Psychiatrist Ralph Colp Jr.’s favorite patient has been buried in Westminster Abbey since 1882. Nevertheless, Colp has come to know him intimately through unpublished letters, his medical diary, and written reminiscences of his family and friends in British and American archives. The patient is Charles Darwin, about whom Colp has written many articles and the classic, 1977 book, To Be an Invalid: The Illness of Charles Darwin, which he is currently revising.

After practicing surgery for five years, Colp switched to psychiatry and became a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (Psychiatry) in 1965. He served as attending psychiatrist at Columbia University Health Services until 1993, and is now a senior associate in the Program of Human Sexuality and Sex Therapy at the New York University Medical Center and a member of the Psychohistory Forum. But it is his labor of love that has earned him a reputation as the dean of Darwin historians. In a series of conversations, Natural History questioned Colp, now 81, about Darwin’s personality, family life, politics, and illness.

NATURAL HISTORY: When did you first become interested in Charles Darwin?

RALPH COLP JR.: My father was a surgeon, and in his office were framed portraits of Darwin, Freud, Huxley, Lister, and Pasteur. As a child, I thought they were heroes of science, much nobler than my father and his colleagues who practiced medicine as a business.

When I was in high school, in the 1940s, my biology teacher said, “Nobody believes in Darwinism any more,” yet she kept mentioning him. I saw that he was exerting a force, still stirring up controversies sixty years after his death. But my interest from the first, staring at Darwin’s portrait when I was a boy, was, “What was he like as a man?” I really started taking him on seriously in 1959, when I was thirty-five, and there were all the scientific celebrations and press reports about the centenary of the Origin of Species.

NH: How can one analyze the mental state of a person who died long ago?

COLP: Darwin’s life is extraordinarily well documented by letters, diaries, notebooks, and his own record of his health. His handwriting is often very difficult to decipher, however, and even when you do decipher it, you might find some fragment incomprehensible. It can call for a bit of scholarly sleuthing.

For instance, in an 1858 letter to his wife, Emma, Darwin complains that he had been to Farnham in Surrey, and that “the Review and the confounded Queen” made him feel ill. What could that mean? Perhaps a nasty article about the Queen had appeared in the popular magazine Quarterly Review? I searched it in vain. But when I checked newspapers for the Queen’s whereabouts on that date, I found that she was near Farnham reviewing some troops. Now it was clear: this man who I knew loved military parades was upset by the sloppy drill de-
scribed in the article, which mentioned that the soldiers kicked up clouds of dust. So he came alive for me there. Multiply that by hundreds of instances of figuring out the meaning of fragments.

NH: How well do you feel you know him?

COLP: Probably much better than I know some of my living friends and patients. I'm interested in physical details as well as his emotional and inner life. Even the way he walked, or worked, or the quality of his laugh—it was thin, musical, and hollow sounding, like a peal. He and Thomas Huxley liked to sit and joke and laugh for hours.

Darwin lived an exemplary life as an English country gentleman, the affectionate father to a brood of seven children. Sometimes he sat on the local magistrate's bench as a Justice of the Peace, "to help keep order in the neighborhood." He was always kind and considerate to his servants and gardeners, and taught his children to always address them with "please" and "thank you."

NH: What are your views on his illness?

COLP: When I first began in 1959, I noticed that the many biographies of him had little to say about the causes and nature of the illness that dominated his life. In *To Be an Invalid*, I published the first comprehensive account of his illness. I showed that as a youth he suffered brief psychosomatic symptoms from transient mental stresses, and as an adult he suffered protracted psychosomatic illness—altered sensations, cardiac palpitations, headaches, and trembling—mainly from working on his controversial theory of evolution. He had told a friend that to abandon Church teachings on the immutability of species was "like confessing a murder." He delayed writing the *Origin of Species* for more than twenty years, until a younger naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, forced his hand. His endless agonizing, guilt, and self-flagellation over writing and publishing could be described as obsessive. When his theory was accepted and he stopped working on it, his health improved.

Darwin was always a sensitive individual, but after the *Beagle* voyage he became even more so, and two years afterward suffered a debilitating illness. His condition points to an organic disease. But Darwin's own doctors were baffled. Not until 1959 did Saul Adler, an Israeli parasitologist, suggest that Darwin's illness was Chagas' disease. During Darwin's lifetime the disease was not yet known to medicine, so it is no wonder it was never diagnosed.

In 1835 Darwin had recorded in his diary that he was bitten by the "Benchuca [vinchuca] bug . . . called the great black bug of the Pampas," a vector of the parasitic trypanosome that causes Chagas' disease [see "In the Heat of the Night," by Giacela Flores, *July-August 2005*]. Darwin appears to have had the ar-

rested form of the disease, which can appear years after the bite and causes weakness, nausea, and flatulence for many years.

