

Charles Darwin's
The Life of
Erasmus Darwin



First unabridged edition

Edited by
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The Life of Erasmus Darwin

As the character of a man depends in some degree on the circumstances under which he has been brought up, it will be advisable to give a very short account of the family to which Erasmus Darwin belonged. It is more important to show to what extent a man inherits and transmits his characteristic qualities; for every addition, however small, to our knowledge on this head is a public benefit, as well as spreading a belief in inheritance.

{As the name Darwin is an unusual one, I may mention that in the Cottonian Library, now in the British Museum, there is a large and very rare book, on the History of Lichfield; and in this book the antiquary, Sir R. Cotton, who was born in 1570 and died in 1631, made the following entry: "This Booke was found in the thatch of an House at Clifton-Campville, in the demolishing thereof. And was brought to mee by Mr. Darwin". Clifton-Campville is near Tamworth, in Staffordshire. Whether the Mr. Darwin who made this discovery was a member of the family we do not know. }

Erasmus Darwin was descended from a family of yeomen who lived for several generations on their own land, apparently of considerable extent, at Marton in Lincolnshire. The great-grandson of the first Darwin of whom we know anything seems to have been a loyal man, for in his will made in 1584 he [Richard Darwin] bequeathed 3s. 4d. "towards the setting up of the Queene's Majesties armes over the queare [choir] door in the parishe Church of Marton".

His son William, born about 1575, possessed a small estate at Cleatham, at no great distance from Marton. He considered himself a gentleman, bore arms and married a lady. He was also yeoman of the armoury of Greenwich to James I and Charles I. This office was probably almost a sinecure, and certainly of very small value.

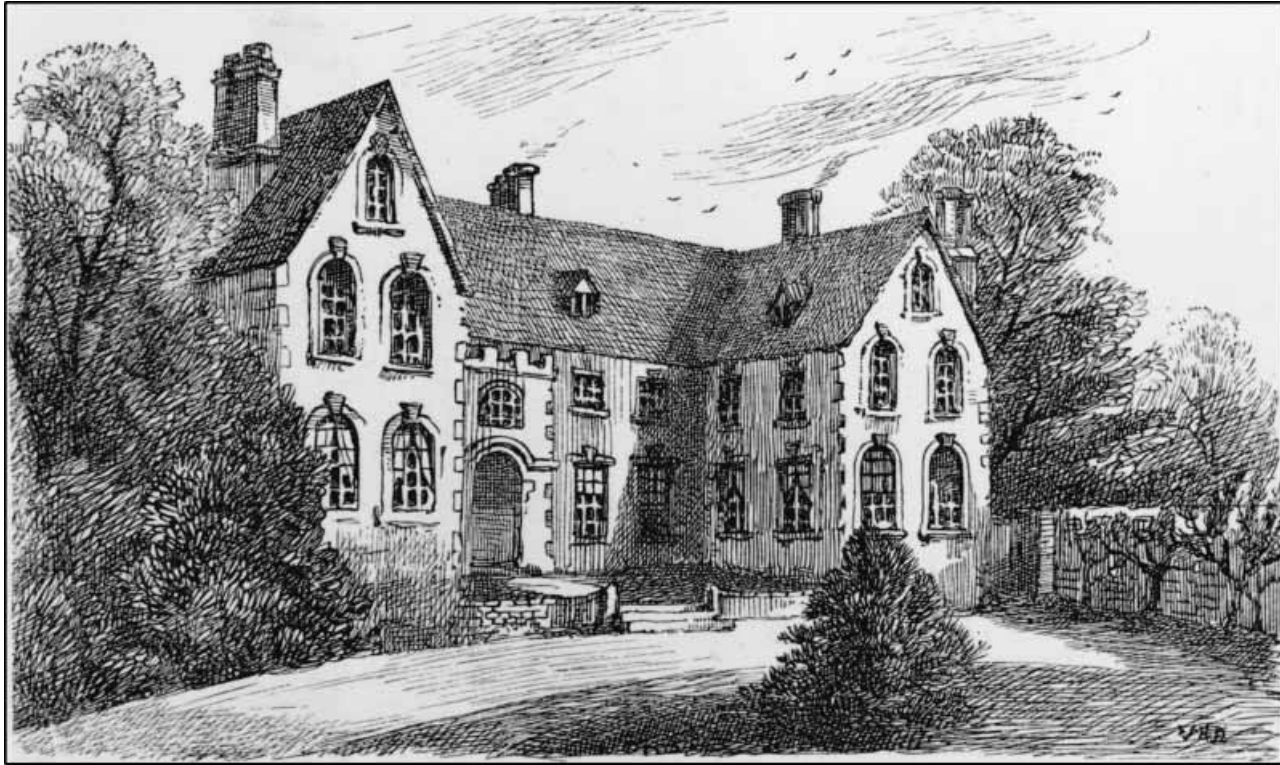
{The greater part of the estate of Cleatham was sold in 1760. A cottage with thick walls, some fish-ponds and old trees, alone show where the "Old Hall" once stood. A field is still called the "Darwin Charity", from being subject to a charge, made by a later Mrs. Darwin, for buying gowns for four old widows every year.}

