

J. Darwin

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More Letters of CHARLES DARWIN: A Record of his Work in a Series of hitherto unpublished Letters. Edited by Francis Darwin, Fellow of Christ's College, and A. C. Seward, Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In two volumes. London: John Murray.

If the true life of a man is seen in his letters, naturally Charles Darwin should realize Newman's ideal. After we have been familiar for years with the life-work of the great naturalist, as revealed in an admirable biography by his son, we are now presented with "an almost complete record of Mr Darwin's work in a series of letters now published for the first time." Even this large collection of letters does not exhaust all that are available. They contain, however, all that the editors deem it desirable to publish, though, they say, at some future time others may find interesting data in what remains unprinted. To some of his correspondents Darwin wrote with great freedom. This is notably the case in letters to Sir Joseph Hooker, Professor Huxley, and some other of his numerous correspondents. It has long been known that Darwin greatly valued what Huxley did to defend and popularize his work, but few can have any idea of the extent to which the famous biologist appreciated the untiring zeal and useful services of Huxley on his behalf without perusing the letters on the subject appearing in these two volumes. Huxley was particularly serviceable to Darwin in defending him against attacks on his work by Sir Richard Owen, and often the author of the "Origin of Species" is found writing in great glee to Huxley expressing admiration of his slashing criticism and telling retorts. A letter to Huxley, dated December 26th, 1859, Darwin closed thus:—"Parson, my good and admirable agent for the propagation of damnable heresies!" Sir Joseph Hooker's services to Darwin were scarcely less valuable than those of Huxley. The close intercourse which existed between them was largely carried on by correspondence, and Darwin's letters to Sir Joseph have supplied much valuable biographical material. "Son," observe the editors of these volumes, "it should not be forgotten that, quite apart from this, science owes much to this memorable friendship, since without Hooker's aid Darwin's great work would hardly have been carried out on the botanical side. And Sir Joseph did far more than supply knowledge and guidance in technical matters; Darwin owed to him a sympathetic and inspiring comradeship which cheered and refreshed him to the end of his life." While the letters will possess greatest value for students of biology and such as have made themselves familiar with "Darwinism," there is much in the correspondence of a personal and wide interest.

In an autobiographical fragment introducing the letters one reads, under date 1817, when Darwin was at a day-school at Shrewsbury:—"I was in those days a very great story-teller—for the pure pleasure of exciting attention and surprise. I stole fruit and hid it for these same motives, and injured trees by larding them for stringy seeds. I secretly ever went out walking without saying I had seen a pheasant or some strange bird (natural history notes); these too, when not detected, I proude, excited my attention, as I recollect them vividly, not connected with shame, though some I do, but as something which by having produced a great effect on my mind, gave pleasure like a tragedy."

The autobiographical fragment ends in July 1820. Then we have two letters from Darwin telling of his experiences as a student in Edinburgh, where he had little interest in the teaching, a horror of the operating theatre, and gradually took such a dislike of medical study that he left Edinburgh for Cambridge with a view to taking orders. The first letter is dated "Sunday evening" (Edinburgh) October 1820, and is addressed to his father. He writes:—

"As I suppose Erasmus has given all particulars of the journey, I will say no more about it except that altogether it has cost me 7 pounds. We got into our lodgings yesterday evening, which are very comfortable and near the College. Our landlady, by name Mrs Mackay, is a nice clean old body—exceedingly civil and attentive. She lives in 11 Leithian Street, Edinburgh, and only four stages of steps from the green-draw, which is very comfortable in some other lodgings that we were nearly taking. The terms are £1, for two very nice and light bedrooms and a sitting-room; by the way, light bedrooms are very scarce articles in Edinburgh, since most of them are little holes in which there is neither air nor light. We called on Dr. Hailey the first evening, whom I think we never should have found, but it was long for a second-year D.D. of Edinburgh, who took us into his library and showed us a map, and gave us some more how to find him. Indeed all the Professors are so civil and attentive, that it is enough to make an Edinburgh student of himself. I should wish to have seen the University of Edinburgh, but I have not time."

dated "Sunday morning" (Edinburgh, October 1839), and is addressed to his father. His written:—

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The other Edinburgh letter is, dated January 5, 1839, and is addressed to his sister Caroline, to whom he writes:—

"Many thanks for your very entertaining letter, which was a great relief after hearing a long stupid lecture from Dugard on Nigricis Medica, but as you know nothing either of the Lectures or Lecturers, I will give you a short account of them. Dr Dugard is so very learned that his wisdom has left no room for his sense and he lectures, as I have already said, on the Nigricis Medica, which cannot be translated into any word expressive enough of its meaning. These few last evenings, however, he has shown signs of improvement, and I hope he will 'go on as well as can be expected.' His lectures begin at ten o'clock in the morning. Dr Hope begins very much earlier which Erasmus goes to 'Mr Stuart on Anatomy,' who is a charming Lecturer. At 12 the Hospital, after which I attend Monro on Anatomy. I dislike him and his lectures so much, that I cannot speak with decency about them. Twice a week we have what is called Clinical lectures, which means lectures on the sick people in the Hospital—these I like very much. I said this account should be short, but I am afraid it has been too long like the lectures themselves."

