



Darwin's world-wide web

Darwin the mentor and family man.

Rissa:

This role of Darwin as a mentor to young scientists comes across clearly in his correspondence. He manages it with skill and flair, even at a distance.

Shelley:

One example that I can think of is Hermann Müller, who was a schoolteacher in Germany, and he was very interested in Darwin's work on orchids. Darwin did a whole book on the topic of orchid pollination mechanisms, and what Darwin had looked at was the orchids themselves and the different mechanisms that allowed them to be cross-pollinated. Well he encouraged Hermann Müller to do what would be really a parallel study, and Müller did a lot of work on the mechanisms in insects that allowed them to pollinate certain flowers.

When his own son, Francis, was working in Germany at the laboratory of Julius Sachs in Würzburg, and this was a very, very prominent botanist, had many graduate students working in his laboratory, Darwin would occasionally say, I hear that so and so is working on such and such, suggest to him this, and he would start up many, many conversations with students of Sachs, who went on to do research that had been actually suggested by Darwin. So I think his role as a mentor is one of the things which really comes through in the correspondence, and that you would not find through reading the publications

Rissa:

Last but not least, the letters paint a rich portrait of Darwin's family life and the interplay between the personal and the professional.

Alison:

One of the fascinating things about Darwin is that he pursued his science in a really domestic setting. His wife was, she was often his secretary, she helped him write letters but it's also quite clear that she was no silent partner in that, that she had discussions with him about his ideas as they were developing. He worked closely with his sons and his daughters as they grew older, and involved them in his work and encouraged their own scientific careers.

One of the most interesting aspects, I think, of this is going to be looking in detail at Darwin's relationship with his daughter, Henrietta, who was one of the few people that Darwin entrusted to read the unpublished manuscript of *Descent of Man*, which is rather in contrast, I think, to the view that most people will have of Darwin as a classic Victorian father. He clearly regarded Henrietta's abilities, her intellect very highly. It's only really through the correspondence that it's possible to see the great trust he placed in her and the great respect he had for her intellect.

Rissa:

Have any other surprises emerged from researching Darwin's letters?

Alison:

We're sometimes asked if there is a sort of single bombshell letter that explodes some major Darwin myth, and I think the real value of the correspondence and the work that we do doesn't lie in that. It lies in building up this detailed picture of Darwin the man throughout his working life, and one of the great things that it does reveal is that he was not a lone genius. This is a man who was working in collaboration with an enormous number of other people, whose ideas were developed in conversation with others, whose work depended on the data that he was able to acquire from so many of his friends and colleagues around the world.