

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE

WITH

A Naturalists Calendar and Additional Observations BY **GILBERT WHITE**

WITH A PREFACE

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PREFACE.

THE simple character of the writings of Gilbert White have, perhaps, in these latter days somewhat deterred people from reading him. They seem so very simple, just as a boy might snatch a bloom of horse-chestnut and bring it home ; so very easy to do that. And what is there in a chestnut bough when you have got it ? In these times there is a certain amount of feeling abroad that all books of information must be written with a marked hardness of style. They must abound in long words and sentences that come out with a slow, crushed motion, like a rail from the rolling-mill. More particularly is this the case with books of what is called popularised knowledge—accurate, comprehensive, fitted in and square, like the mosaic tiles now so common in grates, and about as charming. They contain everything ; they tell you in every page they are teaching you, and leave you without a single idea fixed in the memory. If any one accustomed to such heavily-edited volumes picks up the *Natural History of Selborne*, it is almost like a shock. The sense of repose is at first taken for lack of ability—the author is not one of the " ablest" writers of the day ; very inferior !

" This bird much resembles the white-throat, but has a more white or rather silvery breast and belly ; is restless and active, like the willow-wrens, and hops from bough to bough, examining every part for food ; it also runs up the stems of the crown imperials, and putting its head into the bells of those flowers, sips the liquor which stands in the nectarium of each petal." Such is his way of putting a pretty little incident, and I want to point out that, as a matter of style which is so much talked of now-a-days, it is very much superior to the stiffest writing of the nineteenth century. He refers to the garden fauvet; and those who have gardens would find it interesting to plant the crown imperial where it could be easily observed, in order to see the incident repeated. The humming-bird-like fancy for sweetness is not confined to this white-throat; even the sparrows are believed to sometimes peck open the nectaries of flowers for the same purpose. Shrikes eat that part of the humble bee that contains the honey, while the Redstart has a habit of watching about where there are honey-laden flowers, with a view, not to the honey, but to the insects that come for it. Out of this observation of Mr. White's a variety of further observations expand themselves, and you might go on and on till you had written a long letter about it. You might ask, for instance, whether the visits of birds to flowers may not have something to do with modifying their form as well as those of insects. As many animals eat honey, and as man himself in every country, from the Hottentots upwards, seeks for honey, it may be said that man in this way has worked out some part of the adaptations of plant structure.

Here we branch off into abstruse scientific questions, and see how different minds may trace out the bearing of the same fact. The old naturalist at Selborne simply records it in language which could not be better chosen, highly delighted evidently, and taking a deep interest in it for its own sake. In the same manner any one who has a taste for out-of-door observations may study natural history without any previous scientific learning. There is not the smallest need to know the Latin names of the birds in order to watch them, or of the flowers in order to gather them. Perhaps the Latin names are learned a great deal easier afterwards than before. After you know the things themselves, it is not at all difficult to fit the scientific name to them, and quite easy to recollect the crabbed Latin. If you try to get the nomenclature first, then it is very hard work. If, on the other hand, your mind dwells upon science, and the questions it has opened up of late years, and you feel yourself well armed with argument, then you may find in Mr. White's book a number of facts which will give plenty of occasion for exercising ingenuity. He will do more ; he will suggest to you the way in which to make original notes—the spirit in which to look at nature. Part of his success was owing to his coming to the field with a mind unoccupied. He was not full of evolution when he walked out, or variation, or devolution, or degeneration. He did not look for microbes everywhere. His mind was free and his eye open. To many it would do much good to read this work if only with the object of getting rid of some of the spiders' webs that have been so industriously spun over the eyesight of those who would like to think for themselves.

" The quiet end of evening smiles—
Miles on miles,"

all across these pages. 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 in Wolmer Forest are glad that the heat of the day is passed, and the happy cool of night is within thought; but still the sun stays. The sun stays, leaning on his staff, and looking back over the world as a man might do at the last hill of his journey. There is no haste. You may go down the green lane very slowly, and pull the rushes, and gather the sedge-like grasses, and note how some flowers have closed their petals and some remain open. The swallows are the busiest. Mr. White took much interest in swallows. Not only one evening or two evenings, but a whole year of evenings, and several years, are written in these letters. So quiet, without excitement—he is ready to wait till next year, or a series of years, to verify anything he supposed might be ; something so entirely opposed to the modern lecturer. He gathered his facts very slowly ; they were like experience, which takes a lifetime to grow. You cannot sit down and make up experience, and write it as a thesis ; it must come, and this is what he did—he waited till things came. His book, for this reason, reads as if it had been compiled in the evening.

