Gwen Raverat

Frances Spalding

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Frances Spalding

GWEN RAVERAT

Friends, Family and Affections

PIMLICO

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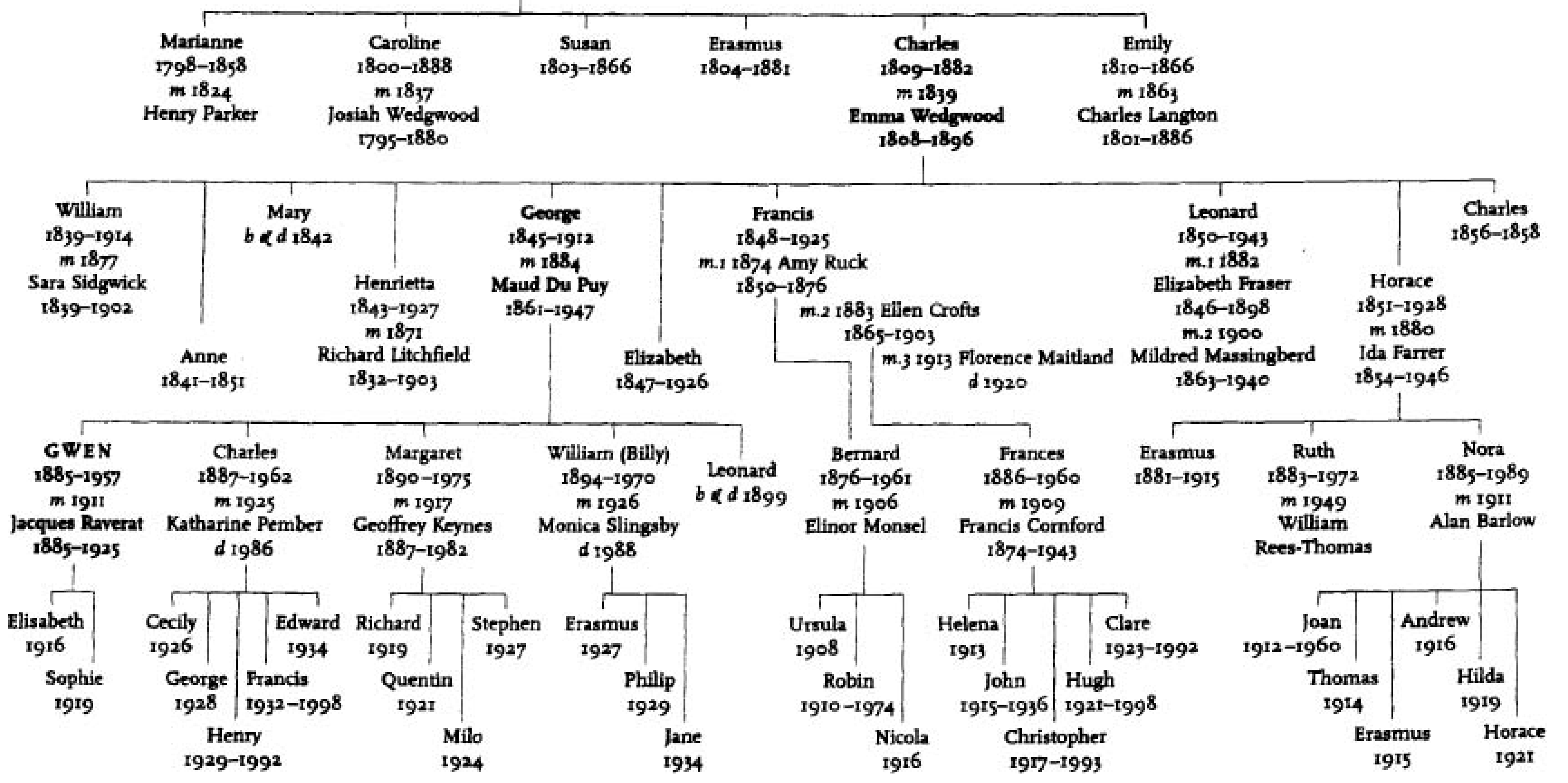
THE DARWIN FAMILY TREE



Introduction

> To live over people's lives is nothing unless we live over their perceptions, live over their growth, the change, the varying intensity of the same – since it was by these things that they themselves lived.
>
> Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and his Friends: From Letters, Diaries and Recollections, 1903.*

Biographers are often asked, "Who are you writing about?" The reaction to my reply – "Gwen Raverat" – was heartening, for I quickly discovered that over the last 50 years her *Period Piece,* whether bought, given, recommended or found by chance, occupies a special place in the hearts and lives of its readers, many of whom went on to recall particular passages or remarks within it. I learnt that the book is passed down from one generation to another, and still in some families read aloud. It also falls into the hands of foreign students and visiting academics who turn to it, perhaps, for an informal glimpse into Victorian Cambridge, but are soon transfixed by the conversational voice of the narrator as she describes, in compelling detail, her childhood world.

