

Influences on Darwin, Part 1

Editor's note: This essay comes from a much longer, unpublished work by Robert Weyant, who wrote several essays on Darwin and on other topics for HP in the mid-2000s. Sadly, Robert died in 2017 before completing this monumental and important work on the people who most influenced Darwin. Robert's wife, Marsha Hanen, philosopher and former President of the University of Winnipeg, has provided us with this section of the manuscript, and may do so with other sections.

Robert Weyant

Emma Wedgwood Darwin

Emma Wedgwood Darwin We can begin with the influence that the most important woman in Darwin's life, Emma, had on him. Emma Wedgwood was born in 1808, in the Wedgwood family home, Maer Hall, in rural Staffordshire. The youngest of the eight children of Josiah Wedgwood II and Elizabeth (Bessy) Allen, she was born into a close-knit, loving family that was economically comfortable due to the fact that her grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood I, had founded an extremely successful pottery firm. The family influence on Emma was to produce an intelligent, level-headed woman who was not likely to be fussed over by a houseful of children and a husband who suffered from a number of undiagnosed illnesses and who harboured ideas that many people at the time considered to be of questionable truth and perhaps even of subversive implications.

Emma was already an accomplished person when she married Charles. Her family, like the Darwins but unlike much of English society, be-

lieved in educating women. She had been taught by private tutors and, for a year, at Greville House, a boarding school located just outside of London. She could speak French, German and Italian, had studied music and played the piano well, having taken lessons from Friedrich Chopin, among others. Emma was widely read, knowledgeable in politics and world affairs (unusual interests for a female in those days) and a fine dancer. She was also a believer in her family's Unitarian faith.

From 1839 through 1856 she gave birth to ten children, not all of whom survived to adulthood; that's seventeen years of almost continual pregnancies. Emma spent most of her life being a mother to her children and a companion and nurse to her husband. She ran the household (including a half-dozen or so servants), read to Charles when he was too ill to read himself, proofread his writing, entertained him by playing the piano, and was a hostess to his scientific visitors. Every night Charles and Emma played backgammon, with Charles meticulously recording the scores.

Emma was already an accomplished person when she married Charles. Her family, like the Darwins but unlike much of English society, believed in educating women.

It seems clear that Charles would have been a very different person without Emma's presence in his life; her influence was not directly on his science but on him as a human being. Shortly before their marriage, Charles wrote to Emma, "I think you will humanize me, and soon teach me there is greater happiness than holding theories and accumulating facts in silence and solitude." As it turned out, he was able to find time to be happy with Emma and still hold theories and accumulate facts.

In December of 1831 Charles began the most influential scientific venture of his life, the Beagle voyage. The 1830s were an exciting time for England as a whole. Parliamentary reform was in the air and the debates concerning the reform legislation included riots and violent mobs advocating revolution. The first of the Reform Bills became law on 7 June

1832 and was of great interest to Emma, whose father was elected to Parliament that year. Even Charles, who by then was far away aboard the Beagle and not usually interested in politics, was eager to know the outcome of the reform legislation. His cousin William Darwin Fox had written to him on June 30 saying, "By the time of your return we shall be better judges of the happy effects of our Reform Bill, at least if it is allowed to have its natural course in the correction of the abuses of Church and state."

Charles' brother Erasmus wrote to him on August 18:

Now that we have got the Reform Bill people seem disinclined to make any use of it, as a vast proportion have either neglected thro' ignorance or else are unwilling to get themselves registered. This makes people more anxious than ever for vote by

ballot, and I have no doubt that will soon be carried. ... I have written you all this politics tho' I suppose you are too far from England to care much about it. Politics won't travel.

But Erasmus was mistaken, for on 24 October Charles wrote to his sister Caroline as the Beagle was preparing to drop anchor at Montevideo, where they would be able to pick up and send mail, "It is now nearly four months, since I have received a letter, so you may imagine how anxious I am for tomorrow morning. We are all very curious about politics; all that we know is that the bill is past; but whether there is a King or a republic according to the captain, remains to be proved."

In the end, substantial and unsettling political change was brought in by the series of Reform Acts.

Political change was in the air, hot on the heels of the technological and economic changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. The political revolutions of 1848, which would sweep through Europe and frighten Britons, brought more change. Change – change – change. Not all of it was good, but it was all undeniable and unavoidable. Evolution through natural selection eventually would become a change in human thought on the subject of the natural basis of change. How much change could the human mind accept? Almost certainly that depends on which human mind we're talking about.

