

# LIFE AND LETTERS

OF

# CHARLES DARWIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE DARWIN FAMILY.

THE earliest records of the family show the Darwins to have been substantial yeomen residing on the northern borders of Lincolnshire, close to Yorkshire. The name is now very unusual in England, but I believe that it is not unknown in the neighbourhood of Sheffield and in Lancashire. Down to the year 1600 we find the name spelt in a variety of ways—Derwent, Darwen, Darwynne, &c. It is possible, therefore, that the family migrated at some unknown date from Yorkshire, Cumberland, or Derbyshire, where Derwent occurs as the name of a river.

The first ancestor of whom we know was one William Darwin, who lived, about the year 1500, at Marton, near Gainsborough. His great grandson, Richard Darwyn, inherited land at Marton and elsewhere, and in his will, dated 1584, “bequeathed the sum of 3*s.* 4*d.* towards the setting up of the Queene’s Majestie’s armes over the quearie (choir) doore in the parishe churche of Marton.”\*

The son of this Richard, named William Darwin, and described as “gentleman,” appears to have been a successful

\* We owe a knowledge of these earlier members of the family to researches amongst the wills at Lincoln, made by the well-known genealogist, Colonel Chester.

Cambridge University Press

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man. Whilst retaining his ancestral land at Marton, he acquired through his wife and by purchase an estate at Cleatham, in the parish of Manton, near Kirton Lindsey, and fixed his residence there. This estate remained in the family down to the year 1760. A cottage with thick walls, some fish-ponds and old trees, now alone show where the "Old Hall" once stood, and a field is still locally known as the "Darwin Charity," from being subject to a charge in favour of the poor of Marton. William Darwin must, at least in part, have owed his rise in station to his appointment in 1613 by James I. to the post of Yeoman of the Royal Armoury of Greenwich. The office appears to have been worth only £33 a year, and the duties were probably almost nominal; he held the post down to his death during the Civil Wars.

The fact that this William was a royal servant may explain why his son, also named William, served when almost a boy for the King, as "Captain-Lieutenant" in Sir William Pelham's troop of horse. On the partial dispersion of the royal armies, and the retreat of the remainder to Scotland, the boy's estates were sequestered by the Parliament, but they were redeemed on his signing the Solemn League and Covenant, and on his paying a fine which must have struck his finances severely; for in a petition to Charles II. he speaks of his almost utter ruin from having adhered to the royal cause.

During the Commonwealth, William Darwin became a barrister of Lincoln's Inn, and this circumstance probably led to his marriage with the daughter of Erasmus Earle, serjeant-at-law; hence his great-grandson, Erasmus Darwin, the Poet, derived his Christian name. He ultimately became Recorder of the city of Lincoln.

The eldest son of the Recorder, again called William, was born in 1655, and married the heiress of Robert Waring, a member of a good Staffordshire family. This lady inherited from the family of Lassells, or Lascelles, the manor and hall of Elston, near Newark, which has remained ever since in the

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## THE DARWIN FAMILY.

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family.\* A portrait of this William Darwin at Elston shows him as a good-looking young man in a full-bottomed wig.

This third William had two sons, William, and Robert who was educated as a barrister. The Cleatham property was left to William, but on the termination of his line in daughters reverted to the younger brother, who had received Elston. On his mother's death Robert gave up his profession and resided ever afterwards at Elston Hall. Of this Robert, Charles Darwin writes †:—

“He seems to have had some taste for science, for he was an early member of the well-known Spalding Club; and the celebrated antiquary Dr. Stukeley, in ‘An Account of the almost entire Skeleton of a large Animal,’ &c., published in the ‘Philosophical Transactions,’ April and May 1719, begins the paper as follows: ‘Having an account from my friend, Robert Darwin, Esq., of Lincoln’s Inn, a person of curiosity, of a human skeleton 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.’ Judging from a sort of litany written by Robert, and handed down in the family, he 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!

\* Captain Lassells, or Lascelles, of Elston was military secretary to Monk, Duke of Albemarle, during the Civil Wars. A large volume of account-books, countersigned in many places by Monk, are now in the possession of my cousin Francis Darwin. The accounts might possibly prove of interest to the antiquarian or historian. A portrait of

Captain Lassells in armour, although used at one time as an archery-target by some small boys of our name, was not irretrievably ruined.

† What follows is quoted from Charles Darwin's biography of his grandfather, forming the preliminary notice to Ernst Krause's interesting essay, ‘Erasmus Darwin,’ London, 1879, p. 4.