William Darwin died in 1644, and we have reason to believe from gout. It is, therefore, probable that Erasmus, as well as many other members of the family, inherited from this William, or some of his predecessors, their strong tendency to gout; and it was an early attack of gout which made Erasmus a vehement advocate for temperance throughout his whole life.

The second William Darwin (born 1620) served as Captain-Lieutenant in Sir W. Pelham's troop of horse, and fought for the king. His estate was sequestrated by the Parliament, but he was afterwards pardoned on payment of a heavy fine. In a petition to Charles II he speaks of his almost utter ruin from having adhered to the royal cause, and it appears that he had become a barrister. This circumstance probably led to his marrying the daughter of Erasmus Earle, Serjeant-at-law, *who lived at Heydon Hall in Norfolk and represented Norwich in the Long Parliament*; hence probably Erasmus Darwin derived his Christian name.

The eldest son from this marriage, William (born 1655), married the heiress of Robert Waring, of Wilford, a family of much consideration in Nottinghamshire. This lady also inherited, by an indirect course, the manor of Elston, which has remained ever since in the family; and Erasmus, the subject of the present notice, was born at Elston Hall.

The William Darwin who married the heiress is said to have been a good workman, and he may have transmitted his mechanical taste to his grandson, Erasmus. I possess an ivory box made by him, prettily ornamented on one side, with his crest on the other side. There is a portrait of him at Elston, showing a pleasing and refined countenance.



Elston Hall, where Erasmus Darwin was born, as it existed before 1754. From a drawing by Violetta H. Darwin.

The third William Darwin had two sons – William, and Robert, who was educated as a barrister and was the father of Erasmus. I suppose the Cleatham and the Waring properties were left to William, who seems to have followed no profession, and the Elston estate to Robert; for when the latter married he gave up his profession, and lived ever afterwards at Elston.

There is a portrait of Robert at Elston Hall, and he looks, with his great wig and bands, like a dignified doctor of divinity. He seems to have had some taste for science, for he was an early member of the famous Spalding Club; and the celebrated antiquary, Dr. Stukeley, in ‘An account of the almost entire Sceleton of a large animal, &c.’, published in the ‘Philosophical Transactions’, April and May, 1719, begins his paper as follows:— “Having an account from my friend, Robert Darwin, Esq., of Lincoln’s Inn, a Person of Curiosity, of a human Sceleton (as it was then thought) impressed in Stone, found lately by the Rector of Elston, &c.” Stukeley then speaks of it as a great rarity, “the like whereof has not been observed before in this island, to my knowledge”.

Erasmus wrote to his friend, Dr. Okes, with much frankness about his father’s character, shortly after Robert’s death in 1754:

He was a man of more sense than learning; of very great industry in the law, even after he had no business, nor expectation of any. He was frugal, but not covetous; very tender to his children, but still kept them at an awful kind of distance. He passed through this life with honesty and industry, and brought up seven healthy children to follow his example.

Judging from a sort of litany written by him, and handed down in the family, Robert was a strong advocate of temperance, which his son ever afterwards so strongly advocated:

From a morning that doth shine,
From a boy that drinketh wine,
From a wife that talketh Latine,
Good Lord deliver me.

It is suspected that the third line may be accounted for by his wife having been a very learned lady.

The eldest son of Robert, christened Robert Waring, succeeded to the estate of Elston, and died there at the age of ninety-two, a bachelor. He had a strong taste for poetry, like his youngest brother Erasmus, as I infer from the latter having dedicated a MS. volume of juvenile poems to him, with the words, "By whose example and encouragement my mind was directed to the study of poetry in my very early years". The two brothers also corresponded together in verse. Robert likewise cultivated botany, agreeing also in this respect with Erasmus, and when a rather old man he published his 'Principia Botanica'. This book in MS. was beautifully written, and my father declared that he believed it was published because his old uncle could not endure that such fine calligraphy should be wasted. But my father was hardly just, as the work contains many curious notes on biology—a subject wholly neglected in England in the last century. The public, moreover, appreciated the book, as the copy in my possession is the third edition.

