

SEEING DARWIN PLAIN—THE COMPLETE AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

"THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES DARWIN, 1809-1882." EDITED BY HIS GRAND-DAUGHTER NORA BARLOW.*

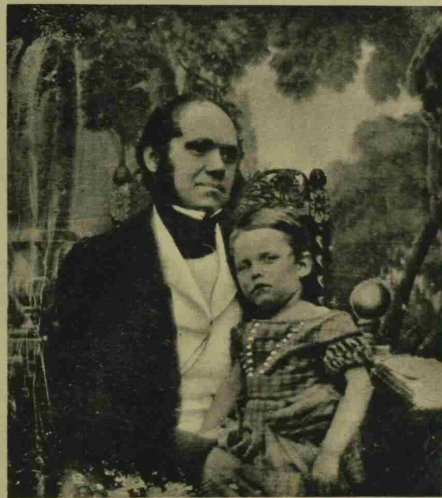
An Appreciation by SIR JOHN SQUIRE.

"IN his old age," says his grand-daughter Lady Barlow, "Charles Darwin wrote down his recollections for his own amusement and the interest of his children and their descendants. He finished the main narrative of 121 pages between May and August, 1876, writing as he tells us for an hour on most afternoons. During the last six years of his life he enlarged on what he had already written as fresh memories occurred to him, inserting the sixty-seven further pages of Addenda into their appropriate places. The present edition of the *Autobiography* is a complete transcript of the whole manuscript, now housed in its old leather binding in the Cambridge University Library.

"The *Autobiography* first appeared in print as part of *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, edited by his son Francis and published in 1887 by John Murray, five years after Charles's death, when many omissions were considered necessary."

At the time of the original publication of the *Autobiography*, there was bitter controversy inside Darwin's family—he had ten children—and even the threat of litigation: some people objected to references to religion, and some to references to men. Now that everything is published *in extenso*, it is difficult to understand what the rumpus was about: Charles Darwin, as a thinker, was honest to the core, and, as a man, was utterly free from malice.

It isn't, even with the restored passages, a very long book, but it is a very revealing one. Anybody who reads "The Origin of Species" is bound to come to the conclusion that Darwin was an utterly detached investigator of Nature, who merely wanted to add a few facts to the store of acknowledged facts already accumulated; anybody who has read his amazing book "The Voyage of the Beagle" must be aware of his unmitigated passion for investigation into all animate and inanimate objects on this globe; and those who are familiar with his portraits, especially the later ones of him leaning on a stick, may have conjectured that his theory about our descent from

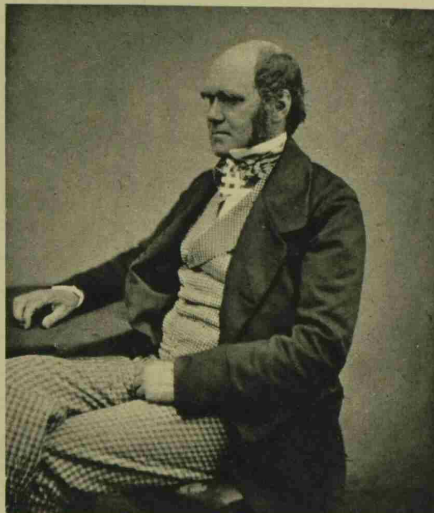


CHARLES DARWIN WITH HIS ELDEST CHILD, WILLIAM, ON HIS KNEE.

From a daguerreotype in the possession of Sir Charles Darwin, Cambridge.

cousins of the anthropoid apes may have been suggested to him by glances at his own image in a mirror. But, in this autobiographical sketch, he is revealed as a very human being, a very sensitive one, an Englishman, and even a sportsman. His memories of his school and Cambridge days were acute. His father, a rather overpowering man, lived in Shrewsbury, but he was sent as a boarder to the great local School, and had the best of both worlds: "As the distance was hardly more than a mile to my home, I very often ran there in the longer intervals between the callings over and before locking up at night. This I think was in

many ways advantageous to me by keeping up home affections and interests. I remember in the early part of my school life that I often had to run very quickly to be in time, and from being a fleet runner was generally successful; but when in doubt I prayed earnestly to God to help me, and I well remember that I attributed my success to the prayers and not to my quick running, and marvelled how generally I was aided."



CHARLES DARWIN AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-ONE.

Illustrations reproduced from the book "The *Autobiography of Charles Darwin*"; by courtesy of the publisher, Collins.

