Flying into history

Richard Mabey

Biographies for Birdwatchers: The Lives of Those Commemorated in Western Palearctic Bird Names. By Barbara and Richard Mearns. *Academic*: 1988. Pp. 490. £17.50, \$35.

SHOULD birds, like dahlias and diseases, be named after people? It is a practice that has survived into the twentieth century, yet it seems a curious hangover from the age of magic, this occasional appropriation of a living creature for the person who first identified it, or shot it, or who just happened to be inspiring the namer at the time.

In this exhaustive study, Barbara and Richard Mearns have sketched the biographies of all 91 people who figure in the scientific or popular names of Western Palearctic birds. They are a motley bunch, chiefly from the nineteenth century. The clergy are strongly represented, as are army officers and colonial servants, for whom exploration was part of the job. Britain heads the list, with 29 subjects, followed by Germany with 25. Only three women feature, and one of these is the unfortunate Thekla Brehm, who died — quite uninterested in birds — when she was 24, and was commemorated in Thekla's lark by her grieving naturalist father.

It is a long book, intended to be used for reference. But enquirers within should be warned that they may not find kindred spirits behind their favourite species. The Northumberland engraver Thomas Bewick, who learned his craft by copying the inscriptions from gravestones, certainly deserved to have a swan named after him (by William Yarrell). But it is not so pleasant to read of the antics of the man commemorated in one of the Mediterranean's commonest warblers. Franco Bonelli (1784–1830) was a zoologist from Piedmont whose notebooks describe 146 methods of catching birds. He 'so admired' his eponymous warbler that he kept one in a cage to study its plumage changes. Colonel George Montagu, of Montagu's harrier, was no better, a great collector and slaughterer who nonetheless had the temerity to lament the havoc caused by this kind of behaviour in others.

Eleonora of Arborea (c. 1350–1404) sounds altogether more interesting and worthy. She was a reforming warrior princess, who had Eleonora's falcon named after her in honour of the legislation she passed protecting birds of prey. But the authors suggest that this was simply to guarantee a market in falcons for the nobility, and for a truly honourable and appropriate naming one has to go to the knot, the little wading bird that Camden

Mary Evans

Thomas Bewick — a deserving case.

thought (probably quite erroneously) commemorated King Canute's (or Cnut's) tideline attachments.

It is a fact of history that most nineteenth-century ornithologists were cold-blooded anatomists, with no great skill in field observation or love for birds, and it is no fault of the Mearns that it is mostly this unedifying aspect of our 'dominion over nature' that is immortalized in the names of birds. They have done a thorough and valuable job of research, even if the results do make them appear a little like Henry Tristram's (of Grackle fame) Griffon vultures, which "took a peculiar interest in taxidermy, scrutinising, head on one side, the whole operation of bird-skinning, and perfectly aware of the moment when a morsel would be ready, exhibiting a more than ordinary excitement when they saw the skin drawn back over the head". Personally I would have preferred the more critical response of the Ivory-billed woodpecker captured by Alexander Wilson (Storm petrel and phalarope) which drilled a hole the size of a fist in his wall and covered his room with plaster in its efforts to escape.

There was a parallel nineteenth-century tradition which deplored reckless collecting and favoured the study of live birds in the field, and it is a comment on past social attitudes that none of this school has been commemorated. The last new naming (the Corsican nut-hatch, dubbed *Sitta ledanti* after the Belgian ecologist Jean-Paul Ledant) was as recent as 1976, so there may yet be opportunities to mend our ways. I would like to nominate for future coiners the still vacant titles of St Francis and St Cuthbert, Margaret Cavendish and John Clare. □

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Observer observed

Robert M. May

Gilbert White and His Records: A Scientific Biography. By Paul G. M. Foster. *Christopher Helm*, London: 1988. Pp. 240. £19.95.

GILBERT White wrote only one book, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (hereafter *Selborne*). The book was first published exactly 200 years ago, in 1788, and since that time new editions have continued to appear at an average rate of slightly more than one per year. The changing styles in the binding, illustration and design of the different editions form a record of changing taste and fashion against which the unchanging popularity of the book itself is remarkable.

Paul Foster is Head of English at the West Sussex Institute of Higher Educa-

tion. His book is not a conventional biography, but rather is an enquiry into the intellectual origins of *Selborne*: into how Gilbert White developed as an observer of the natural world around him, and how his book came into being. Foster, who appears to have an acquaintance with everything written by White (or written to him) that borders on the obsessive, surveys White's writing practices over more than four decades. The material includes: a *Garden-Kalender* which was kept as a record of the goings-on in the vicarage garden for over 20 years from 1751; the *Flora* of Selborne which records a concentrated study over the one year 1766; correspondence with a brother who sent White natural history specimens from Gibraltar while he was posted in the garrison there from 1769 to 1772; and the meticulous *Journals* of meteorological and other natural events which White kept from 1768 up to his death in 1793.

Foster presents this material in a lively

way, showing how the record of more-or-less private writing underpins *Selborne*, and "demonstrates White's systematic, if sometimes halting, development". More than this, Foster singles out those aspects of the work that set it apart from the usual compendium of curiosities, and give it a contemporary resonance.

