

**First Assignment for Michael J. Crowe's Class on
"John Herschel, William Whewell, and
How the Twentieth Century Got Its Solar System"
Letter from Sir John Herschel to Rev. William Whewell**

On 3 January 1854, Rev. William Whewell, Master of Trinity College of Cambridge University, wrote to his good friend Sir John Herschel, a very prominent astronomer, to tell him about a recently published, anonymously authored book (*Of the Plurality of Worlds: An Essay*) on the question of extraterrestrial intelligent life. Whewell knew that John Herschel had long been enthused about extraterrestrials. Whewell also knew that Herschel was very busy; in fact, he was serving as Master of the British Mint. It turns out that Whewell had himself authored the book that he was sending Herschel and was aware that Herschel would not be pleased with it. A copy of Herschel's letter commenting on the book is attached. I am including it so as to be sure that during this week you will encounter at least one letter in its original handwritten form.

Your assignment is to read the letter or at least try to read the letter. I ask that you limit yourself to 15 minutes. Part of the point of this is for you to see a little of history being made. It turns out that until 2009, the letter had not been transcribed and published. Perhaps a half dozen people had read it, buried as it is in



Whewell's papers in the Wren Library (pictured above) in Trinity College at Cambridge. We'll devote a little time during the class to discussing the letter. Most of our time will be focused on a larger and related issue: The origin of the view of our solar system that was dominant at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Some help in reading Herschel's letter:

1. As you may know, Germans will sometimes use a symbol looking like the Greek letter Beta to represent the double s. Herschel does something like this, as you can see in the sixth line up on his first page. The word he is writing is classification.

2. Some well-meaning person wrote the date Nov. 1853 in the right hand corner of the first page. This date is not trustworthy, given that Herschel is responding to Whewell's letter of 3 Jan. 1854.

3. I have attached as the next item the letter from William Whewell to which John Herschel is responding. This will provide some background and context.

Rev. William Whewell to Sir John Herschel, January 3, 1854, Lowestoft [Royal Society HS.18.213]

Taken from Isaac Todhunter, *William Whewell*, II, pp. 399–400.

Lowestoft, Jan. 3, 1854.

My dear Herschel,

Probably by this time an anonymous book has found its way to you, on “the Plurality of Worlds.” I do not know whether you are likely to guess that I have anything to do with it; but if so, pray do not encourage any body in the same opinion. I believe the doctrines there delivered will be deemed to some extent heterodox in science; as they may well be, being so much at variance with opinions which you have countenanced. But I am sure you will not wish that discussion on such matters should be suppressed; and the author seems to me to have discussed the question very fairly. Perhaps you would not take it much to heart if the inhabitants of Jupiter, or of the systems revolving about double stars which you have so carefully provided for, should be eliminated out of the universe. Indeed, if in this way we could obtain a more satisfactory view of the government and prospects of us, the dwellers on this Earth, many of us would deem the loss a gain. But, at any rate, I hope you astronomers will let us speculate on the one side as well as the other; which is all that my friend asks. We are here in the middle of intense winter; the ground covered with snow to the water's edge, the wind howling, and the shore strewn with wrecks in various gradations of destruction. I hope that, whatever your outward world may look like at present, you have within doors the sunshine which arises from good health and good family news, as you are sure to have the sunshine that comes of love and good humour. Mrs Whewell has been here all the autumn, gaining, I hope, in health and strength. Pray give my affectionate good wishes to Lady Herschel and all your family circle, and especially to my godchild Amelia and my deputy niece Maria. I hope she has pleasant recollections of our sojourn at Kreuznach. When we went thither, it was almost as cold as it is now.

Always, my dear Herschel,

Yours most truly,

W. Whewell

