

# Special Features

## An Unusual Find - A Charles Darwin Letter

A number of years ago an appeal was made to the Old Georgian Club for library books. Many books were donated - some old, some new. The older books tended perhaps to have come from people clearing out cupboards, boxes under the stairs, etc. These old books were not classified and put on the shelves immediately. One such box of old books was sorted in February this year and the science orientated books put on one side, in particular a book by the famous naturalist, Charles Darwin.

The book *Vegetable Mould and Earthworms* was printed in 1881. The full title reads *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits*. The book had been carefully separated by our librarian, Nora Kretschel. In going through the book she had found a letter inside whose signature appeared to read Darwin. Was the letter an original or not? A copy of the letter is printed below.

From the impossible-to-read writing the author must have had medical training or illusions of being a doctor! (Darwin had studied medicine in Edinburgh, though never completed the course.) The address - Down, Kent - refers to Down House, to where Darwin moved in 1842 and where he remained for the rest of his life. Today it is a Darwin museum and owned by the Royal College of Surgeons, London. The book on Earthworms referred to above was the last book published by Darwin who died in April 1882. The letter is dated February 26th, 1882, just two months before his death.

A copy of the letter was sent to the Institute of Biology, London and we are thankful to the Institute's General Secretary for his prompt reply and for passing the letter on to the Cambridge University Library. The Cambridge library has a section entitled *The Collected Correspondence of Charles Darwin*.

The following are extracts from the letter received from the managing editor of the section concerned. Again, we are extremely grateful for his

interest, help and prompt reply.

"I can confirm that the handwriting and signature are both Darwin's. Darwin's book on earthworms generated much interest... Darwin kept most of the letters he received and he was punctual in replying to the great majority... despite his age and failing health."

The library mentioned has over 14,000 letters documented to and from Darwin. And with regard to the value of the letter if any?

"I have checked a recent sale catalogue.... In a Christies' sale in December of last year (1986) an unpublished 3 page letter to an unnamed correspondent dealing with Earthworms fetched over £1,400."

Our letter was bought by Mr Rohm (Old Georgian and member of the Board of Governors) for U\$2,000, and he has very generously allowed the College to keep possession of the letter for its display. It is now mounted and displayed with the College archives on the top floor of the library.

And what about the book *Vegetable Mould and Earthworms*? The book was donated via the Old Georgian Club, but originally belonged according to the name inside to Hilary Howard Leng. The Georgian magazine No 77 in 1936 quotes: "The passing of Sir Hilary Leng removes from our midst yet another of the original founders of the St George's College Company." It would appear that Hilary Leng must have written to Darwin with some of his own queries or perhaps observations about earthworms. But there is more!

The book had apparently been donated to the Old Georgian Club for subsequent donation to the College by Mr E H Leng. The book *Quién es Quién en la Argentina?* (Buenos Aires, Kraft, 1963) quotes: "LENG, Edmundo Howard - comerciante. Nacido 29.10.01; padre, Sir Hilary Howard Leng; Estudios, St George's College de Quilmes. Fue socio de Leng Roberts y Cia."

What an amount of interesting information, events and people relevant to our College Archives. We are thankful to Mrs Nora Kretschel, the College librarian, for her interest, conscientiousness and enthusiasm in finding the letter and information about the Leng family.

Mr R G Baylis



H .H. Leng, C.B.E.

## **The Darwin letter - transcription**

February 26th, 1882

Dear Sir,

I wish that I could answer your question, but I cannot. The usual cause of the death of worms is the parasitic larva of a fly, but this does not apply especially to aphidius parasites. Worms are very susceptible to certain poisons and — is poisonous to plants for a quite extraordinary length of time and it may be so to earthworms. I have here an uncovered tennis court, consisting of concrete and my — — — the — have often noticed dead and dying worms on the smooth surface and this makes the whole case still more perplexing.

I am glad that my little book has at all interested you and I remain, dear sir,

Yours faithfully,  
Charles Darwin

## **Traducción al español:**

26 de febrero de 1882

Estimado Sr,

Desearía poder responder a su pregunta, pero no puedo. La causa habitual de la muerte de los gusanos es la larva parásita de una mosca, pero esto no se aplica especialmente a los parásitos afidios. Los gusanos son muy susceptibles a ciertos venenos y son venenosos para las plantas durante un período de tiempo bastante extraordinario y pueden serlo para las lombrices de tierra. Aquí tengo una cancha de tenis descubierta, que consiste en concreto y mi — — — a menudo he notado gusanos muertos y moribundos en la superficie lisa y esto hace que todo el caso sea aún más desconcertante.

Me alegro de que mi librito le haya interesado y quedo, querido señor,

Atentamente,  
Charles Darwin