



DARWIN, ROBERT WARING (1766-1848)

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OUT OF THE PAST

ROBERT DARWIN, F.R.S. (1761–1848): SPLENDID COUNTRY DOCTOR

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IN A RECENT ARTICLE ON Charles Darwin Gruber and Gruber (1962) made the customary uncomplimentary reference to Charles's father Robert:

Secretly, his sceptical, tyrannical father, freethinker Dr Robert Darwin, may have been relieved to see his unfavoured son at one stroke escape the clutches of the clergy and remove himself from the family scene for a long voyage!

Robert Darwin is one of the unlucky men of history, in that he has been seized on to illustrate a fad. But his own genial spirit would not have cared for this sort of luck, good or bad. Robert's misfortune comes from the poor health of Charles which was first noticed in 1837. Charles's son Francis Darwin (1887, 1, 243) quoted a letter of Charles written in 1841:

My father scarcely seems to expect that I shall become strong for some years; it has been a bitter mortification for me to digest the conclusion . . . that the 'race is to the strong'.

Douglas Hubble (1954) quotes Charles Darwin, in the first edition of the *Voyage of the Beagle* (1845), writing of symptoms he felt while waiting in Plymouth for the *Beagle* to depart. Today these symptoms might be regarded as neurotic: "I was also troubled with palpitations about the heart, and like many a young ignorant man, especially one with a smattering of medical knowledge, was convinced that I had heart disease".

Charles Darwin's illness in South America

Other doubts have been raised against the psychiatric explanation. Adler (1959) has suggested that Charles Darwin had Chaga's disease, and Kohn (1963) has supported Adler in a well-reasoned paper. Adler has discovered that Charles had a serious illness in South America; on 19 September, 1834 he wrote in the *Voyage of the Beagle* (1955, p. 257): "During the day I felt very unwell, and from that time till the end of October did not recover". Charles returned to Valparaiso with extreme difficulty, and then spent several weeks in bed at the home of Mr Cornfeld.

Chaga's disease is a trypanosomal infection transmitted by the enormous "black bug of the pampas". On 24 March 1835, Charles (1955, p. 316) described vividly an encounter with a great number of the bugs. But about Charles's later ill-health we have little evidence except what he or Francis have told us. His frequent attacks of vomiting and shivering compelled him to leave London and confined him to Down House. Thus he wrote (1958, p. 117): "So much was I out of health that when my dear

father died on November 13th 1847 [he really died on 13 November 1848] I was unable to attend or to act as one of his executors”.

At his daughter's wedding Charles (1887, 1, 105) got so sick he had to leave the church; in 1860 he spent all day in bed after he had visited London for a meeting of the Linnaean Society (2, 473) and so on. In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Francis Darwin (1888) pays a tribute to his father's character; he “ bore his suffering with such patience that even the most intimate with him hardly realized the amount of his sufferings ”.

In his *Autobiography* Charles is seen as a man of remarkable common-sense and humility (Barlow, 1958). He says his mental powers were not great but he had remarkable gifts for meditation. Many of the great men of history have had to endure solitude; I have no doubt that Charles's greatness, like that of William Pitt and Franklin Roosevelt, is explained by his suffering in isolation. His granddaughter Lady Nora Barlow (p. 241) cites numerous theories “ ranging from the possibility of appendicitis, a duodenal ulcer, pyorrhoea, or the damaging effects of seasickness during the voyage ”.

Psychoanalytical theories

Nora Barlow then names a lot of medical writers who have written about Charles's illness. The first was E. J. Kempf (1918) who used the familiar jargon of psychoanalysis to guess at an ‘ Oedipus complex ’. Cravings brought about by resistance to parental coercion cause “ prolonged struggle to sublimate affective need ”. Kempf says further that Robert Darwin himself was an effective psychoanalyst because he could induce in his patients a “ catharsis and readjustment . . . as a method of treating the distress caused by affective suppression— anxiety ”.

Nearly all the ‘ authorities ’ have gone the psychoanalytical way. Alvarez (1943, 1959) is as biased as Kempf; but he does turn psychoanalysis into melodious prose. Hubble (1943) can do no better though he pays a tribute to Charles as a fine character, just and generous, easy to live with, considerate and gay. Yet for the purpose of psychoanalysis these great virtues can become vices. Hubble (1953, 1954) later heaps fantasy on fantasy in his selective treatment of evidence, looking for heritable defects in all four grandparents, and evidence of instability in his brothers, sisters and cousins. Out of Hubble's 1953 paper a controversy arose in the *Lancet*. Good (1954) supports Hubble with incredible charges of “ unconscious patricide exactly like that of Oedipus ”; Charles's illness was a distorted expression of aggression, hate and resentment. Nora Barlow (1954) in a witty reply recalls the saying “ success in any field is a neurosis ”. Platt (1959) is the next medical writer who sets out to write history backwards: “ His father . . . did not see in his son any spark of genius to come ”. Platt agrees that this ‘ immature personality ’ showed such character that he would not let his symptoms interfere with what he really wanted to do. Nor can Huxley (1960) escape from the fascination of the “ dominating and domineering ” figure of the father; the illness was an escape mechanism.

