



# LIFE OF ALFRED NEWTON

PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE ANATOMY  
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY, 1866-1907

BY A. F. R. WOLLASTON

WITH A PREFACE BY SIR ARCHIBALD GEIKIE, O.M.

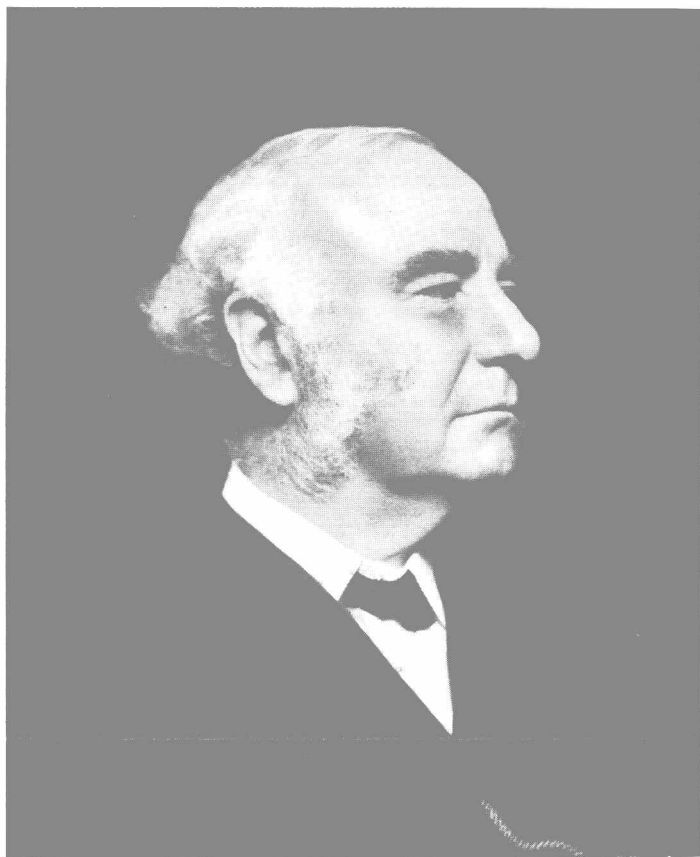
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LIFE OF ALFRED NEWTON, M.A., F.R.S.

PROFESSOR OF ZOOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE ANATOMY  
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, 1866-1907



*Frontispiece.*

*R. Faulkner.*

ALFRED NEWTON, M.A., F.R.S.



*W. & D. Downey.*

SIR EDWARD NEWTON, K.C.M.G.

## NOTE

WHEN in the spring of 1909 his literary executors paid me the compliment of asking me to write a "Life" of Professor Newton, I accepted the invitation with enthusiasm tempered by diffidence, little guessing the delays to which it would be subjected, and little knowing the difficulties of the task. It became very soon apparent that the interests of so sedentary a life as that of Newton must be looked for principally in his letters. This led to the startling discovery that he had kept almost every letter he received during a period of more than fifty years, and to the further fact that a great many of his correspondents had preserved almost every letter that he had written to them. Searching through these thousands of letters was a work of several months; and after that I was unavoidably occupied in New Guinea for a term of years. During these absences from England—and later during the war—I made attempts to induce others to complete the "Life," but without success.

So it was not until 1920 that I was able to return to it. In the meantime the business of producing books, like all other things, has suffered a change, and the ample biographies of the spacious days before 1914 are no longer possible. Thus it happens that this volume has been reduced by nearly a half of its bulk, greatly to the advantage of the casual reader, if such

there be, but, I fear, at the cost of some disappointment to others who had hoped to see their interesting correspondence with Newton included in the book. In cutting down I have tried to act on the principle of preserving his best and most characteristic letters on whatever subject, rather than of including technically important matters, which are elsewhere accessible to naturalists.

The help that I have received from Newton's friends and from members of his family has, I hope, been in every case gratefully acknowledged. There are two—Mr. James E. Harvie-Brown and Lord Walsingham—whose names must be recorded here: both of them have followed their old friend, but not before they had given me incalculable help in my attempt to preserve his memory.

A. F. R. W.

*April, 1921.*

## PREFACE

THE subject of this volume, a man of strongly-marked personality, was for more than half a century a leader among the naturalists of this country, a distinguished Professor in the University of Cambridge, a prolific and accomplished writer, and a charming companion, whose geniality, humour, and innocent little whimsicalities, drew around him a wide circle of friends. All who knew Alfred Newton will be glad that Mr. Wollaston, one of his pupils; should have put together this appreciative memoir. In so doing he has been fortunate in having had access to so large a number of the Professor's letters and journals as to give the chapters not a little of the character of an autobiography.

