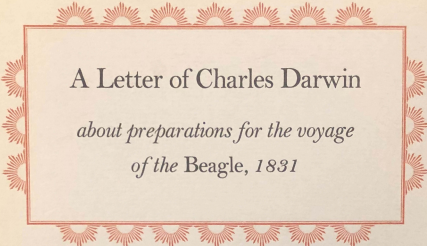


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A Letter of Charles Darwin

*about preparations for the voyage
of the Beagle, 1831*

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AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

CHARLES DARWIN in the summer of 1831 was twenty-two and seemingly without career or purpose. He had spent two years studying medicine at Edinburgh but had found the lectures "intolerably dull" and the clinical wards "distressing," and he fled in horror from the operating room in the Royal Infirmary the only two times he witnessed a surgical operation, and refused ever to return. As the son of a well-to-do physician of Shrewsbury Darwin was under no pressure to support himself. He was fond of shooting, had "a strong taste" for angling, and dogs followed him; he might in fact have become an idle sporting man. His father, "very properly vehement" against such a prospect, sent him to Cambridge in 1828 with the idea that he should take holy orders and become a country parson. At college, where he fell in with a sporting set, he passed much time happily in convivial dinners, song, drinking, and cards. One thing only suggested what his future might be—from his school days he had been a passionate naturalist, and at Cambridge he collected beetles avidly and had the satisfaction of seeing some of his rare species depicted in James Francis Stephens' *Illustrations of British Entomology*. But the interest was not decisive; natural history was a respectable avocation for a village clergyman.

For all this, however, Darwin had attracted the attention of several of his elders at Cambridge, notably the professor of botany, J. S. Henslow. Darwin attended Henslow's lectures, the two men walked and talked much together, and at Henslow's prompting Darwin began to read geology in the winter of 1831. He found the subject deeply interesting, and made some field trips in Shropshire. Henslow then asked Professor Adam Sedgwick to invite the younger man to accompany him on a geologizing tour he intended to make in northern Wales. Setting out from Dr. Darwin's house in Shrewsbury, Sedgwick and Darwin tramped through Llangollen, Conway, and Bangor to Capel Curig, where they separated, Darwin crossing the mountains to Barmouth, where he visited Charles Whitley and other Cambridge friends who were reading there. He returned to Shrewsbury on August 29 with no other plan than to go to Maer, his Uncle Josiah Wedgwood's house, for the shooting on September 1, "for at that time," Darwin wrote afterwards, "I should have thought myself mad to give up the first days of partridge-shooting for geology or any other science."

The story of the events and decisions of the next few days has been often told, nowhere better than in Darwin's own letters

to his father, sister Susan, and Professor Henslow. On reaching home on August 29 Darwin found a letter from Rev. George Peacock, professor of astronomy at Cambridge, offering, on behalf of Captain Francis Beaufort, hydrographer to the Navy, the post of naturalist on an expedition about to sail for the southern hemisphere. Accompanying Peacock's letter was one from Henslow, urging Darwin to accept the invitation. He was, Henslow declared, the best qualified man for the post. "I state this not on the supposition of yr. being a *finished* Naturalist, but as amply qualified for collecting, observing, & noting anything new to be noted in Natural History." Furthermore, the captain wanted a companion, not a mere collector, and so, no matter how good a naturalist the candidate might be, he must be a gentleman first.

The offer, of course, appealed strongly to Charles, but his father as strongly advised against it; and Charles, who was a dutiful son, turned it down. This was on August 30. The subject remained on his mind, however, as he rode over to Maer the next day for the shooting. Uncle Jos and all the Wedgwoods warmly regretted Charles' decision, and, as Dr. Darwin apparently had invited Wedgwood's advice, the latter encouraged the young man to reopen the matter. He himself wrote a reply to each of Dr. Darwin's objections, and Charles despatched the two letters at once. Not content with this action, however, Mr. Wedgwood next morning—September 1—called Charles in from his shooting, and together they drove to Shrewsbury to discuss Peacock's offer in person. Though

strong-minded, Robert Darwin was not an unreasonable man, and he wanted nothing that was not best for his children. After listening to his brother-in-law's sentiments, he withdrew his objections. Charles hurried off to Cambridge, where he arrived on the night of September 2 and at once despatched a note to Henslow: "I trust the place is not given away." On September 5 he met Captain FitzRoy in London. "Gloria in excelsis," he opened his report to Henslow. "Things are more prosperous than I should have thought possible.—Cap. Fitzroy is everything that is delightful. . . ." And he went on: "What changes I have had; till one today I was building castles in the air about hunting Foxes in Shropshire, now Lamas in S. America.—There is indeed a tide in the affairs of men." FitzRoy was no less pleased: "I like what I see of him much," he informed Captain Beaufort, "and I now request you will apply for him to accompany me as Naturalist."

