

A Darwin Letter at Dartmouth

By ROBERT M. STECHER '19

EVERY museum or library has hidden away in its collections, or on its shelves, items of considerable interest which have not been properly recognized or appreciated. It takes the eager eye of a specialist in a particular field to uncover significance, association, or importance. A minor discovery of this nature, patiently awaiting description and interpretation, I recently made at Dartmouth College on the occasion of a rare return to my Alma Mater for the 45th Reunion of my Class.

It happens that the author, carefree and pleasure-bent, could not for long deny his curiosity in a field which has consumed considerable time, attention, and even treasure during his postgraduate years. As an admirer, a collector, a student, and an interpreter of Charles Darwin, he asked at the Baker Library about the extent of the College's collection of Darwin material. Darwin obviously has not been a consuming interest for the savants of the Hanover Plain, but one minor item was found — now resting in the Dana Biomedical Library — a first edition of the *Origin of Species*. To it was attached a holograph letter of Darwin's. This letter and the uncertainties about it form the subject of this article.

There was not time for a personal inspection of these items, and Mrs. June Hicks, Biomedical Librarian, found it impossible, owing to Darwin's hasty, careless and almost illegible handwriting, to read the letter to me over the telephone. Because of my interest in it, however, a photocopy was made for me and awaited my return home.

The *Origin of Species* with the letter attached, according to Mrs. Hicks, came to the Baker Library on October 22, 1956 as a gift of Mr. Perc S. Brown through the Friends of the Dartmouth Library. This was one of 65 items presented by the donor on that date. When the biological and medical collections were moved from Baker Library to their new quarters in the Dana Biomedical Library, August 1963, the book was transferred from the Treasure Room at the Baker Library to the Quinn Memorial Room at Dana. The description of the volume by Drake, the bookseller, states, "Tipped in at the front is an A. L. S. letter by Darwin."

The letter is presented here:

Down Bromly Kent
April 28

My dear Sir

I thank you from my heart for your most kind letter. I never knew or heard of a hostile Reviewer doing so kind & generous an action. — I have read your Review, & I am sure I have no grounds whatever to complain, but on the contrary; to thank you for the general manner of speaking of me. I will scribble down a few remarks and corrections; but there is only one of much importance. —

Of course on the weight of general arguments it would be superfluous in me to make any remarks. — If you think my explanation of rudimentary organs on laws of embryology — succession of same forms or same runs etc., etc. are not true or of no value, there is nothing more to be said. — So my few remarks will apply to details. — Believe me that I feel most truly grateful to you for your kindness.

My dear Sir
Yours very sincerely
C. Darwin

I have put little pencil crosses to your Review, to call your attention to passages if you have patience to read my too lengthy notes. I shd be very much obliged for a copy when published.

It was found to be a typical Darwin letter, written on plain stationery, dated only April 28 without mentioning the year, and addressed simply to "My dear Sir." The writing was better than in many letters to intimate friends, but still very difficult to read. Robert C. Stauffer, Professor of the History of Science at the University of Wisconsin, has admitted publicly the difficulty he has in reading Darwin's handwriting.¹ It took several hours to assign plausible meaning to his scribble, and this only by dint of diligent search through dozens of letters of comparable symbols and a scanning technique of almost random sampling and association to find words that made sense. Once a satisfactory word was selected, its recognition was ridiculously easy.

A photograph of the letter is produced here to show characteristics of Darwin's handwriting and Darwin's signature. The stationery is plain, without engraving or personal identification. Darwin invariably spelled his municipal borough "Bromly" instead of correctly, "Bromley." He usually separated sentences by a dash as well as a period. He always used the symbol "&" instead of writing "and." He used a

Down Bromly Kent
April 28th

My dear Sir

I thank you from my heart for your most kind letter. I never knew or heard of a hostile Reviewer doing so kind & generous an action. — I am sure I have no grounds whatever to complain, but on the contrary; to thank you for the general manner of speaking of me. I will scribble down a few remarks and corrections; but there is only one of much importance. —

Of course on the weight of general arguments it would be superfluous in me to make any remarks. —

My dear Sir
Yours very sincerely
C. Darwin

Page One and part of Page Four, with Darwin's signature, from the letter.

semicolon only twice instead of a comma, apparently the standard usage of a hundred years ago, to judge from letters of Darwin and his correspondents, J. Brodie Innes, Henry W. Bates, and Alfred Russel Wallace. Only once did he use "shd" instead of "should." In other letters he always used "wd" instead of "would," also. And he used the long "s" in "ss" as in "succession" and "kindness," another standard usage of his day. He started all his paragraphs without indentation at the margin. His paragraphs can be recognized only when the preceding line is short.

The substance of the letter indicates that it was to a stranger, at least not to an intimate friend, a "hostile Reviewer," who had probably written about the *Origin of Species*. Since the first edition of the *Origin* appeared in November 1859, it was assumed that this letter was written in 1860. This assumption was supported by the watermark. Letters written on stationery of this size and appearance in my collection show the watermark, "Joynson

1859" or "Joynson 1860." It turns out that these pages are watermarked, "Joynson 1859."

The letter's purport established and the year of its writing, next to be sought was the identity of its recipient. Who was the "hostile Reviewer"? It was not until after much fruitless search through reviews of the *Origin* described in Francis Darwin's life of his father, search for allusions to "rudimentary organs" and "laws of embryology," that suddenly I recognized in the photograph Mrs. Hicks had sent me, a broad lead, an obvious hint to the answer. For in the photograph is included not only Darwin's letter, but also the half-title of the *Origin* into which it had been lightly pasted or tipped in. And on that half-title is inscribed an autograph "Andrew Murray," obviously, or almost certainly, that of the volume's original owner!

