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Mapping Susannah Darwin: Practice and Process

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4 Fig. 1. Katy Alston. *Mapping Susannah Darwin*. Ink and Gouache, 2024. Darwin House,
5 Shrewsbury © Katy Alston.

6

7 In the hallway of Charles Darwin's birthplace at The Mount in Shrewsbury, England hangs a
8 new exhibit about his mother, Susannah. Ostensibly a map of Susannah's home and garden
9 commissioned from artist Katy Alston as part of my February 2024 public humanities project
10 "Susannah Darwin at The Mount: Hidden Maternal Histories," *Mapping Susannah Darwin* is
11 one of the most surprising – and best-looking – developments to stem from my book *The Ghost*
12 *in the Garden: In Search of Darwin's Lost Garden*. Studded with details representing
13 Susannah's forgotten life – from discarded white gloves to crocus bulbs and snatches of
14 conversation – Katy's map refuses the unified viewpoint and fixed timeframe associated with
15 conventional cartography. It is as unlike the charts of the South American coast that developed
16 in tandem with Charles Darwin's species theory on the *Beagle* as Susannah's life was unlike
17 her son's.

18 "Map-making" can be meaningfully distinguished from "cartography" in its concern
19 with more inclusive ways of knowing and seeing the world than those typically associated with
20 ship's captains and scientists.¹ Maps in this sense can have a radical edge, representing
21 marginalised perspectives that are not part of the model cartographer's vision – whether it be
22 the uncharted views of *o'run-del'lico*, one of the Fuegians transported to England on the
23 *Beagle*, or the experiences of a Regency woman whose maternal influence scarcely figures in
24 the Darwin family tree.²

25 *Mapping Susannah Darwin* situates individual lives in the wider collective frameworks
26 that I explored in *The Ghost in the Garden: In Search of Darwin's Lost Garden*, an approach
27 that chimes with Charles Darwin's own reliance on informal modes of research collaboration,
28 including with members of his household.³ The map can equally be viewed as the product of
29 the much broader constellation of relationships, perspectives, setbacks and serendipities
30 shaping our collaborative project: the first of its kind to be held at Darwin's birthplace as it
31 began to open to the public in promising starts – and what have since proved to be unwelcome
32 stops. Anthropologists have long suggested that objects, just like people, have complex and
33 evolving biographies, including lengthy stages of “production,” busy and often multitasking
34 middle-years in “use,” and unpredictable “afterlives” in new situations.⁴ Applying this concept
35 of the object “life cycle” to the apparently fixed project output often privileged by UK
36 universities uncovers contexts and processes that are usually left out of the procedural and
37 individualistic accounts required by funding bodies and institutions.⁵ The link between practice
38 and output is brought into clearer focus and a truer map of the project comes into view.

39

40 **Production**

41 *Mapping Susannah Darwin* has its roots both in research that informed [*anonymised book title*]
42 and in the relationships with other people that the book engendered.

43 I included Susannah's story in my book's creative-critical reflections on Darwin's
44 childhood garden: the formerly seven-acre site attached to The Mount house that shaped
45 Darwin's life and work, which I used as a springboard for exploring the formative influence of
46 Darwin's family and wider household on the development of his ideas. Though Susannah died
47 when Darwin was just eight years old and is left out of many Darwin biographies, she was both
48 an interesting woman in her own right and a possible influence on her son's research practices.
49 Her surviving letters and the tantalisingly sparse details provided by nineteenth-century

50 biographers reveal her to have been, at varying times, a clever schoolgirl, an informal translator
51 serving the business interests of her famous potter father, Josiah Wedgwood, unofficial
52 secretary to her doctor husband, Robert Waring Darwin, and a mother of six.

