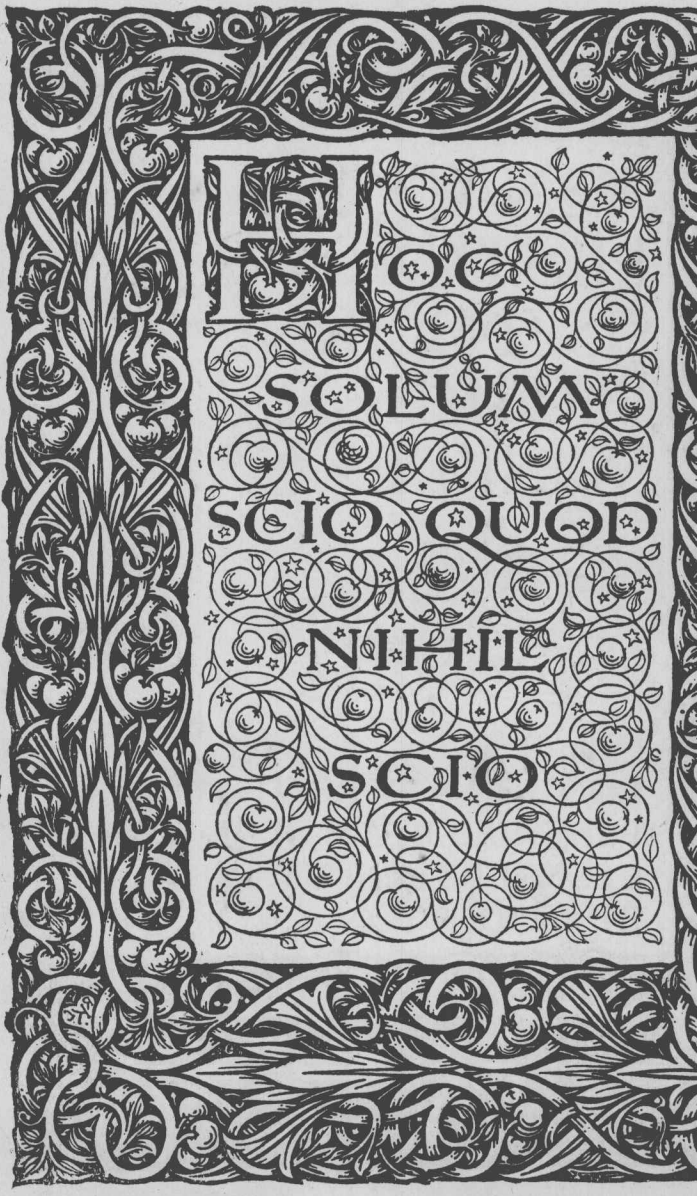
The NATURAL HISTORY of SELBORNE by GILBERT WHITE

LONDON & TORONTO
PUBLISHED BY J·M·DENT
& SONS LTD & IN NEW YORK
BY E·P·DUTTON & CO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INTRODUCTION

BY BERTRAM C. A. WINDLE, Sc.D., F.R.S., F.S.A.

PRESIDENT OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE, CORK

SOME achieve greatness, one might almost say have it thrust upon them, so lightly does it descend, without apparent effort, without that strife and labour through which others win towards their goal. Of such was Gilbert White, of Selborne, who would certainly have been amazed had he known that a hundred years after his time he would be the patron saint of a society named after the little out-of-the-way village in which he was born and where he died Quiet it is to this day, out of the way, and difficult of access. How much more so in White's time, with the "infamous" roads of which he speaks and of which he gives such a graphic description in his fifth letter. But for White's grandfather, who left a considerable sum of money for their amelioration, one must suppose that they would have been even more impassable than the grandson found them in his time. White had an hereditary connection with the village now famous from his association with it. His grandfather, just mentioned, also a Gilbert White, was a Fellow of Magdalene College, Oxford, and was presented by his college to the Vicarage of Selborne in 1681. There he died in 1727, and his tombstone is still to be seen in the church. One son survived him, John, a barrister-at-law, who was the father of the famous Gilbert. The future naturalist was born at the vicarage on the 18th of July, 1720, and was consequently seven years of age at the time of his grandfather's death. He matriculated at Oriel College, Oxford, in 1739, took his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1743, and was elected to a Fellowship in the following year. As was then obligatory, he took orders, and was

