The Natural History Of Selborne

THE NATURAL HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF SELBORNE, IN THE COUNTY OF SOUTHAMPTON; with Engravings, and an Appendix. London: Printed by T. Bensley, for B. White and Son, at Horace's Head, Fleet Street. MDCCLXXXIX.

It is not always the most confidently conducted books, or those best preceded by blasts on the public trumpet, which are eventually received with highest honours into the palace of literature. No more curious incident of this fact is to be found than is presented by the personal history of that enchanting classic, White's *Selborne*. If ever an author hesitated and reflected, dipped his toe into the bath of publicity, and hastily withdrew it again, loitered on the brink and could not be induced to plunge, it was the Rev. Gilbert White. This man of singular genius was not to be persuaded that the town would tolerate his lucubrations. He was ready to make a present of them to any one who would father them, he allowed his life to slip by until his seventieth year was reached, before he would print them, and when they appeared, he could not find the courage to put his name on the title-page. Not one of his own titlarks or sedge-warblers could be more shy of public observation. Even the fact that his own brother was a publisher gave him no real confidence in printers' ink.

Gilbert White was already a middle-aged man when he was drawn into correspondence by Thomas Pennant, a naturalist younger than himself, who had undertaken to produce, in four volumes folio, a work on *British Zoology* for the production of which he was radically unfitted. It has been severely, but justly, pointed out that wherever Pennant rises superior, either in style or information, to his own dead level of pompous inexactitude, he is almost certainly quoting from a letter of Gilbert White's. Yet no acknowledgment of the Selborne parson is vouchsafed; "even in the account of the harvest-mouse," says Professor Bell, "there is no mention of its discoverer." Nevertheless, so rudimentary was scientific knowledge one hundred and thirty years ago, that Pennant's pretentious book was received with acclamation. The patient man at Selborne sat and smiled, even courteously joining with mild congratulations in the rounds of applause. Fortunately Pennant did not remain his only correspondent. The Hon. Daines Barrington was a man of another stamp, not profound, indeed, but enthusiastic, a genuine lover of research, and a gentleman at heart. He quoted Gilbert White in his writings, but never without full acknowledgment. Other friends followed, and the recluse of Selbourne became the correspondent of Sir Joseph Banks, of Dr. Chandler, and of many other great ones of that day now decently forgotten.

Meanwhile, he was growing old. Any sharp winter might have cut him off, as he trudged along through the deep lanes of his rustic parish. Early in 1770 Daines Barrington, tired of seeing his friend the mere valet to so many other pompous intellects, had proposed to him to "draw up an account of the animals of Selborne." Gilbert White put the fascinating notion from him. "It is no small undertaking," he replied, "for a man unsupported and alone to begin a natural history from his own autopsia." Pennant seems to have joined in the suggestion of Barrington, for White says (in a letter, dated July 19, 1771, which did not see the light for more than a century after it was written):

"As to any publication in this way of my own, I look upon it with great diffidence, finding that I ought to have begun it
twenty years ago; but if I was to attempt anything, it should be something of a Nat: history of my native parish, an Annus historico-naturalis, comprising a journal of one whole year, and illustrated with large notes and observations. Such a beginning might induce more able naturalists to write the history of various districts, and might in time occasion the production of a work so much to be wished for, a full and compleat nat: history of these kingdoms."

Three years later he was still thinking of doing something, but putting off the hour of action. In 1776 he was suddenly spurred to decide by the circumstance that Barrington had written to propose a joint work on natural history. "If I publish at all," said Gilbert White to his nephew, "I shall come forth by myself." In 1780 he is still unready: "Were it not for want of a good amanuensis, I think I should make more progress." He was now sixty years of age. Eight years later he was preparing the Index, and at last, in the autumn of 1789, the volume positively made its appearance, in the maiden author's seventieth year. Few indeed, if any, among English writers of high distinction, have been content to delay so long before testing the popular estimate of their work. His book was warmly welcomed, but the delightful author survived its publication less than four years, dying in the parish which he was to make so famous. Gilbert White was, in a very peculiar sense, a man of one book.

