

DARWIN'S NEGRO BIRD-STUFFER

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CHARLES DARWIN wrote in his *Autobiography* (1, 2) that when he was a medical student at Edinburgh (1825 Oct.—1827 Apr.) ‘a negro lived in Edinburgh, who had travelled with Waterton, and gained his livelihood by stuffing birds, which he did excellently: he gave me lessons for payment, and I often used to sit with him, for he was a very pleasant and intelligent man’. Darwin does not name him and he is not mentioned in Darwinian literature except in Ashworth’s account of the Edinburgh years (3) and in de Beer’s biography (4) which add nothing.

Charles Waterton, in his *Wanderings in South America* 1825 (5), offers one probability and one remote possibility as to his identity. On Waterton’s third journey to British Guiana, in the summer of 1820, he found Stabroek (Georgetown) and the surrounding countryside devastated by yellow fever. He went up the Demerara river to Mibiri Creek ‘the former habitation of my worthy friend Mr Edmonstone. . . . The house had been abandoned for some years. On arriving at the hill, the remembrance of scenes long past and gone, naturally broke in upon the mind . . . the room where once governors and generals had caroused was now dismantled and tenanted by the vampire. You would have said,

’Tis now the vampire’s bleak abode,
 ’Tis now the apartment of the toad:
 ’Tis here the painful Chegoe feeds,
 ’Tis here the dire Labarri breeds
 Conceal’d in ruins, moss, and weeds (6)

Waterton made temporary repairs to the house and used it as his headquarters while collecting. ‘It was upon this hill in former days that I first tried to teach John, the black slave of my friend Mr Edmonstone, the proper way to do birds. But John had poor abilities, and it required much time and patience to drive anything into him. Some years after this his master took him to Scotland, where, becoming free, John left him and got employed in the Glasgow, and then the Edinburgh museum. Mr Robert Edmonstone, nephew to the above gentleman, had a fine mulatto capable of learning anything. He requested me to teach him the art. I did so. He was docile and active, and was

with me all the time in the forest; I left him there to keep up this new art of preserving birds, and to communicate it to others'.

The negro John fits well, except that Waterton said that he was stupid whilst Darwin said that he was intelligent, and Waterton does not say that they had travelled together. The unnamed mulatto does not really fit at all except that he was intelligent and had travelled with Waterton. Darwin, writing long after his return from the Beagle voyage, would certainly have distinguished a mulatto from a full-blooded negro.

The Mr Edmonstone mentioned was Charles Edmonstone of Cardross Park, Dunbartonshire, who had gone out in 1781 to the family estate at Warrows Place, Mibirri Creek, to restore its fortunes. Waterton had first met him in 1805, when managing the estates of his uncle Christopher Waterton, and they became close friends. Edmonstone married the daughter of his partner William Reid by his wife Princess Minda, a full-blooded Arawak. There were three daughters of the marriage, Elizabeth, Anne Mary (b. 1812) and Helen. He returned to Cardross Park with his family in 1817 (7, 8). The Department of Registers of Scotland shows various loan transactions by him in the twenties and one by his trustees in 1830. He died between 1824 and 1828 and his wife died about the same time. The three orphan daughters were sent to an English convent school at Bruges, where, on 11 May 1829, Charles Waterton married Anne Mary, then 17. She died in childbed on 27 April of the following year and the other two sisters spent their lives unmarried at Walton Hall. They were later joined by their niece Lydia Edmonstone until Charles's death in 1865.

On the assumption that a freed slave would have taken the surname of his original master, I asked Dr A. S. Clarke of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, and Professor D. R. Newth, of the University of Glasgow, if they could find any information about a John Edmonstone. Charles Edmonstone seems always to have spelt his name with a terminal 'e', but it is often found without and sometimes with an intrusive 'd' as Edmondston.

