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Informal  
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### White's Selborne

It is now within a year of a century since Gilbert White died at Selborne in the same house in which, seventy three years before, he had been born. Selborne a quiet village or parish in Hampshire about fifty miles southwest of London would have remained obscure but for its association with the name of White. It is to-day as much of a household word in England as the Stratford of Shakespeare, the Howarden of Gladstone, or the Haworth of Charlotte Brontë; for in giving to the world the "Natural History of Selborne" Gilbert White gave the first impetus to the study of Natural History by modern method of observation and induction. He has been called the "Father of English Natural History", and to the student of science the little record of his daily walks at Selborne as well known and interesting as the works of Ray or Linnaeus. Before his time the method of Natural science had been to start with an orthodox theory. It seemed to White that the business of the Naturalist was to avoid theories, and patiently to collect evidence by personal observation. The simple daily record of these observations combined in a series of letters to two friends, Thomas Pennant and Davies Barrington, were first published in 1789 as the Natural History of Selborne. We know much better now of some of the matters upon which he expressed himself a hundred years ago. He committed errors in judgment yet the temper and attitude of his mind was scientific and upon modern lines; and his modest efforts to get at the facts without parading authority and claiming omniscience remind one of Darwin or Huxley. But my purpose is not to speak of Gilbert White, the Naturalist, though it may incidentally result that I get upon his favorite subject of birds and especially swallows, swifts and martins. The purpose is to say something of him as a writer of pure English. It is as a literary character that I am thinking of him, and yet I venture to say that nothing would have astonished Gilbert White more than the suggestion that modest correspondence to his friends about field mice, barn swallows, hedge sparrows and weasels should even be mentioned not merely as a text book but as "literature", but so it is with his book, as for White's Selborne, it keeps company with Addison and Steele, Charles Lamb, Sterne and the rest of those who charm as much by the manner, as the interest in the matter of their discourse. I know of no book that has had the same experience except it be Isaac Walton's "Complete Anger". It is as if some Doctor in the club should write a series of reports on Hospital work to some distant congenial fellow-physician, and afterwards these letters should be taken up for their mere charm of style by a literary public and enjoyed for a hundred years by people who knew nothing of matters surgical or medical and cared less, but still were charmed. Over thirty

editions of White's Selborne have been published in England and this country. It has appeared in German and I think in French.

Gilbert White came of good old English family; was educated at Oxford (Oriental College); took orders and became curate of Selborne and never married. I have never seen his picture; but if I ever do as I hope to, it will show I know the face of a fine grained gentle, thoughtful man.

He spent his middle life in this little parish, the size of which he thus describes; "Those who tread the bounds are employed part of three days in the business and are of opinion that the outline in all its curves and indentions does not comprise less than thirty miles". That was his world. With the exception of an occasional trip to London he almost never left it. So closely once absorbed in his study of nature and so shut off once from the world, that in all his correspondence there is not a single allusion to the great events that were passing in English History; Clive was conquering India; America declared her independence, fought for it, and gained it by the treaty of Paris. The English were fighting the Allied armies for the possession of Gibraltar; to say nothing of the rise and fall of a great ministry, and a king who was not so great. Yet no mention is made by White of them; and this is the more curious inasmuch as he corresponded with his brother who was stationed at Gibraltar it was not however war but of the migration of birds that he heard from his brother.

This matter of the migration of birds, and particularly of a species known as Hirundines, was one which seemed to excite a deep interest in Gilbert White, and to have filled a large place in his scientific investigations. He continued, all his life, to hold the then prevalent opinion that the swallow family hibernated in England, and did not migrate with other birds, to warmer climates during the winter.

His doubts and conjectures on this subject form an interesting episode running through the entire natural history; and he died without having solved the matter to his own satisfaction.

In the risk of boring those who may regard such questions as the migration or not of house martins unworthy of their attention, I will give at random some quotations from White's observations on this subject; serving, at the same time, to illustrate the modesty of the man and the charm of his English.

In a letter to Mr. Pennant he says: "It has been my misfortune never to have had any neighbors whose studies have led them towards the pursuit of natural knowledge; so that, for want of a companion to quicken my industry and sharpen my attention I have made but slender progress in the kind of information to which I have been attached from child-hood.

