

## From the Back Verandah

In Issue 14 (July 1999) this column unveiled the chequered history of the English town Berwick-upon-Tweed. One of the trivia bits mentioned was a Civil Service mistake at the end of World War II. Well, here's another tale that includes a nice administrative oversight, this time from Germany.

About 30 km south of Frankfurt-am-Main is the Messel Fossil Pit, which some say is as significant for palaeontology as Pompeii is for archaeology.

Since the 19th century there have been unearthed at this location countless well-preserved fossils of mammals (especially proto-horses) that were trapped 49 million years ago when the pit was a lake in the middle of a tropical rainforest. At that time (the Middle Eocene period), eons before continental drift, this area was far to the south of its current location — indeed, where Sicily is today.

Here is a brief chronology of the pit's fate in modern times.

From 1873, for about 90 years, it was a profitable site for brown coal and later oil shale mining, in

the 1940s using enormous distillation furnaces. By 1962, when it became cheaper to import oil than extract it, a cement factory operated here, but it failed in the 1970s.

“Aha,” thought government officials, “what a great place for a waste dump!”

Yet for some unaccountable reason there was a bureaucratic slip-up and the plans that had been drawn up got forgotten temporarily. Those locals who had recognised the historical value of the site took advantage of the blunder, and in 1975 a petition was started, together with demonstrations and talks by experts.

All this resulted in a court case that with appeals dragged on for twelve years. In the end the legal victory went to palaeontology, and the state was obliged to buy the site and declare it a cultural monument.

The culmination of these civic and legal efforts came in 1995 when the Messel Fossil Pit was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

— Fizzgig

# BIKWIL

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## Admirably Deduced!

Many thanks to all readers who participated in our guessing competition. Most of you guessed our Web site's most popular piece correctly, and I suppose that's because you remembered my comments in the Editorial to Issue 30 (March 2002).

These were the choices you had:

Basque (Issue 13, May 1999)  
 Camp Creative (Issue 8, July 1998)  
 Enter an Archetypal Zealot (Issue 10, November 1998)  
 A Grace Note for George (Issue 11, January 1999)  
 12 Billiard Ball Puzzle (Issue 6, March 1998)  
 William Chester Minor (Issue 14, July 1999)  
 Zulu Love Letter (Issue 18, March 2000).

The correct answer, of course, was *12 Billiard Ball Puzzle*.

Congratulations to the two subscribers (Peter and Michael) who were first in with the answer. A free year of *Bikwil* coming up for you both.

But wait! Something intriguing is happening. Lately the emphasis popularity-wise is shifting. I won't let on what *Bikwil*'s currently most visited piece is, because I might run another competition next year. (And anyway, it could change again.)

But the change is something I'm observing closely. Does it have anything to do with worldwide trends? Almost certainly not. *Bikwil* ain't trendy. Or is it?

## Colophon

*Bikwil*  
 18 Pembury Ave.  
 NORTH ROCKS. N.S.W. 2151.  
 AUSTRALIA.

tony@bikwil.zip.com.au  
 www.bikwil.zip.com.au

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*Back Issues Are Still Available*

You tell me I am the greatest painter since Velasquez. But why drag in Velasquez?  
 James Abbott McNeill Whistler

No, no, no, the British people are quite fond of classical music. They just don't like the noise it makes.

Sir Thomas Beecham

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

I go from stool to stool in singles bars hoping to get lucky, but there's never any gum under any of them.

Emo Philips

History doesn't often repeat itself; but it rhymes.

Mark Twain

Artificial Intelligence is no match for natural stupidity.

Anonymous

The Triumph of Neptune, L'Uomo dai Baffi, Valses Bourgoises, Polka (8.223711)

A Wedding Bouquet, Luna Park March (8.223716).

For readers wanting more detail on Berners' music, may I suggest (a) the very detailed liner notes on the EMI and Marco Polo discs, and (b) the thorough and fair-minded *Lord Berners* by J.A. Westrup, the 12th essay in *British Music of Our Time*, ed. by A.L. Bacharach (Pelican, 1951).

And, no, I have not forgotten Lord Berners' self-epitaph.

Here it is for you at last:

Here lies Lord Berners  
One of the learners,  
His great love of learning  
May earn him a burning,  
But, praise to the Lord,  
He seldom was bored.

While that first line might imply burial, in actual fact Lord Berners was cremated, at the Oxford Crematorium. Apart from Heber Percy, only a few old friends (e.g. John Betjeman and Georgia, Sacheverell Sitwell's wife) attended. Where his ashes were buried or scattered, or where they stand urned, I have been unable to ascertain.