certainly curate of Swarraton, at Old Alresford, for a time, though he must have been again residing in Oxford in 1752, since he was Junior Proctor in that year. In 1755 he settled in Selborne, inherited the family property in 1763, and remained for the rest of his days in the village in which he was born, untempted to leave it by the various College livings which were offered to him. He has sometimes been spoken of erroneously as vicar of Selborne, or as its curate, though he never occupied either position. No doubt at times he officiated in his native place; indeed, the entry in the parish register which records his own funeral, and is signed by "Chas. Taylor, Vicar," is immediately preceded by the notice of the funeral of Mary Barley, aged 16, which was conducted by "Gil. White, Curate," for so he signs himself, though he appears never to have officially occupied that position.

This record is dated 1793, so that White was seventy-three years of age, and had passed the majority of those years in Selborne. He never married, and lived in a house still standing in the main street of the village, known as "The Wakes." The village lies under the shelter of what White calls "a vast hill of chalk, rising three hundred feet above the village." This hill is covered with a wood called "The Hanger," formed, as White again tells us, in his first letter, of "beech, the most lovely of all forest trees, whether we consider its smooth rind or bark, its glossy foliage, or graceful pendulous boughs." The church, near which lie the bodies of White himself and of his grandfather, nestles amongst trees, the finest of which is a splendid old yew, which measures twenty-five feet in circumference. In the centre of the village is a spot called "The Plestor," or playing-place, in the midst of which, again quoting from White, "stood in old times, a vast oak, with short squat body and huge horizontal arms, extending almost to the extremity of the area. This venerable tree, surrounded with stone steps, and seats above them, was the delight of old and young, and a place of much resort on summer evenings; where the former sat in grave debate, while the latter frolicked and danced before them. Long might it have

stood," he proceeds, "had not the amazing tempest in 1703 overturned it at once, to the infinite regret of the inhabitants and vicar, who bestowed several pounds in settling it in its place again; but all his care could not avail; the tree sprouted for a time, then withered and died." At the time of its fall it was supposed to have been four hundred years old. Its place is now occupied by a sycamore. Gilbert White was born in the year of the South Sea Bubble, which probably but little affected the Selborne villagers, if they even heard of it. His life covered a very eventful epoch, for during those years England secured two great Empires, India, whose conquest was commenced by Clive in 1757, and Canada, which was annexed in 1764. And she lost a greater, for, ten years before White died, America became an independent country. He might well have seen the fall of the new and the restoration of the ancient dynasty, if Charles Edward had been successful after the battle of Prestonpans, which took place when he was twenty-five years of age. He saw the introduction of the new style into our Calendar, for he was then thirty-two years of age. Marlborough died when White was one year old, and six years later a greater conqueror in the peaceful contests of science, Sir Isaac Newton, was carried to the grave. John Hunter, the founder of the magnificent Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons in London, was born ten years later than White, and died in the same year as the village naturalist. Of all these stirring events and great men, White, so far as we can gather from his letters, took but little notice. Probably he heard but little of them, for the isolated state of remote villages in a day when there were few newspapers, no telegraphs and infrequent posts, must have been one which it is now difficult for us to realise. In any case he seems to have been the kind of man who would have been much more interested in the fate of his tortoise Timothy and in the coming of his swallows, than in the struggles of European nations. No picture remains to show us what manner of man he was, though it is known that he was short of stature. When Mr. Buckland visited the village he made great efforts to ascertain some facts about White, but

