

1 Friends

Darwin loved female company. As a boy in Shropshire, he spent time not only with his sisters and Wedgwood cousins, but with the Owen girls at Woodhouse. Later in life, Emma Darwin was entertained to see him flirting prettily, as she put it, with female visitors. He was on cordial terms with the ladies he met while he was undergoing hydropathic treatment, and Ellen Lubbock and Henrietta Huxley sent him teasing, funny letters. The formidable Lady Derby kept up an intermittent friendship with him in a series of visits and characteristically brief letters. As an old man, Darwin made an effort to reconnect with the Owen girls, sending a copy of his book on expression of the emotions to the elderly Sarah Haliburton, as she had become.

The first letter is to Darwin from an elderly friend of his family, Mary Congreve. At the time, in 1821, she would have been 75; Darwin was 12. Little is known of Mary. Her brother William, comptroller of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich, where ammunition was manufactured, became a baronet, and his son, William, the second baronet, became famous as a rocket designer. It's tempting to suggest that the Congreve family might have fostered Darwin's youthful interest in chemistry.

My dear M^r: Charles

I find I have only just time to thank you for your entertaining letter, as if I take time to write what I intended I shall not be able to get it franked & I'm sure it will not be worth the postage, I should have liked to have seen the good Gentleman *Gin* that you mention there is no doubt but those that were out of the Scrape were much amused, I assure you I wish'd much you had been of our party on thursday night at the play, I think you would have been highly entertained both with the Coronation, and the entertainment of Monsieur Tonsion [*a farce by W. T. Moncrieff*], I never laugh'd so much at a play I think, I dare say you have been much amused with M^r: Alexander [*a ventriloquist*] & I hope I shall hear some specimenes of his art from you when I return, as I dare say it is practiced in School Lane, so god bless you as I am obliged to conclude this ever believe me | Yours truly M Congreve ...

I think you will not be able with all your Greek knowledge to read this precious Scrawl

Friends

Darwin was a boarder at Shrewsbury School, close enough to home to see his family regularly. In 1825, at the age of 16, he went to Edinburgh University with his brother, Erasmus, to study medicine, but soon decided it was not for him. He then spent three years at Cambridge University, with the intention of later becoming a clergyman. In 1831, he was invited to join HMS *Beagle* as companion to the captain on a surveying voyage to South America and circumnavigation of the globe. When Darwin departed on the *Beagle* voyage, Fanny Owen of Woodhouse wrote her farewells in a letter of 26 September 1831. She had kept up a long, jokey correspondence with Darwin whenever they were apart, alluding to the games they played as children.

2. Northernhay Place, Exeter
 Monday

My dear Charles,

I have this evening heard from Caroline that you leave home the end of this week—and that you wish to have a *good bye* from me before you go. I had not the **least idea** you were to go so soon, for they told me it was the end of October you sailed, so I **hoped** and fully expected I should have been at home in time to see you— I **cannot** tell you how *disappointed & vexed* I am that that cannot be. Little did I think the last time I saw you at the poor old Forest [*Woodhouse*], that it would be **so long** before we should meet again!! This horrid Devonshire—fool that I was to come here— I shall just get home when you are gone I dare say— My dear Charles I do hope you will enjoy yourself & be the happiest of the happy, I would give any thing to see you once more before you go, for it does make me melancholy to think the time you are to be away—& Heaven knows what may have become of all of us by this time two years. at all events we **must** be grown **old** & steady— the pleasant days, and fun we have had at the Forest can never come over again— how I wish I was there this week to have one *last chat* with you I cannot bear to think you are really going *clear* away, without my saying one *good bye*!!

But I must drop this subject for I find I am getting prosy & melancholy & that wont do— They tell me you were at Plymouth about 10 days ago & so was I, how **very very** unlucky we never met, do you go there again? if you should perhaps you may pass through Exeter— I shall leave it on the 6th with the Hunts— I believe not come home direct but go with them to pay some visits— if possible I shall shirk and get the Gov— [*governor, i.e. father*] to meet me at Leamington or Birmingham for I think it will be awful *flat work*, dowagering about with the Hunts to unknown parts— I am sure I have been dull enough all this summer— hope I have expiated all my sins for a severe Penance I have had of it— I wont be *taken alive* again in that way when once I get home— *Home sweet home* you should hear me sing now— I assure you I do it **feelingly**— it would melt a heart of stone— or rather crack an **ear drum** of **Iron** to hear me—but here my powers