After all these fairy tales, it is refreshing to be reminded by Adler

(1959) that there is no evidence to deny that Darwin really was physically ill. It was a source of grief to him (Charles wrote to Hooker) that many of his friends thought him a hypochondriac. Adler points out that Charles when young had had plenty of energy; in his love of geology he had every incentive to keep on his feet.

Robert Darwin's true character

Platt (1959) has given a long list of Robert's faults, but all of them are minor; then Platt says "His patients shared with his family a ready acceptance of such confident authority and he had an enormous success in practice".

Is there any evidence in the *Autobiography* that Robert Darwin did anything to arouse the hatred of his son? None except this (1958, p. 28):

To my deep mortification my father once said to me 'You care for nothing but shooting, dogs and ratcatching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family'. But my father, who was the kindest man I ever met and whom I love with all my heart must have been angry and somewhat unjust when he used such words.

But immediately after this Charles has written 15 pages containing the finest filial tribute any son ever paid his father. Nora Barlow in a footnote says these pages had been omitted from earlier editions of the *Autobiography*. Robert's early objection to the *Beagle* project is another piece of anti-Robert evidence usually cited. Here is Charles's description (1958, p. 71):

I will here only say that I was instantly eager to accept the offer, but my father strongly objected adding the words fortunate for me "If you can find any man of common sense, who advises you to go, I will give my consent". So I wrote that evening and refused the offer. On the next morning . . . my uncle sent for me, offering to drive me over to Shrewsbury and talk with my father. As my uncle thought it would be wise in me to accept the offer, and as my father always maintained that he was one of the most sensible men in the world, he at once consented in the kindest manner.

Robert's objections and Uncle Jos's reply are given in detail in an appendix (pp. 226-230). And the whole transaction makes Robert appear to be an incredibly reasonable father in that age of authoritarianism. There is no further evidence suggesting tyranny except the letter of a niece who was bored by his monologue at a Sunday dinner. This has been cited by Hubble (1954) who says that Robert had had a long and bitter feud with William Withering. But Withering died in 1799, ten years before the birth of Charles; the feud could not have been very long.

Charles's filial devotion

There is no evidence that Charles hated his father, but rather that he loved him a great deal. Francis Darwin (1888) says one of his chief qualities was his "strong love and affection for his father's memory. It was a sentiment which could not fail to strike anyone intimate . . . with him and was manifested by frequent allusions to his father, or references to long-remembered opinions of his". Here is a summary of the finest tribute any son ever paid a father (1958, pp. 30-43):

He was six feet two inches in height and weighed more than 24 stone. He had

tremendous power of observation and sympathy. This gave him power of winning confidence, thus he was a very successful physician. Yet at first he hated the profession of medicine because he could not bear to see a person bleed.

Owing to his power of winning confidence, Robert Darwin was a sort of father confessor to the whole neighbourhood of Shrewsbury. He quickly perceived when an apparent sickness of the body was really due to a troubled mind. He was particularly adept at settling troubles due to so-called incompatibility between husband and wife. He was so sympathetic that women used to weep while telling him their troubles. If he begged them to restrain themselves, they would only weep the more with loss of precious times. So it became an invariable practice to tell them to go on crying because it would do them good "with the invariable result that they soon ceased to cry".

He was a good man of business, and especially skilful at reading character. In one instance he saw through a pseudo-clergyman who was throwing his money around after coming to Shrewsbury, and who was shown up a few months later as a confidence man. Yet he lent a worried manufacturer £10,000 without security; another time he lent £20 for return fare to a stranger from Ireland stranded in Shrewsbury, and got it back by return mail.

An insane young nobleman had a guilt complex and kept confessing to all sorts of crimes. Robert Darwin said to the guardian: "He really is guilty of . . . (a heinous crime) but not of any of the others". The guardian was astonished because it was true. Likewise, Robert had extraordinary power of predicting the course of any illness: Charles observed this when he worked with him after leaving school. Long before typhoid was distinct he used to say that two different diseases were confused under the name typhus. When a very sick patient cried for some strange and unnatural food, Darwin would ask where the idea came from. If the patient did not know, the doctor would trust the instinctive desire of the patient. If the idea had come from someone else, the food would be forbidden.