met with little success. One villager spoke of him in words which might be applied to many others besides White, "He was thought very little of till he was dead and gone, and then he was thought a great deal of." There was another old woman, who was eleven years of age when White died. She must have seen him on many occasions, but did not seem to preserve any very distinct recollection of the old gentleman. "He was a quiet old gentleman," she reported, "with very old-fashioned sayings; he was very kind in giving presents to the poor, and used to keep a locust which crawled about his garden." She was asked whether this animal might not possibly have been a tortoise, and replied, "Ah, that's what I mean." Occasionally he alludes to himself and his people in his letters, but such references are but scanty. Of the parish, writing to Mr. Pennant, he says, "We abound with poor, many of whom are sober and industrious. The inhabitants enjoy a good share of health and longevity, and the parish swarms with children." Again, writing to his niece Anne, he says, "After I had experienced the advantage of two agreeable young housekeepers, I was much at a loss when they left me; and have nobody to make whipped syllabubs and grace the upper end of my table. We have here this winter a weekly concert, consisting of first and second fiddle, two repianos, a bassoon, a hautboy, a violincello, and a German flute; to the great annoyance of the neighbouring pigs, which complain that their slumbers are interrupted and their teeth set on edge." In this little picture we see the fairer side of the isolation of the villages of those days. Self-contained as they were, it is obvious that their inhabitants had a more cheerful time amongst themselves than is the lot of most villagers of to-day. The old village church band of instrumentalists was doubtless a very amateur body, and its replacement by the organ of to-day has no doubt contributed to placing church music on a higher plane, but the revolution has not—one seems to be led to think—been a wholly unmixed advantage. In 1778, when he was beginning to feel that age was creeping over him, White writes to his sister, "My great parlour turns out a fine warm winter room, and affords a pleasant equal warmth. In

blustering weather the chimney smokes a little till the shaft becomes hot. The chief fault that I find is the strong echo, which, when many people are talking, makes confusion to my poor dull ears." It is as difficult to write a life of White as it is to write a life of Shakespeare, and for the same reason that we know so little of either man save through his works. White's Selborne seems to have originated in a letter—very probably the tenth of the series as printed—which was addressed to Thomas Pennant, a naturalist who had written a "British Zoology." To this letter a number of others succeeded, written, one must conclude, without any idea that they would ever be published. Daines Barrington, another of his correspondents, seems to have put the idea that the letters should at some time be made public, into White's head, hence the addition of the earlier letters, composed with a view of giving a general account of the district treated of in the correspondence. The letters are here for all to read, and no special account of them need or will be given, but attention may be called to two points before an attempt is made to indicate White's peculiar position as a naturalist. In the last letter of his Natural History of Selborne, White says, "When I first took the present work in hand, I proposed to have added an Annus Historico-Naturalis, or the Natural History of the Twelve Months of the Year, which would have comprised many incidents and occurrences that have fallen into my way to be mentioned in my series of letters ;—but as Mr. Aikin, of Warrington, has lately published something of this sort, and as the length of my correspondence has sufficiently put your patience to the test, I shall here take a respectful leave of you and natural history together." After White's death, by a curious piece of good fortune, the papers in question fell into the hands of this very Dr. Aikin, who published them, together with a similar calendar composed by a gentleman of the name of Markwick. What an interest it would add to the life of country children, not to speak of country dwellers of riper age, if they took upon themselves the composing of calendars of this kind for their own district and from their own observation. I have myself just experienced the interest which such notes may have, as years