Of his engagement to be married Darwin writes from Shrewsbury on November 12, 1839, to C. Lyell (afterwards Sir Charles Lyell):—

"I write because I cannot avoid wishing to be the first person to tell Mrs Lyell and yourself, that I have the very good, and shortly since [i.e., until lately] very unexpected fortune of going to be married! The lady is my cousin Miss Emma Wedgwood, the sister of Haradleigh Wedgwood, and of the elder brother who married my sister, so we are connected by manifold ties, besides on my part, by the most sincere love and hearty gratitude to her for accepting such a one as myself. I determined when last at Maer to try my chance, but I hardly expected such good fortune would turn up for me."

To his future wife he writes on January 20, 1839, nine days before his marriage:—

"I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed my Maer visit—I felt in anticipation my future tranquil life; how I do hope you may be as happy as I know I shall be; but it frightens me, so often as I think of what a family you have been one of. I was thinking this morning how it came that I, who am fond of talking and am scarcely ever out of spirits, should so entirely rest my notions of happiness on quietness, and a good deal of solitude; but I believe the explanation is very simple and I mention it because it will give you hopes, that I shall gradually grow less of a brute. It is that during the five years of my voyage (and indeed I may add these two last which from the active manner in which they have been passed, may be said to be the commencement of my real life, the whole of my pleasure was derived from what passed in my mind, while admiring views by myself, traveling across the wild deserts or glorious forests or passing the deck of the poor little Bangle at night. Excuse this much apostem—I give it you because I think you will sympathize me, and soon teach me that is greater happiness than building theories and accumulating facts in silence and solitude."

It would be hopeless to attempt to convey any idea of the character of the many letters in the two volumes. The best plan is, perhaps, to select one here and there in order to show that the general reader need not be frightened away from the letters because of the mistaken notion that they are too scientific or too technical. Nothing could be further from the reality. To Professor Huxley Darwin writes from The Lodge, Malvern, on May 24th 1849:—

"You will be surprised to hear that we all—children, servants, and all—have both here for nearly two months. All last autumn and winter my health grew worse and worse; incessant sickness, sensitive hands, and swimming head. I thought I was going the way of all flesh. Having heard of much success in some cases from the cold-water cure, I determined to give up all attempts to do anything and come back and put myself under Dr Gull's. It has succeeded to a considerable extent; my sickness much checked and considerable strength gained. Dr G., moreover (and I shall be rarely so bold as to speak confidently), tells me he has little doubt but that he can cure me in the course of three—four, however, it will take. I have experienced enough to feel sure that the cold-water cure is a great and powerful agent and operator of all constitutional evils. Talking of habits, the cold water has made me leave off snuff—that old enemy of life."

In a letter to Mrs Lyell, sister-in-law of Sir Charles Lyell, Darwin writes on January 20th, 1839:—

"With respect to giving your children a taste for Natural History, I venture can remark—viz. that giving them specimens in my opinion would tend to destroy such taste. Youngsters must be themselves collectors to acquire a taste; and if I had a collection of English Lepidoptera, I would be systematically more minute, and not give my boys but a dozen butterflies in the year."

In April 1839 Darwin writes to Huxley inventing a "brutal attack" made on the famous geologist in the "Edinburgh Review" because of his "unselfish endeavours" to spread what he believed to be the truth. Three months later Darwin writes to Huxley:

shall be: but it frightens me, as often as I think of what a family you have but one of. I was thinking this morning how it came that I, who am fond of talking and am usually over out of spirits, should so entirely lose my notions of happiness in quietness, and a good deal of solitude: but I believe the explanation is very simple and I mention it because it will give you hopes, that I shall gradually grow less of a brute, if it is that during the five years of my voyage (and indeed I may add those two last which from the winter manner in which they have been passed, may be said to be the commencement of my real life, the whole of my pleasure was derived from what passed in my mind, while admiring views by myself, travelling across the wild deserts or stony forests or seeing the dock of the poor little people at night. Excuse this great apology—I give it you because I think you will encourage me, and also teach me there is greater happiness than building theories and accumulating facts in silence and solitude.