NH: How did the illness affect his daily life?

COLP: He could only work for two or three hours a day, and therefore followed a regimen of alternat-
ing work and rest. Yet his dogged determination carried him through thousands of experiments, seventeen books, and a hundred scientific papers. His wife, Emma, would regulate any visitors and strictly limit the time they were with him; he rarely left home and described himself as a “semi-invalid.” But he often used his illness as a convenient excuse to avoid unwanted visitors and dinner parties.

NH: Can we discuss the death of his daughter Annie, on which you’ve written the article “Charles Darwin’s ‘insufferable grief’” [Free Associations 9:7–44 (1987)]?

COLP: He had an enormous capacity for love, but was inhibited in expressing it. His sisters, who raised him, never talked about his mother, who died when he was eight years old. He learned to hold back his emotions, but when Annie died at the age of ten in April 1851 from “fever” (which some now believe was tuberculosis), he was inconsolable. It was the first time anyone had seen him cry. His sister-in-law was present and wept with him.

Darwin expressed his feelings in a moving tribute to Annie, containing precise observations of her, along with his outpourings of affection. Here are some passages:

Her dear face now rises before me, as she used sometimes to come running down stairs with a stolen pinch of snuff for me, her whole form radiant with the pleasure of giving pleasure. . . . She would at almost anytime spend half an-hour in arranging my hair, “making it,” as she called it, “beautiful,” or in smoothing, the poor dear darling, my collar or cuffs, in short in fondling me. She liked being kissed; indeed every expression in her countenance beamed with affection & kindness, & all her habits were influenced by her loving disposition. . . .

All her movements were vigorous, active, & unusually graceful: when going round the sand-walk with me, although I walked fast, yet she often used to go before pirouetting in the most elegant way, her dear face bright all the time, with the sweetest smiles. . . . [In the last days of her illness] when so exhausted that she could hardly speak, she praised everything that was given her, & said some tea “was beautifully good.” When I gave her some water, she said “I quite thank you”; & these, I believe were the last precious words ever addressed by her dear lips to me. . . . We have lost the joy of the Household, and the solace of our old age.

Annie’s death seemed to him so unjust that it precipitated his loss of belief in God.

NH: Did he have strong feelings on social issues?

COLP: Yes, he grew up in an anti-slavery household. The Wedgwood–Darwin family had a long tradition of Abolitionist support. A famous Wedgwood ceramic plaque shows a slave in chains with the slogan, “Am I not a man and a brother?”

In Brazil he witnessed slavery firsthand, and never forgot the screams of a tortured slave coming from a house in Pernambuco. Watching or hearing people in pain made him physically ill. That was why he could not become a surgeon himself, as his father had wished. He fled from the operating theater at Edinburgh when he could not bear the screams of a strapped-down child in surgery—and never returned to pursue his medical career. He was against slavery not only on political and humane grounds, but also because it made him literally sick to his stomach.

NH: And yet he abandoned the cause during the American Civil War?

COLP: In 1861 Union troops boarded the English mail steamer RMS Trent and seized two Confederate officials who were bound for London to seek support for the Rebels. The English declared that to be an act of war unless the pair was freed.

Darwin began to fear that the provocation by the North might lead to war between England and America. So he stopped supporting the Union cause, and opined that the North should learn to co-exist peacefully with the slave-owning South. Here was the strongest political principle that he had, and he compromised it out of petty patriotism. What the hell was wrong with him? He knew better than that.

NH: Has your intimate knowledge of Darwin influenced your own life?

COLP: As a young man, I realized that there were certain similarities. Like Darwin, I grew up in the shadow of a prominent physician for a father, and was expected to follow in his footsteps to become a surgeon. Like Darwin, I rebelled against following the path that had been set out for me. Although I did practice surgery for several years, I was more interested in the mind and the emotions and became a psychiatrist.

I have grown to imitate Darwin in many ways. My daily habits of early rising and then doing important writing first thing, for instance, and how I organize my day around strictly timed alternating periods of work and relaxation, of annotating and abstracting the books that I read, and of writing my first drafts on the backs of used sheets of paper—all of these habits I picked up from Darwin.

He kept a diary on the early emotional expressions of his children, and I did the same when my daughters were infants. I try to be caring and helpful to my friends, as he did. When his friend Sir Joseph Hooker’s young son fell ill, Darwin drew on his own agonizing deathwatch of Annie to comfort him: “Much love much trial, but what an utter desert is life without love.”