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978-1-108-00616-3 - Erasmus Darwin
Ernst Krause and Charles Robert Darwin
Excerpt
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PRELIMINARY NOTICE.

ERASMUS DARWIN was descended from a Lincolnshire family, and the first of his ancestors of whom we know anything was William Darwin, who possessed a small estate at Cleatham.* 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. He 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 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 the second Mrs. Darwin, for buying gowns for four old widows every year.

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[More information](#)

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; and hence Erasmus Darwin derived his Christian name.

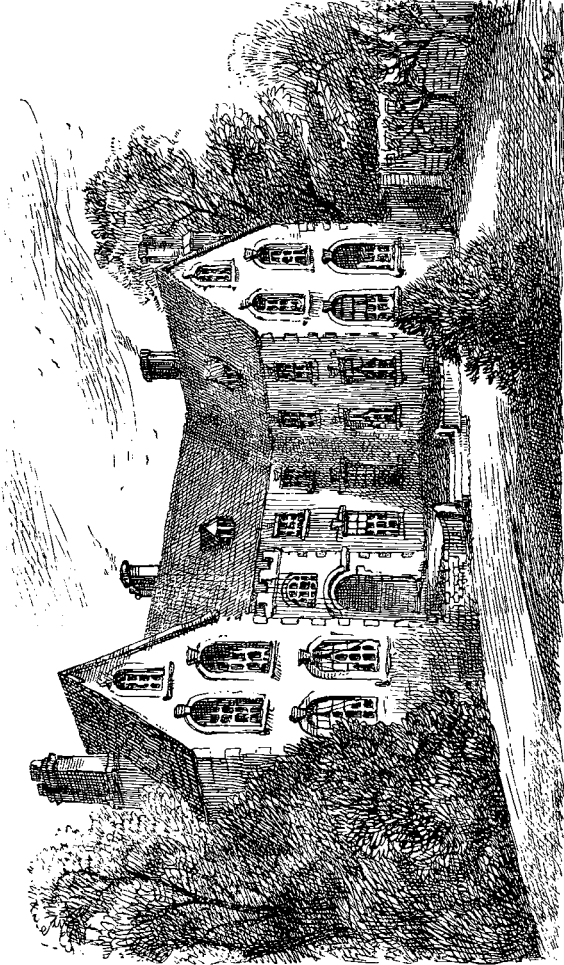
The eldest son from this marriage, William (born 1655), married the heiress of Robert Waring, of Wilsford, in the county of Nottingham. This lady also inherited the manor of Elston, which has remained ever since in the family.

This third William Darwin had two sons—William, and Robert who was educated as a barrister, and who was the father of Erasmus. I suppose that 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

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

ERASMUS DARWIN.

3



Elston Hall (where Erasmus Darwin was born), as it existed before 1754.

B 2

Cambridge University Press
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Excerpt
[More information](#)

the latter married, he gave up his profession and lived ever afterwards at Elston. There is a portrait of him 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 well-known 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 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.

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

ERASMUS DARWIN.

5

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 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.

Of the second son, William Alvey, I know nothing. A third son, John, became the rector of Elston, the living being in the gift of the family. The fourth son, and the youngest of the children, was Erasmus, the subject of the present memoir, who was born on the 12th Dec. 1731, at Elston Hall.

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

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 mechanicks. 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 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.”

When ten years old (1741), he was sent to Chesterfield School, where he remained for nine years. His sister, Susannah, wrote to him at school in 1748, and I give part of the letter as a curiosity. She was then a young lady between eighteen and nineteen years old. She died unmarried, and her nephew, Dr. Robert Darwin (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

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 Excerpt
[More information](#)

ERASMUS DARWIN.

7

of her letter consists of gossip and family news, and is not worth giving.

SUSANNAH DARWIN *to* ERASMUS.

DEAR BROTHER,

I come now to y^e chief design of my Letter, and that is to acquaint you with my Abstinence this Lent, which you will find on y^e other side, it being a strict account of y^e first 5 days, and all y^e rest has been conformable thereto; I shall be glad to hear from you wth an account of your temperance this lent, w^{ch} I expect far exceeds mine. As soon as we kill our hog I intend to take part thereof with y^e Family, for I'm informed by a learned Divine y^t Hogs Flesh is Fish, and has been so ever since y^e Devil entered into y^m and they ran into y^e Sea; if you and the rest of the Casuists in your neighbourhood are of y^e 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 Bro^r.

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;

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 Excerpt
[More information](#)

yⁿ took a walk, came in again and eate a farthing Loaf, yⁿ dress'd me, red a Chapter in y^e Bible, and spun till One, yⁿ dined temperately viz: on Puddin, Bread and Cheese; spun again till Fore, took a walk, yⁿ spun till half an hour past Five; eat an Apple, Chattered round y^e Fire; and at Seven a little boyl'd Milk; and yⁿ (takeing my leave of Cards y^e night before) spun till nine; drank a Glass of Wine for y^e 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 y^e Hens' Eggs; breakfasted on Oat Cake, and Balm Tea; yⁿ dress'd and spun till One, Pease Porrage, Pottatoes and Apple Pye; yⁿ 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 y^e Tatlar and at Ten withdrew to Prayers; slept sound; rose before Seven; eat a Pear; breakfast a quarter past Eight; fed y^e Cats, went to Church; at One Pease Porrage, Puddin, Bread and Cheese; Fore Mrs. Chapells came, Five drank Tea; Six eat half an Apple; Seven a Porreng of Boyl'd Milk; red in y^e Tatlar; at Eight a Glass of Punch; filled up ye vacancies of y^e day with work as before.

Saturday Clock being too slow lay rather longar yⁿ usal; said my Prayers; and breakfasted at Eight; at One broth, Pudding, Brocoli and Eggs, and

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 Ernst Krause and Charles Robert Darwin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

ERASMUS DARWIN.

9

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 y^e
 Chappell ; 12 Dumplin, red Herring, Bread and
 Cheese ; two to y^e Church ; read a Lent Sermon at
 Six ; and at Seven Appel Pye Bread and Cheese.

Excuse hast, being very cold.

ERASMUS, ÆTAT. 16, to SUSANNAH DARWIN.

DEAR SISTER,

I receiv'd yours about a fortnight after y^e date
 y^t 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 y^e
 whole : and not having had a convenient oppertunity
 to consult a Synod of my learned friends about your
 ingenious Conscience, and I must inform you we
 unanimously agree in y^e Opinion of y^e Learned
 Divine you mention, that Swine may indeed be fish
 but then they are a devillish sort of fish ; and we can
 prove from y^e 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

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

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 y^e 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 y^t your Cheek was quite settled by your Temperance, but however I can easily suppose it. For y^e temperate enjoy an ever-blooming Health free from all y^e Infections and disorders luxurious mortals are subject to, the whimsical Tribe of Phisitians cheated of their fees may sit down in penury and Want, they may curse mankind and imprecate the Gods and call down y^t parent of all Deseases, luxury, to infest Mankind, luxury more destructive than y^e Sharpest Famine; tho' all the Distempers that ever Satan inflicted upon Job hover over y^e 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 y^e land, and Sedentary Stone would vanish into oblivion and death himself be slain.