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have no scope I can never give vent to my feelings as I feel inclined—
 ... did you throw yourself on the Governor's mercy, & confess your
 creditors, or what have you done? What a capital way of escaping
ungentlemanlike Tailors &c— When you are *far from the Land* they may
whistle for their cash for what *you care!* Well, dont be surprised if you
 hear I have *taken Ship* too and fled my duns— that **joyful** season
 Xmas is fast approaching— my heart sinks when I think of it—but
 there's nothing like putting a good *face* on it— I shall do so as long as
 I can— Pray write to me one last Farewell my dear Charles & tell me
 all your plans & prospects—where you are to go to—& all about it?
 And tell me too if I shall look out for a nice little Wife for the *Parsonage*
 by the time you return. tell me what you require and I will look about
 and get one in *my eye* by the time you want her—a proper *knowledge*
 of the *Beetle tribe* of course you require— bye the bye has *your faithless*
 Charlotte Salway bee(n) twined off yet—I have heard nothing of her
 As for all your Sisters I think they are gone crazy or *sulky* or sleepy
 or somethi(ng) for not one line have I had from any of them these
 two months—they treat me with the most marked contempt.— I was
 much amused at Plymouth there is so much worth seeing— Mount
 Edgcombe I dare say you saw—it is a beautiful Place.— I went on
 board the Adelaide and all over it—so can fancy you in your little
 Cabin—and I assure you you will not be forgotten, I shall often long
 to have you to laugh with and *scold* out of the Painting room— I
 wish I had made your Pincushions they might have been useful—and
 occasionally in taking out an *instrument of death for a Beetle* you would
 have called to mind the Manufacturer of the *useful article*—but it cant
 be helped now— this letter is *most prosy*, & duller than letter ever was
 before—but I cant help it you must take the *will for the deed* — write to
 me 2 Northernhay Place= I must now conclude—can only add—I
 most sincerely wish you every amusement & happiness possible—but
 only wish most heartily you were not going quite so soon that we
 might have one *more talk & laugh* first—but it is *not* to be— so good
 bye my dear Charles

Believe me always yours most sincerely and *affecty* | F O—
Burn this before you sail for pitys sake —

By the time Darwin returned, in 1836, Fanny was married and had a daughter. She wrote more soberly to thank Darwin for a gift of flowers on 14 January 1837.

My dear Charles,

I am ashamed to think how ungrateful I must have appeared to you—for I believe it is more than a month since I received your beautiful present of Flowers & they have remained quite unnoticed by a line of thanks.— pray forgive me I have indeed been more or less so unwell since I received them that I have not been able to write or do

Friends

any thing else— accept now my best thanks, I was *very much* pleased by your kind recollection of me— the Flowers are the prettiest things I ever saw, much too good to wear I think & I mean to do justice to them in a *glass case*—

—I think you have used your friends very shabbily in taking flight so soon again. I had no idea you were going away for the whole winter— I hope when you have any *precious* time to throw away you will find your way to Chirk Castle— where I assure you we shall both be delighted to see you—

ever dear Charles y^{rs} most truly | F Myddelton Biddulph

Chirk Castle Jan^{ry} 14th 1837.

In 1838, Darwin married his cousin Emma, and after four years in London moved to Down in Kent. During this time there is little surviving correspondence with women other than members of his own family: Darwin was frequently ill and when he was not was busy writing and studying, establishing himself as a respected man of science. In 1849, he began to visit hydropathic establishments in search of a cure for his ill health. At two of these establishments, Moor Park in Surrey and Ilkley Wells in Yorkshire, he encountered Mary Butler, the sister of Richard Butler, the vicar of Trim in Ireland. Butler visited the Darwins at Down in 1860. Evidently she and her friend, the novelist Georgiana Craik, had discussed Darwin's theories with him. With the first surviving letter, written early in 1859, Darwin sent autographs, no doubt cut from the letters of his naturalist friends:

Down Bromley Kent
 Feb. 20th

My dear Miss Butler

I send you some autographs with a list of the men, as you, perhaps, would not know who were who. You will now be well stocked with the autographs of *Naturals*.

I made myself very pleasant at home with ghost stories & other plumes borrowed from you.

