A pilgrim's progress

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The Correspondence of Charles Darwin, Vol.1 1821-1836.

Edited by Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith.

Cambridge University Press: 1985. Pp.702. £30, \$37.50.

A Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 1821-1882.

Edited by Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith.

Garland: 1985. Pp.690. \$100, £80.

Darwin Pedigrees. By R.B. Freeman.

R.B. Freeman, University College London: 1984. Pp.84. £8.

IN THESE contracting times, there is comfort in the appearance of the first volume of a set which, the publishers tell us, will take a score of volumes and most of the rest of the century to complete. The project to locate, edit and publish the complete correspondence of Charles Darwin has already been underway for a decade, supported by large grants from several American funding bodies, including the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and overseen by both British and American advisory committees. The editorial team has already involved more than 20 scholars, designated by a hierarchical variety of titles: editors, associate editors, assistant editors, research associates, research assistants and managing editor. The team has a decided Anglo-American flavour, neatly encapsulated by the two senior editors: Frederick Burkhardt, the American scholar who has masterminded the whole project, and Sydney Smith, the Cambridge zoology don who has done so much over the years to secure the magnificent Darwin archives for the Cambridge University Library. The Darwin family has always been exceptionally cooperative and generous in their dealings with Charles Darwin's Alma Mater, and it is pleasing to see the family represented on the British advisory committee through Darwin's grand-daughter, Lady Nora Barlow.

The *Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, then, has been, and will be, expensive to produce. Will it be worth it? After all,

Francis Darwin included a number of the more important letters in his three-volume biography of his father (1887), which he followed up by *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (two volumes, 1903). Charles Darwin's daughter Henrietta Litchfield edited additional ones in her *Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters* (two volumes, 1905). Nora Barlow has given us the Darwin-Henslow correspondence (1967) and other scholars have published additional bits and pieces. With about 2,800 letters to and from Darwin already in print, is this present project worth the time and money? The answer is short and unqualified: yes. In the first place, 2,800 letters represent but a fraction of the 13,925 the group has already identified and calendared, and many more will undoubtedly surface.

A *Calendar of the Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 1821-1882* gives us a foretaste of the pleasures in store during the coming years and will immediately prove a useful reference tool to historians working on many aspects of nineteenth-century science. The letters are listed and described, and their contents briefly summarized. They come from more than 200 institutions and private collections, and a biographical register lists over 4,000 correspondents and individuals mentioned in the series. Because Darwin lived for so many years in the relative isolation of Down House, he was probably more dependent on the postal service than any other great scientist. The output is staggering: more than 500 letters survive for 1862, almost 600 for 1874 and even

in 1881, with his health visibly failing, the surviving correspondence tops 600 items. The last letter listed in the *Calendar* was written two days before he died.

Darwin, however, was not simply an ardent cultivator of the epistolary art, he was also a distinguished one. His letters are often filled with memorable phrases and shrewd insights and are a joy to read. In no future volume of the complete correspondence are the delights likely to be greater than those contained in the first. This is partly because the time span is longer, from the first surviving letter, written to the 12-year-old Darwin by Mary Congreve, to a letter of 30 December 1836 from Robert FitzRoy to Darwin, discussing publication plans for the diaries, journals and reports prepared in conjunction with the voyage of the *Beagle*. Sandwiched between are more than 300 letters to and from Darwin, and a sprinkling of letters about or affecting him (such as George Peacock's letter of August 1831 to J.S. Henslow, asking him to recommend a naturalist to accompany FitzRoy). They detail a pilgrim's progress, from a spirited young lad variously called Mr Charles, Bobby and Charley, to a mature naturalist, settled in London to work through the large collections of specimens (zoological, botanical, mineralogical and palaeontological) he had acquired on his five-year voyage around the world. The Darwin that emerges is not radically different from the one which numerous biographers and historians have described, but the assembled correspondence does present an uncluttered vision of his early personality, development, and family and social relationships. Two or three points are worth stressing particularly.

First, from the earliest years of the correspondence, Darwin was investing great quantities of libidinal energy engaging with Nature: partly in hunting and fishing, but also in collecting and studying the objects of the natural world. A long, important and largely previously unpublished series of letters between Darwin and his cousin William Darwin Fox, makes clear that insects were Darwin's first scientific passion: "I am dying by inches, from not having any body to

Side elevation of HMS Beagle, 1832. Doubts about her size (90 feet in length, 242 tons) were a recurring feature of Darwin's letters prior to the voyage; thus (to W.D. Fox): "My objection to the vessel is its smallness. . . . As to its safety I hope the Admiralty are the best judges".

talk to about my insects", he wrote in 1828; in 1831, on hearing he was off on the *Beagle*, another collecting friend Frederick Watkins wrote to Darwin, "Woe unto ye Beetles of South America, woe unto all tropical butterflies". Despite Henslow's inspiring Cambridge lectures in botany, and despite Darwin's brief geological tour of Wales with Adam Sedgwick, the Darwin who set out on the *Beagle* was first and foremost an entomologist. He very quickly became much more of a geologist, partly through the influence of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (three volumes 1830-1833), the first volume of which FitzRoy gave him just

before the *Beagle* set sail (the other volumes being sent to him in South America), but mainly through the sheer impressiveness of the geological formations and activity the voyage offered. "There is nothing like geology", he wrote home in 1834; "the pleasure of the first days partridge shooting or the first days hunting cannot be compared to finding a fine group of fossil bones, which tell their story of former times with almost a living tongue."