Formerly when he thought that I should be a doctor, he talked to me much about his patients. In the old days the practice of bleeding largely was universal but my father maintained that far more evil was thus caused than good done; and he advised me that if ever I was myself ill not to allow any doctor to take from me more than an extremely small quantity of blood.

Robert always gave a good prognosis, because when he was a young doctor a very sensible widow confided that he had broken her heart when he told her, long before the event, that her husband would certainly die. Years later, he was called in consultation to the bedside of a distinguished man who, the family doctor said, was certainly going to die from his illness. Darwin disagreed with the diagnosis and said the patient would recover, but was proved wrong. He felt humiliated; but when she became ill the widow dismissed the family doctor and sent for Robert Darwin.

Charles tells us his father never touched a drop of alcohol. The reason is set out by the editor in an appendix comprising a letter from his father Erasmus to Robert, who was then 26, dated 5 January 1792 (pp. 223-225). Robert's mother was an alcoholic who drank first to relieve a painful

recurrent affliction. She died, when he was four, with an enlarged liver.

Robert had an extraordinary memory for detail, especially for dates. Yet he was so sensitive that when he was old he would not go for drives because every road out of Shrewsbury was associated in his mind with some painful event. On the other hand, he remembered an extraordinary number of curious stories, which he liked to tell, because he was a great talker and generally in high spirits.

My father's mind was not scientific, he did not try to generalize his knowledge under general laws; yet he formed a theory for almost everything which occurred. I do not think that I gained much from him intellectually; but his example ought to have been of much moral service to all his children. One of his golden rules (a hard one to follow) was, "Never become the friend of anyone whom you cannot respect".

The age of scepticism

Gruber and Gruber (1962) refer to Robert Darwin as a freethinker; it is clear that he must have influenced Charles towards his doubts of a future existence. Charles writes (p. 95):

Nothing is more remarkable than the spread of scepticism or rationalism during the latter half of my life. Before I was engaged to be married, my father advised me to conceal my doubts, for he said he had known extreme misery thus caused with married persons.

Elsewhere (p. 87) we find reasons why Charles did not want Christianity to be true: "... for if so the plain language to the text seems to show that the men who do not believe and this would include my father, brother and all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished (p. 87)".

Nora Barlow tells us in her introduction about the desire of many members of Darwin's family for reticence about religion. It is hard to imagine today the fierceness of the controversy, and this family was divided. The doubts of Charles, which today look so mild, would have scandalized many friends. So they, with Charles's praise of his father, had to be left out of the *Autobiography*.

In an appendix on Charles Darwin and his grandfather, Nora Barlow (pp. 149-166) analyses the steps Charles's mind must have gone through in order to reject all the traditional beliefs. Here she wavers between Robert's severe criticism and Robert's habit of speculation on every subject. But surely the single word of criticism has been over-emphasized, and surely the word of Francis must carry weight. Up to the end of his life (says Francis, 1888) Charles's speech used to dwell often on long-remembered opinions of his father. To me it is clear that he was like his father in that "he formed a theory for almost everything which occurred". Example is better than precept; like any normal son, Charles was guided by good example rather than by criticism.

The *Autobiography* clearly portrays Charles Darwin as an extraordinarily lovable character of rare simplicity and complete integrity. Charles gave the key to his own character when (p. 138) he said he would not read a novel if it did not portray "some person whom one can thoroughly love". Nearly all great men have been hero worshippers, and until the end Charles Darwin's hero was his own father.

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CLINICAL NOTE

CRITERIA FOR THE EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF EXPANDING SPACE-OCCUPYING INTRACRANIAL LESIONS*

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WHEN A PATIENT SUFFERS FROM intractable and prolonged headache most practitioners are anxious lest they overlook a case of intracranial space-occupying lesion (I.S.O.L.). This anxiety arises from the indefinite clinical picture which such cases may initially present.

The purpose of this article is to review the development of four of these cases with features in common, which shed light on this problem and point the way to an observational research project which may yield information of practical use.

Case histories

Case 1. W.W. was a 22-year old mother who had a history of neurotic breakdown under stress. She first complained of occipital headaches in August 1958, after her baby had been admitted to hospital with pneumonia. The initial diagnosis was reactive depression, and she was given both analgesics and psychotherapy without relief. After three weeks her nervous system was examined but no abnormality was detected. It was felt that this excluded organic disease of the nervous system, but her symptoms might have arisen from sinusitis. She was referred to the ear, nose and throat department where she was found to have a

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