

RECORD: Anon. [1877]. [Review of] A biographical sketch of an infant: How he sacrificed his son. *San Francisco newsletter*.

REVISION HISTORY: Transcribed by Christine Chua and edited by John van Wyhe 3.2020. RN1.

NOTE: The image for this article is at CUL-DAR140.4.19.

Introduction by Christine Chua:

In 1934, Leonard Darwin wrote to the *Times* debunking myths about his father. One of the myths was a version of this story. See Leonard's letter to the editor below. See A biographical sketch of an infant. *Mind. A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 2 (7) (July): 285-294. (F1779).

[page] 1

Mr Darwin threatens to contribute to a magazine an article on infants, suggested by the mental development of one of his own sons. Mothers are cautioned against reading it, as there is insanity in every line. He expects to prove that the texture of young Darwin at his birth was analogous to the pulp of a clam; that the crown of his head was as gelatinous as a marshmallow lozenge, and his bones as gristly as a simple polyp. These examinations were not made without difficulty.

On one occasion the great scientist was boring his infant's nose with a needle, to prove that the cartilage was penetrable, when he was discovered by Mrs Darwin and the nurse, who designed an intricate Italian flower garden on his face in less than two minutes. At another time he poultice young Darwin's spine surreptitiously, in the hope of making a tail grow; and tried to fit him out with an amphibious breathing arrangement, which was so successful that, after the child's head had been under water for thirty seconds, he was black in the face, and lay comatose for a week. Young Darwin can do, however, a great many things which other lads of his age are not at all proficient in. Though not fifteen years old, he can run on all-fours, trot or gallop, dig roots with an artificial snout, and climb trees like a coon. His brains were partially extracted when he was a week old, and he can neither speak nor understand. Though not exactly quadrumanous, he is just as handy with his feet as he is footy with his hands; and early training enables him to hang by one arm from a branch and eat nuts with his toes with the greatest ease. The father of modern thought hopes to live to see his son united to a well-bred Aztec, and is confident that his grandchildren will be three grades lower. In sacrificing his offspring to science, Mr Darwin depends on future generations to complete the work; but as time rolls on, mankind will doubtless have the pleasure of gazing on a perfect gasteropodous mollusk on a wall, directly and lineally descended from the great theorist.— San Francisco Newsletter.

[Darwin, L. 1934. Letter to the editor: On Myths about Darwin. *The Times* (15 August), p. 11.

[page] 11

MYTHS ABOUT DARWIN
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir, - As I grow older my faith in the veracity of mankind gets steadily less and less and now in my eighty-fifth year it is small indeed. Nothing had added more to this decay than the anecdotes which I have heard from time to time about my father, Charles Darwin. For example, a lady who knew the family well published a statement soon after his death that his little dog Polly had died of grief at that event when as a fact she had been mercifully put out of her bodily pain at my mother's request.

Some years later on, an eminent man of science said to me that he knew my "father well; good fellow; smoked a pipe" - which he never did.

A doctor in good practice abroad told me that he had attended a course of lectures "given by Darwin" at Edinburgh: another pure invention.

And a certain lady sent to the Press a long and purely fictitious account of the scene at his death-bed.

And now in your issue of August 14 Dr. Elizabeth Sloan Chesser adds another to this list when she repeats the fable that Mrs Huxley "found Professor Huxley holding the baby and Darwin pricking it with a pin and recording its reactions to pain on a piece of paper": an anecdote on the inaccuracy of which anyone who knew either of these two men well would willingly stake their all.

Yours faithfully,
LEONARD DARWIN.
Cripps Corner, Forest Row, Sussex, Aug. 14.]