As to swallows (*Hirundines rusticae*) being found in a torpid state during the winter in the Isle of Wight or any part of this country, I never heard any such account worth attending to. But a clergyman of an inquisitive turn assures me that when he was a great boy, some workmen, in pulling down the battlement of a church tower, early in the spring, found two or three swifts (*Hirundines apodes*) among the rubbish, which were at first appearance dead; but on being brought towards the fire revived. He told me that out of his great care to preserve them, he put them in a paper bag and hung them by the kitchen fire, where they were suffocated. Another intelligent person has informed me that while he was a school boy at Brighthelstone in Sussex, a great fragment of the chalk cliff fell down one stormy night on the beach, and that many people found swallows among the rubbish”.

Now note the honest temper of his mind, notwithstanding he is dealing with evidence in support of his favorite theory.

“But on my questioning him whether he saw any of those birds himself, to my no small disappointment, he answered me in the negative”,

One of the old theories as to the hibernation of swallows was that they spent the winter under water. So we find White in a later letter saying:

“About 10 years ago I used to spend some weeks yearly at Sunbury, which is one of those pleasant villages lying on the Thames, near Hampton Court. In the Autumn I could not help being much amused by those myriads of the swallow kind which assembled in those parts. But what struck me most was that from the time that they began to congregate, forsaking the chimneys and houses, they roosted every night in the osier beds of the aits of that river. Now this resorting towards that element at that season of the year, seems to give some countenance to the northern opinion (strange as it is) of their retiring underwater . . . . An observing gentleman in London writes me word that he saw a house Martin on the 23rd of last October, flying in and out of its nest in the borough. And I myself on the 29th of last October (as I was traveling through Oxford) saw four or five swallows hovering around and settling on the roof of the county hospital.

Now, is it likely that those poor little birds (which perhaps had not been hatched but a few weeks) should at that late season of the year; and from so midland a country, attempt a voyage to Gorce or Senegal, almost as far as the equator?”

In another letter to the same person he writes: “I have no acquaintance at present, among the gentlemen of the Navy, but have written to a friend who was a sea captain in the late war desiring him to look into his minutes with respect to birds that settled on their reading during their voyage up and down the

channel . . . . What you suggest with regard to Spain, is highly probable. The winters of Andalusia are so mild that in all likelihood the soft billed birds that leave us at that season may find insects sufficient to support them there. Some young men possessed of fortune and health and leisure, should make an Autumnal voyage into that kingdom; and should spend a year there investigating the natural history of that vast country.”

In a still later letter he says: “One of my neighbors last Saturday, November 26th, saw a martin in a sheltered bottom; the sun shone warm, and the bird was hawking briskly after flies. I am now perfectly satisfied that they do not leave this island in the winter”.

A year later, in 1769, he again writes on his favorite subject: “if I ever saw anything like actual migration, it was last Michaelmas day. I was traveling, and out early in the morning: at first there was a vast fog; but by the time that I was got seven or eight miles from home towards the coast, the sun broke out into a delicate warm day. We were then on a large heath or common, and I could discern, as the mist began to break away, great numbers of swallows (*Hirundines rusticae*) clustering on the stunted shrubs and bushes, as if they had roosted there all night. As soon as the air had become clear and pleasant they were all on the wing at once; and, by a placid and easy flight, proceeded toward the sea; after this I did not see any more flocks, only now and then a straggler.”

The subject of migration evidently vexed him, and he could not solve it to his own satisfaction.

“When,” says he “I used to rise in the morning last Autumn, and see the swallows and martins clustering on the chimneys and thatch of the neighboring cottages, I could not help being touched with a secret delight, to observe with how much ardor and punctuality those poor little birds obeyed the strong impulse toward migration, or hiding, imprinted on their minds by their great Creator; and with some degree of modification when I reflected that, after all our pains and inquiries, we are not yet quite certain to what regions they do migrate; and are still further embarrassed to find that some do not actually migrate at all.”

These reflections made so strong an impression on my imagination, that they became productive of a composition that may perhaps amuse you for a quarter of an hour when next I have the honor to write you.”

And, sure enough, a succeeding letter brought a short column addressed to Thomas Pennant Esq.; the conclusion of which I think worth quoting here. After speaking of several objects in nature, the songs of birds, and other rural incidents, he thus describes the glow-worm, as to which it is well known that the male glow-worm is a dark scaraboeus, with no power of emitting light. The female glow-

worm, however, having crawled to the top stalks of grass for the purpose of making herself more conspicuous from afar, has the power of emitting light, as a signal to the male.

