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978-1-108-05274-0 - Extracts from the Private Letters of the Late: Relating to the Invention and Development of the Electric Telegraph

Sir William F. Cooke

Excerpt

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EXTRACTS.

LETTER I.

HEIDELBERG,

April 5th, 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . You must know that for some weeks past I have been deeply engaged in the construction of an instrument which I believe may prove of sufficient importance, should I succeed in bringing it to practical perfection, to merit a visit to London. Determined to satisfy myself on the working of the machinery before I went any further, I prepared to make a model, and, being unable to obtain the requisites at Heidelberg, I sought them at Frankfort. Whilst completing the model of my original plan, others on entirely fresh systems suggested themselves, and I have at length succeeded in combining the *utile* of each; but the mechanism requires a more delicate hand than mine to execute, or, rather, instruments which I do not possess. These I can readily have made for me in London, and by the aid of a lathe I shall be able to adapt the several parts, which I shall have made by different mechanics for secrecy sake. Should I succeed, it may be the means of putting some hundred pounds in my pocket. As it is a subject on which I was profoundly ignorant till my attention was casually attracted to it the other day, I do not know what others may have done in the same way—this can best be learnt in London.

You see I am very mysterious at present, and think it very prudent to continue so; nevertheless, to you, dearest Mother, if it were your wish, my plan and instrument should be explained now, though I think without better drawings than I could make you would scarcely comprehend me. As I do not wish my motives for visiting London to be generally known, you had better, in mentioning it to my friends at Berne, state that private business requires my presence, and allow them to ascribe to modelling or what they please the sudden change of my plans.

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LETTER II.

Wednesday, 26th April, 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

I have at length found myself in London once again, after a most agreeable voyage, tho' not with my Heidelberg friends, whom I preceded, they having arrived only this morning. . . . I have taken lodgings at a pastry-cook's shop in Southampton Place, leading out of Russell Square. . . .

After commencing this letter, I dined with a Mr. Fergus, M.P., brother of Mrs. Nixon, and there met Mr. Hoppner, who gave me your last letter, which had reached Heidelberg after my departure. Mine from Rotterdam will have answered one leading question—viz., relative to the Doctor's* knowing of my being in England, and the cause. I wish to make no secret of it to him, and were we together I would explain the entire plan, but object to so doing on paper, or its being generally known to our friends, as in case of failure (always a strong probability) remarks, posthumous warnings, and advice are the more overwhelming. I have written to Tom†, begging him to prepare himself with one branch of the subject, and then when I have finished my instrument I will divulge my whole plan to him, and perfect together such papers and statements, &c., &c., as will be necessary ere I proceed further. This mode of proceeding will, I think, be highly satisfactory to you, for, although Tom's knowledge of the world will not aid me materially in bringing my plans or instrument before the public, his clear head and patient investigation will clear away the rubbish from the accumulated heap of facts and statements that I have amassed; and succinctness in my paper statements and calculations will be half the battle.

I have not yet fixed upon my patron (a very important consideration). As the commercial and political worlds are equally concerned, I have a choice between Government and the mercantile potentates. The former are, however, too shy of any

* His father, Dr. William Cooke.

† His brother, the Rev. Thomas Fothergill Cooke, M.A.

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innovation to listen to any suggestion, however useful, unless strongly supported by higher influence than I can hope to obtain; yet there are several noblemen always ready to parade their patronage when the claimant pretends to originality of design. Whatever course I eventually take will be directed by the best advice I can procure, and then I may hope (it will be all I can do) for a happy result. . . .

Adieu, dearest Mother.

Ever most affectionately yours,

WILLM. F. COOKE.

In Mrs. Cooke's handwriting is the following note:—

“11th.—Received on the anniversary of his birth, 4th May, 1836. 1st “from his lodgings, Southampton Place, Russel's Square. God preserve and “prosper his undertaking. Replied to before I slept.”

LETTER III.

20, SOUTHAMPTON ROW,

2nd June [1836].

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . Tom will stay with me till I go down to Sudbury, about the 14th of the month—having found a man at Sudbury likely to execute my instrument to my liking. . . . I heard from the Doctor a few days ago; he wrote me a most delightful and affectionate letter; fully satisfied with my motives for not describing what I am engaged with till we meet. I have explained the instrument and its uses to Robert, who will explain all to you. . . .

Yours most affectionately,

WM. F. COOKE.

LETTER IV.

2, SOUTHAMPTON ROW,

June 6th, '36.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . Dear old Tom, in compliance with my request, came up to dinner on Saturday, looking famously, but

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well pleased to shake off for a time the monotony of Cambridge. We commenced work almost immediately, and by mid-day yesterday (Monday) he became fully master of the "affair"! Altho' it be impossible to give you even an imperfect idea of "it" in writing, he will give you his idea of its importance and practicability. Robert understands it sufficiently to satisfy you upon the subject, when he arrives at Bern. I have not heard from the Doctor since I last wrote. . . . It is very doubtful whether I shall be able to go down to Sudbury, as from several causes I am anxious to complete my instrument as quickly as possible, and a simple country workman, however intelligent and devoted to the cause, could only get slowly forward. I fear two months more will pass away ere I can hope to lay plans and instrument before the public; during this time my anxieties will at least keep pace with your curiosity. . . .