According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Andrew Murray, born February 19, 1812, died 1878, was a horticulturist. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1857 and in 1858 he acted as president of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh. In 1860 he went to London where he became assistant secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society and, the following year, was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society. He had American connections because he served as secretary to the Oregon Exploration Society when it was founded and in 1873 he went to Utah and California to report on some mining concessions. As a horticulturist and botanist, he was probably weak, it is easy to understand, on rudimentary organs and embryology.

In a letter to George H. Goodwin Jr., Librarian of the American Museum of Natural History, I asked if there were any quick and easy way, like having him look it up in the Royal Society Catalogue of Scientific Papers, to identify and get a copy of a review of the *Origin of Species* written in early 1860 by Andrew Murray. Since Mr. Goodwin was away, the letter fell into the hands of his assistant, Mrs. Lothian Lynas. Mrs. Lynas, having lived in Cambridge and having known intimately members of the Darwin family, was intrigued by my question. She reported she had found a review, "On Mr. Darwin's Theory of the Origin of Species," by Andrew Murray, in the *Edinburgh Royal Society Proceedings*, Vol. IV, 1862, pp. 274-292. A note stated that this paper was read at a meeting of the Society, Monday, February 20, 1860. She just happened, also, to find, in looking haphazardly at the shelf, a neighboring volume of the *Edinburgh New Philosophical*

Journal, Vol. XI, January-April 1860, containing (pp. 280-289) an anonymous review of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, by Charles Darwin, M.A., 8 Vo. London, 1859.

Comparison of these two articles is most interesting. Although one is but nine pages, the other nineteen, in length, they are so similar in tone and content as to make inescapable the conclusion that the Andrew Murray who wrote and signed the one, also composed the other. It is impossible to determine which manuscript was submitted to Darwin. Perhaps Murray even submitted a third manuscript, because no mention is found in either article of rudimentary organs or of embryology. The anonymous reviewer wrote, "Notwithstanding our skepticism of Mr. Darwin's theory, the 'Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection' is not a book to be trifled with. The author is well known as a man of reputation in science who has travelled over a great portion of the world, observing as he went; and he does not hide his name, like some ashamed Vestigian, but boldly propounds his theory and tells us on what it is based." The signed review states, "Such is a general statement of the position taken by Mr. Darwin; and in support of it, as might have been anticipated from so accomplished a naturalist, we have. . . ." The "Vestigian" mentioned here refers to the author of a highly controversial and provocative book published anonymously called *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 1843. It was attributed to Robert Chambers (1802-1871).

Darwin was always known as a meek, mild-mannered man who detested controversy, who deplored criticism and who carefully avoided public debate. Were it not for his many truly admirable, lovable, human characteristics he could stand as a forerunner of Caspar Milquetoast. But in this instance he acted exactly as such a man would have acted. In his letter to the reviewer, Darwin said, "I am sure I have no grounds whatever to complain, but on the contrary; to thank you for the general manner of speaking of me," and "Believe me that I feel most truly grateful to you for your kindness." Yet in his first letter to Henry W. Bates,² the author of *The Naturalist on the Amazons*, Darwin states, "As you say, I have been thoroughly well attacked and reviled, especially by entomologists. Westwood, Wollaston, and A. Murray have all reviewed and sneered at me to their hearts' content, but I care nothing about their attacks."

Isn't it amazing what can be surmised

from a single letter? When the author and recipient are identified, the subject known, the controversy explained, the general tenor of the times understood, the attitude of the writer to similar situations discovered, and the standing of the men before their contemporaries evaluated, such simple studies go far toward revealing the mind and soul of a man. Toward revealing Darwin's the present study is circulated. "The Darwin-Innes Letters — the Correspondence of an Evolutionist with His Vicar, 1848-1884,"³ has also been published. "Charles Darwin and the Moscow Society of Naturalists"⁴ is awaiting publication. In preparation are "The Darwin-Bates Correspondence" and also correspondence between Charles Darwin and Antonin Stecker⁵ concerning the translation of the *Origin of Species* into the Bohemian, now called Czech, language.

Letters, manuscripts, notes, comments taken individually are but fragments, fugitive items of minor importance in themselves. They seem like crumbs which when scattered are consumed by birds or spread by the wind and irretrievably lost. When found, recognized, analyzed, and assembled they may serve as bricks and mortar used for building substantial, timeless structures of history. Scholars must always preserve them and cherish them.

What would Eleazar Wheelock have thought if he could have known of the time and attention paid to such a godless man — Eleazar Wheelock who strove so valiantly to save the souls of heathen Indians? It seems probable that Dr. John Wheelock, Eleazar's son who reputedly gave thanks to God in public prayers for oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen, would have looked upon all of this attention with a little more sympathy. Today Darwin is accepted without question and without apology, and attention is devoted instead, in this nuclear age, to atomic bombs and cheap power and atomic fallout. Explorers go now to the moon instead of the Amazon, and philosophers attend with concern to man's future with man on earth. The world is wise to take time occasionally to reflect upon the lives of the giants of yesteryear who struggled valiantly and often against great odds to find and reveal the truth and to make the world a better place to live in. Darwin was such a giant and Dartmouth is fortunate to have this one of his personal letters.

REFERENCES

1. "On the Origin of Species: An Unpublished Version." Robert C. Stauffer. *Science*, Vol. 130, November 27, 1959.
2. The Darwin-Bates Correspondence. In preparation.

Issue of JANUARY 1965

With permission from the Dartmouth Alumni Magazine