The second son, William Alvey, became the ancestor of the elder branch of the family, the present possessors of Elston Hall.

A third son, John, became the rector of Elston, the living being in the gift of the family; and of him I have heard nothing worthy of notice.

The fourth son, and the youngest of the children, was Erasmus, the subject of the present memoir, who was born on the 12th December 1731, at Elston Hall.



Before proceeding to give some account of his life and character, it may be well to see how far he transmitted his characteristic qualities to his children. He had three sons by his first wife (besides two children who died in infancy).

His eldest son, Charles (born September 3, 1758), was a young man of extraordinary promise, but died (May 15, 1778) before he

was twenty-one years old from the effects of a wound whilst dissecting the brain of a child. He inherited from his father a strong taste for various branches of science, for writing verses, and for mechanics. "Tools were his playthings", and making "machines was one of the first efforts of his ingenuity, and one of the first sources of his amusement".¹

He also stammered like his father, who sent him to France when between eight and nine years old (1766–67), with a private tutor, as he thought that if Charles was not allowed to speak English for a time the habit of stammering might be lost; and it is a curious fact (as I hear from one of Dr. Darwin's granddaughters) that in after years when speaking French he never stammered. At a very early age he collected specimens of all kinds. When sixteen years old he went [C.D. has 'was sent'] for a year to Oxford, but he did not like the place, and thought (in the words of his father) "that the vigour of the mind languished in the pursuit of classical elegance, like Hercules at the distaff, and sighed to be removed to the robuster exercise of the medical school of Edinburgh".

He stayed three years at Edinburgh, working hard at his medical studies, and attending "with diligence all the sick poor of the parish of Waterleith, and supplying them with the necessary medicines". The Æsculapian Society awarded him its first gold medal for an experimental enquiry on pus and mucus. Several notices of him appeared in various journals; and all the writers agree about his uncommon energy and abilities.

He seems also, like his father, to have excited the warm affection of his friends. The venerable Professor Andrew Duncan, who had Charles buried in his own family vault, spoke to me about him with the warmest affection forty-seven years after his death. Professor Duncan cut a lock of hair from the corpse, and took it to a jeweller, whose apprentice, afterwards the famous Sir H. Raeburn, set it in a locket for a memorial.² The inscription on his tomb, written by Erasmus, says, with more truth than is usual on such occasions: "Possessed of uncommon abilities

and activity, he had acquired knowledge in every department of medical and philosophical science, much beyond his years”.

Dr. Darwin was able to reach Edinburgh before Charles died, and had at first hopes of his recovery; but these hopes, as he informed his second son [C.D. has ‘my father’] “with anguish”, soon disappeared. Two days afterwards he wrote to Josiah Wedgwood to the same effect, ending his letter with the words, “God bless you, my dear friend, may your children succeed better”. Two and a half years afterwards he again wrote to Wedgwood, “I am rather in a situation to demand than to administer consolation”.

About the character of his second son, Erasmus (born 1759), I have little to say, for, though he wrote poetry, he seems to have had none of the other tastes of his father. He had, however, his own peculiar tastes, viz. genealogy, the collecting of coins, and statistics. When a boy he counted, as I was told by my father, all the houses in the city of Lichfield, and found out the number of inhabitants in as many as he could; he thus made a census, and when a real one was first made, his estimate was found to be nearly accurate. His disposition was quiet and retiring.

My father had a very high opinion of his abilities, and this was probably just, for he would not otherwise have been invited to travel with, and pay long visits to, men so distinguished in different ways as Boulton, the engineer, and Day, the moralist and novelist. He was certainly very ingenious, and he detected by a singularly subtle plan the author of a long series of anonymous letters, which had caused during six or seven years, extreme annoyance and even misery to many of the inhabitants of the county; and the author was found to be a county gentleman of not inconsiderable standing.