This voice invites trust because it confides in its readers with unaffected directness; it is seemingly natural and artlessly persuasive. Its gentle humour and good sense are, of course, adult qualities, but the experiences so vividly described are not. They represent an astonishing feat of memory for they recreate the vision of a child and explore a child's gamut of emotions. Not all the stories in *Period Piece* came from Gwen Raverat's own store cupboard; some she

had to be reminded of by her sister Margaret. Nonetheless, this ability to raid one's past was something that Baudelaire rated highly. "Genius," he once declared, "is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will."

I owe my own discovery of *Period Piece* to Ian Stephens, whom I first met over lunch at King's College, Cambridge, in the late 1970s, while doing research in the archives. He had resigned from the Calcutta *Statesman* in 1951, when his sympathies with Pakistan over the Kashmir question made it difficult for him to remain editor of the only British-owned newspaper in India. Instantly welcoming and courteous, he took me to lunch one day in a nearby hotel where in the course of conversation he recommended *Period Piece* and Frances Winwar's *The Life of the Heart: George Sand and Her Times.* There are few virtues to which I can lay claim, but one is a readiness to pick up tips on books. That afternoon I found both in a secondhand bookshop.

Many years later, when I asked another Kingsman, Dadie Rylands, what had drawn him to Gwen, he replied, "her huge powers of enjoyment". These are much in evidence in *Period Piece,* where we find also a clear demonstration of that "natural eagerness . . . for caring about and sharing in the outer details of people's lives", which Gwen's cousin Frances Cornford once identified as a Darwin characteristic.[1] It is perhaps not surprising that Gwen Raverat, the granddaughter of Charles Darwin, brought to her task an attentiveness to experience. Careful looking also informs her drawings, paintings, lithographs and wood-engravings. She was first identified with this last medium by Rupert Brooke who offhandedly but affectionately described her as that "square-headed woman who cuts wood".

She took up wood-engraving at a time when there was very little interest in it. Earlier it had been found to be a cheaper and more suitable medium for book illustration than metal engraving, partly because it can be set in a chase with type and printed in one fell swoop. But its role as

a means of imitative reproduction had been usurped, around 1875, by developments in photographic processes. After that very little wood-engraving was done, until the 1920s and 1930s, by which time artists had discovered new and different ways of working with wood. According to Gwen Raverat, who was a pioneer in this field, it was the realisation that an engraving "is not a drawing translated into terms of wood, but is always thought in the wood from the beginning", that helped bring about something of a renaissance in this medium.[2]

Though her images are often only a few inches tall and wide, they pack a great deal into a small space and command attention. She once claimed: "The whole of a long life is spent learning to *see*: to know what one is looking at with one's inner mind: not in gaining experience, but in losing it."[3] Although she disliked overly neat or fussily detailed work, she yet portrays both actual and imagined scenes with great precision, catching, for instance, effects of light on water or bare fields, the peculiar character of farm machinery or the brooding melancholy of ancient ballads. When encountered on the page, her wood-engravings are often intended to balance the heaviness of the text in their use of black, word and image harmonising with each other. In their sparkling, rich interplay of whites, blacks, and greys, these small works of art offer a satisfying coherence, a still plenitude.

But the significance of Gwen Raverat extends beyond her work. She was as a human being the most outstanding Darwin of her generation. Her husband Jacques is also a strong presence in this book. He was a man of great spirit and high intelligence who passionately wanted to live and create. After his death, when she was 40, Gwen wrote to Virginia Woolf: "Virginia, when we're very old, sixty or so, I'd like to tell you the whole history of my life, as truly as I could; it seems to me it has been so strange; perhaps not

stranger than others? No, I do feel sure that some of it isn't ordinary . . ."[4]

Though in the years that immediately followed, her life was shadowed by the memory of Jacques's illness and death, she eventually found new outlets for her talents, turning to book illustration, theatre design and journalism. If work provided a life-raft, realism and humour were also close to hand. As the story of her life unfolds, she emerges as a person of large character and redoubtable integrity. Also a rather private person, not given to confessional revelations, for though willing to acknowledge a love affair or her experience of depression, she kept much in reserve. Yet running through her work, both her art and her writing, is a deep sense of the importance of life, and a reverence for the texture and fabric of the everyday world, also a delight in the idiosyncratic and the absurd. In her celebration of quiet pleasures, such as the fall of light on a flock of sheep, a game of *boules* or the eccentricities of her Aunt Etty, we find the Gwen Raverat everyone can know.

