THE LIFE OF ERASMUS DARWIN
BY CHARLES DARWIN
SYNOPSIS

[supplied by the editor: the original text is devoid of subject headings]

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Map of the ambient Midland Counties, showing locations of places mentioned in the text.

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In the February number, 1879, of a well-known German scientific journal, ‘Kosmos’, Dr. Ernst Krause published a sketch of the life of Erasmus Darwin, the author of the ‘Zoonomia’, ‘Botanic Garden’, and other works. This article bears the title of a ‘Contribution to the history of the Descent-Theory’; and Dr. Krause has kindly permitted my brother and myself to have a translation made of it and published. {Mr. Dallas has undertaken the translation, and his scientific reputation, together with his knowledge of German, is a guarantee for its accuracy.}

As I have private materials for adding to the knowledge of Erasmus Darwin’s character, I have written a preliminary notice. These materials consist of a large collection of letters written by him; of his common-place book in folio, in the possession of his grandson Reginald Darwin; of some notes made by my father shortly after the death of his father, together with what little I can clearly remember that my father said about him; also some statements by his daughter, Violetta Darwin, written down at the time by her daughters, the Miss Galtons, and various published notices. To them must be added the ‘Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin’, by Miss Seward, which appeared in 1804, and a lecture by Dr. Dowson on ‘Erasmus Darwin, Philosopher, Poet, and Physician’, published in 1861, which contains many useful references and remarks.

It has been the fate of many celebrated men with strongly-marked characters to have been grossly calumniated; and few have suffered more in this respect than Erasmus Darwin. The publication of the present essay seemed to me a good opportunity for showing how utterly groundless most of these
Calumnies were. I hope also to be able to give a truer and fuller, yet far from complete, idea of his general character than has yet appeared.

Dr. Krause has taken great pains, and has added largely to his essay as it appeared in 'Kosmos'; and my preliminary notice, having been written before I had seen the additions, unfortunately contains much repetition of what Dr. Krause has said. In fact the present volume contains two distinct biographies, of which I have no doubt that by Dr. Krause is much the best. I have left it almost wholly to him to treat of what Dr. Darwin has done in science, more especially in regard to evolution.

{Since the publication of Dr. Krause's article, Mr. Butler's work, 'Evolution, Old and New, 1879', has appeared, and this includes an account of Dr. Darwin's life, without anything new having been added, and of his views on evolution.}

Note that here, and in pages 7–91, text deleted from the 1879 book is printed in italics. For notes on the text, see pages 97–134.
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 demolishinge 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 settyngye up of the Queene’s Majestyes armes over the queare [choir] door in the parishe Churche 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