

SIX UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF CHARLES DARWIN

WILLIAM E. PRAEGER

IT WOULD seem that to biologists all letters of Charles Darwin would have an interest of their own even if the contents are of slight importance. I therefore presume to present these letters. With the exception of one which was published in a local paper, none of them seems to have been printed. They are all addressed to Robert Patterson of Belfast, Ireland, and are preserved in his family. He was Darwin's senior by seven years. He died in 1872, ten years before his honored friend.

When in Belfast a few years ago I saw the originals of the letters and made copies of them. I also had the privilege of reading some of Patterson's letters written to his home folks. Those telling of meetings of the British Association are especially interesting to a naturalist. Scientists whom he met were often mentioned, and in one letter — addressed to Mrs. Patterson — he tells of a conversation with Darwin at the rooms of the Linnæan Society. The letter also shows the high estimation in which Patterson's textbooks were held by his contemporaries.

LONDON 11 O'clock Tues night
May 2 1854

DEAREST MARY

I am just home from the meeting of the Linnæan Society. At the dinner of the Linnæan Club, at the Freemason Tavern, I met A. B. Ward, Lieut. Holman, Mr. Yarrell, Mr. Spence etc. It was very pleasant but I was put forward a little more prominently than I would have chosen. I was placed at dinner at the right hand of the President, Professor Ball, and when he proposed the health of the visitors he coupled my name with the toast "as one of the great, if not the greatest benefactor to Natural History in these kingdoms." So I had to make a little bit of a speech. Mr. Spence had a cab, & he took Van Veenst, Yarrell, & myself to Soho Square, where the meetings of the society are held. There I had some pleasant chat with Charles Darwin & Adam White, Curtis the entomologist etc. Many were the compliments bestowed on the "Zoology for Schools." I walked home, a distance of a couple of miles, — the night being fine — a member of the Linnæan whom I did not know was my companion.

So goodnight

ROBERT PATTERSON

Robert Patterson, Fellow of the Royal Society, was one of the many distinguished amateurs whom Britain and Ireland produced in the nineteenth century. When a boy he was apprenticed to his father's business, that of hardware merchant, he became a successful business man and was prominent in civic affairs, filling positions of trust and responsibility in his native town. Yet in spite of a life devoted to merchandizing he found time to develop his very decided literary and scientific tastes and was known far beyond his home town as a writer and a lecturer. In 1838 he published *The Natural History of Insects Mentioned in Shakespeare's Plays*, a quaint and interesting little book that ran through several editions. In 1839 he attended for the first time a meeting of the British Association at Birmingham. A long letter telling in detail his impressions of English scientists is still preserved. At this meeting he was elected one of the secretaries of Section D, Natural History, his associate was Edward Forbes. He held the position for five years. About this time he took a leading part in the movement to have the study of natural history introduced into the schools of Ireland. This was successful, but a difficulty soon appeared, there were no books suitable for school instruction. Patterson attacked the problem and in 1846 published Part I, "Invertebrates," of his *Zoology for Schools*. Part II, "Vertebrates," appeared two years later. The book was adopted by the commissioners of schools for Ireland and later by those for England and was used for many years. The following letter from Darwin will now be understood.

DOWN, FARNBOROUGH, KENT
April 17th [1847]

DEAR SIR

I received only yesterday your note of the 9th of March & very kind present. I fear you must have thought me ungrateful not sooner to have acknowledged your kindness, but owing to not having sent to the Geological Society for some time, the parcel lay there.

I admire your volume much, you seem to have condensed a wonderfully great deal of accurate information & the woodcuts are capital. I am very much pleased to hear that the Commissioners of Education have adopted your book, and I hope you may live to see some good naturalists spring up, who will acknowledge your work as their first guide and incentive. I beg to thank you for your kind expressions towards me in your note, I remain, dear Sir, with much respect

Your obliged and faithful serv

C

To

R. PATTERSON Esq

In 1852 the well-known zoologist, Wm Thompson, died suddenly after three volumes of his *Natural History of Ireland* had been published. Patterson was one of his literary executors, and on him fell the responsibility of completing and seeing through the press the fourth and last volume, issued in 1856. It is evident that Thompson had lent Darwin material to be used in the preparation of his well-known *Monograph of the Sub-Class Crustacea*, hence, in reply to inquiries from Patterson, the two following letters:

DOWN, FARNBOROUGH, KENT
Apr 6th [1854]

MY DEAR SIR

A sharp attack of unwellness has prevented my answering sooner your note of the 28th ulto — Mr Thompson sent me all his M S on Crustacea & the whole of his collection, which filled a good sized box. I remember not long before his death returning all the M S & I feel almost sure I remember packing up all the specimens. I have looked in every likely place and can find none of his, but it is just possible that amongst the numbers sent me from various quarters, his may be overlooked. In the middle of summer or early autumn I intend returning every specimen which I have borrowed & shall then without fail discover whether I have any of your poor friends yet here. And in that case will communicate with you — But I very strongly think that collection was returned. This instant my memory flashes across me that he at my request returned me one specimen for further examination (and which one I must somewhere have) but this demonstrates that the main collection had previously been returned to him.