FRANCES SPALDING

1 *Charles Darwin*

My dearest George,

Father was taken very ill last night with great suffering. They sent Dr Allfrey and he staid [sic] *the night and was a great support to Mother. She was all alone with Bessy. They sent for Dr Moxon and he came just to see him take his last breath. Mother said he was happy to die and sent us all an affectionate message. He told her he was not the least afraid to die. Mother is very calm but she has cried a little.*

You will come at once. Your H.E.L.

(Henrietta Litchfield to her brother, George Darwin, 20 April 1882.)[1]

Five days later a funeral car drawn by four horses brought Charles Darwin's body to Westminster Abbey. It took almost an entire day to travel the 16 miles from Downe, a small village in Kent (which had recently added an "e" to its name to avoid confusion with County Down), and in its wake came three of Darwin's sons – Francis, Leonard and Horace. They were joined at the Abbey by William and George, and all five sons accompanied the coffin as it was carried through the south cloister to St Faith's Chapel, a quiet narrow space between the south transept (Poets' Corner) and the Chapter House. There it remained all night, dimly lit by two oil lamps, covered with a cloth of black velvet and watched over by a guard.

By mid-morning the next day the coffin had been moved to the porch of the Chapter House, inside which had gathered aristocrats, statesmen, scientists and

representatives of the Universities of Oxford, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dublin as well as members of learned bodies and institutions and Darwin's publisher John Murray. The family, meanwhile, assembled in Jerusalem Chamber, not, however, Darwin's widow, Emma, who preferred to remain at Downe.

Shortly before noon, after the Abbey's great bell had tolled for almost quarter of an hour, the funeral cortége left the Chapter House. It was joined at the end of the south cloister by members of the family. Led by the choir and clergy, the procession then entered the Abbey by the south-west cloister door, moved slowly down the south aisle to the west end, turned and passed up the nave and into the choir. Ten pall-bearers accompanied the coffin – Darwin's colleagues Huxley, Hooker, Wallace and Lubbock, the American Ambassador James Russell Lowell, Canon Farrar, an earl, two dukes and the President of the Royal Society. The coffin then rested under the lantern while the first portion of the burial service was read. Music by Purcell and Croft was sung, as well as an anthem composed for the occasion by the Abbey's deputy organist, J. Frederick Bridge – "Happy the man that findeth wisdom and getteth understanding".

When the time came for the burial, the procession re-formed and moved to the north-east part of the nave where a grave had been dug beneath the Abbey pavement. Darwin's two daughters, Henrietta and Bessy, along with other principal female mourners, sat for this part of the service, while the rest stood, as Darwin was buried beside his mentor, Sir John Herschel,[2] and some ten feet from the monument to Sir Isaac Newton. The service ended with the choir singing Handel's funeral anthem – "His body is buried in peace, but his name liveth evermore".

That morning, *The Times,* after reminding its readers that entombment in Westminster Abbey had become “a standard by which great men’s deeds and their vitality are measured”, noted that the decision to honour Darwin in this way had aroused little surprise and scarcely any adverse comment.

The family had initially assumed that he would be buried beside his brother Erasmus at Downe and had even commissioned a local carpenter to make his coffin. But Darwin’s cousin, the eugenist Francis Galton, whose interest in heredity had been fired by his reading of *The Origin of Species,* was determined that Darwin should be buried with full honours. He sought the support of his colleagues in the Royal Society, an elite scientific body, and of its President, William Spottiswoode. A telegram was sent to the Darwin family, in the name of the Royal Society, asking if they would consent to an interment in the Abbey. William, the eldest son, warmly supported this suggestion, and eventually his mother concurred, reflecting that her husband would have welcomed this public acknowledgement of his achievement. Spottiswoode then consulted with Darwin’s friend and defender, Professor T. H. Huxley, with clerics and others. Before two days had passed a formal request that Darwin be buried in Westminster Abbey had been signed by 28 dignitaries. On receiving this, the. Dean of Westminster Abbey, who was in France, telegraphed his “cordial acquiescence”.[3] Thus Charles Darwin, who had been “ignored in life by official representatives”, as Huxley wrote, was buried in the Abbey “by the will of the intelligence of the people”.[4]

