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# Hair-raising observations: Darwin and Crichton Browne on piloerection and insanity

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## Abstract

One of the main aims of Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions* was to document and to detail the many commonalities between humans and other animals in expressing emotions. Examples of such commonalities include the raising of the eyebrows in surprise, the baring of the teeth in rage, and the erection of the hair (piloerection) in fear and anger. In this paper I trace back Darwin's ideas on piloerection to his correspondence with the young psychiatrist James Crichton Browne. More particularly, I reveal how Darwin's initial doubts about the analogy between erection of the hair in animals and in psychiatric patients were eased when studying a photograph of one of Crichton Browne's patients, Ruth Lockwood, whose mental condition was supposed to reveal itself in the bristling of her hair. Remarkably, very few commentators have challenged the analogy in question, even though a) Darwin's evidence for it was at best anecdotal, and b) his correspondence shows that he lost his belief in the documentary value of psychiatric photography soon after the publication of *Expression*. I conclude with some general observations about the role of psychiatric photography in the early development of evolutionary theory.

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