

= The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne =

The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne , or just The Natural History of Selborne is a book by English naturalist and ornithologist Gilbert White . It was first published in 1789 by his brother Benjamin . It has been continuously in print since then , with nearly 300 editions up to 2007 .

The book was published late in White 's life , compiled from a mixture of his letters to other naturalists ? Thomas Pennant and Daines Barrington ; a ' Naturalist 's Calendar ' (in the second edition) comparing phenology observations made by White and William Markwick of the first appearances in the year of different animals and plants ; and observations of natural history organized more or less systematically by species and group . A second volume , less often reprinted , covered the antiquities of Selborne . Some of the letters were never posted , and were written for the book .

White 's Natural History was at once well received by contemporary critics and the public , and continued to be admired by a diverse range of nineteenth and twentieth century literary figures including Samuel Taylor Coleridge , Thomas Carlyle , Charles Darwin , John Ruskin , Virginia Woolf , and W. H. Auden . His work has been seen as an early contribution to ecology and in particular to phenology . The book has been enjoyed for its charm and apparent simplicity , and the way that it creates a vision of pre @-@ industrial England .

The original manuscript has been preserved and is displayed in the Gilbert White museum at The Wakes , Selborne .

= = Overview = =

The main part of the book , the Natural History , is presented as a compilation of 44 letters nominally to Thomas Pennant , a leading British zoologist of the day , and 66 letters to Daines Barrington , an English barrister and Fellow of the Royal Society . In these letters , White details the natural history of the area around his family home at the vicarage of Selborne in Hampshire .

Many of the ' letters ' were never posted , and were written especially for the book . Patrick Armstrong , in his book The English Parson @-@ Naturalist , notes that in particular , " an obvious example is the first , nominally to Thomas Pennant , but which is clearly contrived , as it introduces the parish , briefly summarizing its position , geography and principal physical features . " White 's biographer , Richard Mabey , estimates that up to 46 out of 66 ' letters to Daines Barrington ' " were probably never sent through the post " ; Mabey explains that it is hard to be more precise , because of White 's extensive editing . Some letters are dated although never sent . Some dates have been altered . Some letters have been cut down , split into shorter ' letters ' , merged , or distributed in small parts into other letters . A section about insect @-@ eating birds in a letter sent to Barrington in 1770 appears in the book as letter 41 to Pennant . Personal remarks have been removed throughout . Thus , while the book is genuinely based on letters to Pennant and Barrington , the structure of the book is a literary device .

As a compilation of letters and other materials , the book as a whole has an uneven structure . The first part is a diary @-@ like sequence of ' letters ' , with the breaks and wanderings that naturally follow . The second is a calendar , organized by phenological event around the year . The third is a collection of observations , organised by animal or plant group and species , with a section on meteorology . The apparently rambling structure of the book is in fact bracketed by opening and closing sections , arranged like the rest as letters , which " give form and scale and even a semblance of narrative structure to what would otherwise have been a shapeless anthology . " The unposted Letter 1 begins

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 fifty @-@ one , and near mid @-@ way 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 The soils of this district are almost as various and diversified as the views and aspects . The high part of 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 sheepwalk , 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 .

" No novelist could have opened better " , wrote Virginia Woolf ; " Selborne is set solidly in the foreground . "

= = Illustrations = =

The first edition was illustrated with paintings by the Swiss artist Samuel Hieronymus Grimm , engraved by W. Angus and aquatinted . Grimm had lived in England since 1768 , and was quite a famous artist , costing 2 ½ guineas per week . In the event , he stayed in Selborne for 28 days , and White recorded that he worked very hard on 24 of them . White also described Grimm 's method , which was to sketch the landscape in lead pencil , then to put in the shading , and finally to add a light wash of watercolour . The illustrations were engraved (signed at lower right) by a variety of engravers including William Angus and Peter Mazell .

= = Structure = =

= = = The Natural History of Selborne = = =

= = = = Letters to Thomas Pennant = = = =

There are 44 letters to White 's friend Thomas Pennant (1726 ? 1798) , of which the first nine were never posted and are thus undated . Of those that were posted , the first , Letter 10 giving an overview of Selborne , is dated 4 August 1767 ; the last , Letter 44 on wood pigeons , is dated 30 November 1780 . It is not known how the men became friends , or even if they ever met ; White writes repeatedly that he would like to meet " to have a little conversation face to face after we have corresponded so freely for several years " so it is certain they did not meet for long periods , and possible they never met at all . The letters are edited from the form in which they were actually posted ; for example , Letter 10 as posted had a cringing introductory paragraph of thanks to Pennant which White edited out of the published version .