The Times admitted that “his mortal remains . . . would have rested not inharmoniously under the tall elms in the quiet churchyard of Down[e]”, but argued that the Abbey was a more fitting place. “The Abbey has its orators and Ministers who have convinced reluctant senators and swayed nations. Not one of them has wielded a power over

men and their intelligences more complete than that which for the last 23 years has emanated from a simple country home in Kent."[5]

Darwin had moved to Down House in 1842 and from there had conducted a correspondence with a diverse range of people from all over the British Empire, among them enthusiasts and amateurs as well as the leading scientific figures of his day. Natural historians, botanists, mining engineers, missionaries and magistrates were among those who helped supply him with the information he needed. This he collated and collected, thereby creating a foundation of facts that would sustain and support his theories. He was not alone in his interest in evolution, for which there was plenty of circumstantial evidence by 1830. Among the proponents of this idea was his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, and the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, whose theory had been hotly disputed. But in the absence of any convincing explanation of the mechanism behind evolution, many scientists accepted the dogmas of Creationism, finding in nature evidence of intelligent providential design and believing that God had created all species in their current state of perfection.

Charles Darwin, however, was haunted by two realisations: that species gradually become modified over time; and that organisms of every kind are beautifully adapted to their manner of existence. Aware that selection was the method by which humans successfully bred animals or cultivated plants, he nevertheless could not see how this applied to organisms living in a state of nature until in 1838 he read Thomas Malthus's *The Principle of Population* (1798) and realised the significance of the struggle for existence. From then on his principle of natural selection became the main directive force in the evolutionary process. Nature, no longer the product of divine intervention, became for him an immutable chain of material causes and effects. The "hidden bond" created by succession and inheritance knits

all nature past and present together, forming, in Darwin's phrase, "an inextricable web of affinities".

Within his own lifetime, he saw the whole course of modern science altered by his speculations. Inevitably, his theories fuelled debate as to the relation in which natural science stands to religious belief. *The Origin of Species,* with its meticulous survey of life-forms and the conditions that governed their development, concludes with a rapturous celebration of the multiplicity of life and the laws and chance accommodations within the evolutionary process. In the second edition, however, issued soon after the first, he added the phrase "by the Creator" to his final sentence, thereby re-admitting the notion of divine agency, possibly to mollify his readers.

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Despite this and other alterations, Darwin's theories undermined orthodox religious teaching, chiefly because, as Noel Annan has pointed out, *The Origin of Species* introduced the idea that *chance* begot order: "Fortuitous events, not planned or rational but fortuitous, resulted in a physical law: the process of natural selection, achieved by minute accidental variations in the species, broke the principle of internal determinism so that links in the Chain of Being fell apart."[6] Much has happened since the book appeared, but even today, though details need revision,[7] Darwin's message remains essentially intact, his thesis still able to support more that 140 years of scientific advance.

With the publication of *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871, Darwin shifted the focus of evolutionary debate, treating man as yet another species subject to mutable production. By then, he had become, in popular thinking, the man who had both robbed God of his role as creator of life, and man of his divine origin. But in all his books and essays, whether writing about geology, coral reefs, barnacles, orchids, or the variation of animals and plants under domestication, whether analysing the movement of climbing plants, the use of insects in fertilising flowers, or on the action of earthworms in modifying the surface of the earth through the assimilation of vegetable matter, he opened up new ways of thinking and perceiving. “In Darwinian theory,” Gillian Beer notes, “variability is the creative principle, but the type makes it possible for us to track common ancestry and common kinship.”[8]

After his death it was widely argued that Darwin’s theory of evolution was in no way inconsistent with religious belief. Certain liberal thinkers, notably Charles Kingsley, had earlier reached this conclusion.[9] But Darwin himself was reluctant to speak out on religious matters. He had been made familiar with the habits and practices of the Christian religion as a child, first at Unitarian Chapel services and then, after the death of his mother when he was eight, through the rites of the Anglican church. As a young man he shared the belief, promoted by natural theology, that the world had been produced by a providential and intelligent Creator. After he had abandoned the idea of pursuing a medical career, he went up to Cambridge to train for the ministry, on the understanding that life in a country parsonage would not be inimical to the simultaneous pursuit of a scientific interest in natural history. He recorded that as an undergraduate, he “did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible”.[10] He was, however, troubled by the question asked by the Bishop in the ordination service – “Do you trust that you are inwardly

moved by the Holy Spirit?" – and doubted whether he could answer in the affirmative.[11] Nevertheless two years later, when he set off round the world on his five-year journey as the resident naturalist on board HMS *The Beagle,* he was still an orthodox Anglican, and in his *Autobiography* recalled being laughed at by several of the officers for upholding the Bible as the unanswerable authority on some point of morality.[12]