Unsurprisingly, there are other — almost certainly apocryphal — stories about Berners' final intentions. According to David Herbert, second son of the Earl of Pembroke,

Berners' will stipulated that he was to be stuffed and hung behind glass over the Faringdon drawing-room mantelpiece.

What Berners did provide in his will was that almost his entire estate, including shares in the Berners Estate Company, was to pass to "Archbitchop" Robert Heber Percy. The latter lived at Faringdon until his own death in 1987.

Before I finish, I should point out that I have omitted a couple of unpleasant events that happened during World War II. One was Berners' flirtation with Fascism (through the Mosleys). The other was his depression — so severe that he had to seek a course of psychoanalysis.

Here are two final quotes to round off this epic of idiosyncrasy.

The first is by musicologist and track-organ specialist David Thomas Goguen:

I'm sure Lord Berners would have been perfectly normal if he hadn't gotten swept up in the Wagner craze and then been turned into a monkey by Satie.

And why not let Berners have the final word himself?

There is a good deal to be said for frivolity. Frivolous people, when all is said and done, do less harm in the world than some of our philanthropisers and reformers. Mistrust a man who never has an occasional flash of silliness.

— TR

## Web

As this issue features another article about the Internet, (page 5) this column will be brief.

Let's relax and look at a trio of weird and wacky sites that haven't been mentioned here before. (They have appeared on the *Bikwil* Web site, however.)

It's conceivable there still exist a few people who believe that Dubbin is a British non-shine waterproofing wax, but a few minutes at *the dubbinternet* should soon put them right. Did you know, for example, that "the secret, sordid history of dubbin" reaches back to Shakespeare, who discovered it in 1288, "whilst holidaying near a chimney in Slough"? Or that you can buy it from "most mountaineering or fetish shops"?



## Line

*Totally Absurd* boasts the slogan "The Funniest Patents on the Planet!"™ These are genuine patents lodged with the U.S. government and those of other countries. The Alarm Fork, the Brain Buzzer, the Fingertip Toothbrush, the Greenhouse Helmet, the Meditation Bag, the Ski Fan . . .

Cheekily displaying the slogan "Get an Afterlife", the wonderfully sick *Corpses for Sale* not only sells cadavers, but also offers (for just \$US19.95) step-by-step instructions on how to "build a lifesize, realistic, decaying corpse in the privacy of your own home". (You don't need any prior experience, either.) Just make sure you visit their Hate Mail and Great Mail subpages before you depart.

— TR

### Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.dubbin.com/>  
<http://www.totallyabsurd.com/>  
<http://distefano.com/>

## Poem for My Father

My father was the simple man,  
Who wanted things to fit his plan.  
Not highly lettered this I know,  
He never wrote a word although  
He held strong views on many things  
That dealt with cabbages and kings.

You see, my father felt that all good verse  
In rhyme and meter was immersed,  
That poems be written and constructed  
With long tradition unobstructed,  
And built with blocks called foot or feet  
With meter pounding out its beat.

And so he wanted poems to rhyme  
With meter locked in perfect time,  
And all my verse not to his taste  
Was ridiculed right to my face,  
And they were set aside unread  
Like much between us left unsaid.

And so this poem so long in making  
With all the rules it is now breaking,  
The lines have taken years to craft,  
A life long journey toward final draft,  
And all the words now come so free  
And sing in tethered melody.

So Father here's a poem you'd read,  
One penned by your poetic seed.  
It winks, it giggles and it grins.  
It two steps, tangos and it spins,  
And as every word now tows the meter,  
I hope rhyme wiggles past St. Peter.

— Doug Tanoury

Although the idea for a ballet on an English theme was Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev's, the subject itself (*The Triumph of Neptune*) was proposed by Sacheverell Sitwell, who wrote the "book" for it. He first suggested Sitwell protégé William Walton as the composer, but Diaghilev preferred his next suggestion, Lord Berners.

The ballet is a pantomime in ten tableaux. The suite that we hear on record uses about half the music Berners originally composed.

The later *Wedding Bouquet* was a collaboration between Berners and Gertrude Stein.

Stein wrote the libretto, Berners rewrote it (to no complaints from Stein), composed the music, designed the costumes and conceived the stage set too.

This ballet is fully choral. The text is described by J.A. Westrup (see below for the reference) as in characteristic Gertrude Stein manner, "full of chattering, inconsequent repetitions, in which sound counts for more than intelligibility . . . [t]hese word-patterns are the exact counterpart of the sound patterns to which Berners is so faithful in his music".

During the 1940s Berners turned his hand to film scores.