53 I also found evidence that Susannah was a keen gardener, said to have co-designed the
54 Mount garden's layout with Robert and planted crocuses that became The Mount's signature
55 flowers.⁶ Such interests, though under-documented, are not surprising given that Susannah
56 grew up surrounded by horticultural enthusiasts, including her parents, in the elaborate park
57 and garden of Etruria Hall in Staffordshire. Susannah also maintained a close relationship with
58 her brother, John Wedgwood, who co-founded the forerunner of the Royal Horticultural
59 Society in 1804. Susannah is known to have bred doves at The Mount which were revered for
60 their "beauty, variety and tameness."⁷ This is suggestive and intriguing, given that Charles
61 Darwin bred pigeons at his subsequent home at Down House in Kent, and that he used domestic
62 pigeon-breeding in the first chapter of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) to explain the complex
63 workings of inheritance and variation that informed his whole species theory. Though dove-
64 breeding was a common practice in wealthy households of the period, and we cannot
65 definitively claim that Charles's research was shaped by his mother's hobby, doves and pigeons
66 began to accrue a symbolic as well as literal significance in my imagination, becoming
67 emblems of maternal influences that have always escaped and exceeded documentation.

68 These issues spoke to me both intellectually and personally. As a scholar with an
69 interest in women's history and history from below, I was keen to add to research that situates
70 Charles Darwin's life and work in more inclusive contexts, acknowledging the importance of
71 family influences and informal collaborations.⁸ But the garden's stories also had an emotional
72 pull that related to my own life and domestic situation. From 2015, for a year and a half, I lived
73 next door to the Mount garden's overgrown remains: a dispersed puzzle of riverbank foliage,
74 crumbling masonry, and trees once climbed by the Darwin siblings that, for all its

75 fragmentation, struck me as a bona fide secret garden of both substantial historical significance
76 and nearly boundless imaginative appeal. What is more, I was a mother of young children
77 preoccupied with maternal influence and the power of formative childhood places, concerns
78 that wind their way into my book's chapter on Susannah and its broader memoir strand. The
79 style of my book became part of what I wanted to say through it, resulting in a hybrid of
80 biographical, autobiographical, and creative forms that complemented my exploration of the
81 branching, interpenetrating relationships known to gardeners, families, and evolutionists alike.

82 Despite this, Susannah's life was never my primary focus, and *Mapping Susannah*
83 *Darwin* owes its conception as much to three overlapping relationships that developed because
84 of my book as it does to my own underpinning research and approaches. The organic
85 development of these relationships is indicative of the unusually strong purchase that I have
86 found Darwin has with both the general public and scholars and practitioners from a wide range
87 of disciplines. Darwin's significance straddles the usual divides between arts, humanities, and
88 science subjects and provides rich opportunities for public engagement and interdisciplinary
89 collaboration. In turn, this broad appeal provides a platform for more diverse and inclusive
90 public humanities projects – in the case of *Mapping Susannah*, centring on forgotten women's
91 history, histories of motherhood, and women's unacknowledged contributions to the history of
92 science.

93 The first of the new relationships underpinning *Mapping Susannah* was with Gaynor
94 Llewellyn-Jenkins, a mature student at the University of Chester with a background in
95 healthcare and maternity services. Gaynor, who at the time was researching Susannah for her
96 master's dissertation, had heard me give a public talk at University Centre Shrewsbury, a now
97 defunct Chester campus, in May 2019. She subsequently became my first doctoral student at
98 Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), working on transcribing and interpreting
99 Susannah's unpublished letters. Gaynor was also connected with John Hughes, who I met

100 following my keynote lecture at the Shrewsbury DarwIN Festival in February 2023. As well
101 as running the festival, John was then leading plans to develop for Shropshire Museum Service
102 an on-site visitor centre known as Darwin House, following the long-anticipated sale of The
103 Mount house to a private buyer in 2021 that ended the building's decades as neglected local
104 government offices. The third relationship informing the project was with Katy Alston, who
105 first contacted me via Twitter (now X) in 2022 about her artwork "Botanising at The Mount,"
106 which draws on Katy's independent research, my book, and other sources to creatively map
107 Darwin's garden.

108 These three relationships – spanning individual backgrounds in heritage, visual art, and
109 healthcare, and forged through public speaking, social media, and enabling practical
110 developments at Darwin House – aligned in May 2023, when I learnt about small grants
111 available from the British Academy (BA) SHAPE Involve and Engage Public Engagement
112 Programme designed to catalyse collaborations between university researchers and cultural
113 partners. John confirmed his interest in applying for funding via this scheme to co-deliver a
114 public event that could test ways of incorporating wider family stories into themes being
115 considered for inclusion at Darwin House, supporting the museum service's ongoing public
116 consultation process for the development. As our focus on Susannah solidified, we decided that
117 Gaynor would act as a project co-organiser and that I would ask Katy to produce a new map of
118 Susannah's life as a legacy output for display in the room where Darwin was born – thus
119 reconfiguring the significance of the standard heritage birth room in accordance with more
120 feminist principles.

