AROUND THE WORLD!

THE GREATEST SCIENTISTS & THINKERS OF THE CENTURY

The fourth in our series on the 100 most influential people

Bill Gates on THE WRIGHT BROTHERS
David Ho on ALEXANDER FLEMING
Richard Rhodes on ENRICO FERMI
Peter Matthiessen on RACHEL CARSON
Donald Johanson on THE LEAKES
Wilfrid Sheed on JONAS SALK
Robert Reich on JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES
1981. We were the Young Turks of anthropology in those days, staunchly defending our interpretations of human evolution. Perhaps now, with the mellowing of age, it is time to break the silence.

Much like his father, Richard has strong opinions and is often hasty to make pronouncements about his discoveries. This was especially true when he presented, in 1972, a Homo skull that he believed was 2.9 million years old. Adhering to his father’s belief in very early Homo, this find, older than all Australopithecus fossils then known, was a welcome and stunning endorsement of Louis’ views. Louis and Richard had been feuding over museum matters, and this discovery brought them together again in a final meeting shortly before Louis died. He spent his last days comforted by the knowledge that he had been proved correct. Since then, however, the skull has been correctly dated to 1.8 million years; despite Louis and Richard’s objections, most anthropologists today believe Australopithecus is indeed one of our ancestors.

Richard, meanwhile, continued his rise to prominence. Fossil finds such as the astonishingly complete 1.6 million-year-old skeleton of an African Homo erectus (Homo ergaster to some) and the Black Skull have added immeasurably to our knowledge of human origins. His career benefited from best-selling books, a television series on human evolution and popular lecture tours.

Paleoanthropology has not been his only passion, however. He will probably be best remembered in Africa for founding an opposition political party in Kenya in 1995, after which he suffered public humiliation, including being beaten with leather whips. But Richard has proved astonishingly resilient. Even after a life-saving kidney transplant in 1979 (a gift from his estranged brother Philip) and the partial loss of both legs in a 1993 plane crash, he continues to evade confidence.

In 1989 President Daniel arap Moi appointed Richard head of what is now the Kenya Wildlife Service. Richard raised hundreds of millions of dollars and revamped Kenya’s approach to wildlife conservation, heavily arming anti-poaching units and instituting a controversial edict permitting the shooting of poachers on sight. He resigned in 1994 amid politically motivated accusations of corruption, racism and mismanagement—only to be reinstated by Moi 4½ years later.

Nevertheless, the Leakeys will forever be synonymous with paleoanthropology and even today show all signs of being alive, well and contributing productively to the field. Richard’s wife Meave, a trained zoologist, and their eldest daughter Louise are currently leading teams to northern Kenya, where hominids in excess of 4 million years old are being found. The stage is set for the first family of anthropology to continue well into the next century.

Donald C. Johanson is director of the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University

WHERE ANTHROPOLOGY MEETS PSYCHOLOGY

At mid-century, anthropology textbooks painted a simple picture of the plight of our ancestors on the African savanna: them against the world. Lions menaced and starvation loomed. This hostile environment was considered the driving force behind human evolution. It put a premium on inventing tools and tricks for finding food and not becoming food. So large brains evolved.

During the 1960s and early ’70s, three biologists—William Hamilton, George Williams and Robert Trivers—ushered in a new view of evidence that would complicate this story line. Among its messages: for a highly social species, it isn’t just a jungle out there; it’s a jungle in here. Society is deeply, if often inconspicuously, competitive. Evolution favored traits that helped our ancestors get more genes passed on than their neighbors got. People’s brains are designed less to deal with lions than to deal with other people’s brains.

Oddly, Darwinian success in a dog-eat-dog social world turns out to involve lots of mushy feelings. Swoons of romance, love of kin, devotion to friends and pity for the needy were useful tools in the social jungle. Even conscience and the sense of justice are now said to have roots in our genes.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that a subtle, often unconscious, bias toward ourselves, our kin and our friends can narrow altruism and color moral judgments. “Deception and hypocrisy are very human devices for conducting the complex daily business of social life,” wrote Edward O. Wilson in Sociobiology (1975), which brought the new paradigm to the world’s attention.

Wilson’s book, though mainly about nonhuman animals, made enough such pronouncements to get him viliﬁed as a “biological determinist” and a menace to society. While he was speaking at a scientiﬁc conference, a reactor called him “all wet” and dumped water on him.

It didn’t work. Today the new, improved version of human sociobiology—evolutionary psychology—is flourishing. Such scholars as Leda Cosmides, John Tooby and Steven Pinker (author of How the Mind Works) have begun to explain human language, logic and perception in Darwinian terms.

You know a discipline has arrived when its detractors start depicting themselves as radicals assaulting the intellectual status quo. This fall John Horgan (The End of Science) will come out with a book that, according to its publisher’s catalog, “boldly contradicts all standard views” of psychology, including those of Steven Pinker and E.O. Wilson.”

Ah, vindication at last.

—By Robert Wright