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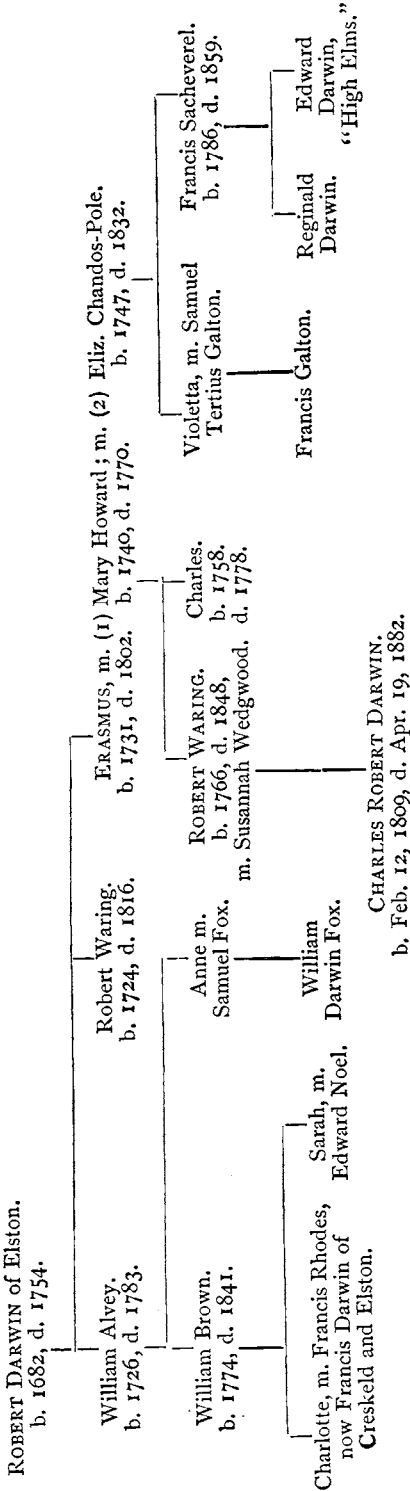
“It is suspected that the third line may be accounted for by his wife, the mother of Erasmus, having been a very learned lady. The eldest son of Robert, christened Robert Waring, succeeded to the estate of Elston, and died there at the age of ninety-two, a bachelor. He had a strong taste for poetry, like his youngest brother Erasmus. Robert also cultivated botany, and, when an oldish man, he published his ‘*Principia Botanica*.’ This book in MS. was beautifully written, and my father [Dr. R. W. Darwin] declared that he believed it was published because his old uncle could not endure that such fine calligraphy should be wasted. But this 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, inherited Elston, and transmitted it to his granddaughter, the late Mrs. Darwin, of Elston and Creskeld. A third son, John, became rector of Elston, the living being in the gift of the family. The fourth son, and youngest child, was Erasmus Darwin, the poet and philosopher.

The table on page 5 shows Charles Darwin’s descent from Robert, and his relationship to some other members of the family, whose names occur in his correspondence. Among these are included William Darwin Fox, one of his earliest correspondents, and Francis Galton, with whom he maintained a warm friendship for many years. Here also occurs the name of Francis Sacheverel Darwin, who inherited a love of natural history from Erasmus, and transmitted it to his son Edward Darwin, author (under the name of “High Elms”) of a ‘*Gamekeeper’s Manual*’ (4th Edit. 1863), which shows keen observation of the habits of various animals.

It is always interesting to see how far a man’s personal characteristics can be traced in his forefathers. Charles Darwin inherited the tall stature, but not the bulky figure of

TABLE OF RELATIONSHIP.



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Erasmus; but in his features there is no traceable resemblance to those of his grandfather. Nor, it appears, had Erasmus the love of exercise and of field-sports, so characteristic of Charles Darwin as a young man, though he had, like his grandson, an indomitable love of hard mental work. Benevolence and sympathy with others, and a great personal charm of manner, were common to the two. Charles Darwin possessed, in the highest degree, that "vividness of imagination" of which he speaks as strongly characteristic of Erasmus, and as leading "to his overpowering tendency to theorise and generalise." This tendency, in the case of Charles Darwin, was fully kept in check by the determination to test his theories to the utmost. Erasmus had a strong love of all kinds of mechanism, for which Charles Darwin had no taste. Neither had Charles Darwin the literary temperament which made Erasmus a poet as well as a philosopher. He writes of Erasmus: \* "Throughout his letters I have been struck with his indifference to fame, and the complete absence of all signs of any over-estimation of his own abilities, or of the success of his works." These, indeed, seem indications of traits most strikingly prominent in his own character. Yet we get no evidence in Erasmus of the intense modesty and simplicity that marked Charles Darwin's whole nature. But by the quick bursts of anger provoked in Erasmus, at the sight of any inhumanity or injustice, we are again reminded of him.

On the whole, however, it seems to me that we do not know enough of the essential personal tone of Erasmus Darwin's character to attempt more than a superficial comparison; and I am left with an impression that, in spite of many resemblances, the two men were of a different type. It has been shown that Miss Seward and Mrs. Schimmelpenninck have misrepresented Erasmus Darwin's character.† It is, however,

\* 'Life of Erasmus Darwin,' p. 68.

† Ibid. pp. 77, 79, &amp;c.

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extremely probable that the faults which they exaggerate were to some extent characteristic of the man; and this leads me to think that Erasmus had a certain acerbity or severity of temper which did not exist in his grandson.