121 Our motives for taking part understandably differed. The nature and emotional intensity
122 of individual interests in Susannah as an emblem of motherhood varied, while my collaborators
123 almost certainly had less interest than I did in finding ways to evidence the map's impact on
124 audiences for a potential "impact case study" about Darwin's childhood garden I had been

125 asked to develop by LJMU colleagues ahead of the 2029 Research Excellence Framework
126 assessment of research quality in UK universities.⁹ However, we all shared a common interest
127 in developing more inclusive narratives about Darwin House with a view to engaging wider
128 public audiences, especially Shropshire women, who initial survey results had indicated were
129 often more interested in local Darwin family history than traditional histories of science.¹⁰

130 Our proposed programme incorporated talks from myself, Gaynor, and historian of
131 pregnancy and childbirth, Jess Cox, a lunchtime heritage tasting experience of maternity-
132 related foods provided by Shrewsbury cook Mel Hirst, and site tours with John. Katy's
133 mapmaking workshop would then invite participants to draw on their experiences of these talks
134 and activities to suggest which elements of Susannah's story should be represented in the map;
135 the emphasis on co-production responded directly to the BA's funding criteria, but also
136 complemented our collaborative approaches. The event would conclude with evaluation
137 activities capturing both participants' feedback and ideas for future heritage provision at
138 Darwin House.

139 I submitted our application in June 2023, along with a similar insurance application to
140 LJMU's internal Communities and Impact Quality Research grant route. Though the external
141 application was unsuccessful, the internal application succeeded in securing £6,417. This was
142 a larger sum than the anticipated BA budget, and it came with new specifications: involving
143 five LJMU masters students as workshop participants, employing two paid postgraduate
144 research assistants, Gaynor, and recent LJMU graduate, Gary Lester, creating a pop-up poster
145 exhibition on Susannah's life, and producing extra copies of the map for wider dissemination.
146 The element of co-production on the map was no longer a required element, but we decided to
147 retain it: a hangover from a context that had ceased to be relevant, but which usefully shaped
148 our ideas. The event – in a form both enhanced and modified from the one originally intended,
149 and limited, due to capacity, to 50 participants, including speakers, organisers, and linked

150 students – was arranged for delivery on 10 February 2024 as part of the same DarwIN Festival
151 at which John and I met.

152 *Mapping Susannah Darwin* in its production stages, much like the life story it depicts,
153 was therefore determined by the complex range of relationships, timings, motivations,
154 economics, setbacks, and successes that shaped the related “Susannah Darwin at The Mount”
155 project. To varying extents, these factors had a significant impact on the map that emerged as
156 the project’s primary output.

157

158 *[Insert Figure 1 Here]*

159

160 **Uses**

161 The map’s first practical use was as the focal point of Katy’s workshop, concluding our event.
162 Katy invited participants to draw on their experiences of the day to produce rough sketches and
163 accompanying notes depicting aspects of Susannah’s life at The Mount for possible inclusion
164 in her commissioned artwork. “How,” I wrote in a linked social media post, “would you map
165 a woman’s life story?”¹¹ Responses to this prompt were enthusiastic and imaginative, despite
166 the lack of artistic experience shared by most. This reflects both Katy’s inspiring approaches
167 and the success of the event in engaging a target audience with strong interests in the family
168 history of a site only just becoming publicly accessible.¹²

169 In keeping with all maps, the finished image Katy produced six weeks later offers a
170 spatial representation of a particular place. However, it eschews the bird’s eye, unifying
171 perspective of traditional cartography for a far more textured and layered vision, peppered with
172 details drawn from many sources, as well as Katy’s independent research. The centrality of the
173 birthing room, brilliantly foregrounded by Jess Cox’s talk, was mentioned by many workshop
174 participants and became a strong feature in Katy’s design. Doves proved equally impactful and

175 became one of the map's most striking images. Their looping flightpaths are indicative of both
176 Katy's departure from standard cartographic practice and the tension between wider horizons
177 and domestic confines that is echoed in the riverside barges at the mapped garden's edge.