Countless as have been the reprints of The Natural History of Selborne, its original form is no longer, perhaps, familiar to many readers. The first edition, which is now before me, is a very handsome quarto. Benjamin White, the publisher, who was the younger brother of Gilbert, issued most of the standard works on natural history which appeared in London during the second half of the century, and his experience enabled him to do adequate justice to The History of Selborne. The frontispiece is a large folding plate of the village from the Short Lythe, an ambitious summer landscape, representing the church, White's own house, and a few cottages against the broad sweep of the hangar. On a terrace in the foreground are portrait figures of three gentlemen standing, and a lady seated. Of the former, one is a clergyman, and it has often been stated that this is Gilbert White himself; erroneously, since no portrait of him was ever executed; (1) the figure is that of the Rev. Robert Yalden, vicar of Newton-Valence. The frontispiece is unsigned, and I find no record of the artist's name. It is not to be doubted, however, that the original was painted by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm, the Swiss water-colour draughtsman, who sketched so many topographical views in the South of England.

(Footnote 1: That discovered in 1913 has yet to prove that it represents Gilbert White in any way.)

The remaining illustrations to this first edition, are an oval landscape vignette on the title-page, engraved by Daniel Lerpinière; a full-page plate of some fossil shells; an extra-sized plate of the himantopus that was shot at Frensham Pond, straddling with an immense excess of shank; and four engravings, now of remarkable interest, displaying the village as it then stood, from various points of view. They are engraved by Peter Mazell, after drawings of Grimm's, and give what is evidently a most accurate impression of what Selborne was a century ago. In these days of reproductions, it is rather strange that no publisher has issued facsimiles of these beautiful illustrations to the original edition of what has become one of the most popular English works. For the use of book-collectors, I may go on to say that any one who is offered a copy of the edition of The History of Selborne of 1789, should be careful to see that not merely the plates I have mentioned are in their places, but that the engraved sub-title, with a print of the seal of Selborne Priory, occurs opposite the blank leaf which answers to page 306.

It is impossible for a bibliographer who writes on Gilbert White to resist the pleasure of mentioning the name of his best editor and biographer. It was unfortunate that Thomas Bell, who was born eight months before the death of Gilbert White, and who, quite early in life began to entertain an enthusiastic reverence for that writer, did not find an opportunity of studying Selborne on the spot until the memories of White were becoming very vague and scattered there. I think it was not until about 1865 that, retiring from a professional career, he made Selborne--and the Wakes, the very house of Gilbert White--his residence. Here he lived, however, for fifteen years, and here it was his delight to follow up every vestige of the great naturalist's sojourn in the parish. White became the passion of Professor Bell's existence, and I well recollect him when he was eighty-five or eighty-six years of age, and no longer strong enough in body to quit his room with ease, sitting in his arm-chair at the bedroom window, and directing my attention to points of Whiteish interest, as I stood in the garden below. It was as difficult for Mr. Bell to conceive that his annotations of White were complete, as it had been for White himself to pluck up courage to publish; and it was not until 1877, when
the author was eighty-five years of age, that his great and final edition in two thick volumes was issued. He lived, however, to be nearly ninety, and died in the Wakes at last, in the very room, and if I mistake not, the very spot in the room, where his idol had passed away in 1793.

As long as Professor Bell was alive the house preserved, in all essentials, the identical character which it had maintained under its famous tenant. Overgrown with creepers to the very chimneys, divided by the greenest and most velvety of lawns from a many-coloured furnace of flower-beds, scarcely parted by lush paddocks from the intense green wall of the coppiced hill, the Wakes has always retained for my memory an impression of rural fecundity and summer glow absolutely unequalled. The garden seemed to burn like a green sun, with crimson stars and orange meteors to relieve it. All, I believe, has since then been altered. Selborne, they tell me, has ceased to bear any resemblance to that rich nest in which Thomas Bell so piously guarded the idea of Gilbert White. If it be so, we must live content with

*The memory of what has been,*

*And never more may be.*

(The end)

Edmund Gosse's essay: Natural History Of Selborne

**By Edmund Gosse**