



# Literature.

*Erasmus Darwin*, by ERNST KRAUSE, with a preliminary notice by CHARLES DARWIN. LONDON. JOHN MURRAY, 1873.

The catalogues of second-hand booksellers are infallible tests, not of an author's merit but, of his popularity. Judged by this standard, the works of Dr. Erasmus Darwin have long ceased to attract the attention of his fellow-countrymen; a very few shillings will make one master of the best editions of the "Zoonomia" or "The Botanic Garden," and it may be safely said that "The Temple of Nature" has, of late years, only been valued on account of the plates after Fuseli and Blake. That refuge of unpracticed book-collectors, Lowndes' *Bibliographer's Manual*, says—"The works of Darwin are now in little estimation," and the editor of the second edition, Mr. Henry G. Bohn, is not deterred by the fable of the Ass and the Lion from quoting Lord Byron's criticism against the illustrious dead—"Pompous rhyme," says Lord Byron, the scenery is its sole recommendation." We can remember the time when it was fashionable to quote Darwin, with a sneer at his "turgid verses," or a shudder at his "atheistic notions"; then folks forgot him altogether, and wondered greatly when, now and again, some wonderfully-descriptive bit of stately [not "pompous"] rhyme cropped-up in illustration which was said to be by an unknown poet, named Darwin.

In the Midland Counties (especially in Derbyshire, the home of his adoption, where he now sleeps) the poet and philosopher has left a more enduring mark. So much is the same respected, partly by reason of old traditional associations and, more largely, on account of the intrinsic merits of Dr. Darwin's descendants who reside amongst us, that a work bearing such a title as that now before us is sure of a hearty reception. Old people will tell one that "there was never a Darwin but could do some one thing or other better than anybody else;" and, without trenching unduly upon the domain of personality, we can justify this assertion from experience. The distinguished grandson of Erasmus Darwin, who now gives to the world this well-timed biography of a neglected great man, is himself a world-known example of Darwinian heredity; and no one who, having had his interest awakened by "The Origin of Species" and "The Descent of Man" turns inquiringly and intelligently to the works of the elder Darwin, can fail to observe how truly Mr. Charles Darwin is descended.

It was a German, we believe, who "invented" Shakspeare—it is to a German that we now owe the resuscitation of Dr. Darwin. Ernst Krause, struck with some points of resemblance which modern English writers have strangely overlooked, discovered that Mr. Charles Darwin's views have been anticipated to some extent by his grandfather and, in the February number of a well-known German scientific journal, "Kosmos," he published a sketch of the life of Erasmus Darwin, under the title of a "Contribution to the History of the Descent-Theory." This it is which is now translated by Mr. Dallas, and enriched by a preliminary notice from the pen of Mr. Charles Darwin, and which will doubtless find a home in most Derbyshire libraries. From Mr. Charles Darwin's sketch we learn that the family came from Lincolnshire, where William Darwin, who was yeoman of the Armoury of Greenwich to James I. and Charles I., possessed a small estate at Cleatham. A field in the vicinity of the spot where the "Old Hall" once stood is still known as "The Darwin Charity," from being subject to a charge made by the second Mrs. Darwin for buying gowns for four old widows every year. Further interesting particulars of the family are given, for which we must refer our readers to the book itself. Erasmus Darwin was born at Elston Hall, in the county of Nottingham, on the 12th December, 1731. It

