

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62645-4 - Letters and Diaries of A. F. R. Wollaston

Selected and Edited by Mary Wollaston

Excerpt

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I

CAMBRIDGE AND BIRDS

EARLY YEARS

Alexander Frederick Richmond Wollaston was the second son of George Hyde Wollaston whose forbears for some two centuries had been distinguished men of science. George Wollaston himself was a man of great culture and wide interests, and an outstanding figure for many years as a master at Clifton College. A.F.R.'s mother was a Richmond—with both her father and grandfather distinguished in the world of painting. She was a woman with an unflinching zest for life, delighting in people, art and literature. She was a great lover of music and a fine musician.

Most of A.F.R.'s boyhood was spent at Clifton, for after leaving his private school he returned home to enter Clifton as a day-boy. He was not the kind of boy to be interested in school life or games: his heart lay elsewhere, above all in the study of birds and the delights of the countryside. He was a born naturalist. He was still at his first school when he formed the habit of keeping 'note-books'. In these he noted down anything that struck him as being of beauty and interest, and although it was more especially of birds that he would write, there seemed little in nature too small to attract his attention and excite his wonder. I have, however, decided to begin with his Diary of May 1893, when he was nearly eighteen, and spending his last term at Clifton before going up to Cambridge.

MAY 5, 1893. (*Clifton.*) Heard first nightingale. Went to Sea Mills and across bridge and along railway for about half a mile. Here I watched a pair of whinchats and saw the hen go to the nest twice in about 50 yards; then I walked up and found the nest with six eggs. The birds were both about, but did not show much excitement.

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1893

MAY 13. To Leigh Woods for wood-wrens. The birds did not seem as excited as they would be if the hens were sitting; I expect they have not laid eggs yet or at any rate not the full number. I found a redstart's nest with six eggs, three of them very curiously longshaped. In the evening I tried to find out the locality of the nightingales, but the beasts would not sing. Heard several nightjars. (Some females I know think the latter are telegraph wires.)

MAY 20. On the screezy slope below the short downs, about half-way down amongst some ground ivy, I have just found a nightingale's nest with five young birds. This is the first I have ever found, and I did this by watching the birds go to their nest with grubs in their beaks. I could not make out for certain whether both birds make the plaintive whistling alarm note: the cock certainly did, and it is the cock also that makes the harsh 'krrr'.

MAY 31. Went to visit my nightingales. The old birds did not come near the nest while I was about and did not utter a sound; the young birds are pretty nearly fledged now.

JUNE. This month I found my first marsh-warbler's nest. It was not unlike a whitethroat's, suspended from a stem of meadowsweet and an osier stem. The birds were exceedingly interesting. The hen slipped quietly off the nest when she was approached, while the cock sat on the top of an osier giving a most amusing concert. He began by singing his own song—which was like a reed-warbler's only more so—and then went off into the songs of other birds. I heard distinctly the skylark, great tit, whitethroat (both song and alarm note), swallow, willow-wren (song and alarm note) and whinchat. Besides these this marsh-warbler imitated more or less well several other birds. It was interesting to compare him with the reed- and sedge-warblers which were numerous in the same osier bed, and there ought to be no great difficulty in future in distinguishing the marsh-warbler.

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1893

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This summer A.F.R. left Clifton, and in October 1893 he went up to King's College, Cambridge. He writes to his sister from King's saying:

I like this place tremendously and I have now pretty well got into the ways of it. Well—to tell you what I do. I get up at any time between half-past seven and half-past nine: at least four times a week at half-past seven, so as to be in time to 'sign in' at the Porter's Lodge by eight o'clock: this is an alternative to going to chapel for a very dull service, and, as you may imagine, it is not very thickly attended. It is rather amusing to see men tearing to the Porter's Lodge at about one minute to eight, clad in not much more than a fig-leaf, sometimes a collar-stud or eye-glass. Then comes breakfast: that is ordered by leaving a note on your table for your 'bedder' to find when she comes in the morning. You get a splendid breakfast for sixpence and of course you can get much more if you pay for it. Then comes work: lectures three days a week till lunch, which is between twelve and two o'clock. After lunch some form of exercise—generally tubbing (rowing two in a boat). Then tea, and chapel at five: this latter is voluntary and I nearly always go. Hall at seven, and after Hall you go out to coffee and smoke in other men's rooms, or they come out to you. Here at King's the second and third year men don't call on the freshmen, but they ask them out to coffee after Hall. Then comes work, and after that bed—about twelve o'clock. Now I think you know pretty well what I do with myself.