The Edinburgh Post Office Directory for 1824–1825 records a John Edmonstone, bird-stuffer, living at 37 Lothian Street and in that of 1832–1833 he is recorded at 6 South St David's Street. Lothian Street is close to the University and Darwin had lodgings, with his brother Erasmus Alvey, at Mrs Mackay's, No 11. Mrs Mackay specialized in medical students and Edward Forbes lived there. The only zoological museum at the time was that of the University; this, which had been largely put together by Professor Robert Jameson who taught Darwin geology, was handed over in 1855, just after Jameson's death, to the new Scottish Industrial & Natural History Museum which became the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art in 1866. Its name was changed to The

Royal Scottish Museum in 1904. The Museum Register shows the acquisition of a 15 ft skin of a boa constrictor in 1822–1823, presented by a Mr Edmonston. This may have been the master or another: John seems more likely to have sold it. The Report Books of the Museum, written up at that time by William Macgillivray, Jameson's assistant and later Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen, contain two records which refer to John Edmonston. The first occurs in the Weekly Report Book for 4 October 1823 'Purchased from John Edmondston 2 swallows, 1 water ouzel & 1 chaffinch for British Colln. 12/6 ?reg. 1823/24.14'. The second, in the Daily Report Book for 15 January 1825 'paid to John Edmondston £3-5-0 for fishes purchased some time ago (not in reg.)'.

Macgillivray's Report Books also have entries for a John and a John Dickie, both of whom dust and clean in the Museum; they were probably one and the same. He is perhaps the boy whom the Rev. Andrew Jameson, of St Mungo, Dumfriesshire, engaged for his brother Robert in 1811, and not John Edmondston.

Glasgow records have produced no information about any John Edmondston between 1820 and 1830, although they do contain the information given above about Charles Edmondstone 'late of the colony of Demerara' on his return to Cardross Park. Darwin visited Waterton at Walton Hall in September 1845 (9). Writing to Charles Lyell, he says that the dinner company consisted of 'two Catholic priests and two Mulatresses'. The ladies were clearly Waterton's sisters-in-law, but there is no mention of John.

A tentative conclusion, with unresolved problems, is that Darwin's negro bird-stuffer was John Edmondston, originally a slave of Charles Edmondstone of Warrows Place, Mibiri Creek, Demerara River, British Guiana. He came to Scotland, with his master, in 1817, first for a brief period in Glasgow and then, at least by 1823, moved to Edinburgh where he still was in 1833.

NOTES

- (1) Darwin, Francis, editor, *The life and letters of Charles Darwin, including an autobiographical chapter*, 3 vols., London 1887, Vol. 1, p. 40.
- (2) Barlow, Nora, editor, *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882, with the original omissions restored*, London 1958, p. 51.
- (3) Ashworth, J. H. Charles Darwin as a student at Edinburgh, 1825–1827, *Proc. R. Soc. Edinb.*, **55**, 97–113 (1935).
- (4) de Beer, Sir Gavin R. *Charles Darwin, evolution by natural selection*, London 1963.
- (5) Waterton, Charles, *Wanderings in South America, the north-west of the United States, and the Antilles in the years 1812, 1816, 1820, and 1824*, London 1825, pp. 153–154.
- (6) The verse is adapted by Waterton from lines 77–81 of John Dyer's *Grongler Hill*, London 1727. Dyer's poems were amongst Waterton's favourite reading. The original lines are:

'Tis now the raven's bleak abode;
'Tis now th'apartment of the toad
And there the fox securely feeds;
And there the poisonous adder breeds
Concealed in ruins, moss and weeds;

- (7) Gosse, Philip *The squire of Walton Hall: the life of Charles Waterton*, London (1940).
(8) Waterton, Charles *Wanderings in South America* etc., London 1973. Oxford English Memoirs and Travels; edited and with an introduction by L. Harrison Matthews.
(9) Darwin, Francis, editor, *Life and letters*, 1887, Vol. 1, pp. 343–344, see No. 1 above.