Chapter 3
Charles Darwin at Cambridge: The Letters to William Darwin Fox

Letters #1 to #43; 12th June 1828 to 1st Aug 1831

That punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty seven, when Mr Samuel Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers; threw open his chamber window, and looked out upon the world beneath. Goswell-street was at his feet, Goswell-street was on his right – as far as the eye could reach, Goswell-street extended on his left; and the opposite side of Goswell-street was over the way. “Such,” thought Mr. Pickwick, “are the narrow views of those philosophers who, content with examining the things that lie before them, look not to the truths that are hidden beyond”.

Pickwick Papers, Charles Dickens

Introduction

Just over three years after the arrival of William Darwin Fox in Cambridge, another young man of nineteen arrived, in early 1828, who was destined to cause one of the biggest upheavals of the Nineteenth Century. Charles Darwin did not come directly from school as Fox did; he had left Shrewsbury School at the age of sixteen and had joined his elder brother Erasmus in Edinburgh, with the intent, largely on his father’s side, of becoming a physician, like his grandfather, his father and his brother. However, young Charley, as his sister’s called him, was honest enough to own up that the blood and gore did not suit him for that kind of life, and as it was determined that that also excluded a military career, the remaining profession for a gentleman of the age was chosen, that of a clergyman.

By the time Charles Darwin arrived in Cambridge in January 1828, Christ’s College was an obvious choice and by the time Charles Darwin his cousin had already been at Christ’s for four years and Erasmus Darwin II, his brother, had recently left to take up his medical studies at Edinburgh University. Furthermore, Hensleigh Wedgwood, CD’s cousin, was also an undergraduate at Christ’s and would later become a Fellow of Christ’s in 1829. Fox, it appears from the letters,
quickly introduced Darwin to many of the good and, probably, “bad” aspects of Cambridge (see “Autobiography” and Diary of W D Fox, Chapter 2). Clearly Fox was already a committed amateur naturalist and had formed a circle of friends at Cambridge, including the brilliant Prof John Stevens Henslow, who was appointed Professor of Mineralogy at the University in 1822 and then to the Chair of Botany in 1825 (see Chapter 2). It appears from the correspondence of Darwin to Fox, but not from Fox’s diary (see below), that Fox was not only a collector of birds and animals which he hoarded at Osmaston Hall just outside Derby, but was also a keen beetle hunter.

We know this from Darwin’s letters to Fox and also from an admission in his Autobiography that: “... in my life at Cambridge, my time was sadly wasted, there and worse than wasted. From my passion for shooting and for hunting, and, when, this failed, for riding across country, I got into a sporting set, including some dissipated low-minded young men. We used often to dine together in the evening, though these dinners often included men of higher stamp, and we sometimes drank too much, with, jolly singing and playing at cards afterwards.” To which Francis Darwin added the footnote, “I gather from some of my father’s contemporaries that he has exaggerated the Bacchanalian nature of these parties”. Clearly this was a sensitive family issue and may account for why the diary of Fox for 1828 is missing. After Fox died in 1880 his effects were passed on to his wife and four of his sons. Darwin himself died two years later, and at that point, Francis Darwin, his son, began to assemble “The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin”, which was published in 1887. The letters of Darwin to Fox form a strong component of this book and it is clear that the letters were made available to Francis Darwin, at an early stage by Charles W Fox (Letter, 1 Nov 1887). Therefore, it is likely that the diaries were also known to Francis Darwin, although he does not acknowledge them (see also Appendix 1).

In 1909, at the time of the Darwin Centenary celebrations, a set of letters was left to Christ’s College in a deed signed by Fox’s son, Gilbert Basil Fox. These letters are a prize-possession of the College. However, they do not constitute the entire collection of letters, which must have been in the collection of W D Fox at his death, together with other letters and memorabilia which have turned up elsewhere (see Appendix 1 and note 5). What is not extant is any letter of W D Fox to Darwin at this stage. In fact, this does not matter unduly for two reasons. Firstly, the letters of Darwin are self-explicit and there is very little that needs explanation in the form of a reply: one can read them rather like a diary of events. Secondly, we have the diary of Fox from 1824-26 that unmasks the persona and life style of Fox at Cambridge, perhaps as well, if not better, than the letters in reply. Nevertheless, we may well ask why no letters exist? The immediate reason seems to be that Darwin did not keep them! However a number of letters of this period are extant (see Correspondence of Charles Darwin); furthermore it is unlikely that Darwin threw the letters away as he would want them to refer to information on beetles, etc., that he was working on. More likely they were lost during or after the voyage of the Beagle. Some later letters of Fox do survive and give us a flavour of him as a letter