= = = = Letters to the Hon. Daines Barrington = = = =

There are 66 letters to the lawyer Daines Barrington (1727 ? 1800) , occupying half the book . Letter 1 , on summer birds of passage , is dated 30 June 1769 ; Letter 66 , on thunderstorms , is dated 25 June 1787 . The Barrington letters therefore largely overlap the time frame of those to Pennant , but began and ended somewhat later . It was Barrington who suggested to White that he should write a book from his observations ; although Pennant had been corresponding with White for a while , he was relying on White for natural history information for his own books , and , suggests White 's biographer Richard Mabey , must have wanted White as a continuing source of information , not as a rival author . Barrington , on the other hand , liked to theorize about the natural world , but had little interest in making observations himself , and tended to accept claimed facts uncritically .

A character in some of the letters is a tortoise :

The old tortoise , that I have mentioned in a former letter , still continues in this garden , and retired underground about the 20th of November , and came out again for one day on the 30th : it lies now buried in a wet swampy border under a wall facing to the south , and is enveloped at present in mud and mire !

Letter 65 describes the summer of 1783 as " an amazing and portentous one , and full of horrible phenomena ; for , besides the alarming meteors and tremendous thunderstorms that affrighted and distressed the different counties of this kingdom , the peculiar haze , or smoky fog , that prevailed for many weeks in this island , and in every part of Europe , and even beyond its limits , was a most extraordinary appearance , unlike anything known within the memory of man ... The sun , at noon , looked as blank as a clouded moon , and shed a rust @-@ coloured ferruginous light on the ground , and floors of rooms ; but was particularly lurid and blood @-@ coloured at rising and setting . All this time the heat was so intense that butcher 's meat could hardly be eaten on the day after it was killed ... " This was caused by the eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland between 8 June 1783 and February 1784 , killing up to a quarter of the people of Iceland and spreading a haze as far as Egypt .

= = = The Antiquities of Selborne = = =

This section , often omitted from later editions , consists like the Natural History of 26 " Letters " , none of them posted , and without even the fiction of being addressed to Pennant or Barrington . Letter 1 begins " It is reasonable to suppose that in remote ages this woody and mountainous district was inhabited only by bears and wolves . " Letter 2 discusses Selborne in Saxon times ; Selborne was according to White a royal manor , belonging to Editha , queen to Edward the Confessor . Letter 3 describes the village 's church , which " has no pretensions to antiquity , and is , as I suppose , of no earlier date than the beginning of the reign of Henry VII . " Letter 5 describes the ancient Yew tree in the churchyard . Letter 7 describes the (ruined) priory . Letter 11 discusses the properties of the Knights Templar in and near the village .

Letter 14 describes the visit of bishop William of Wykeham in 1373 , to correct the scandalous " particular abuses " in the religious houses in the parish . He orders the canons of Selborne priory (Item 5th) " to take care that the doors of their church and priory be so attended to that no suspected and disorderly females , suspectae at aliae inhonestae , pass through their choir and cloister in the dark " ; (Item 10th) to cease " living dissolutely after the flesh , and not after the spirit " as it has been proven that some of the canons " sleep naked in their beds without their breeches and shirts " ; (Item 11th) to stop " keeping hounds , and publicly attending hunting @-@ matches " and " noisy tumultuous huntings " ; (Item 17th) to properly maintain their houses and the convent itself , since they have allowed " through neglect , notorious dilapidations to take place " ; (Item 29th) to stop wearing " foppish ornaments , and the affectation of appearing like beaux with garments edged with costly furs , with fringed gloves , and silken girdles trimmed with gold and silver . " Richard Mabey describes White 's reaction to the " Priory saga " as " grave disapproval of the monks ' sensuality and ... general delinquency " .