In 1943 there was *The Halfway House* (Ealing Studios, starring

father and daughter Mervyn and Glynnis Johns). In 1947 he composed the music for *Nicholas Nickleby* (also from Ealing, with a cast that included Sybil Thorndike, Cedric Hardwicke, Stanley Holloway and Bernard Miles).

At various times throughout his life he wrote some satiric songs and quite a few piano pieces, and in fact orchestrated some of the latter for orchestra: *Fragments Psychologiques*, *Petites Marches Funèbres*, *Valses Bourgeoises* (piano duet).

While little of Berners' music makes it to the concert hall, I'm happy to report that there are now several CDs available. The first (CDM 5 65098 2), which I like a lot, is on EMI Classics, *The Triumph of Neptune*, and, apart from the suite from that ballet, includes the *Fugue for Orchestra*, the *Incidental Music to Nicholas Nickleby*, *Trois Morceaux* and *Fantaisie Espagnole*.

And it looks as though the Marco Polo label, though labelling him as a dilettante, plans to release most, if not all, of Berners' music. For example, the 2001 catalogue contains:

Le Carosse du Saint-Sacrement, Fanfare, Caprice Péruvien (8.225155)

Les Sirènes, Caprice Péruvien, Cupid and Psyche (8.223780)

Songs and Piano Music (8.22519)

which shows what a good thing it is to be a baron.

If you look up his name in an encyclopaedia and unearth him at all (he doesn't warrant an entry in the current *Britannica*), you will find Lord Berners inevitably identified, not as a novelist or painter, but as a composer, for despite his relatively small output, it is his musical pieces for which he will be most remembered.

But let me make a clean breast of it right now: Berners was no great musician, but rather a minor figure among many far superior English composers of the 20th century. In fact he is not really to be regarded stylistically as an English composer at all; from the start he was in spirit a European.

Here is a nicely succinct outline of his music, from *Collins Encyclopedia of Music*:

As a composer he was largely self taught, though he had some encouragement from Stravinsky. His music is often ironical and parodies the conventions of romanticism, but it is evident that he was himself a romantic at heart. His Gallic leanings were revealed in the French titles he frequently chose for his works. He was most successful as a composer of ballets . . .

Ernest Newman, then critic for the *Observer*, characterised Berners' work as "nonsense but logical nonsense . . . inexpressibly comic", and compared it favourably with

"mere harmonic absurdity, in the style that Erik Satie often affects", which "is so easy that it is not worth doing".

Yes, it is not difficult to see why Berners was dubbed "the English Satie". Just take a look at some of his titles for starters: *Fragments Psychologiques*, *Petites Marches Funèbres*, *Strauss*, *Strauss et Straus*, *Valses Bourgeoises*.

Harmonically he was not so "modern"; on the other hand his music at times takes unexpected turns in melodic line, rhythm and orchestral colour. Musical allusion and parody abound — in the words of *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, his works display "a delicate and witty sense of pastiche". At the same time they are disciplined and clear-cut, with an economy of means that suits his mostly small musical forms.

His few "large" works are ballets: *The Triumph of Neptune* (1926), *Luna Park* (1930), *A Wedding Bouquet* (1937), *Cupid and Psyche* (1939), *Les Sirènes* (1946). For orchestra he also wrote *Trois Morceaux* (1917), *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (1919), *Fantaisie Espagnole* (1919), *Fugue for Orchestra* (1924).

The origins of *The Triumph of Neptune* and *Wedding Bouquet* are of interest.

## Is Bikwil Banned in China?

[ The above question was first asked and partially answered in Issue 34 (November 2002), in the *Web Line* column. The following analysis "from the inside" clinches the argument. The author Michael LaRocca and his wife Jan Bond are *Bikwil* subscribers who teach in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. ]

Not only is *Bikwil* banned in China, but I am punished every time I try to access it.

Let me explain.

As was mentioned in *Bikwil* 34, the *New York Times* website is inaccessible from China. But a friend emailed me a rather informative article from that newspaper that explains how we are punished in China. Any site we try to access after trying to access a banned site loads incredibly slowly and often times out. This effect lasts for about five minutes. I suspect that Chinese government computers somewhere are busily gathering those URLs as well. Those URLs are probably filed for future investigation.

I suspect this is how they learned of sites that were being

used instead of Google when Google was banned. Google was banned because of its cache feature. Google returned about a week later, but without the cache feature.

The problem with the cache feature, which people Down Under can use, is that it stores the content of every site that comes up in a Google search. This includes banned sites such as Falun Gong, Taiwanese independence, and *Bikwil*. Thus I could have gone to Google, searched for *Bikwil*, and viewed the cached copy of this forbidden content.

