

THE FATHER OF EVOLUTION †

A. G. TILNEY*

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) had roots—his taproot being the influence of his learned, terrific and overpowering grandfather Dr. Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) of Tichfield and Derby whom of course he never saw.

Charles R. Darwin was named after the first son of Erasmus (whose untimely death as a brilliant medical student at Edinburgh he called the cruelest blow of his life) and the third son Robert, who himself became a famous doctor.

In *Zoonomia* (or "The Laws of Organic Life") Erasmus argued that all organisms may be descended through "millions of ages" from a single ancestral filament. He was scornful of organized religion and included credulity, superstitious hope and the fear of hell in his catalogue of diseases.

In Coleridge's opinion, Erasmus Darwin had "a greater range of knowledge than any other man in Europe". He "won fame in his own lifetime for a variety of accomplishments which has never since been equalled". He was the finest physician in his day. As a poet of some renown, he influenced Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley.

The subjects to which he contributed most were geology, meteorology, agricultural chemistry, plant physiology and, above all, biology, where he propounded the first satisfactory theory of evolution with examples in support, thus anticipating his grandson Charles, whose work is closely linked with his own.

His second long poem, *The Temple of Nature*, traces the evolution of life from its origin as microscopic specks in primeval seas to its present culmination in man. Creation and the Creator had been largely ruled out in the Darwin family without any serious study of the textbook on creation, or correction of any competent defenders of the Faith. At the same time, an unproved and unprovable theory, revived from the ancient and pagan Greeks and Romans had been substituted, almost without effective challenge.

The youthful Charles' mind was sown with the ideas and suggestions of his grandfather, which he sorted out rather than thought out, and half fancied he had himself originated. During the centenary celebrations of *The Origin of Species*, Prof. C. D. Darlington, was almost the only writer who did not join in the chorus of praise. His thoughtful and informed book, *Darwin's Place in History*, is a corrective of the fulsomeness accorded Charles Darwin's epoch-making discovery of natural selection and evolution.

Darlington analyzed the factors leading to the myth,

It was no accident of heredity that remarkable gifts reappeared in Erasmus's grandchildren. For the character of Darwin's descendants no less than the character of his work depended on the companions he gathered around him. The "Lunar Society" he assembled was intellectually the most effectual group that has ever come together in England. Its members and their friends were all Fellows of the Royal Society of London. But it was in the Midlands that they established the Industrial Revolution, and it was largely through the pen of Erasmus Darwin, when he moved to Derby, that they illumined the century which followed. The fact that their children and grandchildren intermarried was another consequence of their friendships of continuing significance for our society.

Erasmus Darwin's works enjoyed success at home and abroad. *Zoonomia* appeared in French, German, Russian and Italian, with a pirated edition in New York. Also it prompted Malthus's *Essay on Population* four years later. Then 40 years later it helped to give Charles Darwin as well as Wallace the idea of natural selection. Samuel Butler supposes that it was Darwin's *Loves of the Plants* which, translated in 1800 into French, converted Lamarck to a belief in the transformation of species.

These were the works which Charles Darwin read as a young man at the University of Edinburgh. *It was from them that he learned about the theory of evolution.*

He gave minimal and reluctant recognition to his grandfather and thus deceived three generations into believing in his originality, whereas in fact his very slogans—*evolution, natural selection, and survival of the fittest*—were adopted from Herbert Spencer.

By virtually disowning his predecessors, Charles was declaring himself a pioneer and creator, claiming the fame he so ardently desired. No wonder Darlington accuses him of having "damned Lamarck and also his grandfather for being very ill-dressed fellows at the very moment that he was engaged on stealing their clothes".

There are plenty of parallels between *Zoonomia* and *The Origin of Species*. Almost every topic discussed in *Zoonomia*, and every example given, reappears in *The Origin*. As to sexual selection, "Every point which Charles made in *The Origin of Species* was to be found in Erasmus's analysis."

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