

Erasmus Darwin M.D.

(Contributor.)

Two things distinguished the Darwin family—gout and a great faculty for observation and scientific speculation. Suffering from gout prompted Erasmus to adopt a style of living almost vegetarian and to eschew malt and spirituous liquors almost to abstinence. The subject of this sketch was grandfather to Charles Darwin, whose name as the reputed father of the doctrine of evolution is a household word throughout the world, and perhaps possessed a more powerful and original mind than the illustrious grandson, though this opinion will probably be questioned by admirers of the latter. Erasmus Darwin died at the close of the eighteenth century, leaving behind him a wealthy inheritance of speculation and suggestion as to the habits, tendencies and origin of the inhabitants of the air, seas and land. Indeed he is legitimately entitled to be designated the parent of the doctrine of evolution and the survival of the fittest. Later investigators of the Flora and Fauna of the world may have detected incorrect reading of phenomena and hasty generalization, but notwithstanding all his mistakes he stands out Primus in the theory of evolution.

On the decline of the teachings and influence of the Puritans, who are decried by many for their narrowness and sourness, and lauded by others for their pure morals and religious zeal and constancy, deism began to prevail

in England. Erasmus Darwin imbibed their opinions, which, while acknowledging God as the Great First cause of the universe, rejected all supernatural verbal revelation, and accordingly all the peculiar doctrines of Christianity, such as the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the miracles recorded in the New Testament. With the deists he cast in his lot, but in his memoirs there is no evidence that he observed any forms of worship either private or public.

The profession by which he procured a livelihood was medicine. His three fields of professional activity were Lichfield, Nottingham, and Derby, in the latter of which he died. He must have made a name for himself in his practice, because a member of the Royal Family journeyed from London north to consult him, while George III invited him to come to London and he would appoint him his physician. The invitation, however, his wife and himself thought it best to decline with thanks. On one occasion he was visited by an invalid gentleman all the way from London who was importunately anxious to know if he were dying. Dr. Darwin said he was. The patient asked how long he might live. The answer was, a fortnight. The Dr., surprised that a gentleman from London, where he could command the most noted physicians, should travel so far to consult him, remarked that he was astonished he had not waited on Dr. Warren. Alas,

replied the invalid, I am Dr. Warren. All this implies that his professional skill was held in general and high respect.

Several persons of literary proclivities, two of whom were ladies who have figured as voluminous authoresses, have given the public a narrative of Dr. E. Darwin as a medical man, scientist and poet. Unfortunately the two ladies from some cause or other were led to publish things about him which they afterwards had to withdraw, very much to their chagrin. It was right, however, that they should be made to apologise, for even ladies have no license to asperse others. The book to which I am chiefly indebted for my information is entitled "Erasmus Darwin, by Ernst Krause, translated from the German by W. S. Dallas, With a Preliminary Notice by Charles Darwin, 1879." C. Darwin's part of the book is a brief account of personal and family matters, and Krause's an estimate and criticism of the Scientific Works. It is popularly composed, full of interest, and very readable, and cannot fail to amuse, instruct and stimulate the mind of any ordinary reader.

Mr Darwin was a poet of considerable distinction, and what may be regarded as somewhat remarkable, he employed the form of poetry to expound, illustrate and commend his scientific theories. The paragraphs given of his Muse are so striking as to produce regret that one has not access to all he

has published. Horace Walpole in a letter says,—“The Triumph of Flora,” is most beautifully and enchantingly imagined; and the twelve verses that by miracle describe and comprehend the creation of the universe out of chaos, are in my opinion the most sublime passages in any author, or in any of the few languages with which I am acquainted. There are a thousand other verses most charming, crowded with most poetic imagery, gorgeous epithets and style.” Mr Edgeworth says,—“I read the description of the ‘Ballet of Medea’ to my sisters, and to eight or ten of my own family. It seized such hold of my imagination, that the blood thrilled through my veins. In future times some critic will arise who shall rediscover the Botanic Garden; it will shine out again the wonder of posterity.” Even Cowper wrote a poem in his honour, beginning:

“No envy mingles with our praise,
Tho’ could our hearts repine

At any poet’s happier lays,

They would, they must at thine.”

Dr Darwin had, like all original thinkers who speak out their convictions, convictions perhaps a hundred years before their time, numerous detractors, detractors who found it easier to rail at his supposed heterodoxy than answer it. To an accusation of atheism he profoundly and neatly replies,—

“Dull atheist, could a giddy dance
Of atoms lawless hurl’d

Construct so wonderful, so wise,
So harmonised a world.”

His speculations seemed to create

the opinion that "spontaneous generation" was a fact. Hence these two lines,—

"Hence without parent by spontaneous birth

Rise the first specks of animated earth."

That theory, however, was exploded or declared to be exploded by that great scientist, Professor Tyndall, by minute and exhaustive experiments; as well as by other eminent seekers after truth.

I will introduce a few lines of Dr Darwin's poetry in which he ventilates some of his conceptions as to how

things came to be as we see them now, which will also illustrate his command of language and rhythm.

"Let there be light!" proclaimed the Almighty Lord.

Astonished Chaos heard the potent word:—

Through all his realms the kindling ether runs,

And the mass starts into a million suns;

Earths round each sun with quick explosions burst,

And second planets issue from the first;

Bend as they journey with projectile

force,

In bright ellipses their reluctant course;

Orbs wheel in orbs, round centres centres roll,

And form, self-balanced, one revolving whole.

Onward they move amid their bright abode.

Space without bound, the bosom of
their God!"

Dr Darwin was a big-hearted philanthropist, aiding the poor and helpless, and denouncing slavery which was in full force in the West Indies in his day, and the horrid and brutish state of the prisons of the United Kingdom and the continent of Europe, which John Howard spent his life and fortune endeavouring to ameliorate. Referring to slavery he says of Conscience,—
"Hear him, ye Senates! hear this truth
sublime,

He, who allows oppression, shares the
crime."

In reference to Howard's self-denying labours he sings,—

"And now, Philanthropy! thy rays
divine

Dart round the globe from Zembla to
the line;

O'er each dark prison plays the cheer-
ing light,

Like northern lustres o'er the vault of
night.

From realm to realm, with cross or
crescent crowned,

Where'er mankind and misery are
found,

O'er burning sands, deep waves, or
wilds of snow.

Thy Howard journeying seeks the
house of woe.

The spirits of the Good, who bend
from high

Wide o'er these earthly scenes their
gen'rous eye,

Mistook a mortal for an Angel-guest.

And asked what Seraph-foot the earth
imprest.

I have purposely refrained from any
notice of the principles or truth of
evolution, hoping to have the opportu-
nity by and bye to sketch the life and
work of Mr Charles Darwin.