

## 2015 Ding Dyason Lecture

**Professor Evelleen Richards**

### **Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection**

*Thursday 06 Nov, 5.30pm.*

*North Lecture Theatre (Room 239-Old Arts)*

Evelleen Richards is Honorary Professor in the Unit for History and Philosophy of Science, University of Sydney and Affiliated Scholar, Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge. She has served on numerous journal editorial boards and as Collaborating Editor of *Social Studies of Science*. Her main fields of interest and publications encompass the sociology of clinical trials, the history of evolutionary biology and gender and science. She is the author of *Vitamin C and Cancer: Medicine or Politics?* (1991); her *Sexing Selection: Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* is in press. She is a founding member of AAHPSSS and has twice served as President.

#### **Abstract**

Darwin's concept of natural selection has been endlessly written about; his "secondary" principle of sexual selection has received far less historical attention. Its sources and the conceptual pathways to its formulation remain largely unknown or misunderstood. The extraordinarily wide range of Darwin's investigations and the depth of his readings in this connection have never been explored.

Yet sexual selection (the struggle for mates) was of considerable strategic importance to Darwin's theory of evolution. He first outlined it in the *Origin of Species* (1859) and fully elaborated it in the *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). There, Darwin's exhaustive investigation of sexual selection throughout the animal kingdom (fully two thirds of the work) was directed to substantiating his view that human racial and sexual differences, including certain mental and moral differences, had evolved primarily through the action of sexual selection.

It was the culmination of a lifetime of intellectual effort and commitment, a "tremendous job", as Darwin described it, long and hard in the making. Yet sexual selection never quite made it. Darwin constantly was forced to contest its validity with a great array of critics and, with his death, sexual selection went into abeyance, not to be revived until late in the twentieth century. Today it remains a controversial theory, subject to ongoing dispute and reinterpretation. But, however it may be read, sexual selection still means Darwin. And what Darwin meant still matters. He lives on in many contradictory (and some quite startling) guises in current narratives, justifications or critiques of sexual selection.

My talk sketches the complexity of theory, analogy and practice, the cultural beliefs, the professional power plays and larger social issues that shaped the history of sexual selection. It highlights some of the more surprising findings that have emerged in the course of my study and critiques aspects of Darwin historiography.