It was during this arduous journey that he acquired "the habit of energetic industry and concentrated attention to whatever I was engaged in".[13] From then on everything that he read or thought was made to bear directly on what he saw or was likely to see. And the progress of his thought made it necessary for him to abandon his belief in the Old Testament creation story, in miracles and free will. By slow degrees he came also to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation, but he still clung to a theistic view of the world. Frank Burch Brown has suggested that ambivalence characterises Darwin's theology at every stage of its evolution,[14] and though he became decidedly agnostic he could not rid himself, as he admits in his *Autobiography,* of "the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including men . . . as the result of blind chance or necessity."

In 1878 James Grant, a fishing tackle maker, wrote to him, wanting to know whether or not his discoveries had destroyed the evidence for God, as found in nature's phenomena. Darwin's reply is lost; but from Grant's subsequent letter it is evident that Darwin had replied in a "kindly spirit" with a solution that neither upheld nor destroyed his correspondent's beliefs but encouraged independent thought. "I do not feel," Grant replied sadly, "that I can place any reliance upon instinct or intuition in relation to the existence of God."[15] This refusal to dogmatise made Darwin an unlikely Devil's Chaplain – the name he once used of himself.[16] Nevertheless, had he died

in France, it was commented at the time of his death,[17] no priest would have taken part in the funeral; or, if he had, no scientist would have been present. Ironically, the man whose work had had such a devastating effect on orthodox religious beliefs, which he himself rejected, was buried at Westminster Abbey, in the eyes of the nation, with a service that gave full expression to Christian hope.

Among the witnesses to this event were Darwin's two faithful servants, Joseph Parslow and his successor William Jackson, both of whom had walked in the procession with the family and the dignitaries. A noticeable omission at the Abbey had been any representative – other than its Chancellor the Duke of Devonshire – from Cambridge University, which had in 1877 conferred on Darwin an LLD (Doctor of Laws), an event that has gone down as one of the most memorable in the University's history. But on the day of the funeral a notice appeared in *The Times*: the Vice-Chancellor and his Council of Senate were approaching the election of the Regius Professor of Hebrew and a statute regulating the election required the Vice-Chancellor and every member of council to be present when the candidates delivered their expositions on portions of Hebrew books. As the time for their delivery had been fixed a month before, it could not be postponed and the University could do no more than send a regretful apology.

In later years the sight of primroses worn on "primrose day", in commemoration of Disraeli, always reminded Darwin's son, George, of his father, for he shared the anniversary of his death with the Prime Minister. Charles Darwin had impressed many in his lifetime with his essential simplicity, nobility, goodness and humour, his powers of observation and deduction, his passion for truth and dedication to his task, his hatred of cruelty and injustice; but as time went on he increasingly became one of the nineteenth century's most influential giants.

Gwen Raverat, born into the Darwin family three years after his death, grew up intensely aware of her grandfather. While Emma Darwin continued to spend part of the year at Down House, where she, her husband and their seven surviving children had lived in an atmosphere of greatest affection, the “faint flavour of the ghost” of Charles Darwin hung about the whole place, “house garden and all”, as Gwen recalled:

> Of course, we always felt embarrassed if our grandfather were mentioned, just as we did if God were spoken of. In fact, he was obviously in the same category as God and Father Christmas. Only, with our grandfather, we also felt, modestly, that we ought to disclaim any virtue in having produced him. Of course it was very much to our credit, really, to own such a grandfather; but one mustn’t be proud, or show off about it; so we blushed and were embarrassed and changed the subject . . .[18]

Because she was, as she admits, a “very high-minded and pure . . . not to say arrogant” child,[19] it irritated her when people made jokes about her family being descended from monkeys. She thought it stupid and in very poor taste. It exposed the downside of Charles Darwin’s legacy. For though her relatives were securely established within the higher echelons of the professional classes, they were also regarded with mistrust, teased, insulted, and often provoked to justify and uphold Charles Darwin’s achievement. Inevitably, this tightened the bond between them, generating among Darwins an exceptional degree of loyalty and family identity.

