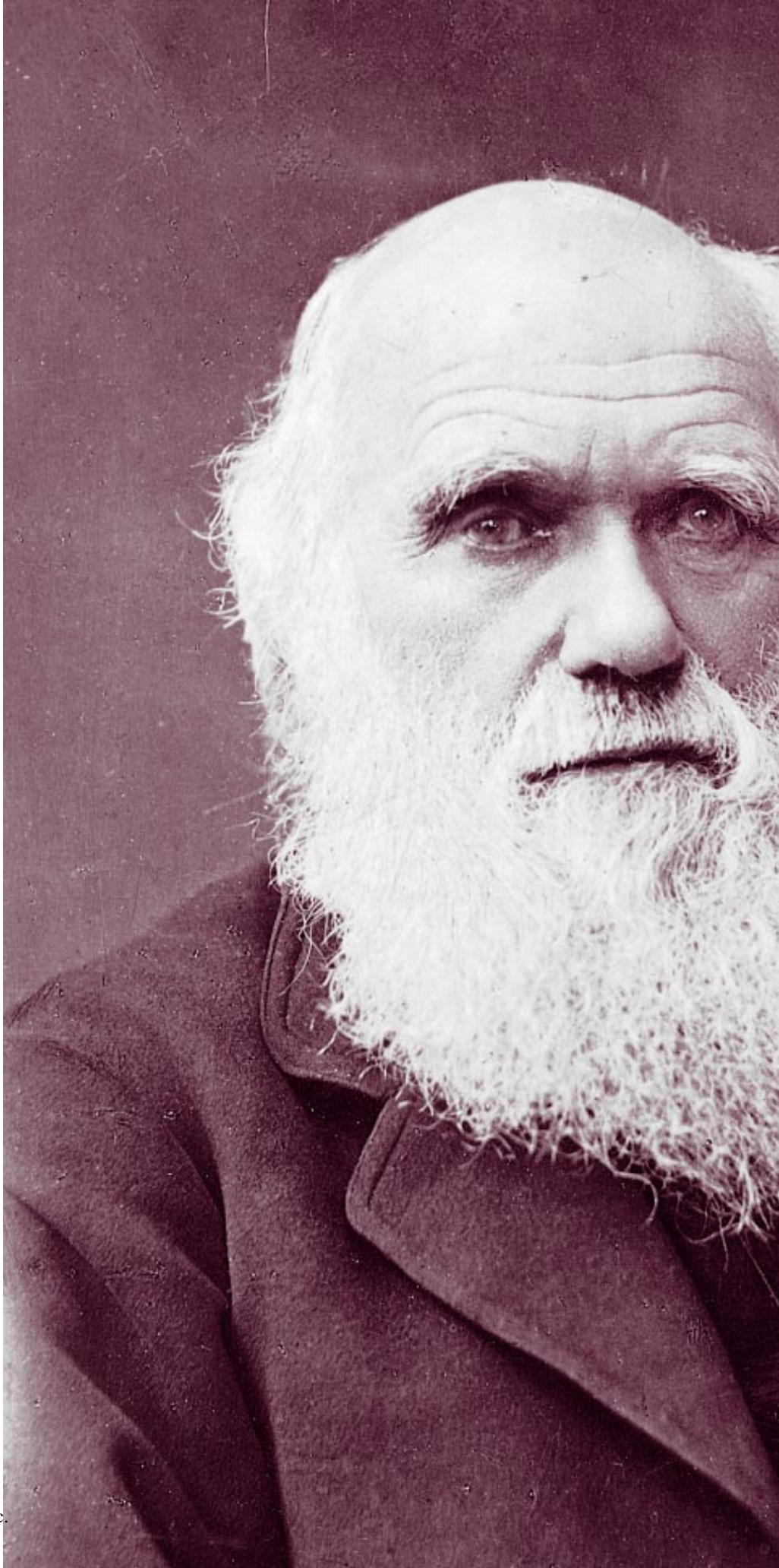


Charles Darwin: The Last Portrait

*This newly rediscovered
photograph appears
to be the last ever made
of the great evolutionist*

by Richard Milner

“I AM VERY SORRY TO
BE DISOBLIGING ABOUT
THE PHOTOGRAPHERS,”
WROTE CHARLES
DARWIN, “BUT I
CANNOT ENDURE THE
THOUGHT OF SITTING
AGAIN.”





The Huntington Library

Despite the reclusive naturalist's lifelong efforts to avoid public lectures, dinner parties and photography sessions, a few early lensmen managed to capture Charles Darwin's image. This newly rediscovered portrait—recently acquired by the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif.—is the work of Herbert Rose Barraud (1845–1896), a London photographer of Victorian celebrities. Unpublished for more than a century, it was made in 1881, the year before Darwin died, and was probably the evolutionist's last.

Over the past 20 years, Gene Kritsky, an entomologist at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, has gathered some 53 photographs of Darwin, including a stereoscopic view [see “Darwin in 3-D,” “Science and the Citizen,” *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*, August 1985]. When the Huntington Library's new portrait turned up among a donor's massive contribution of Darwiniana, historian of science Ralph Colp, Jr., asked Kritsky if he could identify it. From references in his own collection, Kritsky not only came up with the name of the photographer and the date of the sitting but also opined that it was Darwin's final portrait.

Darwin's visitors often came away deeply impressed with the biologist's face, which seemed to express his character completely. One author who met him described Darwin's “quiet contemplative look” that was “both penetrative and meditative.” His gaze had “the keenness and sensitiveness of the man whom nothing escaped... whose eyes seemed to pierce beneath the surface of things.” Another pilgrim to Down House in Kent saw in the aging scientist “a Socrates come to life... with the high-domed brow of the true philosopher.” Francis Darwin recalled that his father “did not realise that he would be recognised from his photographs, and I remember his being uneasy at being recognised by a stranger at the Crystal Palace Aquarium.”

In 1869 a German translator asked Darwin to pose for a joint photograph with Alfred Russel Wallace, his friendly rival and co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection. Darwin declined to travel from his country home to a London studio for what would have been a historic double portrait. Sitting for a photograph, he wrote, “is what I hate doing & wastes a whole day owing to my weak health; and to sit with another person would cause still more trouble & delay.” Even the staunchest Darwinians, however, admit that their hero disliked sharing credit for “his” theory. Last year Wallace's descendant, John Wallace, was asked whether his family resented Darwin for having so completely overshadowed his junior partner. “Grandfather didn't mind,” Wallace replied good-naturedly. “Why should we?”

RICHARD MILNER is the author of The Encyclopedia of Evolution: Humanity's Search for Its Origins (Henry Holt, 1993) and Charles Darwin: Evolution of a Naturalist (Facts on File, 1994).

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