A month or two later he writes again:

(*King's.*) Without exercise I am sure you would die here, for it is the most deadly climate I was ever in. If I stay in in the afternoon I am bound to go asleep, and then it is impossible to wake up for the rest of the day. What with the draughts and fogs and chilliness it is enough to make your blood run cold. However, apart from these little incon-

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veniences it is a most beautiful place. The sunsets are magnificent and the trees have been lovely, but of course they are mostly bare now. There are many very nice men here that I am beginning to know, though it takes some time for me to get to know people. Your exhortation to me to work hard is fortunately needless, though it might have been of use at the time when I wrote to you before; for the day after that I more than doubled my work by adding two more courses of lectures which require a tremendous lot of extra reading, so now with three different courses of Geology lectures, besides Biology ones, I have every prospect of turning into a fossil before the end of this term. In fact I have got such a frightful amount of work to do to-night that I don't know what to do first, so I will think it over while I write to you. (*A fortnight later.*) Here I think I must have gone to sleep or done some work; I can't remember now what I did. Anyhow I lost this letter and it has only just turned up under my inkstand.

FEBRUARY 15, 1895. (*Cambridge.*) Great frost. Cam frozen.

FEBRUARY 25. Winter aconites flowering in King's avenue.

FEBRUARY 28. Snowdrops flowering behind John's.

MARCH 1. St David's Day. First day of spring—my annual holiday.* A chaffinch is singing in the trees behind Paradise. This is very late for them to begin: generally I hear them begin a feeble attempt at a song in February, and one year I heard a bird sing in January. Swallows are building near the town bathing sheds. Rooks busy building everywhere, lots of beetles on the wing, and at Byron's Pool—where I sat and basked in the sun—I heard a corn-bunting sing. I also heard a pied wagtail on the Backs; don't remember to have heard it before.

* A.F.R. had what he called a 'self-persuasion' that spring began on St David's Day, and whenever possible he would make that day a holiday for an excursion into the country.

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A. F. R. IN 1894

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1895

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MARCH 29. (*Back at Clifton.*) Wasps flying about everywhere. Chiff-chaffs migrating along hedgerows near Pilning, down the Severn from N.E. Where did they get into the Severn valley? They must have crossed midlands from East coast, and perhaps followed the Trent, Ouse, etc. Saw three wheat-ears on the Downs—very tame, evidently just arrived. Heard two cock robins having an exciting singing match on the downs; so jolly they were.

APRIL 4. (*Braunton.*) Waded in to the dipper's nest that I found two years ago under railway bridge. Eggs hatched already; they must have been laid by the middle of March. I saw from the train, when I was going to Teignmouth, a whimbrel on the Tor; also caught sight of a dipper that went plump feet first into a stream. Stayed at Bovey Tracey, and walked on to the top of Hey Tor rocks. Such splendid country—very wet and streamy. Numbers of cormorants on the Teign.

APRIL 23. (*Cambridge.*) Watched a common sandpiper on river between King's and Clare bridges. He flew up and down and settled several times, then flew up river to where? Nightingales very good this evening. The cock nightingale is a most beautiful bird—spread tail red.

APRIL 30. Went to Wicken Fen. Had a splendid view of two grasshopper warblers sitting on a low bush and singing. At first I thought the birds I saw were something else, for the song seemed to come from much further away. Saw a great many snipe, but I could not find their nests. Their drumming is most extraordinary and I am almost convinced it is made by tail feathers in descent. Watched through glasses and when the birds came down I saw tail feathers spread out and vibrating very hard almost immediately after; just time for sound to travel. The drumming continued until the bird began to ascend, then it immediately ceased. This means that, allowing for sound to travel, drumming ceased before bird

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began to ascend, which might naturally be expected as tail feathers would not vibrate very rapidly at bottom of curve of flight.

This evening I heard the first young rooks in nests in Backs.

MAY 2. Went into Botanical Gardens and saw a pair of nightingales hopping about. They were disturbed when I went near. Too many people about for me to search. Went into a strip of wood by the Trumpington Road and walked straight up to a nightingale's nest close to where I had found one last year. Later I returned to the Botanical Gardens and there found a nightingale's nest where I had marked a pair of birds. It was a very pretty nest in stump of elder.