Erasmus practised as a solicitor in Derby [C.D. has ‘Lichfield’] and was so successful that when only forty years old he thought of retiring from business and building a cottage on his father’s former botanic garden. His father considered this a great mistake, and in a letter to my father (August 8, 1799) says: “all which I much disapprove. Therefore you will please not to mention it, and I hope it will fall through.” He did, however,

soon afterwards purchase Breadsall Priory, near Derby, with the intention of soon retiring to a life of tranquillity. But no such quiet end was in store for him, and his unhappy fate will afterwards be related.

The third son, Robert Waring Darwin (my father, born 1766), did not inherit from his father any aptitude for poetry or mechanics, nor did he possess, as I think, a scientific mind, though he had a strong taste for flowers and gardening. He published in vol. lxxvi of the 'Philosophical Transactions' a paper on Ocular Spectra, which Wheatstone told me was a remarkable production for the period; but I believe that he was largely aided in writing it by his father. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1788. I cannot analyse why my father's mind did not appear to me fitted for advancing science; for he was fond of theorising, and was incomparably the most acute observer whom I ever knew. But his powers of observation were all turned to the practice of medicine, and still more closely to human character. *Here would not be the proper place to show with what extraordinary acuteness he intuitively recognised the disposition or character, and even read the thoughts, of those with whom he came into contact.* This skill partly accounts for his great success as a physician, for it impressed his patients with confidence; and my father used to say that the art of gaining confidence was the chief element in a doctor's worldly success.

His brother Erasmus [C.D. has 'father'] brought him to Shrewsbury before he was twenty-one years old; his father had given [C.D. has 'and left'] him £20, saying, "Let me know when you want more, and I will send it you". His uncle John, the rector of Elston, afterwards sent him (as I gather from an old letter) £20, and this was the sole pecuniary aid which my father ever received. {It appears however from papers in the possession of Mr Reginald Darwin that he got £1000 under his mother's settlement, and £400 from his aunt Susannah Darwin. }

I have heard my father say that his practice during the first year allowed him to keep two horses and a man-servant. Erasmus tells Mr. Edgeworth that his son Robert, after being settled in

Shrewsbury for only six months, "already had between forty and fifty patients". By the second year he was in considerable, and ever afterwards in very large practice. I remember his coming into the room and saying, "This day, sixty years ago, I received my first fee in Shrewsbury", and he continued to practice for one or two years longer. It may be doubted whether any doctor will ever again have a considerable number of patients before arriving at the age of twenty-one years. His success was the more remarkable, as he for some time detested the profession, and declared that if he had been sure of gaining £100 a year in any other way he would never have practised as a doctor.

He had an extraordinary memory for the dates of certain events, so that he knew the day of the birth, marriage and death of most of the gentlemen of Shropshire. This power, far from giving him any pleasure, annoyed him, for when he once heard a date it was fixed for ever in his mind. He told me that it added to his regret for the death of old friends. His spirits were generally high, and he was a great talker, but he was of an extremely sensitive nature, so that whatever annoyed or pained him, did so to an extreme degree. He was also rather easily roused to anger.

On my asking him, when too old to walk, why he did not sometimes drive out in his carriage, he answered that every road out of Shrewsbury was associated in his mind with some painful event; and so vivid was his memory that I have no doubt such events returned with all the freshness of reality. He strongly disliked extravagance, but was highly generous. A manufacturer, a friend of his, called on him and stated that he should be ruined unless he could borrow £10,000, and that he could offer only personal security for this large sum. My father, from his wonderful insight into character, was convinced of the accuracy of every word which his friend said, and lent him the money, at a time when the amount must have been a serious matter to him. It was repaid, and the manufacturer was saved from ruin.

One of his golden rules was never to become the friend of any one whom you could not thoroughly respect, and I think he acted on it. But of all his characteristic qualities, his sympathy was pre-eminent, and I believe it was this which made him for a time hate his profession, as it constantly brought suffering before his eyes.

Sympathy with the joy of others is a much rarer endowment than sympathy with their pains, and it is no exaggeration to say that to give pleasure to others was to my father an intense pleasure. He died November 13th, 1848 [C.D. has 1849]. A short notice of his life appeared in No. 74 of the 'Proceedings of the Royal Society'.

As we have been here considering how much or how little the same tastes and disposition prevail in the same family, I may be permitted to add that from my earliest days I had the strongest desire to collect objects of natural history; and this was certainly innate or spontaneous, being probably inherited from my grandfather. Some of my sons have also exhibited an apparently innate taste for science. Members of the family have been elected Fellows of the Royal Society for four successive generations.