go by. It was my lot to deliver a lecture to the Selborne Society in Birmingham, in the centenary year of White's death, now twelve years ago. Alluding to this calendar, I remarked that any person who had noted down the events of that year would have had to record that wild roses and hips of the same year's growth were to be seen side by side on the same tree, and that strawberries, grown in the open, were exhibited for sale in the shops in November, all facts of considerable interest, as showing the extraordinary mildness of the season, yet facts which I had entirely forgotten until I came to look up my notes for the purpose of this present introduction. Another point of great interest in White's observations is his account of the birds, now extinct, which were then inhabitants of England. Take the bustard, for example. This was the largest of British birds, and was exceedingly shy, White himself remarking that the smallest British bird, the golden-crested wren, will stand unconcerned until you come within three or four yards of it, while the bustard, the largest British land-fowl, does not care to admit a person within so many furlongs. This fine bird was once exceedingly common, for the Rev. Mr. Chafin, in a book written in the earlier part of the last century, says that he once put up twenty-five at one time between Andover and Salisbury. The Wiltshire downs was a favourite place for them, and there was an inn, now a private residence, no very great distance from Stonehenge, which went by the name of "The Bustard." The hoopoe is a beautiful bird with a magnificent crest, which it erects from time to time. It is sometimes called the child of Solomon, because of a legend that the hoopoe formed part of the cargo of the ships of Tarshish. Further, the legend relates that the crest on the head was at one time really of gold. This was far from being a benefit to the hoopoes, for the accursed thirst for that metal led to their wholesale slaughter. Accordingly they petitioned Solomon, who understood the language of birds as he did so many other things, to relieve them of their dangerous burden, which he did by converting the gold into feathers. White says, "the most unusual birds which I ever observed in these parts were a pair of hoopoes which came

several years ago in the summer, and frequented an ornamental piece of ground, which joins to my garden, for some weeks. They used to march about in a stately manner, feeding in the walks many times in the day, and seemed disposed to breed in my outlet; but were frightened and persecuted by idle boys who would never let them be at rest." Poor Hoopoes! it seems that they want nothing better than to come amongst us and nest, were it not for the attentions of the "idle boys," and the still more objectionable man with a gun and a will to slay any rare thing. The accounts which find their way from time to time into the papers, make it very clear that we are not given to exhibiting much hospitality to rare visitors to these islands. White also mentions the crossbill, a rare bird which occasionally visits us, having even, during severe winters, been seen in considerable numbers in the neighbourhood of London.

For the rest White's letters must speak for themselves. Some of his statements or surmises have turned out to be inaccurate, and the valuable parts of his work have become part of the general corpus of scientific knowledge, but the charm of his simple style and the pictures of the life of the time which are occasionally revealed to us, have rendered his work part of the permanent literature of the country, like Walton's *Angler*, of which one is often reminded when reading White, a book of no use to fishermen, but not to be exchanged for a wilderness of more technically accurate works. But over and above their claims as a piece of literature, White's letters possess the valuable power of stimulating readers themselves to go out and look nature in the face as their writer did, and seek to see for themselves the wonderful things which are ever visible to the observing eye.

From the naturalist's point of view White may be regarded in two aspects. In the first place he was a new phenomenon in his time. His age was one of an artificial character, when little real interest was felt in natural objects. White had to strike out a line for himself; there were no field-naturalists' clubs in those days to make pleasant the paths of natural history to the hesitating beginner, by a large infusion of the picnic element. On the contrary, men who devoted them-

