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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

Frontmatter

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Extracts from the Private Letters of the Late Sir William F. Cooke

Originally a maker of wax anatomical models, William Fothergill Cooke (1806–79) became aware of the new electric telegraph while he studied anatomy in Germany. Hoping initially for a return of perhaps a hundred pounds from the English railway companies, he abandoned his studies and turned his attention to the commercial development of the technology, which, though demonstrable in laboratory conditions, was still little understood. Because the process relied on secrecy and many different clockmakers and engineers, it soon became so fraught that Cooke almost gave up before its completion. However, after receiving the encouragement of Michael Faraday and joining forces with Charles Wheatstone, Cooke finally brought his plans to fruition and eventually set up the Electric Telegraph Company in 1846. First published in 1895, this book includes a selection of his private letters, written as he worked and often movingly uncertain, as well as a short memoir.

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EXTRACTS FROM THE PRIVATE LETTERS

OF THE LATE

Sir William Fothergill Cooke,

1836-39,

RELATING TO

The Invention and Development of the
Electric Telegraph ;

ALSO,

A MEMOIR BY LATIMER CLARK, Esq., F.R.S.,
PAST-PRESIDENT INST. E.E.

EDITED BY F. H. WEBB, SECRETARY INST. E.E.

*The Original Letters are in the possession of the Institution of Electrical
Engineers (late the Society of Telegraph Engineers), by whose
permission these extracts are now published.*

E. & F. N. SPON, LONDON AND NEW YORK.

1895.

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PREFACE.

THE Council of the Institution of Electrical Engineers have authorised the publication of the following extracts from private letters addressed by the late Sir William Fothergill Cooke to his Mother and to other immediate relatives, believing that they will prove of much interest in connection with the early history of the Electric Telegraph, and its practical introduction into this country by him and the late Sir Charles Wheatstone.

These letters form a very small portion of the valuable and interesting collection of MSS. which have come into the possession of the Institution, and which comprises, besides business correspondence and official papers, a number of letters from men of eminence living at that time.

The collection was originally presented by Sir William Fothergill Cooke and his son-in-law, Colonel Andrewes, to Mr. Latimer Clark, F.R.S., M. Inst. C.E., Past-President of the Institution, and was by him arranged and bound, and presented to the Institution in November, 1891, together with a volume of poems by Sir W. F. Cooke.

The selection of extracts to be published was entrusted to a Committee appointed for that purpose by the Council; the letters having been written at a time when postage was expensive, are almost all crossed, and in some cases even re-crossed.

In order to enable the reader to understand more fully the circumstances in which the letters were written, a short Memoir of Sir William F. Cooke, which was presented to the Institution (then the Society of Telegraph Engineers) by Mr. Latimer Clark in 1879, and which appears in the Eighth Volume of the Proceedings of the Institution, page 361, has been re-printed herewith.

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Some difference having arisen between Mr. Cooke and Professor Wheatstone as to their relative positions in regard to the invention and introduction of the Electric Telegraph, they agreed to refer the matter to Sir Marc Isambard Brunel and Professor J. F. Daniell, a copy of whose award will be found on page 93.

It may here be mentioned, as evidence that any soreness of feeling which might once have existed, had been outlived, that Sir William F. Cooke was one of the most genuine mourners who assembled at the funeral of Sir Charles Wheatstone.

The Committee have also added a portrait of Sir William F. Cooke, enlarged by the Swan type process from a *carte-de-visite* photograph given by him to Mr. Latimer Clark; and following the letters is a reproduction in *fac-simile* of a portion of one of them, and of a document expressive of his wish as regards his funeral and burial, the pathetic interest of which is increased by the fact of its being dated little more than a month previous to his decease, which took place at Farnham on June 25th, 1879. He was buried in Farnham Cemetery on June 30th.

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