

CHARLES DARWIN'S HOOSIER CORRESPONDENT

Gene Kritsky
Department of Biology
College of Mount St. Joseph
Cincinnati, Ohio 45233

ABSTRACT: Charles Darwin, the author of *On the Origin of Species*, attracted letters from all over the world. Of the nearly 15,000 known letters that make up his correspondence is one exchange of letters with a young man from Indianapolis. Charles E. Ferguson, then 23 years of age, wrote Darwin in 1879 asking him for a list of books which would cover the "entire ground" of evolution. Darwin responded two weeks later with a short list of books for Ferguson to read. Over the next several years, Ferguson corresponded with Ernst Haeckel, Joseph Hooker, Richard Owen, Joseph LeConte, Alfred R. Wallace, Edward Waldo Emerson, and Thomas A. Edison. Ferguson went to medical school in Indianapolis in 1890 and became a respected teacher and physician. He was instrumental in the detection of typhoid bacteria in the White River and the Indianapolis water supply. At the time of his death in 1945, he had held the title, Professor Emeritus, longer than any other faculty member at Indiana University.

KEYWORDS: Charles Darwin, Charles Eugene Ferguson.

Charles Darwin, best known for his theory of evolution by natural selection, carried on a global correspondence of more than 15,000 letters. One of those letters involved a resident of Indiana, a 23-year old man from Indianapolis, who wrote Darwin on December 27, 1879.

The letter is in the Darwin collection in the Cambridge University Library and is reprinted courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library:

Indianapolis Ind. Dec. 27, 1879,
Mr. Charles Darwin.
Dear Sir.

Knowing your authority on the theory of evolution as relating to man, I take the liberty of of [sic] asking you if you will be so kind as to give me a list of books on the subject, such as a person desiring to cover the entire ground may need. By doing this you will greatly oblige
yours very sincerely
Charles E. Ferguson

Darwin responded one month later with a brief, handwritten note which is now preserved in Indiana University's Lilly Library.

Jan 12/80
Dear Sir

If you will read Haeckel's "Evolution of Man" - if this translation has appeared in America, or his Schopenhengeschichten. - and my

Descent of Man, I think that you will find reference to everything important.-

Dear Sir

yours faithfully

Ch. Darwin

Who was this correspondent, and what was his purpose in contacting Darwin?

Charles Eugene Ferguson was born on May 29, 1856, in Indianapolis and attended school in the Marion County Courthouse and later in the old church on Monument Circle. After completing grade school, Ferguson started work at Hibben-Kennedy, a wholesale dry goods company located on South Meridian (Turk, 1943).

No record exists as to why Ferguson contacted Darwin. Perhaps he was interested in obtaining Darwin's autograph. But subsequent correspondence with other noted scientists and literary figures does suggest that the young Ferguson, for religious reasons, was deeply interested in the subject of evolution. The evidence is not apparent in the Darwin letter but is so in his correspondence with other famous people during the same year he wrote Darwin.

On January 20, 1880, just 8 days after Darwin's letter was written, Ferguson received a letter from Ernst Haeckel. The letter is written in German and also contains a list of books for Ferguson's review.

On January 27, 1880, Ferguson received a letter from William B. Carpenter, a physician in London, who had reviewed Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Carpenter's letter provides Ferguson with a list of titles on "spiritualism and mesmerism." Carpenter relates to Ferguson that a recent exposé had been made of a spiritualist in London, who had been labeled as a fraud after being scientifically tested.

Three weeks later, on February 17, 1880, Ferguson received a letter from Edward Waldo Emerson, son of Ralph Waldo Emerson, responding to Ferguson's question as to whether the senior Emerson "had changed his religious beliefs and accepted the doctrines of the Orthodox Congregationalists." The letter details that claims by a Rev. Joseph Cook in a public lecture and printed in papers around the country were "in every respect incorrect."

The next letter Ferguson received was from John W. Dawson, a Canadian geologist, who wrote a negative review of the *Origin of Species*, allegedly without having read the book. Dawson's letter provided Ferguson with references that were opposed to Darwin's writings, including the Duke of Argyll's *Reign of Law*, which attacked the concept of natural selection.

March brought letters from Joseph Hooker, Richard Owen, and John Lubbock, all including references to books for Ferguson to review. On March 4, 1880, Ferguson received a long letter from Joseph LeConte answering Ferguson's apparent question with "I know of no book on theistic evolution." LeConte also lists several papers and books written for the purpose of reconciling science and religion.

The next letter on the subject was received two years later from Alfred Russell Wallace. The letter was written almost two months after Darwin's death and attempted to answer Ferguson's question about the French and German reaction to natural selection.

No record exists to indicate that Ferguson did anything more with these letters and others from such people as Edison, except save them. Ferguson married in 1882 and moved to Orlando, Florida, two years later, where he lived for six years. In 1890, he and his wife moved back to Indianapolis, where he enrolled in the Medical College of Indianapolis. He set up practice on Ohio Street after graduation in 1892 (Turk, 1943).

Dr. Ferguson was head of the City Hospital for one year, after which he resigned to become Secretary of the City Board of Health. In his work at the Board of Health, Dr. Ferguson made his greatest contribution to the city of Indianapolis. "I detected pollution in the White river. I examined the water for three or four days before I reported my findings to Dr. Frank Morrison, president of the health board. He told me to call in the newspaper reporters and let them inform the public." City water officials claimed the water could not contaminate the city's drinking supply, but two years later, Dr. Ferguson discovered that the fire department's horses would not drink from the public fountains. His testing showed that the water had been tainted with typhoid bacteria. Filters were finally installed to correct the problem that Ferguson had discovered two years earlier (Turk, 1943).

Dr. Ferguson became a professor of bacteriology at Indiana University Medical School. But like many Americans during the first two decades of the century, Dr. Ferguson was drawn to war. In 1905, he was in Japan during the Russo-Japanese War. In 1913, he watched the fighting between the Greek and Turkish navies during the First Balkan War. He left IU and served in World War I in the Volunteer Medical Corps. After his return, he left the classroom again to combat the flu epidemic that struck Indianapolis (Anon, 1945).

In 1922, Dr. Ferguson lost his sight, forcing an end to his teaching career. But he never stopped learning. He soon started "reading" by listening to phonograph records of books and taking postgraduate courses from the University of Illinois, which broadcast courses over the radio (Turk, 1943).

When Dr. Ferguson died on May 18, 1945, he had held the title of Professor Emeritus of Indiana University longer than any other individual. The obituaries make no mention of his correspondence with many famous scientists of the 1880s, and he did not mention them during his last interview, given in 1943. For him, the letters were not an essential part of his many important contributions to Indiana. For us, they show a young man with questions, who asked the most important scientists of the day for help. His inquisitive nature fueled a successful career in medicine and public health that benefited the residents of Indianapolis (Anon, 1945).

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