Pray forgive this long note & believe me Dear Sir

Yours sincerely
C. DARWIN

DOWN FARNBOROUGH KENT
Aug 21 [1854]

DEAR SIR --

I have now gone through all the crustacea in the house, and I find some half dozen specimens (including some bottles) belonging to poor Thompson. None of these are of much value, excepting as being (at least some of them) rare as Irish.

I have also a few M S notes. Will you be so kind as to say how I shall send them. They are rather too heavy & being glass not fit to go by post — and they are not worth the carriage of so long a journey. Is there anywhere in London where they could be till other objects accumulated? I am sorry to cause this trouble but would be much obliged if you could send me a line. Unfortunately I cannot say positively that I shall be at Liverpool, otherwise that probably would have been a good way of transmitting the specimens.

Pray believe me

Dear Sir

Yours sincerely

C. DARWIN

Darwin's interest in the variations of rabbits dates from his visit in 1833 to the Falkland Islands, where introduced domestic rabbits had become feral. On September 8, 1856, writing to J. D. Hooker he says

By the way I have been astonished at the differences in the skeletons of domestic rabbits. I showed some of the points to Waterhouse, and asked him if he could pretend they were not as great as between species, and he answered, "They are a great deal more." How very odd that no zoologist should ever have thought it worth while to look to the real structure of varieties.

On this rabbit problem Darwin asks help from Patterson

DOWN, BROMLEY, KENT
March 10th [1857]

MY DEAR SIR

I am going to beg a great and troublesome favor of you. — I have been collecting skeletons of all varieties of Rabbits, & I want very much a real Irish Rabbit, the *L. vecors* of our poor friend Thompson — Would you have the great kindness to take the trouble to procure me one. The only care requisite is to be to get one not very severely shot, but especially not struck on the back of the head to kill it, as that part is easily injured & is very characteristic.

I enclose an address, and you will know whether to steamer to Liverpool & then per Railway, will be the cheapest and quickest route — I am fearful you will think me rather unreasonable in begging this favor.

Truly believe me

My dear Sir

Yours sincerely

CH. DARWIN

The next letter, on the same subject, has been badly mutilated, evidently to obtain the signature

DOWN, BROMLEY, KENT
Nov 12 [1857]

MY DEAR MR. PATTERSON

The rabbits arrived safely last night after their long journey, & most sincerely do I thank you for this very great trouble you have taken to oblige me. Externally they seem to differ extremely little except perhaps in fulness of head, from the rabbit of this neighbourhood. But they shall be skeletonized.

I have now rabbits from Shetland, Madeira & Ireland and hope to receive one soon from Jamaica, so I shall have good means of comparison for several domestic breeds.

If you remember whenever you see Lord Massarene I hope you will present my thanks for his great kindness. — When I have done with the Rabbit Skeletons for my own purpose I shall present _____ to the Brit _____ been thrown away & I will know that you work for Natural History from a pure love of Science.

With my very sincere thanks pray believe me

The results of this work appear in *Animals and Plants under Domestication*, published eleven years later

Letter six is unimportant, but being brief may well be included here. It was written about a year after the publication of the *Origin*. It suggests the struggle for existence.

Down, Bromley, Kent

Oct. 21 [1860]

MY DEAR SIR

I [would] like to thank you for so kindly taking the trouble of communicating the Rat V. Rabbit case. I am very glad to have all such facts, but it is doubtful whether I would require to use it, so I will not give trouble to your informant of inquiring.

With many thanks, pray believe me, my dear Sir,

Yours sincerely

C. R. DARWIN

Robert Patterson had a wide circle of friends among the scientists of his day. He was an active correspondent and must have received many letters from men of note, but, with the exception of those six, none seems to have been preserved. That there were others from Darwin is very probable, for there seems to have been a genuine friendship between the two naturalists, but none is known or likely now to be discovered.

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