I enjoyed my fortnight extremely at Moor Park, but if I were long exposed to the very pleasant temptation of sitting between Miss Craik & you, I wonder what I should not come to believe: Honey-suckles turning into oaks would be a mere trifle & new species springing up on every Railway embankment.

Will you tell D^r Lane that I found Etty [*Henrietta, Darwin's daughter*] looking as well & as fat as before her illness.

Pray give my kindest remembrances to all the very pleasant party at Moor Park & believe me with much respect | My dear Miss Butler | Yours Truly obliged | Charles Darwin

Please to tell Lady Drysdale that I reached the Station only 14

Friends

minutes before the Train started & I should like to know when she will ever have such a triumph as that.

Later in the same year Darwin wrote to find out whether he could expect to see her at Ilkley. He was finishing work on *Origin of species*.

Down, Bromley Kent
 Sept. 11th

My dear Miss Butler

I wrote to Moor Park to enquire for your address, & was told that a letter addressed to you at Mr Tennant's would be forwarded, but that you were wandering about Scotland. This, I much fear, augurs badly for Ilkley.— My Book at last is so nearly finished that I can really & truly see that I shall be a free man at the end of this month. Our plans are rather undecided; but I incline strongly to go to Ilkley, but I fear, without I found it a very tempting place, that it is too late to take a house for my family; & in this case I should stop three or four weeks in the establishment, return home for a week or so, & then go to Moor Park for a few weeks, so as altogether to get a good dose of Hydropathy.

My object in troubling you with this note,—a trouble, which I hope & believe you will forgive—is to know whether there is any chance of your being at Ilkley in beginning of October. It would be rather terrible to go into the great place & not know a soul. But if you were there I should feel safe & home-like.— You see that all your former kindness makes me confident of receiving more kindness.

I hope that you are well & have had happy visits with your friends,
 Pray believe me, my dear Miss Butler, with truth | Yours sincerely
 obliged | Charles Darwin

In December 1862, Butler wrote her last extant letter to Darwin, asking for assistance for another fellow patient, Mr Thom. Darwin sent him £20. This letter is doubly interesting since 'asking for money, or a job, for someone' is a small but significant theme in letters to Darwin from women. Darwin had grown a beard by this time, at Emma's suggestion, possibly to reduce the irritation caused by shaving and eczema. Darwin wrote to his son William in July 1862, 'Mamma says I am to wear a beard.'

Sudbrook Park | Petersham
 Wednesday

My dear Mr Darwin

We were all relieved & made happy by Mr Darwin's account of you and I wish that I could go to you now and have the very great pleasure of being once more amongst you all, but Lady Drysdale some time since, made me promise not to leave Sudbrook till after

Friends

Christmas— We are a quiet sociable party here, & the absence of even one would make some difference in the arrangements of the house. I have an interest much at heart just now, which I fear you will not be able to assist—willing to do so I am certain you will be— You remember M^r Thom—who excited y^r. admiration by the several victories which he achieved over Brandy, Opium Tobacco—& himself!! he has been the steadiest of men ever since Clever, well educated, highly principled—modest!— For some years he has been nominally Sub Editor of the Home News (from which M^r. Robert Bell derives the revenue) but really the sole Manager of the Paper, which has an extensive circulation, & is said to be extremely well conducted—

The Sedentary life in a damp office in the City has so completely undermined his health that he is obliged to give up his employment, & has no prospect of meeting with a suitable one in this Country— so that as a last resource he is going to Queensland—at the age of 33—to spend the remainder of his days amongst Cows & Sheep (he scarcely knows one from the other) in a strange Country—where he has not even a friend; I feel for him deeply

There are many persons to whom the services of such a man would be valuable—for his abilities are excellent—& he has the highest testimonials as to character, whilst both his appearance & manner are prepossessing— It has struck me as *just possible* that you may know of some place to fit him. He has been trying to get into the Constabulary but has not the proper interest to give any hope of success— he tried for the Secretaryship to an Hospital & found that there were Six hundred Candidates!!— An Inspector of Schools he once thought of, but of that there is no chance, from the Government Interest requisite— Could you speak a good word for him in some influential quarter? he would do you no discredit I believe in any way, for he is really a superior & meritorious man?