“The chilling night dews fall away: away retire:  
For see, the glowworm lights her amorous fire:  
Thus, ere nights veil had half obscured the sky  
Th' impatient damsel hung her lamp on high:  
True to the signal, by love's meteor lead,  
Leander hasten'd to his Hero's bed.”

A few days later we find him again on his subject of migration, while writing to his friend Pennant:

“It gives me satisfaction to find that my account of the ousel migration pleases you. You put a very shrewd question when you asked me how I know that their autumnal migration is southward? Was not candor and openness the very life of natural history, I should pass over this query just as a slight commentator does over a crabbed passage in a classic; but common ingeniousness obliges me to confess, not without some degree of shame, that I only reasoned in the case from analogy.”

Three or four years later, writing to Mr. Barrington we find White saying:

“You are, I know, no great friend to migration; and the well attested accounts from various parts of the kingdom, seem to justify you in your suspicions that at least many of the swallows kind do not leave us in the winter, but lay themselves up, like insects and bats, in a torpid state, and slumber away the more uncomfortable months until the return of the sun and fine weather awakens them.

But then we must not, I think, deny migration in general because migration certainly does subsist in some places, as my brother in Andalusia has fully informed me. . . . . It does not appear to me that much stress may be laid on the difficulty and hazard that birds must run in their migrations by reason of vast oceans, cross-winds, etc.; because if we reflect, a bird may travel from England to the equator without launching out and exposing itself to boundless seas, and that by crossing the water at Dover, and again at Gibraltar. And I with the more confidence advance this obvious remark, because my brother has always found that some of his birds, and particularly the swallow kind, are very sparing of their pains in crossing the Mediterranean; for when arrived at Gibraltar they do not

“..... ranged in figure wedge their way,  
..... And set forth  
their airy caravan high over the seas  
Flying, and over land with mutual wing

Erasing their flight;

Milton.

But scout and hurry along in little detached parties of six or seven in a company; and sweeping low, just over the surface of the land and water, directed their course to the opposite continent at the narrowest passage they can find. They usually slope across the bay to the Southwest, and so pass over opposite Tangier, which, it seems, is the narrowest space.”

A later letter opens with this sentiment:

“I received your favor of the 8th and am pleased to find that you read my little history of the swallow with your usual candor; nor was I less pleased that you made objections where you saw a reason.”

This is the language of a companionable man, who may have opinions without arrogance or super sensitiveness.

This sentence, in an earlier letter would not be a bad motto for politicians to paste in their hats. “Ingenious men will readily advance plausible arguments to support whatever theory they shall choose to maintain; but then the misfortune is, they are all founded on conjecture”.

Any one who re[t]ains a liking for his Latin and Greek, will be pleased with the facility with which White illustrates his scientific points with apt quotations from the classics.

By the end of November 1777 he comes near a settled opinion on the subject of hibernation of swallows saying:

“It is reasonable to suppose that to whole species or at least many individuals of the species of British Hurundines to never leave this island at all, but partake of the same benumbed state; for we cannot suppose that, after a month's absence, house Martins can return from southern regions to appear for one morning in November, or that house swallows should leave the district of Asia to enjoy in March the transient Summer of a couple of days”.

I have not room for more about these favorite birds of White, but I must invoke a phrase of controversy with Scopoli the Italian Naturalist, as characteristic of White's mild manner of contradiction.

“Scopoli's new work (which I have just procured) has its merit in ascertaining many of the birds of the key Tyrol and Carniola. Monographers,, from whence they may, have, I think, fair pretense as no man can investigate alone the works of nature, these partial writers may each in their department, be more accurate in their discoveries and freer from errors than more general writers; and so by degrees pave the way to an universal correct natural history. Not that Scopoli is

so circumstantial and attentive to the life and conversation of his birds as I could wish; he advances some false facts; as when he says of *Hirundo urbica* that "pullos extra nidum non nutria". This assertion I know to be wrong from reported observation this Summer; for House Martins do feed their young flying though it must be acknowledged not so commonly as the house swallow; and the feed is done in so quick a manner as not to be perceptible to indifferent observers. He also advances (I was going to say) improbable facts; as when he says of the Woodcock that "pullos rostro portat fugiens ab hoste". But candor forbids me to say absolutely that any fact is false because I have never been witness to such a fact. I have only to remark, that the long unwieldy bill of the Woodcock is perhaps the worst adapted of any among the winged creation for such a feat of natural affection."

