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[page] 18

THE BEAGLE CHARLES DARWIN'S Diary

CHARLES DARWIN'S DIARY OF THE VOYAGE OF H.M.S. BEAGLE. Edited from the MS. by NORA BARLOW. (Cambridge University Press. 21s. net.)

A century ago Charles Darwin was on the Beagle in South American waters, in process of slow transformation from a young Cambridge graduate with a taste for field sports and natural history and an intention to become a parson, into the man who was to change for all time the fundamental conceptions of biology, and at least for a time to be anathema to nearly all the parsons of all the creeds. His "Journal of the Voyage of the Beagle," published first in 1839 as the third volume of a work by Captains King and Fitzroy, later in the same year, owing to its success as compared with its companion volumes, as a separate book in 1845 as a new edition and since then in many editions, is a standard book. The voyage lasted from the end of 1831 to October, 1836. The commander, Captain Fitzroy, was charged by the Admiralty with a survey of South American and Patagonian waters and had offered to take a young naturalist with him. Darwin kept a manuscript diary, but in intervals ashore and on his return to London wrote the Journal, changing chronological into geographical order, and get adding much detailed scientific description and discussion.

Fortunately the manuscript diary was preserved, and in 1891 Horace Darwin, one of Darwin's sons, had three typed copies made. Mrs. Barlow, Horace's daughter and the granddaughter of Charles, has now edited and published the original Diary, comparing it line by line with the first two editions of the Journal, and adding illuminating notes. She has preserved deliberately the curious constructions and hasty grammar of a manuscript never intended for publication and has done only the necessary minimum in revising punctuation and correcting slips in spelling. She has provided a bibliography, notes on the individuals concerned, and a most interesting preface. There is a picture of Darwin as a young man diagrams of the Beagle, showing the extreme scantiness of the accommodation that could be provided by a brig of 240 tons. Before the ship had left Plymouth Darwin was sleeping on board and found difficulty in getting into his hammock, or lying comfortably in it. Accordingly he had it slung so as to give greater length, but to make this possible, the drawer which he was to use as a wardrobe had to be cut away. On its first effort to leave the Sound the Beagle got aground on a rock at low tide. No damage was done, but it was got afloat only by bringing all the men on deck and making them run to different parts, so getting a swing on the ship. Such was an Admiralty vessel a century ago, commissioned to survey the coasts of South America and to circumnavigate the world!

The Diary was very well worth publishing and in many respects is more vivid and engaging than the Journal from which many of his personal notes were cut out, and to which much scientific matter, new then, but now well known, was added.

Writing of St. Helena, for example, the Journal says: "The next day I obtained lodgings within a stone's throw of Napoleon's tomb; it has a capital central situation, whence I could make excursions in every direction." There is a footnote in which he says that it was even "dangerous to mention the tomb." The corresponding entry in the Diary reads:-

I obtained lodgings in a cottage within stone's throw of Napoleon's tomb. I confess this latter fact possessed me with but little inducement. The one step, between the sublime and the ridiculous, has on this subject been too often passed. Besides, a tomb situated close by cottages and a frequented road, does not create feelings in unison with the imagined resting place of so great a spirit. With respect to the house in which Napoleon died, its state is scandalous, to see the filthy and deserted rooms, scored with the names of visitors to my mind was like beholding some ancient ruin wantonly disfigured.

The Journal reveals to us the transformation of the young Cambridge graduate into the "studious porer over Nature's plan," but less of the writer's personality; in the Diary we see the man himself.