We see the future man of science entering Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1848, as an undergraduate of nineteen. Six years later his youthful reputation gained for him, as the son of a Norfolk squire, election to the Norfolk Travelling Scholarship, with the aid of which he was enabled to make ornithological researches in Lapland and Iceland, and to visit the United States and the West Indies. These early journeys confirmed his bent towards the study of birds, and laid the foundation of his fame as one of the most eminent ornithologists of his day. He used to regret in later life that he had not travelled

more. He was indeed a born naturalist, and but for the lameness, which came from an accident in early boyhood, he would doubtless have become a dauntless pioneer in zoological regions as yet unexplored. Few bird-lovers could equal him in the quickness and sureness of eye which, even at a considerable distance, enabled him to distinguish a bird on the wing. The lameness, much increased by an accident in later years, greatly restricted the exploratory work which he might have achieved. It was most heroically borne by him, and was combated with two walking-sticks. He was too independent, however, to accept assistance if he could possibly do without it. In the yachting cruises which for some years I enjoyed in his company along the western coasts of Scotland, Ireland, and the Faroe Isles, he generally would land at every place of interest, even when a strong swell made it difficult to get into the boat. One could not but admire the tact with which he avoided the proffered hands of the crew, and his dexterity in the manipulation of his two sticks. His perfect coolness was remarkable on such occasions. He used to tell how once at Spitzbergen the dinghy slipped away before he had hold of the ship's ladder and he plumped into the water, but kept his pipe in his mouth, and so, as he said, lost nothing!

It was about 1863 that he made Cambridge his permanent home. In 1866 he was elected Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy in the University. He then began at once with much ardour to improve the Zoological Museum, which in his hands became in the course of years one of the most important in the country. His kindly nature led him to take much interest in the undergraduates who showed a love of natural history. His "Sunday evenings" at Magdalene, when he received his students, academical

friends, and any notable men of science who might be visiting Cambridge, were highly popular. Mr. Wollaston testifies to their value from the undergraduate point of view.

Professor Newton was an indefatigable worker, never without some piece of scientific literature on hand, and often more than one. He was a keen critic of others, and not less of himself. He would write and re-write his compositions several times before they came up to his standard of arrangement and style. Above all he strove to secure accuracy in his own statements, and in his references and quotations. The pains taken by him with this object sometimes led to serious delays in the completion of his manuscript, which brought strong protests from the publishers, who had no sympathy with what they regarded as meticulous labour. If their complaints did not alter his habit, they at least filled him with indignation against the whole publishing tribe.

Newton was a strong Conservative, instinctively opposed to the abrogation of any ancient usage. This resolute stand on the *antiquas vias* led him occasionally into whimsical positions, some of which are alluded to in the following chapters. Yet it is nevertheless true that he was one of the earliest naturalists in this country to accept Darwin's explanation of the origin of species. Not only did he receive with joy and admiration this momentous revolution in scientific thought, he actually made some effort to induce his brother naturalists to do likewise, but without success.

The reader of the volume may, in some measure, appreciate the personal charm which endeared the Professor to those around him. His perennial bonhomie, his youthful enthusiasms maintained up to the last, his inexhaustible fund of anecdote and reminiscence, his

unfailing good humour, his love of work, and his generous co-operation in the doings of every fellow-worker who needed his help, together with the amusing predicaments in which his conversation sometimes placed him, combined to make a rare and delightful personality, and underneath it all lay the solid and lasting service rendered by him to the branch of science to which he devoted his life.

ARCHIBALD GEIKIE.

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# LIFE OF ALFRED NEWTON

## CHAPTER I

### CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL

IF the boundary of the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk had not taken a sudden bend to the south near Thetford, so as almost to include the parish of Elveden, it is probable that the life of Alfred Newton, though it would undoubtedly have been the life of a man of distinction, would not have been the life of a naturalist. Fortunately for lovers of Natural History in general and of Ornithology in particular, his father, as well as owning Elveden Hall in Suffolk, possessed also a small property on the other side of the boundary and was a Justice of the Peace for the county of Norfolk, so that at a critical point of his career Newton was able to establish his claim to be the "son of a Norfolk gentleman."

William Newton, at one time M.P. for Ipswich, was the son of a planter, Samuel Newton of St. Kitts, in the West Indies, in the golden days of sugar, who lived in the island of St. Croix until he bought the Elveden estate in 1810 from the fourth Earl of Albemarle. He married (1811) Elizabeth, daughter of Richard Slater Milnes, M.P. for York, and aunt of Richard Monckton Milnes, first Baron Houghton, by whom he had six sons and four daughters. The eldest son, William Samuel, was one of the survivors of the Coldstream Guards at Inkerman, and retired with the rank of General. The second son, Robert Milnes, became Recorder of Cambridge and a Metropolitan Police Magistrate. Horace Parker was