Of the children of Erasmus by his second marriage (four sons and three daughters), one son became a cavalry officer, a second rector of Elston, and a third, Francis (born 1786, died 1859), a physician, who travelled far in countries rarely visited in those days. He showed his taste for natural history by being fond of keeping a number of wild and curious animals. One of his sons, Captain Darwin, is a great sportsman, and has published a little book, the 'Gamekeeper's Manual' (4th ed. 1863), which shows keen observation and knowledge of the habits of various animals. The eldest daughter of Erasmus, Violetta, married S. Tertius Galton, and I feel sure that their son, Francis Galton,³ will be willing to attribute the remarkable originality of his mind in large part to inheritance from his maternal grandfather.



We may now return to Erasmus Darwin. His elder brother Robert states, in a letter to my father (May 19, 1802) that Erasmus "was always fond of poetry. He was also always fond of mechanics. I remember him when very young making an ingenious alarum for his watch {clock?}; he used also to show little experiments in electricity with a rude apparatus he then invented with a bottle."

The same tastes, therefore, appeared very early in his life which prevailed to the day of his death. "He had always a dislike to much exercise and rural diversions, and it was with great difficulty that we could ever persuade him to accompany us."

But such was not invariably the case, for Robert celebrates, in the following doggerel verses, the fact of Erasmus, when nine years old, and of his brother, J. D., the future rector of Elston, catching a hare. Robert, who was famous afterwards in the family for his beautiful handwriting, and who was in all respects a most precise old gentleman, would have been shocked if he could have seen his own handwriting, bad grammar, and extraordinary orthography when sixteen years old. He would no doubt have declared it was quite beneath the dignity of biography to publish such verses.

A new Song in the praise of two young Hunters, 1740

One morning this winter from school J. D. came,
And him and his brother Erasmus went out to kill game,
And as it happened, which was very rare,
With hounds and 2 Spaniels killed a fine hair.

2.

Into the whome close they went to get crabs for a tart,
They no sooner got them, but a Hare they did start;
And then they run her with hounds and with horn,
And caught her before she got to the corn.

3.

One of the dogs caught her by the head,
Which made Erasmus Darwin cry war dead war dead,
But John Darwin the dogs he could not hear
Because he only cried out war, war, war.

4.

Then the sport was done and all at an end.
They brought her home and told the news to their friends.
Soon after they pouched her and stue'd her in her blood,
And everybody that eat of her, said she was good.

When ten years old (1741), Erasmus was sent to Chesterfield School, where he remained for nine years. His sister, Susannah,

wrote to him at school in 1748 [old style: 1749 new style], and I give part of the letter as a curiosity, considering that she was then a young lady between eighteen and nineteen years old. She died unmarried, and my father, who was deeply attached to her, always spoke of her as the very pattern of an old lady, so nice looking, so gentle, kind, and charitable, and passionately fond of flowers. The first part of her letter consists of gossip and family news, and is not worth giving. Erasmus was sixteen years old when he answered her.

SUSANNAH DARWIN TO ERASMUS

Dear Brother,

I come now to the chief design of my Letter and that is to acquaint you with my Abstinence this Lent, which you will find on the other side, it being a strict account of the first 5 days, and all the rest has been conformable thereto; I shall be glad to hear from you with an account of your temperance this lent, which I expect far exceeds mine. As soon as we kill our hog I intend to take part thereof with the Family, for I'm informed by a learned Divine that Hogs Flesh is Fish, and has been so ever since the Devil entered into them and they ran into the Sea; if you and the rest of the Casuists in your neighbourhood are of the same oppinion, it will be a greater satisfaction to me, in resolving so knotty a point of Conscience. This being all at present I conclude with all our dues to you and Brother.

Your affectionate sister,
S. Darwin

A DIARY IN LENT

Elston, Feb. 20, 1748

Feb^{ry} 8 Wednesday Morning a little before seven I got up; said my Prayers; worked till eight; then took a walk, came in again and eate a farthing Loaf, then dress'd me, red a Chapter in the Bible, and spun till

One, then dined temperately viz: on Puddin, Bread and Cheese; spun again till Fore, took a walk, then spun till half an hour past Five; eat an Apple, Chatted round the Fire; and at Seven a little boyl'd Milk; and then (taking my leave of Cards the night before) spun till nine; drank a Glass of Wine for the Stomack sake; and at Ten retired into my Chamber to Prayers; drew up my Clock and set my Larum betwixt Six and Seven.