There are a number of sites that receive their results from Google and include the cache feature. Comet Search (<http://google.cm.nu/>) comes to mind. It is now banned in China. Others that are part of the Google family, such as Google.ICQ.com, are still live but without the caching feature.

*Bikwil* 34 also mentioned that AltaVista has been banned. I suspect this is permanent, but that nobody really misses it. I quit using AltaVista long before

it was banned because its results are often irrelevant. The ban annoyed me slightly because I was trying to list my “novelist” site on AltaVista, so I found a Search Engine Submission service to do it for me. Try running an AltaVista search for “Michael LaRocca” and you should be bombarded with my fiction. None of which is banned, I might add. At least not yet.

The reason that AltaVista was banned is because of its ability to translate websites into other languages. Why is that a problem? Well, let’s say you have the URL of a banned site such as *Bikwil*. You go to AltaVista and tell it to translate this site from German to English, for example. Of course the site isn’t in German. It doesn’t matter. You will be able to view the “translated” *Bikwil* in English, and it’s banned! So AltaVista is out. We can NOT have people viewing that nasty ole *Bikwil*!

I noticed that Google now has a translation feature as well. I wonder if it works in China. And if so, I wonder how long that’ll be the case. It won’t translate PDF files, the significance of which I’ll explain below, but offering the ability to “translate”

HTML files is a slippery slope as far as China is concerned.

I can, however, still visit my writer site <http://freereads.topcities.com/indexspanish.html>. It has a link to Translate.com. I can type *Bikwil*’s URL into there and see it “translated” from “Spanish” to “English”. Once the Chinese government discovers that trick, they’ll close the loophole. Don’t tell them about it.

Speaking of sites I’ve written, one of them was banned. I teach English here in China, so I wrote an educational site for my students. Whatever they asked for, they got. Ways to learn English, my family tree and life history, and photos I’ve taken here in China. Pretty harmless stuff, right? Wrong.

My students asked for a link to VOA, Voice Of America, to help them improve their English. That’s been banned over here. I did a bit of research, and I found a site that received its news from VOA and reprinted it. I linked to that site. This action may have gotten me banned in China.

Or perhaps it was the fact that I linked to other news sites which weren’t banned at the

## *A Bikwil Epitaph for an Extraordinary Musical Aristocrat*

(This the fourth and final part of an article on the life of eccentric English composer Lord Berners.)

As you will have gathered, I never did intend including in this essay a great deal about Lord Berners’ music, painting or novels, having been satisfyingly distracted by his personal eccentricities. For those of you who are interested in his creative achievements as well as his day-to-day nonconformity let me offer the following few paragraphs.

First I’ll quickly get his novels and painting out of the way, so as to concentrate on his music, which is what I’m most familiar with.

As far as his place as a novelist goes, he is often described as a mere dabbler. He wrote six books, at least one of which he printed privately in a limited edition. This was his most popular novel, *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* (1937), a thinly disguised story of his gay friends, with each depicted as a pupil or teacher in a girls’ school. Berners himself is represented as the headmistress.

Cecil Beaton was furious at his own portrayal (“Cecily Seymour”), and went round Berners’ friends confiscating as many copies as he could.

Another novel was *Far from the Madding War*, written during World War II.

He also wrote two volumes of autobiography: *First Childhood* (1934) and *A Distant Prospect* (1945).

Berners, by the way, appeared in Nancy Mitford’s novel *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) — as Lord Merlin.

Surprisingly, perhaps, in his painting Berners did not present reveal the same quirkiness as in his novels and music. Instead, from childhood he preferred to draw and paint serious pictures, usually landscapes, which are sometimes said to be reminiscent of Jean Corot.

He is described by Amory as “a gifted, industrious, successful amateur, whose pictures are still attributed and give pleasure but are somehow not those of a professional artist”.

Even so, he was able to stage two one-man shows of his art during his lifetime, both to excellent reviews. The edge was taken off the first success (1931), however, by a comment by Evelyn Waugh:

Gerald Berners had an exhibition of pictures and sold them all on the firstday

## A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Here's the solution to the brain-teaser I set in Issue 33 (September 2002).

As you'll recall, the 26 letters of the English alphabet were divided into four groups, as shown below, and the question was: "What is the principle on which the grouping has been made?"

Before letting you into the secret, I want to describe the situation in

Group 1:

**F G J K L N P Q R S Z**

Group 2:

**B C D E**

Group 3:

**A M T U V W Y**

Group 4:

**H I O X**

No luck?

Well, the Chinese clue points to the fact that the *shape* of the letters has determined the grouping, rather than their usage in English or their pronunciation.