As a schoolboy he was an all-rounder, though not recognised as such. "I was not idle, and with the exception of versification, generally worked conscientiously at my classics, not using cribs. The sole pleasure I ever received from such studies was from some of the Odes of Horace, which I admired greatly. When I left the school I was for my age neither high nor low in it; and I believe that I was considered by all my masters and by my father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect. To my deep mortification my father once said to me, 'You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family.' But my father, who was the kindest man I ever knew, and whose memory I love with all my heart, must have been angry and somewhat unjust when he used such words."

He had when young a passion for poetry, of which he says "I mention this because later in life I wholly lost, to my great regret, all pleasure from poetry of any kind, including Shakespeare." When he was only ten, says he, "I continued collecting minerals with much zeal, but quite unscientifically—all that I cared for was a new named mineral, and I hardly attempted to classify them. I must have observed insects with some little care." Those juvenile expeditions into entomology are described, and they do give premonitions of the great observer. But the young Darwin, always honest, says: "How I did enjoy shooting, but I think that I must have been half-consciously ashamed of my zeal, for I tried to persuade myself that shooting was almost an intellectual employment; it required so much skill to judge where to find most game and to hunt the dogs well."

"After having spent two sessions in Edinburgh, my father perceived or he heard from my sisters, that I did not like the thought of being a physician, so he proposed that I should become a clergyman. He was very properly vehement against my turning an idle sporting man, which then seemed my probable destination." His father, at that time, had no notion about his son's destination, and even thought that he might become a wastrel. Certain clever dons took him out for walks and discussed Natural History, and certain undergraduate friends recognised his superiority. "Certainly I was not aware of any such superiority, and I remember one of my sporting friends, Turner, who saw me at work on

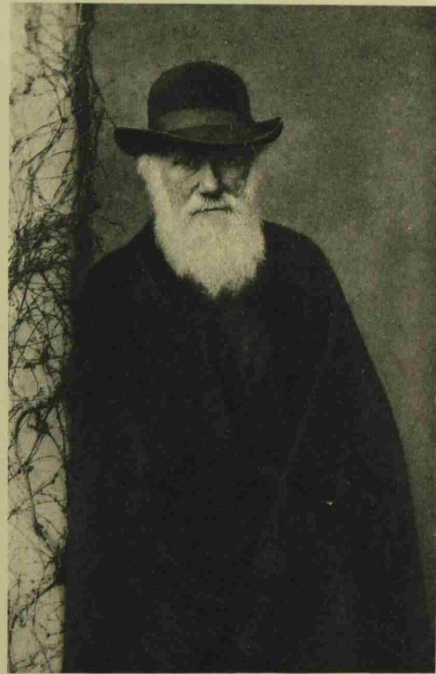
my beetles, saying that I should some day be a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the notion seemed to me preposterous."

But even after that, Darwin had not yet finally dedicated himself to that area of discovery in which Bacon and Aristotle were pioneers. He writes: "I visited Barmouth to see some Cambridge friends who were reading there, and thence returned to Shrewsbury and to Maer for shooting; for at that time I should have thought myself mad to give up the first days of partridge-shooting for geology or any other science."

After that there was no indecision. The job was offered him of going on a five-year trip round the world as Naturalist in H.M.S. *Beagle*. His father resisted it, but his Wedgwood relations supported it, and off he went to bring back one of the best travel books ever written, and an enormous accumulation of scientific data.

That long expedition changed Darwin. He came back having lost his passion for poetry, and his love of shooting; he brought back with him little more than a wealth of observations and a retained belief that man was more than the breath in his body. Darwin always stood in awe of the mysteries of creation; his beliefs changed, but he was always humble and modest.

There are passages of noble and unaffected prose in this book, as there are in "The Voyage of the Beagle." There are very shrewd paragraphs about people whom Darwin met, like Babbage, and Sydney Smith. There are chapters about his secluded life at Down, Beckenham, Kent, when he



ON THE VERANDAH AT DOWN HOUSE: CHARLES DARWIN, AGED SEVENTY-TWO, READY FOR HIS CUSTOMARY STROLL TO THE SANDWALK.

was mostly ill, but to his great good luck, happily married. There is also more than most readers will want about the one-sided row with Samuel Butler, who, like his imitator Bernard Shaw, barged argumentatively into fields of knowledge of which he knew nothing. In the Appendices there are certain letters from Darwin's loving wife, about their differences of opinion. She calls him "My own dear Nigger." And he scribbled on the back of the most beautiful of them:

When I am dead, know
that many times, I
have kissed and cried
over this: C. D.

This, I take it, hardly conforms to the general notion of Charles Darwin.

Novels are reviewed by K. John, and other books by E. D. O'Brien, on page 844 of this issue.

* "The *Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882*." With original omissions restored. Edited with Appendix and Notes by his grand-daughter Nora Barlow. Illustrated. (Collins; 16s.)