Thursday call'd up to Prayers, by my Larum; spun till Eight, collected the Hen's Eggs; breakfasted on Oat Cake, and Balm Tea; then dress'd and spun till One, Pease Porrage Pottatoes and Apple Pye; then turned over a few pages in Scribelerus; eat an Apple and got to my work; at Seven got Apple Pye and Milk, half an hour after eight red in the Tatlar and at Ten withdrew to Prayers; slept sound; rose before Seven; eat a Pear; breakfast a quarter past Eight; fed the Cats, went to Church; at One Pease Porrage Puddin Bread and Cheese, Fore Mrs. Chappells came, Five drank Tea; Six eat half an Apple; Seven a Porringe of Boyl'd Milk; red in the Tatlar; at Eight a Glass of Punch; filled up the vacancies of the day with work as before.

Saturday Clock being too slow lay rather longer than usual; said my Prayers; and breakfasted at Eight; at One broth Pudding Brocoli and Eggs and Apple Pye; at Five an Apple; seven Apple Pye Bread and Butter; at Nine a Glass of Wine; at Ten Prayers.

Sunday breakfast at Eight; at Ten went to the Chappell; 12 Dumplin, red Herring, Bread and Cheese; two to the Church; read a Lent Sermon at Six, and at Seven Appel Pye Bread and Butter.

Excuse hast being very cold.

ERASMUS TO SUSANNAH DARWIN

Dear Sister,

I receiv'd yours about a fortnight after the date that I must begg to be excused for not answering it sooner: besides I have some substantial Reasons, as having a mind to see Lent almost expired before I would vouch for my Abstinence throughout the whole: and not

having had a convenient opportunity to consult a Synod of my learned friends about your ingenious Conscience, and I must inform you we unanimously agree in the Opinion of the Learned Divine you mention, that Swine may indeed be fish but then they are a devillish sort of fish; and we can prove from the same Authority that all fish is flesh whence we affirm Porck not only to be flesh but a devillish Sort of flesh; and I would advise you for Conscience sake altogether to abstain from tasting it; as I can assure You I have done, tho' roast Pork has come to Table several Times; and for my own part have lived upon Puding, milk, and vegetables all this Lent; but don't mistake me, I don't mean I have not touch'd roast beef, mutton, veal, goose, fowl, &c. for what are all these? All flesh is grass! Was I to give you a journal of a Week it would be stuff so full of Greek and Latin as translation, Verses, themes, annotation, Exercise and the like, it would not only be very tedious and insipid but perfectly unintelligible to any but Scholboys.

I fancy you forgot in Yours to inform me that your Cheek was quite settled by your Temperance, but however I can easily suppose it. For the temperate enjoy an ever-blooming Health free from all the Infections and disorders luxurious mortals are subject to; the whimsical Tribe of Phisicians cheated of their fees may sit down in penury and Want, they may curse mankind and imprecate the Gods and call down that parent of all Deseases, luxury, to infest Mankind, luxury more destructive than the Sharpest Famine; tho' all the Distempers that ever Satan inflicted upon Job hover over the intemperate; they would play harmless round our Heads, nor dare to touch a single Hair. We should not meet those pale thin and haggard countenances which every day present themselves to us. No doubt men would still live their Hunderd, and Methusalem would lose his Character; fever banished from our Streets, limping Gout would fly the land, and Sedentary Stone would vanish into oblivion and death himself be slain.

I could for ever rail against Luxury, and for ever panegyryze upon abstinence, had I not already encroach'd too far upon your Patience; but it being Lent the exercise of that Christian virtue may not be amiss so I shall proceed a little further—

{The remainder of the letter is hardly legible and unintelligible, with no signature.}

P.S.—Excuse Hast, supper being called, very Hungry.

Judging from two letters—the first written in 1749 to one of his school-friends [C.D. has ‘under-masters’] during the holidays, and the other to the head-master, shortly after arriving at the University of Cambridge, in 1750—he seems to have felt a degree of respect, gratitude, and affection for several masters unusual in a schoolboy. Both these letters were accompanied by an inevitable copy of verses, those addressed to the head-master being of considerable length, and in imitation of the 5th Satire of Persius.

His elder brother John [C.D. has ‘His two elder brothers’] accompanied him to St. John’s College, Cambridge; and this seems to have been a severe strain on their father’s income. They appear, in consequence, to have been thrifty and honourably economical; so much so that they mended their own clothes; and, many years afterwards, Erasmus boasted to his second wife that, if she cut the heel out of a stocking, he would put a new one in without missing a stitch. He won the Exeter Scholarship at St. John’s, which was worth only £16 per annum.