178 Several participants thought that Susannah, a Unitarian, should be shown walking to
179 chapel with her family, and this is also included towards the bottom right. A motif of banana
180 leaves (bottom right, above the ink bottle) was drawn from Katy's observations of decorative
181 features around the dining room fireplace while on John's tour.¹³ The quotations stem from a
182 range of texts, including Susannah's correspondence and my book: "hands stained banana
183 green" is probably identifiable only to myself as words I wrote as part of a loose biographical
184 sequence.¹⁴ Ideas seeded by Gaynor about the importance of correspondence in Susannah's
185 life, meanwhile, are represented in the map's preoccupation with letters and wax seals. As such,
186 *Mapping Susannah* bears the traces of both the collaborative processes and the multiple
187 individual research efforts that underpinned it, just as it inclusively maps Susannah's life as a
188 series of overlapping identities and experiences, spanning the perspectives of the girl "Sukey"
189 through to the wife and mother she became.

190 I collected the framed map and additional prints from Katy at an ad hoc drop-off
191 arranged for mutual convenience outside my sister's Shrewsbury flat during a weekend visit in
192 May 2024. Parking was unavailable, so the exchange was brief, though pleasant. We discussed
193 the possibility of an article such as this, as well as separate arrangements made for John to
194 collect the map from my sister a few days later, in a further example of flexible and evolving
195 practical processes. I thought, again, of the inseparability of the personal and the intellectual,
196 of how family and domestic relationships shape and support individual pathways even as they
197 simultaneously limit them. Even at this point, I was not entirely sure that the map would find
198 the display space we had hoped for. Darwin House, was, after all, still more likely to echo with

199 the sound of drills than cooing doves, and there are presumably many considerations to bear in
200 mind when deciding where and when an artwork might be exhibited in such a protean space.

201 Two weeks later, I received a photograph from John of the image in situ at Darwin
202 House along with an accompanying caption card explaining the project context. The map was
203 not, at least at this stage, to be hung in the birth room, as originally planned, but instead in the
204 hallway: an encouragingly central, if unanticipated, location that afforded Susannah increasing
205 visibility in the house she once ran.

206

207 **Afterlife**

208 *Mapping Susannah Darwin* may now be framed and finished, but it begins to have an extended
209 life beyond its primary functions. When John and I were invited to contribute to an episode of
210 BBC Radio 4's *Open Country* about Darwin's house and garden, broadcast in May 2024, we
211 both unconsciously gravitated towards telling Susannah's story – showing a familiarity with
212 details that owes a clear debt to the legacy of the map. Three months later, I joined two LJMU
213 postgraduate students to co-deliver a paper showcasing the map and related film and poetry
214 they have created at the British Association for Victorian Studies conference at the Gladstone's
215 Library, Hawarden hub, contributing to a panel about the event alongside Gaynor and myself.
216 We speak of our hopes that the map will contribute to a larger thematic concern with women's
217 history at Darwin House, generating new ways of thinking about family influences on Darwin
218 that will offer valuable correctives to assumptions about lone male genius. In 2025, prints of
219 the map are set to be displayed in two parallel heritage settings on the basis of both established
220 ties and new connections directly forged through our project.

221 Then, in September 2024, I receive an unexpected email that changes the mood, headed
222 "Darwin House – Update."¹⁵ John Hughes's two-year contract at Darwin House has come to

223 an end. Plans for the visitor centre are stalled and uncertain, with commercial businesses set
224 to move into portions of the building. Renovations continue apace.

225 On the map and off again.

226 It is confusing, frustrating, downright disappointing, and not the ending to the story that
227 any of us wanted.

228 A flurry of mixed messages ensues. Julia Buckley, the new labour MP for Shrewsbury,
229 endorses and welcomes The Mount's new "international visitor attraction" in her maiden
230 speech at the House of Commons.¹⁶ The DarwIN Festival lives to fight another day. The house
231 remains open to occasional visitors and our map on the wall – but queries go unanswered. It is
232 a baffling silence, indicative of the delicate interpersonal relationships, local politics, and
233 discretions that can blindside even the best-conceived collaborative public engagement
234 projects, and for which no room is ever allowed in the neat boxes of official reports and
235 applications.