He was always it would seem anxious not to appear to boast or dictate or lecture; (an anxiety little felt in these days so far as I noticed). At the conclusion of a letter into which he had crowded more than the usual quantity and variety of information, he says:

"on a retrospect I observed that my long letter carries with it a quaint and magisterial air, but when I recollect that you requested stricture and anecdote, I hope you will pardon the didactic manner for the sake of the information it may happen to contain".

Though there was every reason to indulge in pardonable pride at the thoroughness and magnitude of his researches, he had that belittling notion of his own labor that is said to have distinguished Isaac Newton. When urged by Mr. Barrington to write a formal history of the animals of Hampshire and vicinity, White answers thus:

"Your partiality towards my small abilities persuades you, I fear, that I am able to do more than is in my power: for it is no small undertaking for a man unsupported and alone to begin a natural history from his own autopsy. Though there is room for observation in the field of nature, which is boundless, yet investigation (where a man endeavors to be sure of his facts) can make but slow progress; and all that one could collect in many years would go into a very narrow compass."

As examples of curious bits of personal observation, I take the following and random:

"Birds that fly by night are obliged to be noisy: their notes often repeated become signals or watchwords to keep them together that they may not stray or lose each other in the dark".

Speaking of a tortoise that lived on his grounds and of which he made a most careful and interesting study:

“No part of its behavior ever struck me more than the extreme timidity it always expresses with regard to the rain; for though it has a shell that would secure it against the wheel of a loaded cart, yet does it discover as much solicitude about rain as a lady dressed in all her best attire, shuffling away on the first spring rain and running its head up in a corner”.

Again:

“When owls fly they stretch out their legs behind them as a balance to the heavy heads, for ia most nocturnal birds have large eyes and ears, they must have large heads to contain them. Large eyes, I presume, necessary to collect every ray of light and large concave ears to command the smallest degree of sound or noise.”

Writing again of owls he says, “They all hoot in B flat.”

“Most birds” he says “drink sipping at intervals; but pigeons take long continuous draughts like quadrupeds”.

Speaking of animals drinking reminds me of what he says of deer in that regard:

“When deer are thirsty they plunge their noses, like some horses, very deep under the water, while in the act of drinking and continue them in that situation for a considerable time: but to obviate any inconvenience they can open two vents, one at the inner corner of each eye, having communication with the nose..... This curious formation of the head may be of singular service to beast of chase, by affording them free respiration: and no doubt these additional nostrils are thrown open when they are hard pressed..... And we know that grooms and gentlemen of the turf, think large nostrils necessary and a perfection in hunters and running horses.

Those of the club who remember Darwin's most interesting essay on “Earth worms” will be struck with the shrewdness of Gilbert White's diagnosis of their uses!

“Earthworms, though in appearance a small and despicable link in the chain of nature, yet if lost, would make a lamentable chasm..... Worms seem to be the great promoters of vegetation which would proceed but lamely without them, by boring, perforating, and loosening the soil, and rendering it pervious to rains and the fibre of plants, by drawing straws and stalks of leaves and twigs into it: a and most of all (and here he gets close to the truth) by throwing up such infinite numbers of lumps of earth called worm casts, which being their excrement, is a fine manure for grain and grass.”

“These hints,” he says, “we think proper to throw out in order to set the inquisitive and discerning to work. A good monograph of worms would afford much entertainment and information at the same time, and would open a large and new field in Natural History”.

Letters XLII and XLIII to Daines Barrington upon the manner of flight, and the notes and cries of various birds, are to a man who gets close to nature when he walks in the fields, intensely interesting. To such, and there are those of course who read Thoreau and Burroughs, Gilbert White is a friend and a resource. The man who craves highly spiced literature, whether of incident, argument or style, three times a day and all the time will find White insipid. I will venture however to recommend him to any if such there be in this club who have not read him.

Listen to what James Russell Lowell says of him and Isaac Walton or rather of the two books, “The Complete Angler” and the “Natural History of Selborne”, in one of his latest literary essays written in 1889.

“They cannot be called popular because they attract only a limited number of readers, but that number is kept full by new recruits in every generation; and they have survived every peril to which editing could expose them, even the crowning one illustration. They have this in common, that those who love them find themselves growing more and more to love the authors of them too. . . . Nature had endowed these men with the simple skill to make happiness out of the cheap material that is within the means of the poorest of all. . . . They did not waste their time or strive to show their cleverness in discussing whether life was worth living, but found every precious moment of it so without seeking, or made it so without grimace, and with no thought that they were doing anything worth remark.

Joseph Wilby

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