The next few days Darwin spent in a round of interviews and in collecting supplies for the voyage. FitzRoy recommended that he buy a case of pistols like his own, but Darwin balked at paying £60, and finally succeeded in getting a case of good strong pistols and an excellent rifle as well for only £50. He ordered a dozen shirts and "three jointed hoops for catching beetles," and asked his sister to pack his microscope and geological compass, and collect certain books from his room. One of these busy days he found time to witness the coronation procession of William IV. The King looked well and seemed popular, Darwin wrote his sis-

ter, the Life Guards were quite magnificent, but the crowd displayed so little enthusiasm that he doubted there would be a coronation fifty years hence. On September 11 he and FitzRoy went down to Plymouth, where Darwin had his first look at the *Beagle*.

Amid these preparations, Darwin did not forget to write his friend Whitley at Barmouth. The letter is dated "Friday Evening," that is, September 9. Though it adds little to the familiar story of Darwin's decision, it reveals by the number and confu-

sion of postscripts—the reference to the key for the microscope was intended for the letter to Susan—the excitement Darwin was feeling on the eve of the voyage of the *Beagle*; it echoes with the high spirits of the young man as he prepared for the great experiences that were to give a new direction to his life and a new dimension to the thinking of much of mankind.

The letter is a gift of the Friends of the Library of the American Philosophical Society, and has not been published.

17 Spring Gardens
London
Friday Evening

My dear Whitley

I dare say you will be surprised when you see the date of this letter & perhaps you will be more so when you read its contents. —

When I arrived home after having left Barmouth, I found letters from Peacock & Henslow offering me (from the Admiralty) the privilege of going in a Kings ship on a surveying voyage round the world. — This I at first refused owing to my Father not approving of the plan, but since then we have convinced him of the propriety of my going. — Accordingly after many doubts & difficulties I started for Cambridge & then came on here, where I arrived on Monday. — And I believe now it is all finally settled. — Cap Fitz Roy, my captain, appears an uncommonly agreeable open sort of fellow — whom I liked at first sight, he is uncommonly civil: I am to live with him: the Vessel is very small, but it was his own choice. — It is such capital fun ordering things. Today I ordered a Riffle & 2 pair of pistols, for we shall have plenty of fighting with those d— Cannibals: It would be something to shoot the King of the Cannibals Islands. —

Our route is Madeira, Canary Islands Rio de Janeiro. 18 months all about S America, chiefly Southern extremity. — South Sea Islands (some new [?] course) Australia India home. — I shall see a great number of places, as they take out 20 Chronometers to ascertain Longitude. —

Cap Fitzroy is very scientific & seems inclined to assist me to the utmost extent in my line. I go on Sunday to Plymouth to see the Vessel. She sails 10th of next month. — So that I have not an idle moment. — I shot one partridge on the 1st. Devilish dear 12 . . 13 . . 6 [?]. By 8 oclock I was off. — Remember me most kindly to the Lowes. I should like to hear their observations on my grand tour. Tell Lowe Sen. that my things arrived quite safe & I am very

The King of Prussia
will give 5000 roubles
I shall not be long
your self -
I shall be
L. A. B. -

Christians
I attempt to
write you
I desire them
to be
I have to send such letters
I am with love of writing
with

purpose ahead
this letter - perhaps you will be here
so when you read its contents -
When I arrived home after having left
Bernath - I found letters from Peacock
& Herston saying he (for the Admiralty) the
privilege of going in a King's ship on
a surveying voyage round the world -
This I at first refused owing to my
Father not approving of the plan, but since
then we have convinced him of the
possibility of going - Accordingly after many

doubts & difficulties I started for Cambridge &
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King of the Cannibal Islands. -
Our route is Madras. Ceylon Islands
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characters to ascertain lengths -

Cap Fitzroy is very scientific & seems inclined
to assist me to the utmost extent in
my business. I go on Sunday to Plymouth

to see the Kipah. She sails 10th
of next month. - So that I have not
an idle moment. - I shot one partridge

on the 1st divided deer Dec. 13. 6. by 8 o'clock
I was off. - Perhaps he must kindly
to the Jews, I should like to hear their

Observation on my grand tour. tell Louis I
that by things arrived quite safe. & I am
very much obliged for all the trouble he took:

There will be a paper published about
the Frigates. all by conjecture were right.
If any one can be got, & put into your pocket
it will be capital

I will be glad to see you & your
 dear Mr Whalley. I have my dear
 Brown for Mr Herbert in London. I will
 will be glad to see you & your
 dear Mr Whalley. I have my dear

I have your note with me. I am
 in your last note. I am sure
 that I would have a few questions to ask. I
 will remain yours very truly
 Again I remain as ever yours &c

Chas. Whitley Esq
 Post Office
 Carmarthen
 N. Wales

London 10/15/1831



much obliged for all the trouble he took: There will be a paper published about the Fungus. All my conjectures were right.

[If any more can be got & put into gin [?] & sent to Shrewsbury: it will be capital] I wish them all sorts of good luck & Believe me dear old Whitley, Yours very sincerely

Chas Darwin

I saw poor old Herbert in Cam. He is pretty well tired of Cam poor old Fellow. —

Remember me most kindly to Beadon.

I hope you will write to me. I am much obliged for your last note. — If I was [to] see Lowe I should think he would have a few questions to ask. I hope he will remain pretty easy in his mind. —

Again remember me most kindly to the two Lows.