Here's the solution:

which I first heard of this puzzle, a lecture series called The Language of Communication. When the lecturer presented it, ten minutes elapsed before a hand was raised.

It was a lady of Chinese background who eventually solved it, and before you look at the solution, think about that fact. It holds an important clue.

Back in a sec.

Group 2 has a horizontal axis of symmetry, Group 3 a vertical one, Group 4 has both, while Group 1 has none.

(Of course, you need to use an appropriate typeface, or the whole thing mightn't work.)

— Harlish Goop

time, but which were banned later. CNN, BBC, *Miami Herald*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*. I chose these sites because they were listed in my students' textbooks. But they're banned, and I am guilty by association. Maybe that's what got me banned.

Upon discovering this, I got myself a new URL. I uploaded the old site to the new site, minus the possibly offensive links. The new site is at <http://michaeljan.topcities.com/> Then I had a friend back in the US change the old website so it would forward all visitors to the new website. To date, I haven't been banned for doing this. Visit the site if you want. It's not nearly so offensive as the infamous *Bikwil* 10, which I've read by proxy.

I have a neighbor who is a real computer expert. We were talking about banned websites in general, not *Bikwil* in particular, when he suggested that maybe some of the sites we think are banned really aren't. Maybe China's computers are just using out-of-date DNS tables, or no DNS tables at all. As I've noticed that I can never access any new site I read about, he had my interest.

Every Internet "hub" is located in a major city, usually on a campus. When I log onto the Internet and try to visit *Bikwil's* web site, my request is routed up the road to China Telecom in Hangzhou, then from there to a campus in Shanghai, and then probably to Beijing and then to Sydney or Melbourne. The DNS table translates the address (<http://www.bikwil.zip.com.au>) into a series of numbers. Without those numbers, my request can't be processed.

So I wondered, can I get into *Bikwil* with the DNS numbers?

Absolutely not. You are banned! Blocked! Verboten! You naughty *Bikwil* people! You're probably hiding the leader of Falun Gong AND bin Laden in your basement! And that Chen Shui Bin guy too! You shall be punished for existing, and I shall be punished for knowing about it.

But again, I've read the infamous *Bikwil* 10. Wagner!

*Bikwil* 34 mentioned proxy servers. I'm able to access *Bikwil's* site through a number of proxy servers, but it's painfully slow. Two to five minutes per article, and you've published a lot of articles over the years.

What I wanted was to snatch the entire *Bikwil* 10 PDF file in one shot, so that I could read it at my leisure. This led to a new problem.

Many proxy servers are limited in their bandwidth. Meaning, graphics are stripped and large files are inaccessible. Such as the infamous *Bikwil* 10 PDF. 622 KB. Now I could've asked the editor to email it to me, and of course he would have. He's been snail-mailing me the magazine, and China Post has been letting him do it. But darnit there was a principle involved here! I wanted to get the *Bikwil* 10 PDF myself.

Of the 27 proxy servers I tried, 2 were successful. I won't name them because you don't need them, and there's no reason to tell the Chinese government who they are. But they're there. So HA!

Incidentally, the *Miami Herald* has been blocked since before I arrived here in February 2002. Why is this important? It means I can't read Dave Barry's humorous column. I told Dave that it's all his fault, and that Beijing fears he'll write a scathing expose about the condition of China's toilets.

Indeed, the *China Daily* has written many pages about the deplorable state of China's toilets, and about how they plan to upgrade them before the 2008 Olympics. They've built some new five-star toilets, and are rating the existing toilets. I don't even want to think about what a one-star Chinese toilet would be like.

(I could say it'd stink, but I'm above such bad puns.)

However, Dave Barry hasn't seen fit to answer me. Or perhaps he did through his column, which I can't access without the nightmare of a super-slow proxy server. I used to read him via Google cache, only one month behind, but I can't do that now.

Seriously, I have no idea why *Bikwil* has been banned in China. But I know that if I search for it on Google, that's now part of *Bikwil's* website description. "Banned in China." And hey, anyone who's been banned in China can't be all bad. If they ban me (not my website) in China, I'll probably come on over to Australia and log onto *Bikwil's* website every day I'm there.

— Michael LaRocca

continually dedicating her efforts "to shield him from every avoidable annoyance".

For nearly 40 years he followed the same routine, his day being carefully apportioned into times for exercise and light reading "in such proportions that he could utilize to his fullest capacity the [few] hours he devoted to work".

Additionally, his experiments and scientific reading were structured with "the most rigorous economy". Indeed, he worked only for short periods — two hours in the morning, then a rest and a midday walk, then two hours' more work, then rest again.

