

Classic Poetry Series

Gilbert White
- poems -

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Gilbert White(18 July 1720 – 26 June 1793)

Gilbert White FRS was a pioneering English naturalist and ornithologist.

Life

White was born in his grandfather's vicarage at Selborne in Hampshire. He was educated at the Holy Ghost School and by a private tutor in Basingstoke before going to Oriel College, Oxford. He obtained his deacon's orders in 1746, being fully ordained in 1749, and subsequently held several curacies in Hampshire and Wiltshire, including Selborne's neighbouring parishes of Newton Valence and Farringdon, as well as Selborne itself on four separate occasions. In 1752/53 White held the office of Junior Proctor at Oxford and was Dean of Oriel. In 1757 he became non-resident perpetual curate of Moreton Pinkney in Northamptonshire. After the death of his father in 1758, White moved back into the family home at The Wakes in Selborne, which he eventually inherited in 1763. In 1784 he became curate of Selborne for the fourth time, remaining so until his death. Having studied at the more prestigious Oriel, at the behest of his uncle, he was ineligible to be considered for the permanent living of Selborne, which was in the gift of Magdalen College.

The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne

White is best known for his *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789). This was a compilation of his letters to Thomas Pennant, the leading British zoologist of the day, and the Hon. Daines Barrington, an English barrister and another Fellow of the Royal Society. These letters contained White's discoveries about local birds, animals and plants. He believed in distinguishing birds by observation rather than by collecting specimens, and was thus one of the first people to separate the similar-looking Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Wood Warbler by means of their song.

White is regarded by many as England's first ecologist and one of the founders of modern respect for nature. He said of the earthworm:

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...

White and William Markwick collected records of the dates of emergence of more than 400 plant and animal species, White recording in Hampshire and Markwick in Sussex between 1768 and 1793. These data, summarised in *The Natural*

History and Antiquities of Selborne as the earliest and latest dates for each event over the 25-year period, are among the earliest examples of modern phenology. His 1783–84 diary corroborates the dramatic climatic impacts of the volcanic 'Laki haze' that spread from Iceland with lethal consequences across Europe. 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).

Gilbert White's famous work has been continuously in print since its first publication and is one of the most frequently published books in the English language; it is available from the Gutenberg Project. The paperback edition of *The Illustrated Natural History of Selborne* was last reprinted by Thames & Hudson in 2007. It was long held 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*.

Gilbert White's sister Anne was married to Thomas Barker (1722-1809), called 'The father of meteorology', and Gilbert maintained a correspondence with his nephew Samuel Barker, who also kept a naturalist's journal.

Commemoration

His house in Selborne, The Wakes, now contains the Gilbert White Museum, as well as the Oates Memorial Museum, commemorating Frank and Lawrence Oates.

The Selborne Society was founded in 1895 to perpetuate the memory of Gilbert White. It purchased land at Perivale in West London to create the first Bird Sanctuary in Britain, known as Perivale Wood. In the 1970s, Perivale Wood became a Local Nature Reserve. This was designated by Ealing Borough Council under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. It was at the instigation of small group of young naturalists led by Edward Dawson, with the support of Andrew Duff, Peter Edwards and Kevin Roberts.

The Gilbert White Fellowship was founded in 1932 by Winifred Boyd Watt, a historian and naturalist. It was based at Oxford, but was unable to gain continued financial sponsorship. Suggestions to revive it have been made in 2010 as part of the Selborne Society's Gilbert White Memorial Library relocation.

White is quoted by Merlyn in *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White.

A biography of White by Richard Mabey was published by Century Hutchinson in 1986, and won the Whitbread Biography of the Year award.

A documentary about White, presented by historian Michael Wood, was broadcast by BBC Four in 2006.

He is commemorated in the inscription on the heaviest of eight bells installed in 2009 at Holybourne, Hampshire.