It had been Darwin’s habit to keep a record of his working life, noting down in his journal the date on which he started

a book and the weeks, months or years it took to produce. But as well as originating new books he was also revising old ones and correcting the proofs of both. “Jan 17 Began Expression [of the Emotions in Man and Animals]” reads his record for 1871, “and finished final rough copy on April 27. Many interruptions. June 18th Began 6th edit[ion] of Origin. Oct 29th finished it but lost 2 months by illness. Nov and Dec proofs of do [the same] and Expression.” The outcome of all this industry was that he left his family, among other things, a major literary inheritance; and one of the first things that needed to be obtained after his death, for the purposes of probate, was a valuation of the copyright on all of his books.

This George Darwin sought from John Murray. Simultaneously he asked if he and his brother William might learn the conditions under which his father and Murray had conducted business. “We also think it would be desirable that we, as trustees of our father’s estate, should have some written arrangement with yourself as to the future.”[20] He proposed that William Hacon, his father’s solicitor, might visit Murray in order to make the necessary arrangement, and in a letter sent soon afterwards, he requested that no further reprints of his father’s books be produced until Murray had spoken to Hacon. Murray was clearly ruffled by these proceedings which he felt showed a want of courtesy towards his firm. On learning this, William Darwin hastily wrote to assure him of their hope “that whatever business relations we may have together may be carried on in as friendly a spirit as that which animated your dealings with our Father . . . our action was governed by the consideration that where trustees have rights, it becomes a duty incumbent on them to look at the rights.”[21]

These rights were far from insignificant. The fresh burst of interest in Charles Darwin’s work, stimulated by his death, made necessary not only numerous reprints but also the production of more serviceable editions, and by 1887

indexes for both *Origin* and *Descent* had been completed. When it was first published, *On the Origin of Species* had sold out in a day. By the time the sixth edition appeared in 1872 the word “On” had been omitted from the title. The following year Murray’s put out a seven-shillings-and-sixpence edition, almost half the price of the original book, and in 1885 a six-shillings edition was produced which sold around 2,000 copies every year for the next 15 years, until 1900, when Murray, in order to defy competitors, had the book “stereotyped” and brought out a “library” edition which sold at half a crown. When the first statement of account reached William Darwin six months after his father’s death, he was pleased to see a balance of £1,023 19s. id. Thereafter Charles Darwin’s books brought in around £2,000 a year which was paid into an account held jointly by William and George.

The money itself did not significantly alter the Darwin family finances. Charles Darwin had not only been a shrewd investor, buying shares in the railways and farm land in Lincolnshire, but the year before he died, he had also inherited half his brother Erasmus’s estate, valued at around £130,000. In addition a Mr Anthony Rich, an admirer of Charles Darwin’s work, had informed Darwin in 1879 that he intended leaving him and his descendants a large property. Darwin had protested at the time that he was already a rich man and he did so again after he received Erasmus’s inheritance, but Rich remained firm in his intent. In 1879, by which time Darwin was providing his five sons with an annual allowance of £400, also dividing his surplus income each year between them, he estimated that the combined value of his property, together with Erasmus’s and Mr Rich’s bequest, meant that, after his wife’s death, each of his sons would receive at least £40,000.[22] In fact they were to receive over £10,000 more than this estimate.[23]

One motivation behind Darwin’s generosity towards his sons was his fear that his children would not be strong

enough to support themselves and live normal, healthy lives. He worried that there was a hereditary weakness in the family, a peculiarity of the nervous system. Eating green peas was enough to cause Darwin's brother Erasmus to relapse into a semi-permanent state of invalidism. Charles's own life, his son Francis claimed, had been "one long struggle against the weariness and strain of sickness".[24] Various theories have been advanced to explain Darwin's ill health, including the notion that he had caught Chagas's disease in South America during his voyage on *The Beagle.* Others suggest that there were psychological causes behind his ill health and that either his relationship with his kind but overbearing father, the suppression of painful emotions, or the anxiety bred in him by the implications and reception of his theories subjected him to great stress. But, owing to the lack of medical records, no definite conclusions can be drawn. The only extant recollection of Darwin by a physician is that by a Dr Edward Wickstead Lane, who ran a hydropathic establishment at Moor Park in Farnham, Surrey. His conclusion was that Darwin suffered greatly from "an aggravated form of dyspepsia, brought on . . . by the extreme sea-sickness he underwent in HMS *Beagle* . . . When the worst attacks were on he seemed almost crushed with agony, the nervous system being severely shaken, and the temporary depression resulting distressingly great."[25]