In his modest autobiography Darwin refers to the drying up in later life of his tastes for literature, painting and music. On the latter he wrote, "Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure." The atrophy of such work-unrelated intellectual pastimes he regretted as "a loss of happiness". Any non-scientific reading he did do was purely for relaxation, and even then he believed that "a law ought to be passed" against sad endings in novels.

Before I wrap up this piece with a handful of unrelated odds and ends, I ought to share with you a modern quote that helps keep the

great man in perspective. It's from comedian Steven Wright:

My theory of evolution is that Darwin was adopted.

Finally, those bits and pieces. Beware, though: at least one item is no more than urban legend. But which?

Darwin's walking-stick was of a spiral shape, and was made from a climbing plant.

The famous "survival of the fittest" phrase was not Darwin's at all, but was coined by the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) in his *Principles of Biology*.

Although his own doctrines were in some respects pre-Darwinian, Karl Marx admired Darwin greatly and wanted to dedicate the English translation of *Das Kapital* to him. Darwin declined.

There is a largish crater on Mars named after Darwin.

When he died in 1882 the Darwin family expressed the wish that he be buried at Down. Public feeling, however, was such that a petition was organised and presented to Parliament, which decreed that he should be interred in Westminster Abbey. His tomb is next to that of an earlier scientific trailblazer, Sir Isaac Newton.

— TR



lecture of his she had just attended might have been rather boring for her, her resigned response was, “Not more than all the rest.”

But boredom was not the only thing that worried him on Emma’s behalf. He awaited the publication of *The Origin of Species* (and even more so *The Descent of Man*) in great trepidation, for he knew the hurt his ideas would cause her, a devout Christian, for whom his theories would be heresy.

Darwin was frightened of his ideas in a wider sense also. By the late 1830s he was already satisfied that all animal species, including humanity, had evolved from a common ancestor. But the betrayal of Christianity and of human nobility implied by his theory would, he feared, give comfort to atheists and socialist revolutionaries.

So, faithful to propriety and social order, he held back from publishing *The Origin of Species* for an astonishing 20 years. It was only when he learned that a younger biologist, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), had reached similar conclusions that he allowed himself to be persuaded by friends to brace himself and go public.

Another researcher who was destined to play a part in Darwinism (more strictly, neo-Darwinism) was Gregor Mendel. Although Darwin

had received a copy of Mendel’s work, it lay unopened on his desk, and he never learnt of the vital mechanism of inheritance that makes natural selection work by transmitting those units of information we now call genes.

I used the word “hypochondria” above, but I need to stress that Darwin did actually suffer from more than just *mal de mer* — and often. Indeed, he became a semi-invalid before he turned 40, predisposed to painful flatulence, vomiting, insomnia, palpitations, heart trouble, lethargy and fainting attacks.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, over the last hundred years his illnesses have been the subject of wide-ranging speculation. At one time it was thought that while on the *Beagle* he had contracted Chagas’ Disease (from exposure to South American insects) or some other tropical ailment. Today the consensus seems to be that his maladies were psychosomatic, going back at least to his days in medical school and brought on specifically by acute anxiety, usually relating to his work. For instance, some of his attacks began in force in 1837, when he began his first notebook on species transmutation.

Whatever the true origin and nature of his ill-health, Darwin’s life at Down was particularly adapted to preserve his energy, with Emma

## One Thing Certain

Promises are not always kept.  
Some are not ours to keep.  
A bud may not unfold  
or fledging fly. The old  
and loved may not endure  
for our sake. We dare  
to wish it were not so,  
but ache for the truth we know:

we live precariously  
and for our losses weep,  
for the life we cannot save  
and for ourselves bereft.

Living with loss is hard.  
The pain does not quickly fade.  
The loss remains entire  
in the heart and memory,  
and something else worth  
keeping: the subtle legacy,  
fruit of love’s discipline  
hard won through shared years:

strength to live without lies,  
fantasy and false prophecies,  
without the feared paralysis  
of hesitation and despair.

This promise is ours to fulfil.  
Grief gives it shape and pattern,  
and after tears fall cleanly  
we learn in quietness to accept.  
One thing in time is certain:  
after loss there is renewal.

## Mary Bennet

8

When a new family comes into a country neighbourhood there is always speculation about its circumstances, pecuniary and personal, and the histories of individual family members, their habits, talents, oddities and secrets are much wondered about and discussed. And when such a family takes possession of one of the principal properties in the neighbourhood, the speculation reaches fever pitch.