A sequence of Letters then relate the history of the priors of Selborne , until Letter 24 which relates the takeover of the priory by Magdalen College , Oxford under bishop William Waynflete in 1459 . White describes this as a disastrous fall : " Thus fell the considerable and well @-@ endowed priory of Selborne after it had subsisted about two hundred and fifty @-@ four years ; about seventy @-@ four years after the suppression of priories alien by Henry V. , and about fifty years before the general dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII . " The final letter records that " No sooner did the priory .. become an appendage to the college , but it must at once have tended to swift decay . " White notes that since then , even " the very foundations have been torn up for the repair of the highways " so that nothing is left but a rough pasture " full of hillocks and pits , choaked with nettles , and dwarf @-@ elder , and trampled by the feet of the ox and the heifer " . White had reason to be bitter about the takeover by Magdalen College , as it had made them Lords of the Manor of Selborne , which in turn gave them the right to appoint the parish priest . White 's biographer

Richard Mabey casts doubt on the " frequent assumption " that White 's " deepest regret was that he could never be vicar of Selborne " , but it was true that he was ineligible , as only fellows of Magdalen could be granted the living .

= = = A Naturalist 's Calendar = = =

= = = From the year 1768 to the year 1793 = = =

This section , compiled posthumously , contains a list of some 500 phenological observations in Selborne from White 's manuscripts , organised by William Markwick (1739 ? 1812) , and supplemented by Markwick 's own observations from Catsfield , near Battle , Sussex . The observations depend on the latitude of these places and on the (global) climate , forming a baseline for comparison with modern observations . For example , " Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) heard " is recorded by White for 7 ? 26 April , and by Markwick for 15 April and 3 May (presumably only once at the earlier date) and " last heard " by Markwick on 28 June . The table begins as follows :

= = = Observations in Various Branches of Natural History = = =

Observations on Birds

This is the longest section of the observations , with comments in each instance by Markwick .

Observations on Quadrupeds

These are a few entries on sheep , rabbits , cats and squirrels , horse and hounds .

Observations on Insects and Vermes

The ' Vermes ' cover glow @-@ worms , earthworms , snails and slugs , and a " snake 's slough " , a cast skin .

Observations on Vegetables

The observations relate to trees , seeds , " beans sown by birds " , " cucumbers set by bees " , and a few fungi (truffles , *Tremella nostoc* , and fairy rings) .

Meteorological Observations

These are a few curiosities such as frozen sleet and the " black spring " of 1771 . He also recorded the effects on the weather of the 1783 volcanic eruption of the Icelandic crater Laki .

= = Reception = =

= = = Contemporary = = =

White 's lifelong friend John Mulso wrote to him in 1776 , correctly predicting that " Your work , upon the whole , will immortalize your Place of Abode as well as Yourself . "

Thomas White wrote " a long , appreciative , but .. properly restrained review " of his brother 's book in *The Gentleman 's Magazine* of January 1789 , commenting that " Sagacity of observation runs through the work " .

An anonymous reviewer in *The Topographer* of April 1789 wrote that " A more delightful , or more original work than Mr. White 's *History of Selborne* has seldom been published ... Natural History has evidently been the author 's principal study , and , of that , ornithology is evidently the favourite . The book is not a compilation from former publications , but the result of many years ' attentive observations to nature itself , which are told not only with the precision of a philosopher , but with that happy selection of circumstances , which mark the poet . "

= = = Nineteenth century = = =

In 1830 , an anonymous critic , in what critic Tobias Menely called a description of Selborne " as a place that lingers beyond the spatio @-@ temporal horizon of modern life " , wrote having visited the village that

[T] he sequestered retreat of the naturalist still remains ... inaccessible to all the improved knowledge and re?nement which belong to these enlightened and virtuous times . It has been excluded from the blessings of increasing commerce and population , from factories and filiations , manufactures and Methodism , genius and gin , prosperity and pauperism .

= = = Edwardian era = = =

The 1907 ? 1921 Cambridge History of English and American Literature begins its essay on White 's Selborne with the words

Gilbert White 's Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (1789) holds a unique position in English literature as the solitary classic of natural history . It is not easy to give , in a few words , a reason for its remarkable success . It is , in fact , not so much a logically arranged and systematic book as an invaluable record of the life work of a simple and refined man who succeeded in picturing himself as well as what he saw . The reader is carried along by his interest in the results of far @-@ sighted observation ; but , more than this , the reader imbibes the spirit of the writer which pervades the whole book and endears it to like @-@ minded naturalists as a valued companion .

= = = Modern = = =

White is sometimes treated as a pioneer of ecology . The British ornithologist James Fisher gives a more balanced view , writing in 1941 :

His world is round and simple and complete ; the British country ; the perfect escape .