Tom and I are now going to the Adelaide Gallery to study various scientific instruments, connected more or less with our object in hand. His quickness in comprehending all my complexities was delightful; it is impossible to describe the comfort and delight of having him to consult and talk to. My confidence has risen since seven-fold. . . .

Ever your child,

WM. F. COOKE.

LETTER V.

2, SOUTHAMPTON ROW,

21st July [1836].

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . Old Tom left me yesterday for Cambridge. . . . His absence I feel terribly; the comfort of having him with me after living quite alone since November last was greater than I can express. He was of great service to me, and very patient under all the explanations I gave and questions I asked. . . .

22nd July. . . . I think that three months must yet elapse ere I can know the fate of my projects. One instrument

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will shortly be so far advanced as to enable me to see whether it answers my expectation. I must then have a second made and both finished before laying them before the public. The difficulties you allude to of securing the wires were the first I surmounted before thinking further of the instrument, and having succeeded to my content in that respect I then worked out the remainder. My prospectus is ready, but I am about to send it down to Mr. Chevalier, with detailed drawings, for his judgment and correction. He has seen one movement, and in giving a favourable opinion of [it], offered his further services, little thinking what he entailed upon himself. I will shortly send you my prospectus, but its length will occupy two or three very closely written sheets, and I have not time for that at present. I will only say that, if the wires were broken anywhere between London and Portsmouth, I would find the injury out and repair it in less than eight or ten hours—that is to say, as quickly as a coach could carry me there and back. When you see the prospectus and explanations attached you will be convinced of that. Accident, in the manner in which they are guarded, can hardly injure them; design and malice may. A guard or watch is out of the question entirely. But the mode of discovering the injury when done is both rapid, easy, and decisive. Along railroads the risk from intentional injury is materially diminished, as the depth at which the wires may be laid without increased expense is much greater. Still, occasionally for particular purposes they may be interfered with for a few hours. Still they offer in the long run an advantage. . . . Still I beg you seriously not to be sanguine of my success. I do not know yet that my instrument will answer, and then very probably it may never be used during my life. I fully believe that the day will come when such a means of conveying intelligence will be employed. I am very far from sanguine, and shall not feel any very bitter disappointment if I fail, provided that my instrument answers the purpose I intend; otherwise, I shall regret having thrown away so much time fruitlessly. . . .

Your most affectionate Son,

WM. F. COOKE.

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LETTER VI.

YORK CHAMBERS, 13, GEORGE STREET,
ADELPHI, LONDON, *Sept. 2nd*, 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . I do hope this time to have mentioned everything, but I feel far from confident of having succeeded.

I am going with an engineer to look over the St. Catherine Docks, and all the plans, models, &c., which will occupy me till late in the evening. My model is progressing. I hope to see it work before I cross for the Continent. It is now so near completion that I may speak with confidence of its answering its destined purpose. It is a very showy-looking affair. The Doctor was much pleased with it.

Believe me ever,

Your most affectionate child,

WILLM. F. COOKE.

LETTER VII.

YORK CHAMBERS, ADELPHI,
Oct. 7th, 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . My clockmaker has again disappointed me. I called (in Clerkenwell, nearly three miles from here) on Monday evening before coming home, in full expectation of finding that everything had been completed several days, but he told me the balance work had been broken by the running down of the works. This danger I had foreseen, but not obviated, so I gave him a sketch on the instant of a means of preventing a similar accident in future. This, with one or two other little things, was to have been completed on Wednesday. I called—all to be ready on Saturday. This morning a note came to state that the workman who had the balance (very delicate work) to complete had refused to go on with it till he had made something else, but that all should be ready by next Wednesday. Till then I must wait with patience. I then have a good deal of work to fit in myself, and then, if that answers, I have to send it to him again for my index-

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plate and other things. None but those who have been engaged in such work can imagine the endless series of disappointments and delays to which the inventor of a new and secret instrument is exposed ere he can approach the moment of trial. And then, perhaps the bitterest and ultimate disappointment awaits him. But I am better prepared for disappointment than success. . . .

Ever your attached child,

WM. F. COOKE.

LETTER VIII.

YORK CHAMBERS,

Saturday, 22nd Oct., 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . My instrument was to have been finished this morning, but upon calling I found that a wheel in the escape-movement was wrong, and had to be altered. I am to have it on Monday morning, if not to-night. You would be astonished at the stoicism with which I bear these repeated and endless disappointments. I have been taught a valuable lesson in self-control, if I am to gain nothing more by my labours. The instrument looks beautifully. I hope it will go as well. . . .

Your most affectionate Son,

WILL. F. COOKE.

LETTER IX.

YORK CHAMBERS,

17th Nov., 1836.