That, at least, was how it was with Jasper Coates. Stories about him began to circulate long before he arrived at Netherfield. He was first reported to be a single man of four and twenty, living in London, a writer of novels but with an independent fortune of some five or six thousand a year. His widowed sister and her two young sons were also reportedly coming to live at Netherfield and this same sister was to keep house for him.

A contradictory report however had Mr Coates as a widower, aged about thirty, and father to two young boys — the boys were the constant in all the stories — whose mother-in-law and unmarried sister were jointly to keep house for him. In this version, there was no mention of Mr Coates writing novels although he was reputed to own a very fine library which he intended bringing with him to Netherfield.

Sir William Lucas was the first to visit the newcomer and he called at Longbourn shortly afterwards to tell us what he had learned.

Yes, he assured Mama, Mr Coates was indeed a single man, and a very fine young man too, very handsome — if Sir William was any judge — with an affable well bred manner, perhaps a little too informal in his dress (he had been in his shirtsleeves, supervising the unpacking of a crate of books when Sir William

government ship *H.M.S. Beagle* which was about to set sail around the world on a surveying expedition.

When taken on the *Beagle* the 22-year-old Darwin had no scientific qualifications whatever. He had, however, made large collections of beetles, fossils and rocks and knew how to stuff animals.

Apart from scientific works, one of the books he took with him was Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which often read before falling asleep in his only bed, a hammock. Inevitably, he suffered severe seasickness during the five-year voyage. His day-time working space was a cramped corner of the chart room.

In 1839 he married his first cousin, Emma Wedgwood, and they moved to Down, in Kent, where until his death he lived a privileged existence as a well-off independent scientist and country gentleman among his garden conservatories, pigeons and fowls.

His first great undertaking was the laborious classification of barnacles, for which he collected and kept in his house ten thousand specimens. This investigation took him eight years, and resulted in his first published work, a monograph in four volumes.

Having explored the workings of a single biological group he next

devoted himself to the more difficult question of speciation generally. His efforts here would eventually result in the book that changed scientific thinking forever, *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The first edition of 1859, in 1250 copies, sold out in a day.

Although he lived in seclusion and worked alone, Darwin was by no means a hermit, often attending scientific meetings in London. Yet I recall a TV documentary of a few years ago which distinctly promoted the impression of Darwin as recluse, pampered by wife and daughters, irritable and much given to hypochondria.

It is certainly true that Darwin treated the adult females in his family like children, insisting for example that Emma “ask him for the only key to the drawers containing all the keys to cupboards and other locked depositories”.

Even so, he seems to have been genuinely devoted to his family, with his son Francis writing of his “affectionate and delightful” manner and wondering how he could preserve it “with such an undemonstrative race as we are”.

Emma, loyal though she was to his work, failed to share his enthusiasm for it. He once apologetically asked whether a particular

## *The Man behind the Theory: the Evolution of Charles Darwin*

This is not a review of Darwin's work, let alone of any controversies arising out of it. It is simply a collection, in approximately chronological order, of Darwiniana fragments that seem worthy of inclusion in an idiosyncratic magazine like *Bikwil*. They might even be used as the basis for a special box of Trivial Pursuit cards, and, if absolutely necessary, for a brand new sort of *Mastermind*.

Charles Robert Darwin was born in 1809 into a successful and prosperous family. His grandfather on his father's side was the eminent physician and poet Erasmus Darwin, who through his second wife was also the grandfather of scientist Francis Galton, among other things the inventor of the fingerprint identification system.

Charles' maternal grandfather was the china and pottery entrepreneur Josiah Wedgwood.

After his restrained schooling at Shrewsbury Grammar, the pursuits he developed as a young man seemed to predict Charles' life as little more than that of an idle country sportsman. Indeed, his father, a physician, once vehemently

informed him, "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family".

Young Charles certainly loved shooting, and he also liked music, reading novels and playing backgammon. As a child, on the other hand, his fantasies had been concerned with fabulous discoveries in natural history, which explains the career for which he became famous. Not before a couple of false starts, however.

His first attempt at a career was dictated by his father, that calling being medicine. He persevered for three years of the course at Edinburgh, but he was too sensitive for the medical profession, principally surgery with no anaesthesia. Next he began studying at Cambridge to become a clergyman, but he found himself unable to stifle his interest in science, and soon grew to be a passionate entomologist.

At Cambridge he met J.S. Henslow, the Professor of Botany, who encouraged his interest in zoology and geology. It was Henslow who organised Darwin's appointment in 1831 as naturalist on the

called) but on the whole Sir William was very well pleased with him.

However, when questioned further by Jane and Elizabeth as to what sort of a man Mr Coates *really* was — his interests and pursuits and whether he was indeed a writer of novels — Sir William at first could offer little: he guessed Mr Coates' age to be five and twenty or thereabouts, and his weight to be about thirteen stone.