When Charles returned from his voyage in 1836, Emma seems to have found the serious post-Beagle Charles to be much more interesting than the somewhat dilettantish pre-Beagle Charles. As Edna Healey has put it, "The Charles Emma was getting to know was a young man of

It seems clear that Charles would have been a very different person without Emma's presence in his life; her influence was not directly on his science but on him as a human being.

infinite curiosity about every aspect of life and thought, and dedicated to the pursuit of truth as he saw it. And for the first time, Emma fell in love.”

Before the Beagle voyage, Emma had traveled much more widely than Charles. In 1818, when she was ten years old, she had been to Paris and Geneva with her family and early in 1825, when she was just sixteen, the whole family did an eight-month Grand Tour indulging in history, art, music, fashion and social evenings with members of continental society for whom they had letters of introduction from friends and relatives at home. Travel between cities in Europe at the time was still difficult, but they particularly enjoyed Rome and Naples.

Late in that year they returned to Staffordshire, but the girls traveled again in 1826 to Switzerland for six months. When their father went to bring them home he took Charles and Caroline with him, and included a stopover in Paris. It was Charles’s first trip outside Britain and, except for the Beagle voyage, it would be his last. My reason for recounting Emma’s early history is to point out that she was a sophisticated, traveled, intelligent, accomplished and largely unflappable individual who was to bring all of these influences to bear on Charles during their long and – despite some difficulties – quite happy and secure marriage.

Charles and Emma were married at Maer Hall in January of 1839; he was thirty, and she was thirty-one. Charles was not her first suitor; there was even gossip at the time that she had attracted the notice of Charles’s older brother, Erasmus. However, Emma accepted Charles’s proposal as soon as he made it. They were first cousins and had known each other for their whole lives – the Darwins and the Wedgwoods having had connections that extended back through three generations (in 1837, Emma’s brother Josiah III had married Charles’s sister Caroline).

At the time of their marriage, Charles’s father Dr. Robert and Josiah II gave bequests to their children, which meant that Charles and Emma would be securely wealthy. Emma later described Charles to her Aunt Jessie as “the

most open, transparent man I ever saw and every word expresses his real thoughts.” Edna Healey, in her biography of Emma, remarks that “Easygoing and unfussed, she would never reach the Darwin standard of domestic perfection; but nevertheless, as she adapted herself to Charles’s needs, she created a home which was calm and comfortable.” It was what Charles needed.

Before they moved into their new home a series of letters passed between Emma and Charles concerning his search for a house, the hiring of servants, the furnishings they would need and what their life together might be like. It seems clear that even before their marriage Emma had some pretty clear ideas about Charles’s personality. On 23 January 1839 she wrote, “I believe from your account of your own mind that you will only consider me a specimen of the genus (I don’t know what Simia I believe). You will be forming theories about me & if I am cross or out of temper you will only consider ‘What does that prove’. Which will be a very grand and philosophical way of considering it.”

Shortly before their wedding they rented a house in Upper Gower Street, London, not far from the newly founded University College. It was apparently decorated in bright, almost gaudy, colours and they called it “McCaw Cottage” because it reminded Charles of the colourful parrots he had seen in the tropics. The decision to live in the city was made largely because that was where Charles’s scientific contacts were (England’s foremost geologist, Charles Lyell, was a neighbour) and Charles had duties relating to his recent appointment as Secretary to the Geological Society. The house was large enough to have room for servants and for visiting guests.

Charles moved in on December 30, 1838, shortly before their wedding day. Among their scientific guests would be Charles’s close friend, the botanist Joseph Dalton Hooke; his Cambridge professor John Henslow; the Lyells, of course; and – someone he had met through his brother – the inventor Charles Babbage, who had developed a complex computing machine

that would eventually become a forerunner of the modern computer. Socially, Charles was made a member of the Athenaeum Club on the same day that Charles Dickens became a member. The Darwins were settling in.

An interesting letter from Emma to Charles in February 1839, shortly after their marriage, brings to light Emma's uneasiness about some of Charles's ideas. She began:

The state of mind that I wish to preserve with respect to you, is to feel that while you are acting conscientiously & sincerely wishing, & trying to learn the truth, you cannot be wrong; but there are some reasons that force themselves upon me & prevent my being always able to give myself this comfort. I dare say you have often thought of them before, but I will write down what has been in my head, knowing that my own dearest will indulge me. Your mind & time are full of the most interesting subjects & thoughts of the most absorbing kind, viz following up yr own discoveries – but which make it very difficult for you to avoid casting out as interruptions other sorts of thoughts which have no relation to what you are pursuing or to be able to give your whole attention to both sides of the question.