We have felt a good deal of anxiety about M^r. Smyth—who was thrown *penniless* upon the kind family here—but M^r. Tennant of Glasgow has given him an appointment in Trinidad where he has a prospect of becoming a Planter & doing well—he sailed for the West Indies a fortnight ago.— My dear M^r. Darwin I will not excuse myself for writing all this to you, I scarcely believe in the possibility of your having it in your power to befriend poor M^r Thom, but at all events I am assured of your most kind sympathy—

My best love to M^{rs}. Darwin. I dont like the idea of your long beard. M^r. Davenport who is here—wears one from the same cause, but he has benefited wonderfully from the frequent use of the Turkish Bath—& is beginning to look perfectly handsome—

Always Sincerely & affectionately Yours | Mary Butler

The Darwin and Huxley families became close not only because of scientific sympathies between Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley but because

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they both had many children, and the Darwins, who were older and better established, gave the Huxleys a good deal of practical and emotional support, on occasion transferring the whole family from London to Down for a rest. Henrietta Huxley, Thomas's wife, liked to tease Darwin with literature.

Dear Mr Darwin

Hal has just brought me your note containing your slyly disparaging remarks on my beloved Tennyson—& quoting “as a gem”

‘And he meant, he said | he meant, | Perhaps he meant, or partly | meant you well.’

In the first place it was very mean of you to give the lines without the context shockingly Owenlike [*an allusion to Darwin's adversary, the anatomist Richard Owen*]

Secondly. The lines only convince me more than ever that Tennyson is quite master of his situation. Could you better render in words, the desire in the wife's mind to do justice, to—her enemy I suppose for I have not read “Sea Dreams”, together with the conflicting feeling which yet possessed her of his insincerity? I am very pleased that Tennyson accredits the feminine mind with such a strong sense of justice.

I now refer to the book—I am grieved to find that a philosopher of your repute—should have damaged your reputation for accuracy so greatly as to tell me that the quotation was from “Enoch Arden” whereas it was from “Sea Dreams”—If the “facts?!” in the Origin of Species are of this sort—I agree with the Bishop of Oxford— [*Samuel Wilberforce had criticised the Origin of species at the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in 1860.*]

Yours too sincerely | Henrietta Huxley

love to your dear wife & ask her for a screed.

New Year's Day | 1865.

In 1872, the Huxleys moved house.

at Miss Woodington's | The Common | Sevenoaks
 Oct. 16th

My dear Mr^s Huxley

Every man has a right to give a friend a marriage present; & going into a new house is nearly as serious & dangerous an affair as marriage.—Therefore I have a full right to enjoy the pleasure of making you a marriage present. I defy your husband, with all his sharpness, to pick a hole in this logic. But here comes my difficulty: I want to give something useful & not poetical, & I thought of asking to be allowed to furnish your dining room; but then I know not what furniture you already have. Now will you not allow me to treat you, as I have treated

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some of my near relations (& I am sure that I feel like a near relation to you all) & ask you to buy something with the enclosed for your self.—

Do grant me this favour.— I was very sorry to hear so poor an account of your husband's state, both for my own sake, & you must know what admiration & affection I feel for him, & for the sake of the whole world.— I hope that he may soon improve, & there is at least one comfort in indigestion, with all its miseries, that there is always a good chance of a prompt cure.—

Pray believe me, my dear | M^{rs} Huxley.— | Yours affectionately | Charles Darwin

Mary Catherine Stanley, Lady Derby, was the daughter of George Sackville-West, Earl De La Warr; she married James Gascoyne-Cecil, the marquess of Salisbury, and after his death she married Edward Henry Stanley, the earl of Derby. Her *ODNB* entry describes her as a politician manqué, and speculates that her childhood friendship with the duke of Wellington might have been the source of her fascination with 'politics, diplomacy, and war, and her preference for male conversation'. Her second marriage brought her to Holwood House, in Keston, Kent, not far from Darwin's house at Down. Her letters to Darwin are notably brisk and brief. They begin with a shared interest in the writings of the psychic investigator William Crookes, on 16 November 1871:

Holwood | Beckenham
 Thursday Evg

Dear M^r: Darwin

I could not lose a moment on my return home—& read the article most eagerly. You will be obliged to believe that M^r: Crookes has "a craze". It staggers **me** a good deal.—but I know that my imagination is apt to overpower my judgment!—

I wish I had seen you after you had read the article. I sh^d have liked so much to hear what effect it produced on you!—

Y^{rs} very sincerely | M C Derby

Down | Beckenham | Kent
 Saturday

Dear Lady Derby

If you had called here after I had read the article you would have found a much perplexed man. I cannot disbelieve M^r: Crookes' statement, nor can I believe in his result. It has removed some of my difficulty that the supposed power [*altering the weight of objects remotely*] is not an anomaly, but is common in a lesser degree to various persons. It is also a consolation to reflect that gravity acts at any distance, in some wholly unknown manner, & so may nerve force. Nothing is so difficult to decide as where to draw a just line between scepticism & credulity.

