WILLIAM WHEWELL, D.D.
THE LIFE
AND
SELECTIONS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE
OF
WILLIAM WHEWELL, D.D.
LATE MASTER OF TRINITY COLLEGE
CAMBRIDGE

BY
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WITH PORTRAIT AFTER A PAINTING BY SAMUEL LAURENCE

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INTRODUCTORY.

Shortly after the death of Dr. Whewell, fourteen years ago, his then surviving sister, Mrs. Newton, and some other of his friends expressed a strong wish that such a selection should be made from his intimate and familiar correspondence as could without impropriety be made public, and were of opinion that it would be found interesting by general readers as well as by personal friends. To the former class these letters will probably show a side of the character of which they were previously unaware; while to his friends it can scarcely fail to be interesting to see those qualities of mind and heart, those habits of thought and expression, which were characteristic of him to the last, manifested throughout the letters of fifty-five years under every variation of subject and of mood. The responsibility of making this selection was pressed upon me by Mrs. Newton in a manner which made me feel it impossible to refuse. The editing of the scientific correspondence was undertaken by Mr. Todhunter, and when his volumes were published, three years ago, it was announced that they would shortly be followed by others, containing Dr. Whewell's domestic and academic correspondence, edited by Mr. Aldis Wright and myself.
In consequence of the pressure of other engagements Mr. Wright has unfortunately found himself unable to fulfil this promise, and I have been deprived, I regret to say, of his co-operation. In the expectation that the materials collected for the Academic Life would form the basis of a separate portion of the work, Mr. Todhunter has left them untouched. They were beyond the limits of my own task, which indeed was completed when Mr. Aldis Wright announced his decision. It seemed impossible, however, to allow a memoir of Dr. Whewell to appear in which none but incidental mention should be made of Trinity, and no account whatever be given of his relation to the University and the College where fifty years of his life were passed, and which were at once the principal field of his life-long labours and the objects of his life-long affection. Therefore, though painfully conscious of my inadequacy for such a task, I felt it my duty to endeavour to interweave with my own portion of the work some notice of these materials. I have been aided in this difficult task by the late Mr. J. L. Hammond of Trinity College, the last surviving executor of Dr. Whewell. Personal reasons, among which no doubt were his failing health and the heavy pressure of official work, made him resolutely decline to undertake the task himself, but he gave me his help whenever it was possible.

It would be impossible adequately to describe my obligations to him. I can only here briefly acknowledge them. To him it is mainly owing that the work is completed at all. I could not have undertaken this last portion of it without his help, and his sudden and untimely death is the greatest of all the many misfortunes which have attended the preparation of the work, and caused delays, much to be regretted on all accounts, and especially as the recent death of Mrs. Newton has removed the person most deeply interested in its appearance. Those portions for which Mr. Hammond had made himself especially responsible were left in a measure incomplete. This is particularly the case with the account of Dr. Whewell’s Bequest to Trinity College and the associated foundations of the Professorship and Scholarships of International Law. With this subject he was personally most familiar, having as executor been directly concerned in the elaboration and development of Dr. Whewell’s scheme. Of this account only a rough sketch existed at his death. To the completion of these portions, to the final revision of the whole work, and to a last exhaustive examination of all the remaining materials, he and I were intending to devote this year the weeks of his official leisure. What was to have been a joint labour I have now endeavoured, as far as possible, to accomplish alone, believing that most imperfect as must necessarily be the result, it was better to follow this course than to defer the publication of the work by renewed attempts to secure the advantage of more competent aid, all such attempts having previously led but to delay and disappointment.

It has been difficult to apply any uniform principle of selection to the large mass of correspondence with which I have had to deal in the execution of my original task. As a man of science and literature, Dr. Whewell’s published works and his correspondence with men of science and letters reveal him to the world. My
hope has been to represent him as he was in early life to the relations he left behind him when he went up to Cambridge; and in later life as he was by his own fireside and in his correspondence with those who knew him chiefly or only there. It is obvious that such a sketch must depend for its truth upon minute touches. What is most characteristic is often found in unguarded revelations of feeling and of opinion, whether upon matters of domestic detail, of passing interest in persons, books, or events, or still more in the frank expressions of emotion caused by those vicissitudes of life which try the very heart. Not less characteristic and interesting are other very different letters, such as those to Mr. Spedding and to Mr. Myers, in which subjects wholly literary and closely connected with his published writings are discussed. The choice of materials in the present collection may therefore, it is feared, often appear fragmentary and inconsistent, often trivial, sometimes perhaps even painful; so passionate and overwhelming was the grief, the expression of which he poured into the ears of those who knew whom he had loved and whom he had lost.

The same ardour which distinguished his intellectual temperament belonged in an even greater degree to his affections. They bound him with filial fondness to his remote Lancashire home, to his family, to the picturesque town of Lancaster itself, to his old schoolmaster Joseph Rowley. They bound him with great tenacity and appreciative esteem to persons from whom he differed in opinion on almost every point. They bound him with the most indulgent tenderness to younger relations who could contribute nothing but love and gratitude to the unequal friendship. And they bound him also with a loyalty and fidelity which no shock of disagreement, no strain of separation, could permanently impair, to the 'friends of a lifetime,' as he delighted to call Herschel, Jones, Sedgwick, Worsley, Peacock, Kenelm Digby, Airy, Henslow, Forbes, and others, whose friendship he reckoned amongst the greatest blessings of his life.

To such a man his letters were second only to his home and fireside. After his married life had confirmed in him habits of great unreserve and communicativeness, they became a positive necessity. One of the trials of the loneliness which ultimately fell upon him was that, as he used to say, 'There is no one now to whom I can say whatever occurs to my mind at once, as the way of giving reality and meaning to all that passes before me.' He endeavoured to mitigate the privation thus felt by correspondence, and to this circumstance many of the letters in the latter part of this collection owe their character.

The letters selected have, as far as possible, been left just as they were written. No changes have been made, save such as were necessary in order to avoid repetition, or any allusion which might be painful to those who survive. So uniformly kindly, candid, and tolerant, however, was the spirit in which all criticisms were made in his home circle, that very few omissions have been necessary on this latter ground. It is hoped that the letters may be found to tell their own story with sufficient distinctness, supplemented by the slightest possible links of narrative or words of explanation. To assume the position of critic or even of biographer would
be impossible to a near relative belonging to another generation; and the portrait of William Whewell, if contained at all in these pages, is one drawn by his own hand, and must be 'read

In those fall'n leaves which kept their green,
The noble letters of the dead.'

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