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

Whilst waiting the arrival of my instrument—which *should* make its appearance at six o'clock this evening, but which most likely will not come at all—I will employ my time in writing to you. . . . I can say nothing certain about my instrument at present. Moore has not behaved well, tho' he has done better the last few days. Tom will have told you that

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at the moment of his arrival in my rooms I was receiving intimation that one of the most important parts of the machine (the timing part) would not answer. They, however, undertook, by another application of the same escapement, to make it go; but (as I confidently maintained at the instant) they failed entirely. After some weeks' delay, I have since tried another plan, and am to see the effect this night, and in case of its answering I shall be exactly where I expected to find myself on my return from France!!! My mind is nearly made up to return to modelling if the instrument does not answer; and I suppose Tom has prepared you to expect a thorough discomfiture. I, however, feel myself bound to try all I can before giving it up as a failure.

Friday. My instrument came home late last night, but does not answer. I have, however, arranged another plan for keeping the time, which I shall try. Everything depends upon this part of it, as Tom will explain to you. I got the best advice I could from clock and watch makers months ago, and they said they could arrange it to perfection!!! So much for their knowledge. The moment the probable fate of my instrument is decided, I will let you know. You will perceive, from what I have already said, how humbled are my (never very sanguine) expectations. I shall not give it up till all hope is gone, however. I am very anxious that it should be decided one way before I go to Treeton, as, if unfavourably, I shall make my preparation for renewing my labours in wax immediately on my return. I am by no means disheartened at this prospect of failure, and shall set to work again, with more than former spirit, at my old occupation. I only regret having talked so much about the Telegraph. The time occupied by this affair, if it should not answer, I do not consider altogether thrown away, as I have acquired a good deal of information which will prove useful one day or other. I also have some other plans in my head, if I can find anyone to take them up, but will not venture on anything else myself unless successful here.

Ever your attached child,

WILLM. F. COOKE.

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LETTER X.

YORK CHAMBERS,

Thursday, 24th Nov. [1836].

MY DEAREST MOTHER,

. . . . My motive for writing to-day (at a moment when much pressed for time) is to give you a little more cheering news about my instrument than I could do in my last. At that time I had quite despaired of success, and only wished for a justifiable opportunity of giving up, from an impression that I had detected an error in the *principle itself*. I could not at the moment make up my mind to tell you. Tom will understand and explain this. I had good reason for believing that it was a well-ascertained fact that the galvanic fluid only imparted a magnetic quality to cold iron (or an electro-magnet) when its course was short, and that the shorter the course the greater the attractive power. Hence electro-magnets were made with several short thick wires for experiments requiring *quantity*, and one long thin wire where *intensity* was required! To set this point at rest I got an introduction (through Dr. Uwins) to Faraday, the "King of Electro-Magneticians." He received me yesterday, and I asked him to give me his opinion upon the instrument, and in the kindest manner he proposed calling this morning for half an hour, which he did, but stayed an hour and a quarter, entering with great interest into all the details. He finally gave me as his opinion that the "*principle was perfectly correct*," and seemed to think the instrument capable, when well finished, of answering the intended purpose. He would not give an opinion as to the distance to which the fluid might be passed in sufficient quantity, but observed that if it be only for 12 or 20 miles it can be passed on again. He said in reply to my question: "I am "afraid of inducing you by my advice to expend any large sum "in experimenting, but it would be well worth working out, and a "beautiful thing to carry on in this manner a conversation from "distant points; and the instrument appears perfectly adapted to "its intended uses."

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Now I consider this highly satisfactory. He took his leave in a most friendly manner, but in a way which induces me to think he does not mean to take any further step in the affair. I asked his advice as to my way of proceeding in bringing it before the public when completed, but he declared his inability to advise me. I do not intend to expend anything more upon it myself, but hope to find someone who will take the risk in consideration of a fair remuneration in case of success. The difficulty of arranging the escapement I shall be able to overcome, beyond a doubt. You will see by what I have said that if I fail it will not be owing to any obvious error, which I ought to have detected myself; and that is a great relief to my mind, for I have felt the disgrace of failing from ignorance as to the principles of the power I employed, which would justly have exposed me to severe animadversion for presumption.

I showed him also my *perpetuum mobile* principle. He says it is original, to the best of his belief, but deemed it difficult to work out. He was so pressed for time that he could not enter into the nature of the means I proposed employing to attain my object. This coincidence with Mr. Chevalier's opinion is highly satisfactory, even should it come to nothing. . . .

I still think of going on with my modelling, not to be idle, and to put a few pounds in my pocket if I can. . . . Do not let your hope of my future success be too sanguine, but that there is a fair ground for the further prosecution of the plan I consider proven. . . . Whatever be the ultimate fate of my plans, I shall certainly derive some benefit from the moral tuition I have undergone, and have, I hope, acquired a greater degree of control over myself than I before possessed.

With most affectionate love to the Doctor and Tom,

Ever your attached child,

WILLM. F. COOKE.

P.S.—Though I have been up till 2 o'clock on Monday and Tuesday, and 4 o'clock last night, I have no headache.