His fairly continuous struggle with illness left Darwin obsessively concerned with his own health and that of his children. "A man is mad to risk health," he told his friend Hooker in May 1852, "on which everything including his children's inherited health, depends." This dread – that his children would inherit his pathology – developed in him during the early 1850s and by the end of that decade he began to feel that it had become a reality. Not only had he to face the realisation that his tenth and last child, Charles Waring Darwin, was mentally retarded, but at least two of his children, George and Horace, had begun to suffer, like

him, from debilitating bouts of gastrointestinal pain. In George’s case these became severe enough to justify his decision to give up the Bar, no doubt with his father’s approval, for as Charles remarked in the above letter to Hooker, the stomach was the organ wherein “lie intellect, conscience, temper, and the affections”.[26]

There was an almost too ready acceptance of illness in the Darwin family. “Horace is so very short in his letter,” George once wrote to his father, “that I don’t make out what’s the matter and whether he’s only a little seedy in his usual manner.”[27] When his sister Henrietta found herself nursing her husband Richard Litchfield in the course of their honeymoon, her mother observed: “I think you rather enjoyed R’s headache – (nothing marries one so completely as sickness).”[28] Later Gwen Raverat was to cast a critical eye on this scenario, noting that ill health at Down House was considered normal. “There was a kind of sympathetic gloating in the Darwin voices when they said, for instance, to one of us children, ‘And have you got a bad sore throat, my poor cat?’”[29] After a large Darwin clan had settled in Cambridge, Gwen’s cousin Nora used statistics to prove, on one occasion, that two-thirds of “the entire Darwin family at the university town of Cambridge are at present suffering, or have been suffering within the limit of a week, with various and deadly diseases”.[30]

But illness alone does not explain why none of the Darwin sons fulfilled their initial promise. “Oh Lord, what a set of sons I have, all doing wonders,” Charles Darwin exclaimed in 1876.[31] And it was true at the time: William had joined a bank; George had begun to show his mathematical prowess; Leonard had found his niche within the Army and was making an expedition to New Zealand as a photographer; Francis (Frank) was doing innovatory work as a biologist; and Horace was shortly to set up as a manufacturer of scientific instruments. They were applauded and encouraged by their father. But, as William Irvine has

pointed out, they eventually became “the friends of eminent men but not eminent men in their own right”.[32] Looking back on her uncles and father, Gwen saw that her grandfather was largely to blame.

> [He] was so tolerant of their separate individualities, so broad-minded, that there was no need for his sons to break away from him; and they lived all their lives in his shadow, with the background of the happiest possible home behind them.[33]

Strong ties of family affection gave these brothers a careful respect for their father’s legacy. They were the inheritors, they realised, of far more than material wealth. Though William and George were their father’s executors, it was Frank who played a key role in Charles Darwin’s posthumous reputation, taking responsibility for decisions over reprints of his father’s books, co-operating with Murray, and writing certain prefaces himself.

Frank Darwin had been especially close to his father. His interest in biology had enabled him to carry out work, even as a boy, on his father’s behalf. He had studied medicine, but lost interest in the subject, completed a thesis on animal tissues and returned to Downe as his father’s botanical assistant. In anticipation of his return, a laboratory had been created for him on the first floor and there he experimented with plant fertilisation. He remained in easy reach of his lab and his father’s greenhouse after he married Amy Ruck in 1874, for they had moved into a house at the other end of the village. Two years later his wife died at Down House, three days after giving birth to a son, Bernard. During her last hours, while she lay unconscious, Frank sat up all night stroking her face and hair, and afterwards went out of his mind with grief for almost a year. For the rest of his life, he never received the news that a baby was expected without suffering a spasm of fear.

As a widower, aged 28, he moved back to Down House with his baby son. A two-storey extension was added to accommodate them, including a purpose-built billiard room. This allowed the old billiard room, next to Charles Darwin's study, to become Frank's study. Here, after his father's death, he transcribed his father's *Autobiography* for inclusion in the first biographical account of Darwin's life. News that a German professor was preparing a memoir of Charles Darwin with a series of letters had stirred him into action. He suggested to Murray a biography of Charles Darwin, composed largely of his father's letters and his unpublished autobiography, together with personal recollections by those who had known him well. Murray not only expressed immediate interest, but also accepted the terms that Frank proposed, whereby the book would be printed and bound at his expense and then handed over to Murray for sale, in return for which he would receive 11/20 of the advertised price, per copy sold.[34]