The medical historian Richard Barnett writes that

" White has the strange power to make natural historians of his readers , whether gardeners , historians or biologists " , noting that this demands analysis . He observes further that " White is straight out of Jane Austen . If it were not for his fame as a naturalist and writer , nothing in his life would distinguish him from hundreds of country parsons in the 18th and 19th centuries . The Natural History of Selborne is an oddly unassuming masterpiece , its haphazard construction revealing the process by which White came to write it . "

Barnett notes , too , that

Part of White 's appeal lies in this ability to summon a powerful , particular vision of pre @-@ industrial England . He offers his readers the key to a walled garden of mellow Queen Anne brick , lying beside Thomas Gray 's country churchyard and an ancient water meadow .

Yale nonfiction tutor Fred Strebeigh , writing in Audubon magazine in 1988 , compared White with Henry Thoreau 's Walden :

Out of the ruts and the ways of its village , Selborne fashioned a new natural history . It spoke simply , with a human voice . But it looked profoundly . It pioneered a way for students of nature who wished , as White did , not to roam the high Arctic or far Pacific but to fathom their own terrain . It offered a wide world to anyone willing to dig deep . Selborne said : watch narrowly , skim close to the ground . It whispered , hushed , what Thoreau would later broadcast : " We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live . Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface , nor leaped as many above it . We know not where we are . " In those words , as in all Walden , Thoreau may have had in mind the village of Selborne and the Reverend Gilbert White--the town reached only by ruts running well beneath the surface , the man whose book had leapt the ruts to round the globe .

Tobias Menely of Indiana University notes that the book " has garnered praise from Coleridge , Carlyle , Darwin , Ruskin , Woolf , and Auden " and that

Selborne 's reception in the two hundred years since its initial publication o?ers a vivid instance of the retrospective idealization that transforms history into heritage .

The naturalist Richard Mabey writes in his biography of White that

I must confess that , like many others , I did not come painlessly to the Natural History . For years I was put off by the aura of sanctity and bluffness which seemed to surround it . It was the kind of book presented on prize @-@ giving days , and I saw it as a work , in all senses , of the old school . Even when I eventually came to read it , I cannot say my opinion changed dramatically . I could not cope at first with its rambling disorder , its sudden plunges into thickets of taxonomic Latin , and , for a while , I failed to notice the feeling behind the often dispassionate prose .

= = Manuscript = =

The manuscript for the book stayed in the White family until 1895 , when it was auctioned at Sotheby 's . The purchaser was Stuart M. Samuel , who mounted the letters and bound the book in green Morocco leather . His library was sold in 1907 . The manuscript was bought by the dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach in 1923 , and passed into the collection of Arthur A. Houghton . The Houghton collection was auctioned by Christie 's in 1980 , where the manuscript was purchased by and for Gilbert White 's museum at The Wakes , Selborne , where it is displayed .

= = Legacy = =

Thomas Bewick , in the first volume (Land Birds) of his A History of British Birds (1797) , presents a phenological list of 19 birds which are " chiefly selected from Mr. White 's Natural History of Selborne , and are arranged nearly in the order of their appearing " . The list begins with the wryneck (" Middle of March ") , places the cuckoo in the middle of April , and ends with the flycatcher in the middle of May .

White 's Natural History has been continuously in print since its first publication . A paperback edition of The Illustrated Natural History of Selborne was reprinted by Thames & Hudson in 2007 . It was long held (" apocryphally " , according to White 's biographer , Richard Mabey) to be the fourth @-@ most published book in the English language after the Bible , the works of Shakespeare , and John Bunyan 's The Pilgrim 's Progress .

White 's frequent accounts of a tortoise inherited from his aunt in The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne form the basis for Verlyn Klinkenberg 's book , Timothy ; or , Notes of an Abject Reptile (2006) , as well as for Sylvia Townsend Warner 's The Portrait of a Tortoise (1946) .

= = = Versions of the book = = =

Archive.org : 1841 edition (Harper and brothers , New York)

Biodiversity Library : 1813 edition

Biodiversity Library : 1877 edition

Archive.org : 1880 edition (complete with Antiquities)

Project Gutenberg edition

Kindle edition (free)

= = = = Audio = = = =

The Natural History of Selborne public domain audiobook at LibriVox

= = = About the book = = =

Review in Nature , 1901 (paywall)

Review of Dadswell 's The Selborne Pioneer by Richard Barnett , 2007

Gilbert White 's Cosmopolitan Parochialism by Tobias Meneley

Letter @-@ Writers . Bartleby 's Cambridge History of Literature , 1907 ? 1921