Darwin's transformation from beetle collector to rounded naturalist is strikingly demonstrated in the volume. Equally significant, however, is the light it sheds on his circle: family, more distant relations and friends. The letters remind us that the sage of Down House was once a carefree young man who lay in the strawberry patches and played Housemaid and Postilion with Fanny Owen. His letters to her are lost, but Fanny's to Charles survive (mostly with strict instructions for him to burn them instantly once he has read them). One wonders what he felt when, barely a year at sea, he received his sister's letter informing him that the girl he described as "la belle Fanny", "the prettiest, plumpest, Charming personage that Shropshire possesses" was engaged to another. Fanny's letters suggest Charles was infinitely better off with Emma Wedgwood, still a shadowy figure in Volume 1. Her time will undoubtedly come in Volume 2.

This lapse into the language of romance is entirely appropriate, for these letters reflect a real world very like the one created by Jane Austen. Darwin's sisters took it in turn to write him each month, and their long and newsy letters are full of the stuff of the social history of upper middle class, provincial England during the 1830s. They send him news of the Reform Bill and the cholera epidemic, but also of engagements and marriages, births and deaths, balls and visits. His sisters despair as the voyage stretches from two to three to five years; and Darwin's own stiff upper lip begins to quiver as seasickness persists, the novelty fades and (after the visit to the Galapagos Islands), the scientific returns decrease exponentially. "In short, I am convinced

The Wedgwood connection — Susannah (1765-1817), daughter of Josiah Wedgwood the founder of the pottery dynasty, and Charles Darwin's mother, with her brother (centre).

it is a most ridiculous thing to go round the world, when by staying quietly, the world will go round with you." He penned this prophetic sentiment in the penultimate letter he wrote home, in July 1836.

This volume is teeming with life and exuberance. There is little of the ill health that was to plague Darwin's later years, and, because his correspondents are allowed to speak for themselves, much about his early circle, from his irascible and fascinating brother Erasmus to his

quietly supportive father to his wonderfully demonstrative sisters. The letters are finely edited and presented, even if the explanatory editorial apparatus could profitably have been fuller. Several appendices provide additional information for these years, including the main events of his life, a list of books and people on board the *Beagle*, and biographical details of those with whom he corresponded or who are mentioned in the letters. The family connections can now be additionally sorted out with the aid of Richard Freeman's new book, *Darwin Pedigrees*. This reprints the scarce pedigree first produced in 1888 by H.F. Burke,

and incorporates Freeman's own researches, particularly on later Darwins and on female members of the family.

For some years now, historians have referred (sometimes disparagingly) to the Darwin Industry. All it needed, it seems, was an injection of foreign capital to show itself alive, well and an immensely fruitful activity. □

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Happy repitition

David L. Hull

The Survival of Charles Darwin: A Biography of a Man and an Idea.

By Ronald W. Clark.

Random House/Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 1985. Pp.449. \$19.95, £14.95.

BIOGRAPHIES of Charles Darwin have become as stylized and predictable as kabuki theatre — Darwin's comfortable childhood, his lazy days at Cambridge, the happy accident that put him on board the *Beagle*, his return to England after his arduous voyage, his marriage and retreat to Victorian gentility at Down House, his mysterious illness, the long gestation of the *Origin of Species*, Wallace's bolt from the blue, T.H. Huxley taking on "Soapy Sam" at the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the eventual triumph of Darwin's theory, Darwin's later publications, his death and burial at Westminster Abbey. Clark's biography is no exception, although he does strew this familiar narrative with interesting titbits. For example, anyone reading Darwin's *Life and Letters* might notice that Darwin called his residence near the village of Downe in Kent "Down House", instead of "Downe House", and wonder why. Clark explains that the village was "Down" until 1842 when the government added the "e" to distinguish the village in England from the

county in Ireland. There was, after all, the continuing Irish Problem. Darwin refused to adopt the new spelling for his own house.

Clark does not stop with Darwin's death in 1882. His book is the biography of a man, but it is also the biography of an idea. He traces the decline of evolutionary theory towards the end of the nineteenth century, its rough treatment at the hands of such Mendelians as William Bateson, the resurgence of Lamarckism, the "Monkey Trial" in Tennessee, the increasing influence of mathematics on the theory and the formation of the Modern Synthesis. He concludes with two chapters, one entitled "Molecular Biology Takes Over" and a second in which he describes recent controversies over the tempo of evolution and over cladistic analysis. These discussions are necessarily somewhat cursory, and some evolutionary biologists might protest that molecular biology has not taken over their field. The most that can be said is that molecular data have been incorporated into traditional views of the evolutionary process. With respect to the pace of evolution, Clark shows that emphasis on slow, gradual evolution has alternated periodically with more saltative views. Eldredge and Gould's punctuational model is but one more swing of the pendulum.

Another theme that recurs in the book is the social responsibility of scientists. Scientists do not publish in a social vacuum. Other experts read their work but so do theologians, reporters, high-school teachers and politicians. For example, the