

## The unstoppable force of Emma Darwin

Charles Darwin's work turned the world upside down, but it is doubtful he would have achieved so much without his gifted and able wife, Emma, ALISON ELLIOTT argues.



*Emma Darwin, aged 31  
From the portrait painted by George Richmond, R.A.*

In October 1859, aged 50, Charles Darwin published the epochal *On the Origin of Species* and more than a decade later *Descent of Man*. His theories on the unstoppable force of natural selection and the process of evolution were revolutionary. He changed accepted thinking about creation and sparked a seismic shift away from Victorian conservatism. His ideas became an impetus for social change on a larger scale. From initial public condemnation as *The Devil's Disciple*, on his death on April 26 1882 Charles Darwin was described as the "greatest Englishman since Newton".

While Charles Darwin gets the accolades, he didn't work alone. Every step of the way he had a happy home life, substantial financial resources and strategic family connections. Most significant was the moral, practical and intellectual support of his wife Emma Darwin (nee Wedgwood) and later his children.

Emma's extensive diaries and letters provide intimate insights into Charles' home and work environment. They help contextualise his thinking and add richness to the picture we have of his life and ideas. Importantly, they celebrate the generally unacknowledged role that Emma Darwin played in his work.

Born in 1808, Emma was the youngest of eight children to Josiah Wedgwood of Maer (in Staffordshire) and Elizabeth Allen. She had a happy privileged childhood. Her mother was clever, beautiful, cheerful, practical, caring and giving, traits that Emma inherited. Both had a *radiant cheerfulness and ...a singular sweetness in voice and manner....In both there was the same delight in giving and the same unfailing consideration for the unprosperous.*

Emma developed formidable organisational abilities under a veneer of steely determination fused with an *unfussy way of taking life*. She managed her large household including a dozen live-in servants, her seven children, visiting relatives and a stream of Charles' associates and admirers with grace, good humour and military precision. She also provided Charles with emotional and intellectual support.

Emma and Charles were first cousins and had known each other since childhood, sharing the same grandparent Josiah Wedgwood (1730 to 1795) from the now famous Wedgwood pottery family. During the *Beagle's* epic voyage (1831 to 1836) the pair corresponded occasionally, but his romantic interests lay elsewhere. When he returned to England,

#### ABOVE

Emma Darwin, reproduced with permission from John van Wyhe ed., *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online* (<http://darwin-online.org.uk/>)

Charles and Emma were reacquainted and developed the strong affection and respect for each other that led to marriage.

In writing excitedly to her Aunt Jessie (her mother's sister *Madame Sismondi*) at the time of her marriage proposal in November 1838, Emma spoke of Charles' *affectionate nature* and his perfectly *sweet temper*, but commented that he was very unwell. This early mention signalled a pattern of sickness and depression that endured all his life.

For Charles marriage was no light decision. He had coolly weighed it up. On the positive side a wife would be a *constant companion (and friend in old age) who will feel interested in one, object to be beloved and played with – better than a dog anyhow... someone to take care of the house- charms of music & female chit chat...* On the negative was a list of woes and inconveniences ranging from lost work time to tedious family and social gatherings (July 1838).

Emma and Charles were married in January 1839 and, in 1842, moved to Down House in Kent, about 16 miles from London. The house was substantial but extended to accommodate a growing household and the scientific work.

Charles was a complex character. Brilliant and determined, he was also emotionally and physically needy. It is unlikely that he could have published his research without the Darwin and Wedgwood financial resources and Emma's extraordinary emotional and intellectual input.

The Darwin correspondence paints a picture of domesticity orchestrated by Emma's remarkable talents. In a less supportive environment the likelihood of Charles ever publishing his data is slim, no matter how revolutionary the ideas.

Notwithstanding the painstaking nature of scientific work without the benefit of computers and the effects of his lingering illnesses, Charles' daily work routines are unimaginable in today's academic world. Or maybe it is what we now call work-life balance. His daily routines also indicate Emma's dedicated role as personal assistant.

He used to rise at 6.30 or 7, breakfast and work from 8 to 9.30 or so *when he came out to the drawing room... After reading his letters and talking for a time he would then lie down on the sofa whilst my mother or sister read aloud to him some novel, history or book of travels.... The chief requisites were a pretty girl & a good ending. At 10.30 he returned to work in the study. At 12 or 12.15 he used to come back to the drawing room... he would sit and talk for a quarter of an hour or so & afterwards start for his walk. ...After luncheon he lay on the sofa & looked through newspapers... At 3 o'clock he went up to his bedroom & lay on the sofa & smoked a cigarette. Then my mother or sister read aloud to him for 20 minutes ... At four o'clock he went for another walk... At 4.30 he was home again and worked until about six or sometimes sooner.... Towards 6 he went upstairs again and rested until 7.30, during this time there being another reading... Sometimes he read his scientific books in the evening... He suffered much from sleeplessness and bad nights.*

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Although Charles was a scientific celebrity he was also somewhat reclusive, a situation probably exacerbated by his ill-health. He often stopped work for weeks on end as he recovered from one illness or another. His enthusiasm for work varied dramatically. At each point Emma nursed him back to health and work.

*Charles has just finished his Journal, which has overtired him a good deal, and he is but poorly, now he has not the excitement of being forced to go on with his work....(Emma to her aunt Madame Sismondi August 1845).*

Emma's role in supporting Charles was academic as well as emotional. She was *cultivated* and intelligent. She translated German, French and Italian texts and letters for him and edited his writing. She acted as a sounding board and discussant for complex ideas and helped him clarify tensions between religious beliefs and traditions and his evolving notions about the origins of humankind. Later his adult children also helped edit and proof manuscripts, building on the work they did as children in helping with scientific experiments.

Emma Darwin died in 1896.



#### ANTENNAE

Professor Alison Elliott is Head of CDU's School of Education. Professor Elliott acknowledges the following sources in the preparation of this article:

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Charles Darwin 1838 Memorandum on Marriage [darwin-online.org.uk](http://darwin-online.org.uk).

Census Returns of England and Wales for 1851, 1861 and 1871 [darwin-online.org.uk](http://darwin-online.org.uk).



ABOVE  
Alison Elliott,  
courtesy Peter Eve