Friends

It was a very long time before scientific men would believe in the fall of aerolites [*meteorites*]; & this was chiefly owing to so much bad evidence, as in the present case, being mixed up with the good.

All sorts of objects were said to have been seen falling from the sky—

I very much hope that a number of men, such as Professor Stokes will be induced to witness M^r. Crookes' experiments.

Pray believe me | your Ladyship's | truly obliged | Charles Darwin

23. S^t. James's Square. | S.W.
 June 4/72

Dear Mr. Darwin

Sackville [*Sackville Cecil, Lady Derby's son*] would be extremely pleased to be allowed to be present with M^r. Galton at a Séance of M^r. Crookes'.—tho' he doubts being able to form any opinion without going thoroughly into the Evidence, & this,—with the work he has in hand would not be possible.

But the truth is I am very eager Sackville should be at one of M^r. Crookes' séances, & if you think it likely M^r. C. w^d. allow him to go with M^r. Galton—w^d. it be asking too much of you to try to arrange it? Sackville is very sceptical on the point but very curious— I am all ready to hear of a new force & very curious indeed.

...
 Believe me | Y^{rs} very sincerely | M C Derby

As an occasional neighbour of Darwin's, Lady Derby took an interest in the district, but was rarely able to visit. In this letter, a visit from her has almost coincided with a visit from two ornithologists, one Russian, one American.

Fairhill, | Tunbridge.
 Sept 14/75

Dear M^r. Darwin

It was very good of you to write to me yest^r. & I thank you much for telling me such exact truth. I was very much disappointed not to go to Down, but sh^d. have been in despair had I found myself arriving at an inconvenient moment. I must now defer my visit till November, for we go to the North early next week.

I went on to Keston to see M^r. Carlyle; the country air has done him great good & I want him to linger on at Keston till the fine weather leaves us. [*Lord Derby had put Keston Lodge at Thomas Carlyle's disposal for the summer of 1875.*] I suspect he is getting rather dull, & is half sorry to have been so unsociable to his neighbours on his first arrival!

Friends

I was in the New Forest the other day & saw some birch trees with bark exactly like that of the birch in Holwood which I remember hearing you speak of.

Believe me | dear M^r Darwin | Yrs very sincerely | M C Derby
 I hope M^{rs} Darwin's headache has passed away

In 1875 she wrote to thank Darwin, probably for praising Lord Derby's inaugural address as rector of the University of Edinburgh.

Knowsley, | Prescott.
 22 Dec^r/75

Dear M^r Darwin

Though you tell me not to answer your most kind note I cannot help disobeying you: Your warm & genuine expressions of approval have given L^d Derby more pleasure than any other compliment he has received, & you must forgive me for saying so.— We made two short visits to Keston last month, but I was never able to find time to get as far as Down.

We are more & more pleased with Keston each time we go there.

Will you remember me kindly to M^{rs} Darwin & believe me | Y^{rs} very sincerely | M C Derby

Knowsley, | Prescott.
 19 Sept/77

Dear M^r Darwin

Count Schouvaloff [*Peter Andreivich Shuvàlov, Russian ambassador to London*] has been asserting today that your works are still prohibited in Russia. I told him your story as you told it to me, but he thinks I have made a mistake. If you would not mind dictating a letter to me stating what you believe to be true, I sh^d be much interested to be able to tell him that *he* was mistaken.

Still if you prefer to let the matter alone take no notice of my request.

Yrs very sincerely | M C Derby

23. St. James's Square. | S.W.
 May 24/78

Dear M^r Darwin

My brother who has just returned from S. America has brought from the River Plate the accompanying fragment of bone from a fish's head called *Corbin*; he is very anxious to know if it ever came under your notice. There are two of these bony substances in the head of every fish. Fibrous threads diverge from the rough part in the interior—as if this substance were the covering of the brain! if one can venture to speak of the brain of a fish.