She went on to point out that Charles's high opinion and affection for his brother, Erasmus, who already had serious doubts about the truth of many religious beliefs, may have made it easier, she feared, for Charles also to harbour such doubts. Then she continued:

May not the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved, influence your mind too much in other things which cannot be proved in the same way, & which if true are likely to be above our comprehension. ... I do not know if this is arguing as if one side were true & the other false, which I meant to avoid, but I think not. I do not quite agree with you in what you once said – that luckily there

were no doubts as to how one ought to act. I think prayer is an instance to the contrary, in one case it is a positive duty & perhaps not in the other. ... I do not wish for any answer to all this – it is a satisfaction to me to write it & when I talk to you about it

I cannot say exactly what I wish to say, & I know you will have patience, with your own dear wife. Don't think that it is not my affair & that it does not much signify to me. Every thing that concerns you concerns me & I should be most unhappy if I thought we did not belong to each other forever.

**“When I am dead,
know that many
times, I have
kissed and cried
over this.”**

This is clearly the work of a woman who has a mind of her own, who is concerned about the differences in belief between herself and her husband whom she loves, but who respects his attempts to reach his own understanding no matter how much it may trouble her.

And trouble her it did. Charles clearly recognized this. After he died, Emma's letter was found preserved by him among his papers. On it he had written, “When I am dead, know that many times, I have kissed and cried over this.”

Emma's personality was the solid foundation upon which their marriage rested. Charles's various ailments began to appear early on. Concerning his health, Edna Healey has written:

It is possible, too, that he sometimes gave in to illness when he wanted Emma's comfort. For he was always insecure, and his mother's death when he was eight must have been traumatic, though he could remember little of her. Emma gave him back his security. Many years later Mrs. Huxley said of her, ‘More than any other woman I ever knew, she comforted.’

Eventually Emma and Charles tired of the noise and dirt of the metropolis and in September of 1842 they moved to Down House in the town of Downe in Kent, some sixteen

miles south of London, where they lived for the rest of their lives. It was surrounded by an acreage that allowed for gardens and various outbuildings that served an assortment of purposes, some of them scientific. And it would have the famous sand walk where Charles spent many hours walking and pondering the questions that his research raised in his mind.

The 1850s, just prior to the publication of *The Origin of Species*, were a memorable but troubled decade for the Darwins. Down House had experienced two major renovations since Emma and Charles moved there – one in 1843 when extra bedrooms and a school-room were added in anticipation of a large and demanding family, and again in 1846 as the family continued to grow. Now, in 1857 with more children and more servants, additional renovations were underway and, for assorted Darwins and Wedgwoods, Down House had apparently become “the family headquarters.” Edna Healey sums up the decade this way:

The 1850s had begun with the death of one child and would end with the death of another; and during the intervening years one after another of the seven children became seriously ill. Emma had suffered pain and heartbreak; yet her children all remember the happiest of childhoods. Rarely can a major scientific work have been completed against such a disturbed background.

Add to this that Emma suffered from occasional migraines (for which she took opium), that there were constantly numerous children underfoot and that Charles’s experiments and

specimens filled the house with sickening odours, and one has to wonder how any thoughtful work got done at all.

There was no way that she could bring herself to agree with Charles’s conclusions concerning human beings having descended from ape-like creatures, and in this she was not alone in English society.

Emma had to have been the calm in the protracted storm that followed the publication of the *Origin* in 1859. There was no way that she could bring herself to agree with Charles’s conclusions concerning human beings having descended from ape-like creatures, and in this she was not alone in English society. The Victorian Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, was speaking for the majority of Britons when, in 1864, he remarked, “Is man an ape or an angel? I, my lord, I am on the side of the angels. I repudiate with indignation and abhorrence those new-fangled theories.”

In a sense Emma had the last word concerning

her differences with some of Charles’s ideas. It was the custom in the nineteenth century when a notable person died for some member of the person’s family to produce a “Life and Letters,” a kind of combination biography and compilation of some of the noted person’s communications. For Charles this task was undertaken by his son Francis. It was published in 1888, with another volume of additional letters appearing later, and included an autobiography written by Charles and dated 1876. But before publishing, Francis asked Emma to read the autobiography and delete anything she thought would be embarrassing or hurtful to anyone mentioned in the text.

Emma deleted a number of passages, some of which dealt with Charles’s religious beliefs. It was not until 1958 that Charles and Emma’s grand-daughter, Nora Barlow, with access to the

family papers, restored the missing sections and published the complete original autobiography. Unfortunately, it is still possible to find the expurgated edition being sold as the Autobiography.

Public acclaim came to Darwin, as well as the opprobrium. In November of 1853, the Royal Society awarded him its Royal Medal in recognition of his enormous work on Cirripedia (barnacles). On November 16, 1877, Emma was with Charles when he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Law from Cambridge

Over his later years Charles's illness continued to call on Emma's attention. Edna Healey has commented:

Emma's greatest trials, though, were within her own home. Only she knew how ill Charles was in the years after the publication of the *Origin of Species*. She cared for him during nights of hysterical weeping and violent retching, days of giddiness and fainting when he desperately needed her and she could not leave him.