selves to studies such as those of White, suffered, not merely from isolation in their pursuits, but ran the risk of being looked upon as lunatics, whose harmlessness rendered them objects of pity or derision rather than of fear. White was, perhaps, not the father of field-naturalists, but he did more than any other man to popularise and give life to that branch of work, and that without any effort—perhaps without any intention—on his part, by the quiet example of his life. The country squire, and, in many cases, the country parson, too, of those days had a horizon which was bounded by their rod, their gun, their hounds, and their dinner. Their knowledge of nature did not extend further than sufficed to teach them what the weather was likely to be from a hunting point of view, or how best to slay the greatest number of birds or beasts in the shortest possible time. Their epitaphs might have been written, in the words applied by Carlyle to "Phillipus Zaehdarm, Count of Zaehdarm," who, "whilst he still trod these sublunar fields, slew 15,000 partridges and with the help of his servants, quadruped and biped, consumed of various foods one hundred thousand hundredweights." Of such the generation is not yet extinct, but the lump is leavened with others of the race of White. But when that observer still "trod those sublunar fields" he must have been looked upon as little better than an imbecile for wasting his time in watching a tortoise, and concerning himself about the comings and goings of the swallows. His work, however, has told. It has been said that when his letters were published, the country gentlemen of the period rubbed their eyes in astonishment, to find what things had been going on around them all their lives, without their having once noticed them. Gradually the leaven has permeated the whole lump, the field naturalist is no rarity in the land, sometimes when he devastates the scarce things of a district one wishes that he was rarer; his vasculum and his butterfly-net attract little attention when they are seen in country lanes; it is not now considered to be a sign of a mean mind to have some knowledge of plants and birds neither edible nor usually shootable, and the day may even come when we shall think it as reasonable to have a royal recorder of natural history as we now do

to pay a Master of the Royal Buckhounds, or as men, not many years ago, did to support the Royal Falconer.

But there is another point of view from which White may be regarded. He was an example of an almost new and unknown kind of man in his own day, and to-day we see him as an example of the kind of worker met with much more amongst so-called "amateurs" than amongst so-called "men of science." Embryology, miscroscopical anatomy and the like have for years past attracted the attention of prominent stars in the world of science to a much larger extent than the study of living nature as it is to be seen in the field, in the botanic garden, or in the aquarium. Perhaps this is not unnatural, for, in the first place, constant patient work has pretty well exhausted the possibilities of these islands for seekers after new species. And, again, the vast field of physiological work opened up by the microscope is one where conceptions of greater magnitude may be come by than in the humbler paths of systematic work. Yet it is surely to be regretted that the attractive and educational subject of field botany should have been so sorely neglected by professional botanists as it has been for these years past. Physiological and microscopic botany is a fine study—no one doubts it—but for children and young students, to my mind there are few more interesting and useful introductions to science than that of field botany—the study of the now despised Natural Orders.

Perhaps time is bringing its revenge, for the whole biological world is now agog about Mendelism, and what is Mendelism but the result of the work in his garden on common peas of a little-known Abbot of an obscure Abbey. To the seeing eye and the mind trained to study and comparison there is much still to be learnt—much, there is a whole world! —from the common things which are all around us every day. Those who commit themselves to these studies know not only the joys of discovery—be their discoveries but of a very modest character—but they know also the joys of the open moor and the quiet stream, of "the wind on the heath," of still starry nights when moths were the chase, of the silent movements of the creatures of the wood, when man, the

enemy, is supposed to be lapped up in his blankets. These and kindred joys they know who are of the following of White, and not the least of the merits of that writer is that every year, as new editions of his book appear, the number of those who go to nature for first-hand information and trouble themselves but little whether they make epoch-moving discoveries or not, is slowly and insensibly increased.

The first edition of White's "Natural History of Selborne" appeared in 1789,—four years before his death. It bears the imprint of his brother, Benjamin White, who was a Fleet Street publisher. The "Naturalist's Calendar," now usually included in the same volume, was extracted from his papers after his death, and followed in 1795. Some additional extracts were published by Jesse in 1834. The "Standard" edition by Bennett, and revised by Harting, appeared in 1874–6, and in 1877 came the still better edition of Thomas Bell. Still further matter was added to Dr. Bowdler Sharpe's edition of 1900, including a "Garden Kalendar" kept by Gilbert White from 1751 to 1771; and Dean Hole contributed an introduction. Special attention has been given, too, to Selborne of later years, and Mr. Tompkins' book in the "Temple Topographies" will be found useful.

