BOOKS: HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Home Life at Down House

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Charles Darwin's home laboratory may not have been unique in the history of science, but Darwin was surely an original in the way he incorporated his entire household into his research: as helpers, observers, and, occasionally, as objects of study. Victorian family life, especially the lives of the educated middle class, has been both idealized and vilified, depending in large part on the family in question and on the perspective of the critic. Most families had a patriarch; Darwin was certainly a major figure in his home, but he was no tyrant. This Victorian played on his hands and knees with his children. He invited them into his study to gaze through his magnifying glass at the barnacles he spent eight years patiently dissecting and then organizing taxonomically. The relaxed yet serious atmosphere at Down House, the Darwin home in the Kent village of Downe, was also the mood in his laboratory.

Annie's Box
Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution
by Randal Keynes
Fourth Estate, London, 2001. 363 pp. £16.99. ISBN 1-84115-060-6.
Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution
Riverhead (Penguin Putnam), New York, 2002. 416 pp. $27.95. ISBN 1-57322-192-9.

Emma Darwin
The Inspirational Wife of a Genius
by Edna Healey
Headline, London, 2001. 384 pp. £20. ISBN 0-7472-7579-3.

As Darwin's reputation continues to grow, so does the library of edited notebooks, letters, and biographies. Yet for all the words describing his voyages—interior as well as the five years he spent on *H.M.S. Beagle*—only recently have biographers tackled the impact of this home and his family on his scientific vision. Two very different books about Darwin's family have appeared in the past year.

In *Annie's Box* (released in the United States as *Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution*), Randal Keynes (a great-great-grandson of Darwin's) offers a graceful, thoughtful account of the spectrum of life at Down—from descriptions of games Darwin played with his children to directions he gave them about how to collect shells. Keynes seems to have captured the sheer joy of childhood in that idiosyncratic country household. It is delightful to learn that even as Darwin held his firstborn, Willy, on his knee, he was observing him closely; a week later he began to keep notes on the "natural history of babies."

We learn that when his second child, Annie, arrived in 1841, Darwin noted: "I shall be curious to observe whether our little girls take so kindly to throwing things when so very young [as Willy]. If they do not, I shall believe it is hereditary in male sex, in the same manner as the S. American colts naturally amble from their parents." Charles and Emma adored all their children, but it seems there was a special place for Annie. She was by all accounts a wise, musical, happy child. But in her tenth year, she went into decline with an undiagnosed disease (that Keynes's consultants identify as tuberculosis peritonitis) from which she died a painful death. Leaving Emma in Downe because she was about to deliver a ninth child, Charles took Annie to the spa village of Malverne, in Worchestershire, where he had once successfully "taken the cure." There, he nursed Annie with the help of a devoted nanny. He recorded his thoughts in letters to Emma, and while we read, appalled by the absence of any inkling of modern medicine, we suffer with him. Keynes focuses on Annie's death for more than pathos. He notes, "After Annie's death, Charles set the Christian faith firmly behind him." Freed from the last vestige of belief that the world was perfect because God created it that way, Darwin continued without spiritual restraint to work out his theory on the origin of species. Using family papers and artifacts—including Annie's small wooden writing case, which Emma had tucked away with some of her dead child's favorite things—Keynes's first book is a masterpiece of sensitive, evocative prose.

Down House circa 1860.

The author of the second book, Edna Healey, is a lecturer and broadcaster whose previous work includes two biographies and a social history of Buckingham Palace. In *Emma Darwin*, she too writes about the daily lives of the Darwins, but from the perspective of Emma Wedgwood Darwin, Charles's wife and first cousin. Healey recounts the accomplishments of the two generations of Wedgwoods and Darwins who preceded Emma and Charles. We discover that Emma was extremely well-educated, well-traveled, and comfortable with intellectual and political leaders. She studied piano with Chopin and wrote some of the music she played for her children. She was devoted to her mother, who had prematurely become senile. With its account of the families' earlier generations and frequent allusions to traits and talents that Healy suggests are hereditary, Healy's effort seems more like a family hagiography than does the book written by Emma's actual descendant.

This criticism notwithstanding, Healey presents a splendid picture of the social insecurities some of the Wedgwoods suffered because their riches came from the "wrong" source: pottery. Using Emma's diaries and letters, she also reveals how hard it was to bear 10 children in 16 years, all the while caring for a man who continually suffered from ailments including headaches, diarrhea, bloating, and gas. Healy makes a convincing case that without such an incredibly supportive companion, Darwin might never have managed physically to complete his work.

Healey paints life at Down House as an earthly paradise, save for the lack of modern medicine and social equity. Keynes is more skeptical. Yes, parts were wonderful, like the specially constructed wooden slide Darwin designed for the staircase so the children could play indoors when it rained. But Keynes also includes the impression of his American great-grandmother, Maud Du Puy. After meeting her husband George Darwin in 1883, she wrote home: "The Darwin family *are* a nice family together, extremely nice, always cordial and kind together and yet it strikes me that they are like affectionate second cousins more than brothers and sisters. I don't now why it is, unless that when there is a family gathering there is no family talk, no personal talk, it is more about the world at large and everything in general. Each goes his own way, thinks his own thoughts to himself." Of course, the Darwins were no ordinary family, and it is unreasonable to expect them to have been simply nice.

In different ways, both books portray the anguish Charles endured as he battled his fear of the impact his conclusions about evolution would have on the world beyond his home in Downe. They also describe the peace he found when his ideas were accepted with remarkable rapidity by the world at large, which honored him for his achievement.

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