The sons of Erasmus Darwin inherited in some degree his intellectual tastes, for Charles Darwin writes of them as follows\* :—

“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 received 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 . . . He also inherited stammering. With the hope of curing him, his father sent him to France, when about eight years old (1766–67), with a private tutor, thinking that if he was not allowed to speak English for a time, the habit of stammering might be lost; and it is a curious fact, 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 was sent for a year to [Christ Church] Oxford, but he did not like the place, and thought (in the words of his father) that the ‘vigour of his 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 inquiry on pus and mucus. Notices of him appeared in various journals; and all the writers agree about his uncommon energy and abilities. He seems like his father to have excited the warm affection of his friends. Professor

\* ‘Life of Erasmus Darwin,’ p. 80.

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Andrew Duncan . . . . spoke . . . . about him with the warmest affection forty-seven years after his death when I was a young medical student at Edinburgh . . .

“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 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.” His death by suicide, in 1799, seems to have taken place in a state of incipient insanity.

Robert Waring, the father of Charles Darwin, was born May 30, 1766, and entered the medical profession like his father. He studied for a few months at Leyden, and took his M.D.\* at that University on Feb. 26, 1785. “His father” (Erasmus) “brought† him to Shrewsbury before he was twenty-one years old (1787), and left him £20, saying, ‘Let me know when you want more, and I will send it you.’ His

\* I owe this information to the kindness of Professor Rauwenhoff, Director of the Archives at Leyden. He quotes from the catalogue of doctors that “Robertus Waring Darwin, Anglo-britannus,” defended (Feb. 26, 1785) in the Senate a Dissertation on the coloured images seen after looking at a bright object, and “Medicinæ Doctor creatus est a clar. Paradijs.” The archives of Leyden University are so complete

that Professor Rauwenhoff is able to tell me that my grandfather lived together with a certain “Petrus Crompton, Anglus,” in lodgings in the Apothekersdijk. Dr. Darwin’s Leyden dissertation was published in the ‘Philosophical Transactions,’ and my father used to say that the work was in fact due to Erasmus Darwin.—F. D.  
 † ‘Life of Erasmus Darwin,’ p. 85.



uncle, the rector of Elston, afterwards also sent him £20, and this was the sole pecuniary aid \* which he ever received . . . 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.”

Robert Waring Darwin married (April 18, 1796) Susannah, the daughter of his father’s friend, Josiah Wedgwood, of Etruria, then in her thirty-second year. We have a miniature of her, with a remarkably sweet and happy face, bearing some resemblance to the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of her father; a countenance expressive of the gentle and sympathetic nature which Miss Meteyard ascribes to her.† She died July 15, 1817, thirty-two years before her husband, whose death occurred on November 13, 1848. Dr. Darwin lived before his marriage for two or three years on St. John’s Hill, afterwards at the Crescent, where his eldest daughter Marianne was born, lastly at the “Mount,” in the part of Shrewsbury known as Frankwell, where the other children were born. This house was built by Dr. Darwin about 1800, it is now in the possession of Mr. Spencer Phillips, and has undergone but little alteration. It is a large, plain, square, red-brick house, of which the most attractive feature is the pretty green-house, opening out of the morning-room.

The house is charmingly placed, on the top of a steep bank leading down to the Severn. The terraced bank is traversed by a long walk, leading from end to end, still called “the Doctor’s Walk.” At one point in this walk grows a Spanish chestnut, the branches of which bend back parallel to themselves in a curious manner, and this was Charles Darwin’s favourite tree as a boy, where he and his sister Catherine had each their special seat.

The Doctor took great pleasure in his garden, planting it

\* See errata. † ‘A Group of Englishmen,’ by Miss Meteyard, 1871.

Cambridge University Press

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with ornamental trees and shrubs, and being especially successful in fruit-trees; and this love of plants was, I think, the only taste kindred to natural history which he possessed. Of the "Mount pigeons," which Miss Meteyard describes as illustrating Dr. Darwin's natural-history tastes, I have not been able to hear from those most capable of knowing. Miss Meteyard's account of him is not quite accurate in a few points. For instance, it is incorrect to describe Dr. Darwin as having a philosophical mind; his was a mind especially given to detail, and not to generalising. Again, those who knew him intimately describe him as eating remarkably little, so that he was not "a great feeder, eating a goose for his dinner, as easily as other men do a partridge." \* In the matter of dress he was conservative, and wore to the end of his life knee-breeches and drab gaiters, which, however, certainly did not, as Miss Meteyard says, button above the knee—a form of costume chiefly known to us in grenadiers of Queen Anne's day, and in modern wood-cutters and ploughboys.

Charles Darwin had the strongest feeling of love and respect for his father's memory. His recollection of everything that was connected with him was peculiarly distinct, and he spoke of him frequently; generally prefacing an anecdote with some such phrase as, "My father, who was the wisest man I ever knew, &c." It was astonishing how clearly he remembered his father's opinions, so that he was able to quote some maxims or hint of his in most cases of illness. As a rule he put small faith in doctors, and thus his unlimited belief in Dr. Darwin's medical instinct, and methods of treatment was all the more striking.

His reverence for him was boundless and most touching. He would have wished to judge everything else in the world dispassionately, but anything his father had said was received with almost implicit faith. His daughter Mrs. Litchfield remembers him saying that he hoped none of his sons would

\* 'A Group of Englishmen,' p. 263.