A great master is under a disadvantage. You go to look at an old and celebrated picture with exalted feelings, and when you get there you say, "How disappointing! I have seen all this before ; the style, the attitude, and the method of composition are all familiar in a hundred engravings and modern pictures, and, really, the old masters, instead of being such a guide, look a long way behind the age. We can do things better now." The secret is, the old master's work has been multiplied exceedingly, and used as the ground-work on which to build innumerable variations. Without his work these could never have come into existence. From the stores accumulated by Gilbert White a very great deal of the contents of modern books have been drawn. Not only the facts but the general system has been followed out in a hundred ways, so that his book suffers exactly like the old picture, until you understand it. The more you understand them the more you appreciate old masters, whether artists or

authors, until you would be ready, if you had the means, to give the extraordinary prices for them that seem so incomprehensible to outsiders. It is curious that White should have had an artist's eye for landscape. He frequently, as he rides along the South Downs, checks his horse to admire those very scenes which Turner has made classic. He thinks them glorious, as indeed they are ; yet one would scarcely expect, in the world's judgment, a man who was not an authority on art to find out for himself the views which the public now purchase so eagerly. The sympathy he felt with nature enabled him to see much farther than the hedges by which he walked, and brought his mind into parallel lines with the great painter. At Mount Caburn he was attacked by swarms of wild bees—a little incident; but fifty years afterwards, or more, another naturalist, who had paid particular attention to these insects, happened to visit the same spot, and there he found colonies of the same bees, and recognised the same species.

Anyone who desires to see some of the things that this man saw, if he have the least inclination for drawing, cannot do better than fix himself in some pleasant spot, and work there in absolute quietness for as many days as possible. For it is in this quietness that the invisible becomes visible. The vacant field gradually grows full of living things. In the hedges unsuspected birds come to the surface of the green leaf to take breath. Over the pond brilliantly coloured insects float to and fro, and the fish that never seem to move from the dark depths do move and do come up in sight. Be very careful not to go too far; keep round the skirts of home near the garden, or in the nearest field, else you will jump over the very best; for it is a fact that the greatest variety of information is generally gathered in a very small compass. I have noticed that people are never so astonished as when some fact of natural history is unexpectedly pointed out to them, where it must have been for a long time under their very eyes. There are people who have never seen a humble bee drill a hole in the nectary of a snap-dragon, and yet have whole gardens full of flowers. At least, do not go out of your own locality much for some time.

The mass of this book was collected in the little Surrey parish of Selborne. They say the place is very much the same as when he was there a hundred years ago, for the country changes very slowly ; the people, too, move slow, and their memories linger long—memories never seem to die out. I suppose in a modern villa people would hardly understand what was meant by the allusion to bats creeping down chimneys and gnawing the bacon. Of old time, in all country houses, sides of bacon were hung up to smoke in the fumes of the great wood fires, so that a bat might come down and eat the edge. Bacon is not so much cured like this now; but in any country house they would at once understand what was meant. Those who follow the studies of Mr. White out-of-doors will find very little altered, and can take up the picture as he left it, and begin to fill in the endless touches which make nature.

If the great observer had put down what he saw of the people of his day just as he has put down his notes of animals and birds, there would have been a book composed of extraordinary interest. Walking about among the cottages, he saw and heard all their curious ways, and must have been familiar with their superstitions ; indeed, there are scattered notices of these as of the shrew ash. He knew the farmers and the squires ; he had access everywhere, and he had the quickest of eyes. It must ever be regretted that he did not leave a natural history of the people of his day. We should then have had a picture of England just before the beginning of our present era, and a wonderful difference it would have shown. The gallows-trees grew far too plentifully at the cross roads in those days, and the laws were inhuman, men were put to death like wild beasts : in fact, they seemed to look on man as a species of wolf that could only be tamed by stretching its neck. Let us not wish for the good

old times of Gilbert White,—they are gone ; but his fields and hedges remain to us more peaceful now than ever.

Perhaps the *Naturalist's Calendar* is that part of the book that will be found most valuable to those who take up this study. The dates are not the same every year of course, and that is what makes the interest if you keep a pocket-book founded on this model and look back in a year or two. By its aid you will miss very little. I did not come across Mr. White's book till late in the day, when it was, in fact, too late, else this Calendar would have been of the utmost advantage to me. Such data, though they may refer to apparently trivial details, often prove in after years the basis of important scientific conclusions. I have said nothing of the different aspect that has been cast on natural history in our days by the works of Darwin and the general drift of modern science. To compare the natural history of White with the natural history of our time would require a large space. Better, perhaps, take them apart and read the *Natural History of Selborne* as it was written.

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