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A Great Naturalist

ON ALMOST any warm summer's day from 1860 to 1880, in a garden in Kent, you might have seen a tall, spare, bearded man, pottering about among his roses. Had you got in conversation with his gardener, he would have told you, "Ah, the poor master would be a deal better if only he would find something to do!" Such was his servant's opinion of Charles Darwin, one of the greatest thinkers and scientists the world has ever seen.

Charles Robert Darwin was born at Shrewsbury on February 12, 1809, the same year as Alfred Tennyson, the great Victorian poet, and Abraham Lincoln, one of the presidents of the United States of America. His father was a well-known doctor in Shrewsbury, and his mother was a member of the famous Wedgwood family. His grandfather was Erasmus Darwin, a physician who had risen to fame as a naturalist-poet and a scientist. His mother died when he was little more than eight years old, and he remembered nothing of her except "her deathbed, her velvet gown, and her curiously constructed work-table." He was put to school at the age of nine, where he remained for seven years. He made so little progress that his father took him away. "You care for shooting, dogs, and rat-catching," said Dr. Darwin, "and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family." Of this period of his life Darwin, in after life, wrote, "The school as a means of education to me was simply a blank."

AS A YOUNG STUDENT

In the autumn of 1825 young Darwin was sent to Edinburgh University where he studied medicine and surgery. Here he remained for two years as a medical student, but his heart was not in his work. The dissecting-rooms and the sight of an operation revolted him so greatly that he benefited little from his time there. This clearly demonstrated that he was not meant to be a physician, and, as he expressed a desire to become a clergyman, his father dispatched him to Cambridge. Here he gave more attention to his studies, and in spite of many of the subjects proving distasteful to him, he matriculated in 1828, and took his degree of Bachelor of Arts three years later. While at Cambridge he came in contact with scientific men who were interested in entomology, botany, and geology. His chief friend was Professor Henslow, who set his pupil to work on a systematic study of natural history. And the elements of botany, zoology, geology and entomology were mastered as easily as Greek and Latin were acquired slowly and painfully. He says: "I should have thought myself mad to give up the first days of partridge-shooting for geology or any other science." He started collecting beetles and soon obtained some very rare species, whose capture was reported to the world

at large. "No poet," wrote Darwin of this event "ever felt more delighted at seeing his first poem published than I did at seeing in Stephen's Illustrations of British Insects, the magic words, "Captured by C. Darwin, Esq."

Within a year of his leaving Cambridge occurred the event which was to determine the whole course of his life. His friend, Professor Henslow, wrote and informed him that the post of naturalist on board H.M.S Beagle was open to him. This vessel was being sent round the world in order to correct the longitude in South American waters, and also to carry out other scientific work. This offer Darwin accepted, and the expedition sailed on December 27, 1831. He was to receive no salary for his services, but it was agreed that he should have the entire disposal of the collection of specimens made on the voyage. The five years which he spent on board the Beagle were full of happiness to Darwin. He visited the countries of South America, New Zealand, Australia, and Tasmania, and several of the islands off the coasts of Africa and South America. Although single-handed, he did more valuable work for natural history in its various departments, and made discoveries of more important species, than any scientific expedition has done since.

VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD

He returned to England with overflowing notebooks, and for the next three years Darwin was busy arranging his collections and writing the experiences of his travels. In his work 'A Naturalist's Voyage Round the World,' he gives an interesting account of his observations and discoveries. In this work, as in all Darwin's writings there is a wonderful simplicity and a freedom from all scientific terms.

In 1839 Darwin married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, and for a time they resided in London, but as his health began to fail, they removed to Down, in Kent, a charming place, about 20 miles from London. From 1842 to the end of his life Darwin remained at Down, living there in the greatest seclusion and quiet. He realised that he must lead the most regular of lives if he was to enjoy even moderate health. Frequently he could not work for weeks on end. "I never pass 24 hours without many hours of discomfort when I can do nothing whatever." Despite this tremendous handicap, Darwin continued to experiment, dissect, and write with great vigour. As far back as 1837 he had begun to make notes for the chief work of his life, the book on 'The Origin of Species,' and after years of laborious work it was given to the world in 1859. The teaching of the book is to show the preservation of the strongest in the struggle of life. Those animals die off which are unable to bear up against this struggle, and those animals continue their species which are best able to overcome the difficulties of the battle of life. From birth there is in many cases a considerable difference, and if this difference is perpetuated, it constitutes a species. From a careful study there can be no doubt that such an animal as the fox owes its species to the dog and some other animal, and many of the bird tribes are cross-breeds.

HIS SCIENTIFIC WORKS

Having published his great work, Darwin felt that his life's work was in a sense completed. Probably no book published within the last 200 years has aroused half the storm which 'The Origin of Species' created. It was fiercely attacked because it was supposed to be opposed to the Christian religion. Gradually, however, the attacks discontinued, and in 1864 Darwin received the greatest honour a British scientist knows, namely, the Copely [sic] Medal of the Royal Society.

Notwithstanding his increasing age, Darwin continued his work. During the 20 years following the publication of 'The Origin of Species' he produced other works: 'On the Contrivances by Which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects,' 'The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants,' and 'The Descent of Man.'

In 1881 Darwin's health rapidly failed, and in December of that year he suffered from a heart attack when on a visit to London. He recovered temporarily and returned to Down, but suffered further attacks of increasing severity. Finally, on April 19, 1882, he died. His last words were, "I am not the least afraid to die." He was buried in Westminster Abbey. Darwin cared little for personal fame. His generous and kindly nature was evidenced in his relations with other writers, with friends and strangers, and even with animals, whose affection he always won. A favourite saying of his was, "It's dogged as does it," and, writes his son, "I think doggedness expressed his frame of mind almost better than perseverance."