236 As autumn turns to winter, I think back to The Mount as it was when I first visited
237 nearly a decade ago. Shored up on a muddy bank, cracking with the pressure of two hundred
238 years of subsidence, and rendered shabby and obscure by its decades-long shift as a tax office.
239 As tantalisingly inaccessible as a fairytale castle – for those of us with romantic leanings – and
240 with a string of hazy names to match. The Mount, Mount House, Darwin Place, Darwin House:
241 all variously applied to both house and garden, and sometimes to neighbouring plots as well.
242 Murmuring with the sounds of tired computer fans and after-lunch chat, The Mount had seemed
243 as stubbornly impervious to interpretation and amplification as the lives it had once contained.
244 Why, I wondered, was nobody telling its stories, or preserving the space where the stories
245 began? Why was no one out pruning The Mount's overgrown trees or cleaning the windows
246 that Darwin once looked through? Yet this odd neglect was part of the place. It was part of
247 local histories less stable than "heritage" and a thread running through The Mount's charms.

248 Now, as I try to decipher continuing developments and look ahead to new dissemination
249 plans, it is with the feeling that we did well to salvage something while we could—that I have
250 always been trying to salvage something from this place and its people. Feeling. Memory.
251 Ongoing histories. Susannah’s story, at least set in motion: Katy’s map facing out like a river
252 barge’s sail.

253 This article, itself one of the several unexpected developments stemming from *Mapping*
254 *Susannah Darwin*, has offered an exploratory – and inevitably partial – personal reflection on
255 the practical processes and wider collaborative contexts that are often forgotten once a project
256 is apparently complete. From the perspective of future visitors to The Mount and other settings
257 who will see the map on the wall and perhaps not read the accompanying label too closely, the
258 image will predominantly figure as a compelling artwork that tells Susannah’s story and
259 expresses Katy’s vision and talent. In the more sterile and procedural parlance of the British
260 university system, it will be assessed as an “output” with the potential to have a measurable
261 “impact” on wider public audiences. But from my personal perspective on the inside of the
262 project, *Mapping Susannah* feels most akin to a memento. It evokes the full range of
263 overlapping practices, relationships, fudges, and failures that must always characterise the
264 humanities in action – and which made up this project’s terrain.

¹ Cohen, Phil and Duggan 2021, xxv.

² Author (anonymised) 2021, 31.

³ For details of Darwin’s collaborative garden experiments and wider collaborative research practices, at Down and The Mount respectively, see Costa 2017 and [anonymised author] 2021.

⁴ Harrison, Rodney and Richards 2014, 45-6. See also Kopytoff 1986, 66.

⁵ Harrison and Richards 2014, 45.

⁶ Wedgwood and Wedgwood 1980, 68-9.

⁷ Meteyard 1871, 261.

⁸ See Harvey 2009 and Evans 2017 for details of Darwin’s correspondence with women. See Keynes 2001 on the importance of family contexts and domestic spaces to Darwin’s research practices.

⁹ The most recent Research Excellence Framework criteria, including information about evidencing research via impact case studies, is at “Research Excellence Framework.” 11 July 2024. <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>

¹⁰ Early results from Shropshire Museum Service’s consultation survey for Darwin House revealed that 68% of respondents identified as female, 69% noted an interest in Darwin’s family, as opposed to Darwin alone, and 60% were Shropshire residents. John Hughes, “Survey Results” document emailed to author, 31 May 2023.

¹¹ @authoranonymised, 11 February 2024.

¹² Of the 22 workshop participants who supplied anonymised personal details on feedback forms, 81 percent were women and 68 percent from Shropshire. Author, “Susannah Darwin at The Mount” evaluation forms, 10 February, 2024.

¹³ Katy Alston, email to author, 26 June 2024.

¹⁴ Author 2021, 58.

¹⁵ John Hughes, email to author, 18 September 2024.

¹⁶ Buckley 2024.

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