One such aspect is White's use of deliberate experiments in pursuit of an understanding of what was going on around him. These vary from simple observations as to the efficacy of removing mouldiness from some melon plants by "the experiment of clipping off the infected parts with a pair of scissors", or experimenting with peat dust instead of old thatch in the bottom of potato trenches, through to sowing "a pot with cucumber-seeds, and set[ting] it by the parlour-fire for experiment-sake", to rather complex and detailed experiments carried out in connection with ventilating a hotbed. The great age of experiments in farming by the Russells and others (of which the Rothamsted Field Station is one legacy today) still lay about half a century ahead in White's time, and it would be interesting to see a larger analysis that explored the extent to which White's style and ideas, and this larger enterprise, were part of the same broad current.

Foster also presents an assessment of the accuracy of the observations recorded in White's writing, and in his *Journal* in particular. As Foster remarks, "to gain purchase on the level of accuracy deployed in the records of a natural historian two centuries ago is not easy. The best way would be to walk the lanes and paths of *Selborne* with White and to verify his

observations as he made them, but that is clearly impossible". Foster gives a careful analysis of the likelihood that White actually saw what he says he saw, and that the weather was as he recorded it, and decides if there are errors "they have crept into the record against White's practice, and against his conscious caution". To a degree unusual in the eighteenth century, White seems to have understood the procedures and problems of scientific record-keeping, noting that "the bane of our science is the comparing one animal to another by memory in order to describe it".

Although he spent most of his life in *Selborne*, White was not isolated. His correspondence includes exchanges with some of the most distinguished naturalists and travellers of his time (Lightfoot, Pennant and Banks among them). He maintained a lifelong involvement with the affairs of the Oxford college (Oriell) where he was an undergraduate and later Fellow, although — as described by Foster — the running of the college at that time seems to me to reflect little credit on anyone associated with it.

Foster's book is probably more for the *Selborne* aficionado than the general reader. It is, however, far more than the sadly common shoebox of file cards arranged by chronology or theme, and those with an interest in Gilbert White will find in it an engaging account of the intellectual odyssey of that remarkable man. □

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Radiating curiosity

Eric Denton

In Search of Nautilus. By Peter Douglas Ward. *Simon & Schuster: 1988. Pp. 238. \$19.95.*

THE pearly nautilus is one of the most beautiful and famous of all sea creatures, giving its name to the wondrous craft imagined by Jules Verne and to the submarine built early in the last century by Robert Fulton. It is evidently related to the fossil nautiloids and ammonoids and seems, much more than the coelocanth, to be the archetype of the 'fossil' animal. Peter Ward had two general aims in writing a book about this extraordinary animal. First, using nautilus research as an example, to show how fitful the scientific process can be. Secondly, to tell the story of nautilus itself. He has succeeded in both.

Ward begins by reviewing the earlier descriptions and speculations of Aristotle,

Robert Hooke, Richard Owen and others to bring his story to the end of the nineteenth century. The main business of zoologists was then widely believed to be that of understanding and following the processes of evolution, and great hopes were pinned on the study of the early development of animals during which they were thought to recapitulate their evolutionary history. The nautilus was felt to be a key animal. With this in mind, a very able Cambridge zoologist, Arthur Willey, spent the years 1894–1897 working on the nautilus in the south Pacific, always under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. He discovered a great deal but, although many of his animals laid eggs, he sadly failed to find any that were fertile.

The account of Willey's adventures and results is followed by an assessment of the researches of Anna Bidder, John Gilpin-Brown and myself in the early 1960s. My only 'complaint' about this account is that I am sure that I used either the expression, "damn all" or "sweet Fanny Adams" rather than that attributed to me on page

93. Ward then recounts the rapid advances made, mainly by American zoologists and geologists, during the past 20 years. He keeps a good balance between the development of scientific ideas, the ways in which the problems posed were solved, and the difficulties of research and dangers to researchers from boats, storms, sharks and bureaucrats. He is well acquainted with the scientists who have worked on the nautilus recently and has taken the trouble to meet those whom he did not know well.

The book concentrates on four sets of

Ancient design — the chambered nautilus.

problems. First, how does the nautilus achieve and use its buoyancy system? Secondly, where and how does it live? Thirdly, how many species are there and what is their place in evolutionary history? And, lastly, how does nautilus reproduce and what can we learn about evolution of cephalopods from its embryological 'history'? On all of these points Ward has a great deal of successful research to report, research that has given conclusive results which will not be overturned in future. He ends on two contrasting thoughts — that the latest work seems to show that, surprisingly, nautilus is a very young form in the midst of a great radiation of species and that, less surprisingly, its future is most threatened by man's predations.

A few years ago the New York Academy of Sciences decided to launch a project to help scientists and science writers to get books published for a popular audience. The aim was to communicate the excitement of discovery without drifting into superficiality. *In Search of Nautilus*, published as part of this project, is admirably successful in achieving the Academy's aims. It should attract a wide general readership, as well as the attention of professional geologists and zoologists who will find much of interest, lucidly and amusingly expressed by an acknowledged international authority. □

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