No doubt he continued to study the classics whilst at Cambridge, for he did so to the end of his life, as shown by the many quotations in his latest work, ‘The Temple of Nature’. He must likewise have studied mathematics to a certain extent, for, when he took his Bachelor of Arts degree, in 1754, he [actually his brother] was at the head of the Junior Optimes.

Nor did he neglect medicine; and he left Cambridge during one term to attend Hunter’s lectures in London. As a matter of course, he wrote poetry whilst at Cambridge, and a poem on ‘The Death of Prince Frederick’, in 1751, was published many years afterwards, in 1795, in the *European Magazine*.

In the autumn of 1753 [C.D. has '1754'] he went to Edinburgh to study medicine, and while there seems to have been as rigidly economical as at Cambridge; for amongst his papers there is a receipt for his board from July 13th to October 13th [1754], amounting to only £6 12s.

Mr Keir, afterwards a distinguished chemist, was at Edinburgh with him, and after his death wrote to my father (May 12, 1802):

The classical and literary attainments which he had acquired at Cambridge gave him, when he came to Edinburgh, together with his poetical talents and ready wit, a distinguished superiority among the students there. Every one of the above-mentioned Professors {those whose lectures he attended}, excepting Dr. Whytt, had been a pupil of the celebrated Boerhaave, whose doctrines were implicitly adopted. It would be curious to know (but he alone could have told us) the progress of your father's mind from the narrow Boerhaavian system, in which man was considered as an hydraulic machine whose pipes were filled with fluid susceptible of chemical fermentations, while the pipes themselves were liable to stoppages or obstructions (to which obstructions and fermentations all diseases were imputed), to the more enlarged consideration of man as a *living being*, which affects the phenomena of health and disease more than his merely mechanical and chemical properties. It is true that about the same time, Dr. Cullen and other physicians began to throw off the Boerhaavian yoke; but from the minute observation which Dr. Darwin has given of the laws of association, habits and phenomena of animal life, it is manifest that his system is the result of the operation of his own mind.

The only other record of his life in Edinburgh which I possess is a letter to his friend Dr. Okes, of Exeter,⁴ which shows his sceptical frame of mind when twenty-three years old. The expression "disagreeable news" applied to his father's death, sounds very odd to our ears, but he evidently used this word where we should say "painful". For, in a feeling letter to Josiah Wedgwood, written

a quarter of a century afterwards (Nov. 29, 1780) about the death of their common friend Bentley, in which he alludes to the death of his own son, he says nothing but exertion will dispossess “the disagreeable ideas of our loss”.

ERASMUS DARWIN TO DR. OKES

Yesterday’s post brought me the disagreeable news of my father’s departure out of this sinful world. {Here follows the character of his father already quoted.}

He was 72 years old, and died the 20th of this current November 1754. ‘Blessed are they that die in the Lord’.

That there exists a superior ENS ENTIVM, which formed these wonderful creatures, is a mathematical demonstration. That HE influences things by a particular providence, is not so evident. The probability, according to my notion, is against it, since general laws seem sufficient for that end. Shall we say no particular providence is necessary to roll this Planet round the Sun, and yet affirm it necessary in turning up *cinque* and *quatorze*, while shaking a box of dies? or giving each his daily bread? The light of Nature affords us not a single argument for a future state; this is the only one, that it is possible with God, since He who made us out of nothing can surely re-create us; and that He will do this is what we humbly hope. I like the Duke of Buckingham’s epitaph— “Pro Rege saepe, pro Republicâ semper, dubius, non improbus vixi; incertus, sed inturbatus morior. Christum advenero, Deo confido benevolenti et omnipotenti, Ens Entium miserere mei!”

Erasmus Darwin



In 1755 he returned to Cambridge, and took his Bachelor of Medicine degree. He then returned to Edinburgh, and early in September 1756, settled as a physician in Nottingham. Here, however, he remained for only two or three months, as he got

no patients. Whilst in Nottingham he wrote several letters, some in Latin and some in English, to his friend, the son of the famous German philosopher, Reimarus.⁵ Mechanics and medicine were the bonds of union between them. Erasmus also dedicated a poem to young Reimarus, on his taking his degree at Leyden in 1754. Various subjects were discussed between them, including the wildest speculations by Erasmus on the resemblance between the action of the human soul and that of electricity, but the letters are not worth publishing. In one of them he says:

I believe I forgot to tell how Dr. Hill makes his 'Herbal' {a formerly well-known book}. He has got some wooden plates from some old herbal, and the man that cleans them cuts out one branch of every one of them, or adds one branch or leaf, to disguise them. This I have from my friend Mr. G—y [Gurney], watch-maker, to whom this print-mender told it, adding, 'I make plants now every day that God never dreamt of'.