[Another short postscript begins: "The key of microscope was forgotten: . . ." This was crossed out, and the following explanation given:] I added this postscript to the wrong letter. Will you call at the Postoffice & desire them to forward to Caernarvon a letter directed Prof: Sedgwick.

I am quite ashamed to send such letter. I am quite tired of writing.

[Addressed:] Chas. Whitley Esqr
Post Office
Barmouth
N. Wales

[Endorsed:] Darwin's 10 Sep. 1831

NOTE: CHARLES WHITLEY, who had "inoculated" Darwin with a taste for pictures and good engravings, became reader in natural philosophy in the University of Durham, vicar of Bedlington in Northumberland, and Honorary Canon of Durham. JOHN MAURICE HERBERT, who became a county court judge for Herefordshire, Radnorshire, and Monmouth Circuit, had introduced Darwin into a "musical set" at Cambridge, and remained his "warm-hearted friend" until his death. ROBERT LOWE, an Oxford graduate, had a distinguished career. As vice-president of the Board of Education he promoted educational reforms, scandalizing his Oxford friends by showing preference for physical sciences over classical studies. He was chancellor of the exchequer in

Gladstone's cabinet of 1868 and was created Viscount Sherbrooke in 1880. His brother, HENRY PORTER LOWE (later Sherbrooke), a member of the Cambridge dining club to which Darwin, Whitley, and Herbert belonged, became a country gentleman—captain of the South Nottinghamshire Yeomanry, justice of the peace, and high sheriff of the county. BEADON may have been Richard A'Court Beadon, a student of St. John's College with Whitley and Herbert, later vicar of Haselbury Plucknett, Somerset. As for DARWIN, he never killed the King of the Cannibal Islands. On the contrary, at his first sight of a savage—a naked Fuegian with long hair blowing about a painted face—he merely stared in astonishment.

Charles Darwin and the American Philosophical Society

IT WOULD be gratifying to record that the American Philosophical Society immediately recognized the significance of the *Origin of Species* when it appeared in November 1859 and that accordingly they chose Darwin a member at the next election; but they did not. (In Philadelphia that distinction belongs to the Academy of Natural Sciences, which named Darwin a correspondent on March 27, 1860.) Nor did the Library acquire any copy of the *Origin* for many years. If the records are to be trusted, a copy of the sixth edition of 1872 was added to the collection in 1906; the first edition was not received until 1947, and then only purchased as a rare book.

On May 14, 1869, Darwin was at last nominated for membership in the Society "by the Board and Council." There is no evidence as to who first put forward his name. It could have been Joseph Leidy, who had been one of the first Americans to write Darwin in warm appreciation of his work; or J. Peter Lesley, one of the Society's secretaries, who not only favored Darwin's theory but had actually met Darwin at a dinner party at Sir Charles and Lady Lyell's in London in 1869—"Charles Darwin (*the Darwin*), a gentle shy person of 55+ years of age." On October 1 the nomination was read in a full meeting, as the by-laws required; "half an hour after which," the minutes note, "the riot commenced in front of the Hall." This was not an expression of orthodox Christian disapproval of the great naturalist; only a clash between two

political marching clubs, in which twelve persons were shot, cut with knives, or struck by paving bricks. Two weeks later, on October 15, Darwin was formally elected, along with fifteen others, including three women: Maria Mitchell, professor of astronomy at Vassar College, the English scientist Mary Somerville, and Elizabeth Cady Agassiz, collaborator with her husband on the famous expedition to Brazil in 1865. Darwin acknowledged the honor in a polite letter of February 5, 1870; and this was read on March 4.

Thereafter, the Society's minutes are silent on Darwin; although, of course, members' papers sometimes revealed the effect of Darwinism on their thought. Darwin's death on April 19, 1882, was the occasion for a brief tribute. Professor John LeConte, at the Society's regular meeting two days later, spoke sincerely of the man "who has by his work and his writings, become a dear companion, and a guide in our scientific thought." He continued:

For, to no man more than to Darwin, does the present age owe as much, for the gradual reception of the modern method of close observation over the scholastic or *a priori* formulæ, which, up to a brief period, affected all biological investigations. To him, above all men, we owe the recurrence to the old Arayan doctrine of evolution (though in those ancient times promulgated under the guise of inspiration) as preferable, by reasonable demonstration, to the Shemitic views, which have prevailed to within a few years, and are still acceptable to a large number of well-minded but unthinking men. The doctrine of

evolution, in its elementary form, means nothing more than that everything that exists has been derived from something that pre-existed; that the former is related to the latter as effect is to cause. And it is most pleasing evidence of the acceptability of this doctrine, that it is now heard from many pulpits in the land, as a strong illustration of the instructions which are thence given.

Therefore, while lamenting the death of Darwin, at a ripe old age, and losing the benefit of his vast store of learning, which could not much longer remain with us, we are grateful that we lived in a generation in which he was a conspicuous example of the humble and holy men of heart, which other scientific men should endeavor—albeit, with much less capacity—to imitate.



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