JULY. This month I heard several curlews flying over at night—especially dark, cloudy nights. I suppose they come closer to the ground on such nights. On one clear night I think I heard a redshank flying over; he sounded a long way off and must have been at a very great height.

One day I walked along the coast from Hunstanton and found the nests of two lesser tern. The eggs were laid right down on the shingle not far from high-water mark; no attempt at a nest was made, and so I think it was a good deal harder to find than a ringed plover's. On my way home I several times heard a loud squeaking, more like rabbits in distress than anything else. I could not make out what it was, until a pair of water-rails got up at my feet making the same noise. I think this is the first time I have seen a water-rail fly.

SEPTEMBER. Went to stay in Arran. Saw heaps of birds but the only new species was gannet. They shine in the sun like snow—I never saw birds so intensely white. It is a grand sight to see them suddenly dive down beak first into the sea from a great height; tremendous splash. The black primaries are very conspicuous. All the birds I saw were adult.

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JANUARY 15, 1896. (*Cambridge.*) Heard a chaffinch beginning to sing near Newnham; he tried the beginning of the song and failed miserably. Saw a kingfisher sitting on the willow just above King's bridge. Winter aconites flowering in King's avenue and the Wilderness of John's.

JANUARY 25. A thrush has been singing magnificently in the Provost's garden for more than a week now; every morning for two or three hours and sometimes in the afternoon. I went this evening to see Professor Newton* and we talked birds all the time. He told me an interesting thing about the bills of birds. In some, specially finches, the length of the bill in spring is so different from the length in autumn that the same bird has been described at different times as two distinct species. The beak grows enormously in summer when the birds feed on soft food, and gets worn down in the winter by seeds.

FEBRUARY 5. The young leaves on willow by King's bridge are quite an inch long. Trees are budding everywhere, and lots of thrushes are courting each other in the Botanical Gardens. One of my emperor moths that I got in Arran came out this morning; it is a female, nearly a perfect specimen. The warmth of the room must have forced it; it had been rattling about in the cocoon a great deal lately.

FEBRUARY 26. Saw a flock of peewits flying northwards over the Backs this afternoon. . . . Sallows budding by bathing sheds.

MARCH 20. Chaffinches improving steadily. Plums beginning to flower, and the quince tree in New Court getting green. I was woken up this morning by a chiff-chaff singing in the Provost's garden. Went for a long bicycle ride and was delighted to find a cowslip out in a field near Huntingdon.

* In 1921, A.F.R. wrote the *Life of Alfred Newton*.

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1896

APRIL 4. (*Braunton.*) Went home and came to Braunton. Looked at my little dipper's nest under the same bridge where I have found it in '93 and '95. There are two young birds about half grown in it; eggs must have been laid very early. I found a linnet's nest ready for eggs in a gorse bush, and a kestrel's nest ready for eggs in a fir wood up the Chattowell. A tremendous lot of *Equisetums* all over the water-meadows.

APRIL 15. (*Porlock Weir.*) Went to a meet of the D. and S. staghounds at Hawcombe Head. Two hinds broke away from Birch-hanger plantation very soon after tufters were put in, and went away towards Black Barrow. We had a grand view of them trotting down the coombe and up the other side, followed by a few hounds. Then appeared three more hinds, and after that general confusion for the rest of the day—deer and hounds all over the place. Coming home I nearly trod on a very fine adder near the cross roads below Hawcombe Head. It was the best marked specimen I ever saw, very silvery and deep black markings. We stunned it and then got it into a field-glass case and afterwards took it to the Clifton Zoo. There are a great many ring-ouzels about on the move. One puzzled me much by making a very curious plaintive whistle like a bullfinch, but really quite distinguishable.

APRIL 24. (*Cambridge.*) The double white cherry in Fellows' garden is now in flower; a most beautiful sight. I heard a lesser whitethroat in Trinity garden and saw a spotted fly-catcher in John's Backs. I also heard and saw a wood-wren in the lime trees of King's avenue; this is the first I have ever seen near Cambridge.

MAY 2. Found a lesser redpoll's nest ready for eggs. The birds made a great noise when I went near, and they fetched