

**RECORD:** Anon. 1880. [Review of] Erasmus Darwin. *New York Times* (16 Feb), p. 3.

**REVISION HISTORY:** Transcribed by Christine Chua and edited by John van Wyhe 4.2020.  
RN1.

**NOTE:** Darwin, C. R. 1879. Preliminary notice. In Krause, E., Erasmus Darwin. Translated from the German by W. S. Dallas, with a preliminary notice by Charles Darwin. (F1319)

[page] 3

The increased importance which the theory of evolution in its Darwinian form has given to ancestry will naturally apply most forcibly to that brilliant and thorough thinker whose name represents to many readers the first and last of evolution: If Charles Darwin has made an epoch in human thought for the nineteenth century, how much of his intellectual force can be traced to his ancestors? Erasmus Darwin, the author of "Zoonomia" and the "Botanic Garden," has fallen so completely out of sight, owing to the want of literary excellence in his works, that few people thought of connecting the originality of the grandson with what happened to be the dullness of the grandsire.

Last year Dr. Ernst Krause published in *Kosmos* a sketch of the life of Erasmus Darwin, under the title "Contribution to the History of Descent Theory." It is now translated by W. S. Dallas, and published together with a sketch by Charles Darwin.

From the latter we learn that the Darwin family belong in Lincolnshire since James I. A William Darwin fought for Charles II, was beggared, and became a barrister. Robert Darwin, elder brother to Erasmus, wrote poetry, and was a botanist, publishing "Principia Botanica." Erasmus was born at Elston Hall in 1731, was a very good and diligent school-boy, graduated with honors at Cambridge, and studied medicine in Edinburgh, (1754.) He corresponded with the German philosopher Reimaras, and many other distinguished men, and fell into acquaintance with Rousseau by chance during the stay of the latter in England.

Rousseau was staying at Wootton Hall in 1766, and spent much of his time "in the well-known cave upon the terrace, in melancholy contemplation." He disliked being interrupted, but, on seeing Dr. Darwin, while passing the eave, stop to examine a plant, came out of his gloominess and spoke. They afterward corresponded. The father of Maria Edgeworth was his friend for life, and testified to the worth of his character, as was also Dr. Day, the eccentric author of the much-read and much-derided boy's book, "Sandford and Merton." The term "benevolent" was associated with the name of Erasmus Darwin, much as "judicious" was connected with that of Hooker.

Robert Darwin, his son, reported that Dr. Darwin had great powers of conversation. Although it is a fact that he stammered, Lady Charleville reported that Dr. Darwin was one of the most agreeable men whom she had ever met. A young man once asked him in, as he thought an offensive manner, whether he did not find stammering very inconvenient. He answered, "No, Sir, it gives me time for reflection, and saves me from asking impertinent questions." Dr. Johnson in his visits to Lichfield rarely met Erasmus Darwin; they seem, Charles Darwin states to have disliked each other cordially, and to have felt that if they met they would have

quarreled like two dogs. There can, he adds, be little doubt that Johnson would have come off victorious. Dr. Darwin evidently alluded to Johnson's edition of "Shakespeare" in the following squib found in a volume of manuscripts belonging to him:

"From Lichfield two giant critics come,  
Tremble, ye poet, hear them! 'Fe, Fo, Fum!'  
By Seward's arm the mangled Beaumont bled,  
And Johnson grinds poor Shakespeare's bones for bread."

Dr. Darwin was no atheist, although the rustics thought him a conjurer. Besides the premonitions of Lamarck's theory of evolution, found by Dr. Krause in his poetic writings, Erasmus Darwin foreshadowed the enlightened treatment of the insane, reasons for "catching cold," the truth and importance of the principle of inheritance in disease, the use of sewage for agriculture, and the true principle of the artesian well.

This little book, therefore, gives two sides of Erasmus Darwin, one being his character as seen by a descendant; the other, his relations to the reasonings and discoveries of Charles Darwin.