A Harvest Scene

Wak'd by the gentle gleamings of the morn,
Soon clad, the reaper, provident of want
Hies cheerful hearted to the ripen'd field;
Nor hastes alone; attendant by his side
His faithful wife, sole partner of his cares,
Bears on her breast the sleeping babe; behind
With steps unequal trips her infant train:
Thrice happy pair, in love and labour join'd! --
All day they ply their task; with mutual chat
Beguiling each the sultry, tedious hours:
Around them falls in rows the sever'd corn,
Or the shocks rise in regular array.
But when high noon invites to short repast
Beneath the shade of sheltering thorn they sit,
Divide the simple meal, and drain the cask:
The swinging cradle lulls the whimpering babe,
Meantime; while growling round, if at the tread
Of hasty passenger alarm'd, as of their store
Protective, stalks the cur with bristling back,
To guard the scanty scrip and russet frock.

Gilbert White

On The Dark, Still, Dry Warm Weather

Th'imprison'd winds slumber within their caves
Fast bound: the fickle vane, emblem of change,
Wavers no more, long-settling to a point.
All nature nodding seems compos'd: thick steams
From land, from flood up-drawn, dimming the day,
"Like a dark ceiling stand:" slow thro' the air
Gossamer floats, or stretch'd from blade to blade
The wavy net-work whitens all the field.
Push'd by the weightier atmosphere, up springs
The ponderous Mercury, from scale to scale
Mounting, amidst the Torricellian tube.
While high in air, and pois'd upon his wings
Unseen, the soft, enamour'd wood-lark runs
Thro' all his maze of melody; -- the brake
Loud with the black-bird's bolder note resounds.
Sooth'd by the genial warmth, the cawing rook
Anticipates the spring, selects her mate,
Haunts her tall nest-trees, and with sedulous care
Repairs her wicker eyrie, tempest torn.
The plough-man inly smiles to see upturn
His mellow glebe, best pledge of future crop:
With glee the gardener eyes his smoking beds:
E'en pining sickness feels a short relief.
The happy school-boy brings transported forth
His long-forgotten scourge, and giddy gig:
O'er the white paths he whirls the rolling hoop,
Or triumphs in the dusty fields of taw.
Not so the museful sage: -- abroad he walks
Contemplative, if haply he may find
What cause controuls the tempest's rage, or whence
Amidst the savage season winter smiles.
For days, for weeks, prevails the placid calm.
At length some drops prelude a change: the sun
With ray refracted bursts the parting gloom;
When all the chequer'd sky is one bright glare.
Mutters the wind at eve: th' horizon round
With angry aspect scowls: down rush the showers,
And float the delug'd paths, and miry fields.

The Invitation To Selborne

See Selborne spreads her boldest beauties round
The varied valley, and the mountain ground,
Wildly majestic! what is all the pride
Of flats, with loads of ornament supply'd?
Unpleasing, tasteless, impotent expense,
Compar'd with nature's rude magnificence.
Arise, my stranger, to these wild scenes haste
The unfinish'd farm awaits your forming taste:
Plan the pavilion, airy, light and true;
Thro' the high arch call in the lengthening view;
Expand the forest sloping up the hill;
Swell to a lake the scant, penurious rill;
Extend the vista, raise the castle mound
In antique taste, with turrets ivy-crown'd;
O'er the gay lawn the flow'ry shrub dispread,
Or with the blending garden mix the mead;
Bid China's pale, fantastic fence, delight,
Or with the mimic statue trap the sight.
Oft on some evening, sunny, soft and still,
The Muse shall lead thee to the beech-grown hill,
To spend in tea the cool, refreshing hour,
Where nods in air the pensile, nest-like bower;
Or where the Hermit hangs the straw-clad cell,
Emerging gently from the leafy dell;
By fancy plann'd; as once th' inventive maid
Met the boar sage amid the secret shade;
Romantic spot! from whence in prospect lies
Whate'er of landscape charms our feasting eyes;
The pointed spire, the hall, the pasture-plain,
The russet fallow, or the golden grain,
The breezy lake that sheds a gleaming light,
Till all the fading picture fail the sight.
Each to his task; all different ways retire,
Cull the dry stick; call forth the seeds of fire;
Deep fix the kettle's props, a forky row,
Or give with fanning bat the breeze to blow.
Whence is this taste, the furnish'd hall forgot,
To feast in gardens, or th'unhandy grot?
Or novelty with some new charms surprizes,

