



# Atheist evolves into a fan of the museum

SAMELA HARRIS

HE is the most famous atheist in the world, but Professor Richard Dawkins is a believer – in the power of museums to present evolutionary facts.

Prof Dawkins long has been an emphatic voice against religious mythology and creationists – people he has dubbed the “history deniers”.

He has produced 10 books on the subject, the latest being *The Greatest Show on Earth – The Evidence for Evolution*. He is visiting Adelaide as a star guest of Writers’ Week.

Dawkins’ fight for scientific evidentiary truth, has been dubbed “Darwin’s rottweiler”. In the flesh, he is a softly-spoken, slightly diffident intellectual, 68, in a loud, evolutionist tie.

Museums, he asserts, are places where the facts of science are presented incontrovertibly. Even he, a celebrated evolutionary biologist, can learn things by visiting them – as he found yesterday when, at the South Australian Museum, he came face to face with the 560 million-year-old fossils of Ediacara from the Flinders Ranges.

He long has known of their pivotal place in the evolutionary chain, just before the Cambrian explosion. He has written about them. “But I had no idea the Ediacaran fossils were so beautiful and elegant,” he says.

The museum’s senior collections manager for earth sciences, Ben McHenry, also introduced Professor Dawkins to our oldest ancestor, an Ediacaran chordate fossil which, despite its antiquity, is so new to science it yet is without an official scientific name

“History deniers are ignorant and need to be exposed to museums like this,” he said, adding that “some are so blinded by dogma that they refuse to look”.

While Professor Dawkins – author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*, winner of myriad scientific and literary awards and presenter of the BBC TV series *The Genius of Charles Darwin* – abhors those who shun knowledge, he has a surprisingly soft spot for the ignorant.

“It is not their fault,” he says. “In Britain, a recent poll suggested that 19 per cent of the population think it takes one month for the Earth to orbit the Sun. There is no real reason for this, just that they have been poorly educated in science. The answer is

to make science exciting instead of something people don’t listen to.” To this end, Professor Dawkins suggests scientists leave their labs and spread the word. “Ultimately, the money for scientific research comes from the taxpayer, so you have a responsibility to trumpet the beauty of science,” he says.

Professor Dawkins is doing this almost all the time these days. “It’s become my job,” he says.

He runs a celebrated atheist website, RichardDawkins.net, an international hub for the cut and thrust of atheist versus believer discussions.

Members of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science last week joined representatives of secular groups in the US in visiting the White House to present the non-believer perspective on politics.

“I was delighted the Obama Administration took the initiative of meeting the seculars. They are a very substantial minority of America and some of its best qualified and educated people, so all power to him,” he says.

That the American religious right now was in backlash at the Obama Administration for meeting the secular groups, which the right said were out to destroy their religions, spurred the professor to a bitter laugh.

“Seculars are not out to destroy anyone,” he says. “What fatuous paranoia. The dominance of religion in American political life is so utterly palpable that any suggestion of persecution is ridiculous.”

Prof Dawkins, of course, is pleased at the rise of atheism in society but, he says, “as a scientist I can’t explain the zeitgeist”.

Between Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and the youngest and new vogue atheist, American Sam Harris, atheist books have been big sellers. “I can’t explain the number of books coming out and why they are selling so well, but I want to see it go on happening,” he says.

Prof Dawkins, meanwhile, is writing his first book for children. “It is a book about science,” he says unsurprisingly. “Each chapter is headed by a question – what is the sun, what is an earthquake, how old is the world . . . Each chapter begins with a myth about it, Aztec or Aboriginal myths, and among them Judeo-Christian myths lost among the others. Then the science is explained.”

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**DARWIN'S ROTTWEILER:** Richard Dawkins at the South Australian Museum yesterday