But then Sir William *did* recall that while the crate of books was being emptied, Mr Coates had set aside several identical three-volume sets in red leather, all with gilded page fore-edges, and ordered that they be placed under lock and key.

"His own work!" cried Elizabeth eagerly. "It must be so. And what was the title, Sir William?"

Sir William could not recall the title except that it was encased in a scroll and the lettering was in gold.

"And what of the other members of the family?" Mama wanted to know. "Did you see

the man's sister, Sir William? And what of the little boys?"

Here, Sir William was much better informed. It was Mr Coates' *step*-sister, a Mrs Allardyce, who was the mother of the boys, and it was *her* mother, Mrs Rossi, who would be acting as housekeeper. As to the boys, Sir William had met them both; their names were George and Samuel — remarkably well-grown rosy-faced fellows, and the older boy, George, a very talented young musician by all accounts. Both boys were very happy to have left London and looking forward enormously to living in the country and riding their ponies every day — their ages were ten and eight.

"The exact same ages as Kitty and Lydia!" exclaimed Mama joyfully. "Well, and so what of the mother? How is she circumstanced? Did you meet her?"

"No, I did not have that honour — although I saw a lady as I was leaving — a remarkably fine lady on the stairs as I came away, who I assumed to be Mrs Allardyce — dark hair and eyes and a decided air of fashion —"

“She is a widow, I suppose?”

Sir William had not liked to enquire; it seemed a rather delicate point. “For, you know,” said he. “If she is not a widow, she must be living quite apart from her husband or possibly even,” (lowering his voice) “divorced, and that, you know, would be . . .” Shaking his head, he forbore to say what it would be.

“Well” said Mama. “Mr Bennet is to call on Mr Coates tomorrow — that is, if he does not put it off again — and after Mr Coates has returned the visit, I shall invite them all here to dinner. And then, you know, it will all come out I daresay — that sort of thing can never be hushed up.”

Mama was as good as her word, and one week later a little before four in the afternoon the Bennet family gathered in the drawing room, there to await the arrival of the guests. It was but a small dinner party — only the Netherfield family and Sir William and Lady Lucas had been invited — but Mama had asked the two Allardyce boys as

company for Kitty and Lydia, observing to my father that today’s childhood playmates often became tomorrow’s lovers.

We children would not be joining the rest of the company in the dining parlour however — we would be sitting quite apart in the breakfast room — but this evening for the first time Elizabeth was to dine with the adults. And now as I looked across at her, I saw she was quite excited at the prospect. Her face, bent over her needlework, had a heightened colour and she was behaving in an unusually quiet and decorous fashion.

I also saw that she was wearing a new gown — white with a sort of silvery trim — and as I watched her sewing and from time to time pausing to rethread her needle or snip off her silk, it seemed to me that she had become all at once maidenly and mysterious, that she had joined Jane in an esoteric world to which as yet I possessed no key. I remember it unsettled me a little.

Perhaps my father sensed something of this too for he said

suddenly: “That is a new gown Lizzy, I think?”

“Yes, Papa. Do you approve?”

She was looking up at him and smiling in her usual mischievous way, and he — possibly reassured — nodded and returned to his book.

My mother meanwhile was becoming restless. “The Lucases are late,” said she. “And Sir William promised me they would come early — he promised faithfully — so that we might all be assembled here and ready for when Mr Coates and his party arrive.”

And then after a couple of minutes during which nobody spoke — Kitty and Lydia being engrossed in a game of spillikens in the corner — she burst out again: “I do so hate it when people do not keep their word. And nowadays that man thinks of nothing but his own importance. His head is full of the Court of St James — everything is the Court of St James! He thinks of nobody’s convenience except his own —”

“Of whom are you speaking?” My father asked the question without putting aside his book and his tone was decidedly unfriendly.

Mama for once took the hint: “Nothing, nobody. It is of no consequence.”

But then her angry restless glance fell on me. “For heaven’s sake Mary! That gown if I do not mistake is the one I told you to leave off wearing — it is by far too tight and now look, look!” (Pulling at my sleeve.) “Here is the seam split open entirely. Oh! I declare I have no patience with you! If you would spend *one-tenth* of the time you spend squinting over your books on your appearance!”

“Mama,” said Jane. “I believe I can hear a carriage.”

But Mama’s attention was now firmly fixed on my split seam: “I cannot pin it — there is not time enough to pin it — you will have to go and change. Go put on your blue checked muslin. Ask Gil to help you. Go *on*, girl! Hurry!”