1906.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE

BY GILBERT WHITE

'The shadows are stealing out; the hares are shaking their ears and thinking of the coming ramble; and the jar of the night-hawk is heard in the fern, but he will not rise yet to pursue the moths; the red cattle have ceased to low; the red stags of Wolmer Forest are glad that the heat of the day is past and the happy cool of night is within thought.'—

RICHARD JEFFRIES.

ADVERTISEMENT

THE Author of the following Letters takes the liberty, with all proper deference, of laying before the public his idea of *parochial history*, which, he thinks, ought to consist of natural productions and occurrences as well as antiquities. He is also of opinion that if stationary men would pay some attention to the districts on which they reside, and would publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them, from such materials might be drawn the most complete county-histories, which are still wanting in several parts of this kingdom, and in particular in the county of Southampton.

And here he seizes the first opportunity, though a late one, of returning his most grateful acknowledgments to the reverend the President and the reverend and worthy the Fellows of Magdalen College in the University of Oxford, for their liberal behaviour in permitting their archives to be searched by a member of their own society, so far as the evidences therein contained might respect the parish and priory of Selborne. To that gentleman also, and his assistant, whose labours and attention could only be equalled by the very kind manner in which they were bestowed, many and great obligations are also due.

Of the authenticity of the documents above-mentioned there can be no doubt, since they consist of the identical deeds and records that were removed to the College from the Priory at the time of its dissolution; and, being carefully copied on the spot, may be depended on as genuine; and, never having been made public before, may gratify the curiosity of the antiquary, as well as establish the credit of the history.

If the writer should at all appear to have induced any of his readers to pay a more ready attention to the wonders of the Creation, too frequently overlooked as common occurrences; or if he should by any means, through his researches, have lent an helping hand towards the enlargement of the boundaries of historical and topographical knowledge; or if he should have thrown some small light upon ancient customs and manners, and especially on those that were monastic, his purpose will be fully answered. But if he should not have been successful in any of these his intentions, yet there remains this consolation behind—that these his pursuits, by keeping the body and mind employed, have, under Providence, contributed to much health and cheerfulness of spirits, even to old age:—and, what still adds to his happiness, have led him to the knowledge of a circle of gentlemen whose intelligent communications, as they have afforded him much pleasing information, so, could he flatter himself with a continuation of them, would they ever be deemed a matter of singular satisfaction and improvement.

GIL: WHITE.

Selborne, January 1st, 1788.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE

LETTER I

TO THOMAS PENNANT, ESQUIRE

THE parish of Selborne lies in the extreme eastern corner of the county of Hampshire, bordering on the county of Sussex, and not far from the county of Surrey; is about fifty miles south-west of London, in latitude 51, and near midway between the towns of Alton and Petersfield. Being very large and extensive it abuts on twelve parishes, two of which are in Sussex, viz., Trotton and Rogate. If you begin from the south and proceed westward the adjacent parishes are Emshot, Newton Valence, Faringdon, Harteley Mauduit, Great Ward le ham, Kingsley, Hedleigh, Bramshot, Trotton, Rogate, Lysse, and Greatham. The soils of this district are almost as various and diversified as the views and aspects. The high part to the south-west consists of a vast hill of chalk, rising three hundred feet above the village; and is divided into a sheep down, the high wood, and a long hanging wood called the Hanger. The covert of this eminence is altogether beech, the most lovely of all forest trees, whether we consider its smooth rind or bark, its glossy foliage, or graceful pendulous boughs. The down, or sheep-walk, is a pleasing park-like spot, of about one mile by half that space, jutting out on the verge of the hill-country, where it begins to break down into the plains, and commanding a very engaging view, being an assemblage of hill, dale, wood-lands, heath, and water. The prospect is bounded to the south-east and east by the vast range of mountains called the Sussex Downs, by Guild-down near Guildford, and by the Downs round Dorking, and Ryegate in Surrey, to the north-east, which altogether, with the country beyond Alton and Farnham, form a noble and extensive outline.