Gilbert White (1720 - 1793) English Naturalist Encyclopedia Article

Gilbert White (1720 - 1793) English Naturalist

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Gilbert White was born in 1720 in the village of Selborne, Hampshire, England. The eldest of eight children, he was expected to attend college and join the priesthood. He earned his bachelor's degree at Oxford in 1743 and his master's degree in 1746. A fair student, White was well known for his rambunctious and romantic exploits. White developed a fuller sense of religious identity after college. He was ordained a priest three years after leaving Oxford and was subsequently assigned to a parish near his family home in Hampshire, known as "The Wakes." His religious perspective played an important role throughout the rest of his life, and this is reflected in the beauty and gentleness of his writings.

It was at The Wakes that White began studying **nature** and recording his observations in letters and daily diary notations, which also provide an interesting look at various aspects of local life. He was highly susceptible to carriage sickness and rarely traveled, and his writings therefore focused solely on his immediate environment—the gardens in the village of Selborne. He organized his observations in what he called his "Garden Kalendar," and in 1789, these notes, letters, and memos were combined to comprise *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, now considered a classic of English literature.

White's ability to write in a clear and unpretentious poetic style is evident throughout the book. He closely watched leaf warblers, cuckoos, and swallows, and unlike his contemporaries, he describes not just the anatomy and plumage of the birds, but their habits and habitats. He was the first to identify the harvest mouse, Britain's smallest mammal, and sketched its physical traits as well as noting its behaviors. *The Natural History* also presents descriptive passages of insect biology and wild flowers White found at Selborne.

After a brief illness, White died alone in his family home at the age of 72.

Resources

Books

Jenkins, A. C. *The Naturalists: Pioneers of Natural History*. New York: Mayflower Books, 1978.

Lockley, R. M. *Gilbert White*. London: H. F. and G. Witherby, 1954.