seems that poetry and mechanics were amongst his earliest "tastes," and that the same tastes prevailed to the day of his death. When ten years old he was sent to Chesterfield School, where he remained for nine years, so that his early education was conducted in Derbyshire although our county cannot boast of being his birth-place. Very interesting anecdotes are given of his school and college life which we must pass over. In 1754 he went to study medicine in Edinburgh, where he very early began to distinguish himself by his poetical talents and ready wit. In November, 1756, we find him settled at Lichfield, where, a year later, he married Miss Mary Howard. This match seems to have been one of pure affection, but Mrs. Darwin, who is described to have been a superior and charming woman, died, after a long and suffering illness, in 1770. In 1781 Darwin removed into Derbyshire, having married the widow of Col. Chandos-Pole, with whom he had become acquainted in the course of his professional practice. They lived two years at Redbourne Hall, and then removed to Derby, and ultimately to Breadsall Priory, where he died in 1802. In Derby his influence speedily exerted itself and became felt. He founded the well-known Philosophical Society. "Here," says the *Times*, "he had round him young men, afterwards of great note in their several ways, one of them the ingenious and public-spirited father of the present Lord Belper. There were men of letters in the town, and even a painter of great genius [Joseph Wright], whose portrait of Darwin appears in the frontispiece of this volume; but the prevailing tone of the place was mechanical, for people were making fortunes and families rising to sudden eminence by newly-invented machinery. For twenty years Dr. Darwin reigned without a rival in a Paradise of theories, inventions, projects, and reforms." Very early in his life, on the only occasion in which he had ever been entrapped into strong drink, after running a great distance and walking up to his neck through a river, he mounted a tub and harangued the population of Lichfield on sanitary improvement. There was nothing for which Dr. Darwin did not invent a machine, more or less successful, and to this day worth a revival. He defined "a fool" as "one who had not tried an experiment." He tried to improve on the clumsy carriages of that day by placing the driver more over the horse, but he evidently had not taken enough into account the mitigation of centrifugal force obtained by putting the cart well behind the horse, for he was upset and lamed for life. He constructed an artesian well on a small scale at his house in Full-street, adjoining the famous residence of the Marquis of Exeter, once the head-quarters of Prince Charles Edward. Here there still exists an iron plate with the following inscription:—

TERREBILLO EDUXIT AQUAM

ANNO MDCCLXXXIII

ERASMUS DARWIN

LABITUR ET LABATUR.

The prediction has not, we fear, been fulfilled, for, to the best of our knowledge, the spring no longer flows. Alluding to this well in *Phil. Nans.* 1785, pt. I. p. 1., he remarks that "some of the more interior strata of the earth are exposed naked on the tops of mountains, and in general these strata which lie uppermost or nearest to the summit of the mountains are the lowest in the contiguous plains." He adds that the waters "sliding between two of the strata above described, descend till they find or make for themselves an outlet, and will in consequence rise to a level with the parts of the mountains where they originated." Mr. Darwin considers rightly that his grandfather here recognised the true principle of artesian wells. He connected a wind-vane on the top of his house with a dial-plate in his study so as to note every change in the wind. Of this house, Breadsall Priory, there is a charming little sketch on p. 125. The initials appended, "V. H. D.," illustrating the proposition with which we started that of any Darwin, it may be said, "*Nihil tetigit quod non omavit.*"

The stigma of atheism has been frequently and undeservedly affixed to Dr. Darwin. In reality, he was a pure theist, believing in one Maker, Upholder, and Blessor, but steadily and emphatically refused to admit any interference with the design once made, or any government, except by continuity of sound rules. He frequently referred with reverence to the precepts and example of the Great Teacher; he refused to take fees from the priests and lay vicars of Lichfield Cathedral, and it is not a little remarkable that his last words and last act were the strongest possible testimony to the observance of the duty founded on the sacred record of the Creation. "On the day of his death, in the early morning—it was about 7 a.m.—whilst writing a long and affectionate letter to Mr. Edgeworth, he was seized with a violent shivering fit, and went into the kitchen to warm himself before the fire. He there saw an old and faithful servant churning, and asked her why she did this on a Sunday morning. She answered that she had always done so, as he liked to have fresh butter every morning. He said, "Yes, I do; but never again churn on a Sunday." In two hours he was dead.

Of the German biographer's share in this excellent work it may be sufficient to say that his remarks open out a wide field of study for those who follow the teachings of Charles Darwin. Into this field, we will not, at present, enter; sufficient to say that out of the elder Darwin's wealth of matter and hypothesis there can be selected the materials for a system so like the younger Darwin's as to seem an anticipation of it. The German writer ascribes to Erasmus a complete system of the theory of evolution, at the same time deeming it necessary to adduce the evidence of it. We agree with the *Times* that "it is impossible not to recognize a strong family resemblance between these two remarkable men. But if the resemblance be studied more closely, the difference will more appear, and the grandson will be found not a mere repetition of his grandfather—by his own creed an impossible thing."