It would be hopeless to attempt to convey any idea of the character of the many letters in the two volumes. The best plan is, perhaps, to select one here and there in order to show that the general reader need not be frightened away from the letters because of the mistaken notion that they are too scientific or too technical. Nothing could be further from the reality. To Professor Henslow Darwin writes from The Lodge, Malvern, on May 26th 1847:—

"You will be surprised to hear that we all—children, servants, and all—have both here till nearly two months. All last autumn and winter my health grew worse and worse: incessant sickness, tremulous hands, and swimming head. I thought I was going the way of all flesh. Having heard of much success in some cases from the cold-water cure, I determined to give up all attempts to do anything and come here and put myself under Dr Gully. It has succeeded to a considerable extent: my sickness much checked and considerable strength gained. Dr G., moreover (and I hear he rarely speaks confidently), tells me he has little doubt but that he can cure me in the course of time—time, however, it will take. I have experienced enough to feel sure that the cold-water cure is a great and powerful agent and specific of all constitutional habits. Talking of habits, the cruel wreck has made me leave off snuff—that chief source of life."

In a letter to Mrs Lyell, sister-in-law of Sir Charles Lyell, Darwin writes on January 26th, 1850:—

"With respect to giving your children a taste for Natural History, I venture one remark—viz. that giving them specimens in my opinion would tend to destroy such taste. Youngsters must be themselves collectors to acquire a taste; and if I had a collection of English Lepidoptera, I would be systematically more mischievous, and not give my boys half a dozen butterflies in the year."

In April 1850 Darwin writes to Huxley lamenting a "verbal attack" made on the distinguished biologist in the "Edinburgh Review" because of his "unselfish endeavours" to spread what he believed to be the truth. Three months later Darwin wrote to Huxley:—

"I want need you a line to say what a good fellow you are to send me so long an account of the Oxford doings. I have read it twice, and sent it to my wife, and when I get home shall read it again: it has so much interested me. But how dare you attack a live bishop in that fashion? I am quite ashamed of you! Have you no reverence for the laws of heaven? By Jove! you mean to have done it well. If any one were to ~~take~~ ^{take} any hold of the bishop's, would he not stand ~~with~~ ^{on} his shoulders and be indignantly shocked? I am very sorry to hear that you are not well; but am not surprised after all your self-imposed labours. . . . God bless you!—get well, be safe, and always reverence a bishop."

In 1857 the honorary degree of LL.D. was conferred on Darwin by the University of Cambridge, and in a letter to an old schoolfellow on the subject Darwin penned a characteristic note. He wrote:—

"I am very much obliged for your kind congratulations about the LL.D. Why the Senate conferred it on me I know not in the least. I was astonished to hear that the R. Prof. of Divinity and several other great Doct. attended, and several such men have subscribed, as I am informed, for the picture for the University to commemorate the honor conferred on me."

Such quotations as have been given are taken from the first volume. The second is more practical and less personal. Yet it will, probably, have more interest for Scottish readers than the other volume. There is much correspondence in it with men of recognised authority on the subjects on which they write. Sir William Turner, now Principal of the University of Edinburgh, is again and again most cordially thanked for the valuable information he afforded to Darwin while he was engaged in writing the "Descent of Man." In the same connection Alfred Russel Wallace has warm recognition. In treating of geological questions Darwin had correspondence with the late David Milne-Hume, Sir Charles Lyell, the late James Geol, a self-made man of Perthshire, whose interesting career was not very long ago admirably sketched by Mr James Campbell Innes, B.S.C.; Professor James Geikie, the late Mr Robert Chambers, and others. In the botanical section of the correspondence there are no letters which will be read with more avidity than those which passed between Darwin and John Scott, a humble worker in the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens, in the early sixties, of whom Darwin wrote to Sir Joseph Hooker:—"If he had leisure he would make a wonderful observer, in my judgment. I have come across no one like him." Darwin's active interest in Scott and the great pains he took to find more congenial employment for him afford an admirable illustration of his ardent love for the advancement of science. There is an index extending to upwards of fifty pages, so that letters on any particular subject may easily be consulted. An outline is given of Darwin's life, based on his diary. This in themselves these volumes constitute a complete and unique record of the great biologist's work. Numerous beautiful portraits and facsimiles of sketches in the letters lend additional interest to a work of much scientific and biographical value.