Or from our very shifts some joy arises.
Hark, while below the village-bells ring round,
Echo, sweet nymph, returns the soften'd sound;
But if gusts rise, the rushing forests roar,
Like the tide tumbling on the pebbly shore.
Adown the vale, in lone, sequester'd nook,
Where skirting woods imbrown the dimpling brook,
The ruin'd Convent lies; here wont to dwell
The lazy canon midst his cloistered cell;
While papal darkness brooded o'er the land,
Ere reformation made her glorious stand:
Still oft at eve belated shepherd-swains
See the cowl'd spectre skim the folded plains.
To the high temple would my stranger go,
The mountain-brow commands the woods below;
In Jewry first this order found a name,
When madding Croisades set the world in flame;
When western climes, urg'd on by Pope and priest,
Pour'd forth their millions o'er the deluged east;
Luxurious knights, ill suited to defy
To mortal fight Turcéstan chivalry.
Nor be the Parsonage by the muse forgot.
The partial bard admires his native spot;
Smit with its beauties, loved, as yet a child,
(Unconscious why) its scapes grotesque, and wild.
High on a mound th' exalted gardens stand,
Beneath, deep vallies scoop'd by nature's hand.
A Cobham here, exulting in his art,
Might blend the General's with the Gardener's part;
Might fortify with all the martial trade
Of rampart, bastion, fosse, and palisade;
Might plant the mortar with wide threatening bore,
Or bid the mimic cannon seem to roar.
Now climb the steep, drop now your eye below,
Where round the blooming village orchards grow;
There, like a picture, lies my lowly seat,
A rural, shelter'd, unobserved retreat.
Me far above the rest Selbornian scenes,
The pendent forests, and the mountain-greens
Strike with delight; there spreads the distant view,
That gradual fades till sunk in misty blue:
Here nature hangs her slopy woods to sight,

Rills purl between and dart a quivering light.

Gilbert White

The Naturalist's Summer-Evening Walk

To Thomas Pennant, Esquire.

... equidem credo, quia sit divinitus illis
Ingenium.
Virg., Georg.

When day declining sheds a milder gleam,
What time the may-fly haunts the pool or stream;
When the still owl skims round the grassy mead,
What time the timorous hare limps forth to feed;
Then be the time to steal adown the vale,
And listen to the vagrant cuckoo's tale;
To hear the clamorous curlew call his mate,
Or the soft quail his tender pain relate;
To see the swallow sweep the dark'ning plain
Belated, to support her infant train;
To mark the swift in rapid giddy ring
Dash round the steeple, unsubdu'd of wing:
Amusive birds! -- say where your hid retreat
When the frost rages and the tempests beat;
Whence your return, by such nice instinct led,
When spring, soft season, lifts her bloomy head?
Such baffled searches mock man's prying pride,
The God of Nature is your secret guide!
While deep'ning shades obscure the face of day
To yonder bench leaf-shelter'd let us stray,
'Till blended objects fail the swimming sight,
And all the fading landscape sinks in night;
To hear the drowsy dorr come brushing by
With buzzing wing, or the shrill cricket cry;
To see the feeding bat glance through the wood;
To catch the distant falling of the flood;
While o'er the cliff th'awakened churn-owl hung
Through the still gloom protracts his chattering song;"
While high in air, and pois'd upon his wings,
Unseen, the soft, enamour'd woodlark sings:
These, Nature's works, the curious mind employ,
Inspire a soothing melancholy joy:

As fancy warms, a pleasing kind of pain
Steals o'er the cheek, and thrills the creeping vein!
Each rural sight, each sound, each smell, combine;
The tinkling sheep-bell, or the breath of kine;
The new-mown hay that scents the swelling breeze,
Or cottage-chimney smoking through the trees.
The chilling night-dews fall: away, retire;
For see, the glow-worm lights her amorous fire!
Thus, ere night's veil had half obscur'd the sky,
Th'impatient damsel hung her lamp on high:
True to the signal, by love's meteor led,
Leander hasten'd to his Hero's bed.

I am , & c.

Gilbert White