It really isn't clear whether he would have survived without her and, if so, in what condition. Healey goes on to observe:

And in the ensuing years, as Charles grew weaker, Emma grew stronger. She was able to deal with many of the letters that flooded in from all over the world, translating them for him from French, Italian and German, and answering them on his behalf. She protected him from visitors, nursed him and hardly ever left him. At the same time her old liveliness and energy returned; and her old interests were revived.

Periodically, Charles was a complete invalid not even able to leave Down House. A skin problem made shaving difficult and hence we have the famous image of the bearded Charles Darwin. Diagnosed in March of 1882 with angina pectoris, he died on April 19 having assured Emma, in true Epicurean fashion, that he was not in the least afraid to die.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 26, 1882, in a ceremony attended by hundreds of individuals including members of Parliament, ambassadors from the diplomatic corps, sci-

entific notables, Church of England divines, the Lord Mayor of London, and other assorted dignitaries, with two dukes, an earl, the President of the Royal Society, and scientific friends and colleagues among the pallbearers (Hooker, Huxley and Wallace included), the earthly remains of Charles Robert Darwin were interred in Westminster Abbey, close to those of such other great English scientists as Sir Isaac Newton. The service was conducted by the "Queen's Chaplain-in Ordinary" George Prothero. A hymn was specially composed and sung beginning with a line from the Book of Proverbs (echoing Virgil), "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding." The nation was paying honour to Charles – the highest honour it had ever paid him.

Emma had planned to bury him in the family plot in Downe next to his brother, Erasmus, but Charles's cousin, Francis Galton, along with Thomas Henry Huxley, used their connections to have a petition signed by a number of parliamentarians and persuaded the appropriate church officials, as well as Emma, to approve the Abbey event. Thirty-three Darwins

**Diagnosed in
March of 1882 with
angina pectoris,
he died on April
19 having assured
Emma, in true
Epicurean fashion,
that he was not in
the least afraid to
die.**

and Wedgwoods followed the coffin into the Abbey, which was filled with over two thousand mourners.

Emma, however, was not among them; she remained in Downe with her memories. Janet Browne has written:

Dying was the most political thing Darwin could have done. As Huxley and others were aware, to bury him in Westminster Abbey would celebrate both the man and the naturalistic, law-governed science that he, and each member of the Darwinian circle, had striven, in his way, to establish.

Despite the fact that Charles was not a believer in Christianity and certainly not in Anglicanism, with a little help from his friends his ideas had become the ideas of his time and culture, and it was convenient for both church and state to recognize that fact.

What did Emma, who had devoted her whole adult life to Charles, do following his death? According to Edna Healey,

. . . the structure of Emma's world was shattered. Her whole life had revolved around Charles, and the regular rhythm so essential to him had made the pattern that her own easygoing nature needed. Wisely, she now recreated her own life, gradually reviving interests which she had neglected when her work was Darwin's. Now the family provided the framework of her new life.

I said earlier that Emma's influence was not directly on Charles's science, but she certainly had an indirect, and crucial, influence on his work. By providing him with a secure and happy home where he could think, by supporting him in his illnesses, by taking seriously his ideas even though she was unhappy about their impli-

“I marvel at my good fortune that she, so infinitely my superior in every single moral quality, consented to be my wife. She has been my wise adviser and cheerful comforter throughout life...”

cations, she structured an environment in which he could work productively. Charles recognized all of this when, in his autobiography he wrote of Emma, “She has been my greatest blessing.” He continued:

I do not believe she has ever missed an opportunity of doing a kind action to anyone near her. I marvel at my good fortune that she, so infinitely my superior in every single moral quality, consented to be my wife. She has been my wise adviser and cheerful comforter

throughout life, which without her would have been during a very long period a miserable one from ill-health. She has earned the love and admiration of every soul near her.

Clearly, this was an influence that was life-altering for Charles. When Charles died their daughter, Henrietta, described her mother, in part, by saying that, “she had lived in his life.” Emma was to live another fourteen years without him. By giving him the support he needed to develop his unorthodox ideas, Emma was perhaps the most important psychological influence in Charles's life. •

For further reading on the relationship discussed here between Emma and Charles Darwin, readers of *HP* may wish to look at Edna Healey's biography *Emma Darwin: the Inspirational Wife of a Genius* (London: Headline, 2001) and Janet Browne's 2-volume biography *Charles Darwin: Voyaging* (NY: Knopf, 1995) and *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (NY: Knopf, 2002).

Robert Weyant was Professor Emeritus of General Studies at the University of Calgary, where he had previously served as Professor of Psychology, Dean of Arts and Science, and Dean of General Studies.