Soon the whole family became involved in the business of reconstructing Darwin's life for the benefit of future generations. They were divided over certain passages in Darwin's autobiography concerning his religious beliefs. Frank wanted to publish the manuscript in its complete form, but his sister Etty (Henrietta Litchfield) felt that her father's views on religion were crude and ill-considered, and that they would damage his reputation and be unfair to his memory. So strong were her feelings on this matter that she threatened legal proceedings to prevent publication. Emma Darwin, likewise, had reservations over a couple of passages, including a sentence in which her husband compares religious belief with superstition, arguing that it is as difficult for children, constantly inculcated with religion, "to throw off their belief in God, as for a monkey to throw off its instinctive fear and hatred of a snake".[35]

> My dear Frank [wrote Emma], There is one sentence in the Autobiography which I very much wish to omit, no doubt partly because your father's opinion that all morality has grown up by evolution is painful to me; but also because . . . it gives one a sort of shock – and would be an opening to say, however unjustly, that he considered all spiritual beliefs no higher than hereditary aversions and likings, such as the fear of monkeys towards snakes . . . I should wish if possible to avoid giving pain to your father's religious friends who are deeply attached to him, and I picture to myself the way that sentence would strike them . . .[36]

The sentence was duly omitted in Frank's three-volume *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* when it appeared in 1887. It was the first monument to Darwin and gave the reader a vivid picture of both the man and his work, though careful selection played down the extent of the controversy that his work aroused, for many of the key figures, about whom Darwin had gossiped at length to Hooker, were still alive.

In fact the family habit of chronicling their relatives began with Charles Darwin himself who took a great deal of interest in his forbears. In 1879 he had published a "Preliminary Notice" to a translation from the German of Dr Ernst Krause's life of his paternal grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, a leading physician, wit, poet, member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham and inventor of mechanical devices. Darwin's introduction is in fact slightly longer than Krause's biography. It incorporates letters and other papers that were in his possession, draws on anecdotes, recollections, even a memorandum which Erasmus Darwin kept of the profits which he earned as a physician. Admiration and respect fired his interest in his grandfather, who had arrived at an evolutionary view of the world in his *Zoonomia* in 1794–6, some 15 years before Lamarck's better known theory, but lacked the kind of factual evidence that his grandson was to

produce to justify his theories. By bringing to his task sharp observation, attention to detail and a keenness to refute the false assertions of an earlier biographer, Charles Darwin set a model of accuracy which his children did not forget.

In this, and in his scientific writings, Charles Darwin addressed not a scholarly elite but an intelligent public, with the confidence that his thoughts and discoveries would be understood. His example, combined with the family habit of lively letter writing, helped give Frank, George and Etty a natural grasp of the pen. Gwen Raverat later noticed that the tone set by her Uncle Frank in his occasional essays reappeared in the way that his two children – Bernard Darwin and Frances Cornford – always thought and wrote. There may even be an hereditary connection between the passionate descriptions of plants, creatures and people found in Darwin's *The Voyage of The Beagle* and those characterful vignettes of her uncles, aunts and late-Victorian Cambridge which Gwen Raverat almost a century later recreated in *Period Piece.* "Family connexions are part of the poetry of history," Noel Annan has written.[37] One noticeable trait within the Darwin family seems to have been willed remembrance, a readiness to open – in Dante's phrase – the "book of memory".[38]

It must nevertheless have been strange, having a grandfather known to all the world but not to oneself. Gwen's solution lay with "The Five Uncles", as she termed her father and uncles: "In so far as I conceived of my grandfather at all, I thought of him as a kind of synopsis of his five sons, my uncles; with the same warm family voice, the same love of children and dogs; and the same gently humorous charm and transparent honesty and absence of any sort of pretension."[39] She was a short-sighted child and these uncles seemed to her remarkably similar in appearance, forming a solid block, "each more adorable than the other".[40] They belonged to a stable, prosperous world, but the relative smoothness of their lives, in her

opinion, owed much to the straightforwardness and simplicity of their characters. Perhaps this, too, was a family trait. Her chapter on the uncles in *Period Piece* ends: “I know that I always felt older than they were. Not nearly so good, or so brave, or so kind, or so wise. Just older.”[41] But after the book was published, she scribbled a postscript in the margin, wondering if something of the Uncles’ simplicity was also to be found in herself, and recalling Virginia Woolf’s remark – “You are an old monolith, Gwen”.[42]