It also appears from one of his letters to Reimarus that Erasmus corresponded at this time about short-hand writing with Gurney, the author of a famous book on this art, which my grandfather practised for some time, so that whilst young he filled six volumes with short-hand notes.

Several of the letters to Reimarus relate to a case which is partly to the credit and partly to the discredit of my grandfather. He seems to have been much interested about a working man whom he sent or helped to send to a London surgeon, Mr. D., for a serious operation. There appears to have been some misunderstanding between Dr. Darwin, Reimarus, and the surgeon, who they expected would perform the operation gratuitously. Dr. Darwin wrote to Reimarus:

I am very sorry to hear that D. took six guineas from the poor young man. He has nothing but what hard labour gives him; is much distressed by this thing costing him near £30 in all, since the

house where he lay cheated him much. . . . When he returns I shall send him two guineas. I beg you would not mention to my brother that I send this to him.

Why his brother should not be told of this act of charity it is difficult to conjecture.

From two other letters it appears that my grandfather wrote an anonymous letter to the surgeon, complaining of his charge; and this, though in a good cause, was a discreditable action, which he ought to have fully owned when suspected of being the author. Erasmus, on hearing that he was suspected, wrote to Reimarus (Nottingham, Sept. 9, 1756), adding in a P.S. “that he might show the letter to Mr. D.”

You say I am suspected to be the Author of it {i.e. the anonymous letter}, and next to me some malicious Person somewhere else, and that I am desired as I am a gentleman to declare concerning it. First, then, as I am upon Honour, I must not conceal that I am glad there are Persons who will revenge Faults, that Law can not take hold off: and I hope Mr. D. will not be affronted at this Declaration; since you say he did not know the Distress of the Man. Secondly, as another Person is suspected, I will not say whether I am the Author or not, since I don't think the Author merits Punishment, for informing Mr. D. of a Mistake. You call the Letter a threatening Letter, and afterwards say the Author pretends to be a Friend to Mr. D. This, though you give me several particulars of it, is a Contradiction I don't understand.

The anonymous letter answered its purpose, for the surgeon returned four guineas, and my grandfather thought it probable that he would ultimately return the other two guineas.



In November 1756, Erasmus settled in Lichfield, and now his life may be said to have begun in earnest; for it was here, and in or

near Derby, to which place he removed in 1781, that he published all his works.

Owing to two or three very successful cases, he soon got into some practice at Lichfield as a physician, when twenty-five years old.

A year afterwards (December 1757) he married Miss Mary Howard, aged 17–18 years, who, judging from all that I have heard of her, and from some of her letters, must have been a superior and charming woman. She died after a long and suffering illness in 1770. They seem to have lived together most happily during the thirteen years of their married life, and she was tenderly nursed by her husband during her last illness. Miss Seward gives,⁶ on second-hand authority, a long speech of hers, ending with the words, “he has prolonged my days, and he has blessed them”. This is probably true, but everything which Miss Seward says must be received with caution; and it is scarcely possible that a speech of such length could have been reported with any accuracy.

The following letter was written by Erasmus four days before his marriage with Miss Howard, and I give it because any one who judged of his character from some of the statements made by Miss Seward, might well doubt whether he possessed any human feelings.

ERASMUS DARWIN TO MARY HOWARD

Darlaston, Dec. 24, 1757.

Dear Polly,

As I was turning over some old mouldy volumes, that were laid upon a Shelf in a Closet of my Bed-chamber, one I found, after blowing the Dust from it with a Pair of Bellows, to be a Receipt Book, formerly, no doubt, belonging to some good old Lady of the Family. The Title Page (so much of it as the Rats had left) told us it was “a Bouk off verry monny muckle vallyed Receipts bouth in Kookery and Physicks”. Upon one Page was “To make Pye-Crust”,—in another “To make Wall-Crust”,—“To make Tarts”,—and at length “To make Love”. “This Receipt”, says I, “must be curious, I’ll send it to Miss Howard next