

APPENDIX C: A REVIEW OF
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES
 DARWIN 1809-1882* (ED. NORA BARLOW, 1958)

A review of Barlow, N. (Ed.) (1958). *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882*. Collins, London by R.A. Fisher (1958). Reprinted from *Nature* 182, 71.

Lady Barlow keeps adding to our debt of gratitude for her untiring care in editing or de-editing the literary remains of her illustrious grandfather.

It is good to have Charles Darwin's original biographical sketch as it was written and left for the information of his children and grandchildren 'with original omissions restored'. His grand-daughter's notes are helpful and informative, and do not trouble or interrupt the narrative.

About half the book is, however, devoted to new material. There are two appendixes, one of eighteen pages 'On Charles Darwin and his grandfather Dr. Erasmus Darwin', and one of more than fifty entitled 'The Darwin-Butler Controversy'. The six notes which complete the volume are of personal and bibliographical interest, and take only twenty-six pages.

The relationship between Charles Darwin's evolutionary doctrine and that of Erasmus Darwin is treated here in terms of the theories, if that is not too strong a word, held by Charles on the subject of scientific inference. I believe this point of view does less than justice to his grandfather, who wrote in the tradition of didactic poetry, and was, to the taste of his century, one of the greatest of poets. I do not understand that this fact should be ignored merely because, eighty years later, the function of poetry in contemporary literature had changed; and people like Coleridge had written spitefully.

The charge that Charles plagiarized his grandfather's work, and took credit for his ideas, was indeed nothing but a malicious falsification due, I suppose, to Samuel Butler relying on the public's lack of direct familiarity with the work of either. I could wish that Lady Barlow had given half a dozen pages in this first appendix to quotations from *The Botanic Garden* and from the *Zoonomia*. The sonorous lines could be annotated from Buffon or Lucretius, lest the reader forget that Erasmus as an eighteenth century *philosophe* was expressing his appreciation of an old and richly poetic idea and not assembling the evidence for an inductive proposition. It would be apparent that Erasmus was not trying to do what his grandson later did, and this not from any lack of understanding of the proper procedure of the natural sciences.

I have, for myself, no doubt that Charles would never have undertaken the large task of marshalling the evidence for 'descent with modification', which had indeed become much more impressive since Erasmus's time,

without having hit upon a truly naturalistic explanation. Speculation, indeed, has an important part to play in inductive reasoning, but speculation supported by a theory which both Cuvier and Lyell had been forced to reject was to Charles Darwin a major obstacle.