



Darwin's world-wide web

Darwin the collaborator

But what special pleasures do the letters hold for an historian such as Pearn?

Alison:

I think for me there are two factors that made me want to work with the Project. One is the material itself. It is immensely engaging, even for non-scientists, because it has a human dimension. Correspondence, unlike published work, unlike scientific notes and all the rest of it, really allows us to see Darwin and his correspondents as real people, so there was the immediately engaging nature of the material. Then there was also the great level of scholarship that the Project has always set. It is an immensely high standard, and it's a huge privilege to be part of an undertaking that continues to maintain those high standards set by the people who founded it.

We publish Darwin's correspondence chronologically, and we've just reached the point in his life where he is really focused completely on issues of human development and human origins. This is a very exciting period for us. So we're working together with partners, with funders, over the next few years to explore questions such as gender and race in Darwin's publications, and the conversations that underpin those publications that he was having, often very guarded private conversations with philosophers, thinkers, other scientists, many of them women.

Rissa:

Given the richness of these multiple conversations, what facets of Darwin's personality have emerged from his letters?

Alison:

Darwin is an extremely good people person. We know that he was very popular right from the days that he was at Cambridge and the days that he was on the Beagle. He had a great gift for getting on with people, and I think one can see through the correspondence. He had, I think, an instinct for pitching his approaches to people so that they were more likely to actually provide him with information, which is very often what he was using his correspondence to get, and at maintaining good relations with people from a very wide range of backgrounds. He corresponded with people of a much lower social class, which was probably quite uncommon, I think. He did correspond with women. He had correspondents also who were quite difficult characters in many ways but he maintained those relationships over long periods of time.

Rissa:

This ability to steer a diplomatic and discerning line with people, be they allies or opponents, certainly paid dividends. Shelley Innes.

Shelley:

One thing about Darwin is that he's not a confrontational person. He doesn't try to stir up controversy, in fact he tries to ameliorate the situation. He respects opinions of others, he agrees to differ very often, both with scientific colleagues and with people from all walks of life, for example, people who might hold religious views that they find incompatible with his theory. But he's always very respectful of other people's views, while at the same time holding fast to his own view. And I think when, when we realise just how many of his opponents actually provided him with good scientific information, almost no-one in France was a supporter of Darwin and yet he had many French correspondents on whom he relied for information. And so these people were happy, not only to support his work by giving him information, but actually to nominate him for membership in the French Academy of Sciences.

And I think, if you have your scientific opponents supporting you in that way you must be doing something right.

Rissa:

One of the most fascinating areas to emerge has been Darwin's correspondence with women. Apart from family and friends, his female correspondents included a diamond prospector, a political hostess, a novelist, a botanical artist and various advocates of women's rights and education.

Shelley Innes highlights the findings from a recent book, *Good observers of nature*, by Tina Gianquitto, which features a telling exchange of letters between Darwin and an American woman naturalist.

Shelley:

One of the women that Darwin corresponded with was Mary Treat, and she's a very interesting woman, and she corresponded with some very important male scientists. And she's actually responsible for some very important discoveries. And one of the things that she did was to study how larval nutrition in butterflies affected the sex of the adult butterfly. When she wrote to a very well-known American entomologist about her discovery he sent her a letter, and I'm going to read a little bit from the letter, because it's very telling.

He says, "Dear Madam, I regret that your experiments were not more thorough, for I can hardly see that you have had sufficient grounds for the unqualified statement in the *Hearth and Home* article." Mary Treat wrote in a publication called *Hearth and Home*, so not the best of scientific journals. And then he says, "More error and confusion creeps into our science by these rash and unequivocal conclusions than in any other way."

Compare this to Darwin who says, "Your observations and experiments on the sexes of butterflies are by far the best as far as known to me which have ever been made. They seem to me so important that I earnestly hope you will repeat them and record the exact number of the larvae which you tempt to continue feeding and deprive of food, and record the sexes of the mature insects. Assuredly you ought to then publish the result in some well-known scientific journal." And indeed, Treat did republish her article three years later in *American Naturalist*.

Now I think what's very interesting about this is that Darwin is not just encouraging to her, he doesn't just say this is very interesting, I think you've got something here, but he suggests a way forward. He tells her to repeat the experiments and to record them a little bit more carefully perhaps. He's very encouraging and he's very respectful of her work.

Rissa:

What's equally revealing is how Darwin reacts when disagreements arise.

Shelley:

She disagreed with him on a certain topic, and so she published something disagreeing with him and then Mr Darwin, as she says, wrote, "I've read your article with the greatest interest. It certainly appears from your excellent observations that the valve was sensitive, but I cannot understand what I could never with all my pains excite any movement. It's pretty clear I am wrong about the head acting like a wedge." So he acknowledges that he was wrong, she was a better observer, she was right. I mean, he is extremely interested in getting the science right. He's interested in the result and not the accolades I suppose, and he's interested in acknowledging the people, and you can see that throughout all of his publications, he always acknowledges whoever he gets information from. So I think that's a real insight into his character.