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Literary life

Richard Mabey

The Book of Naturalists: An Anthology of the Best Natural History. Edited by William Beebe. Princeton University Press: 1988. Pp. 499. Hbk \$45, £25.20; pbk \$12.50, £7.

TOWARDS the end of this "Anthology of the Best Natural History", there is a piece by Aldous Huxley's friend Gerald Heard, in which he tries to give a kind of report from the front on the discovery of flint tools. His jumpy, inquisitive "half-man" finds the nodules sticking out of a cave wall, scares himself silly striking sparks and eventually succeeds in splitting one open:

In the light he saw no spark. But it had been angry. When he looked at the nodule's end a corner had been bitten off. It was black inside. It had a faint smell. He licked the smooth black piece, then dropped it angrily. It had bitten him. His tongue was cut.

Enter proto-Stukeley, man the romantic geologist, alongside man the tool-maker.

Rather sadly there isn't much of this kind of blend of fascination and animism, which was later to produce the most imaginative writing on the natural world. William Beebe (1877–1962), who compiled the first edition of this classic collection in 1944, took a strictly rational and developmental view of natural history. Those first stone-agers may have set (or broken) the mould; but it was their intelligence, not their feelings, that was important. Since then, according to Beebe, there has been an ever continuous progression in increase of knowledge, an evolution worthy of comparison with that other evolution of animal life on our planet — the foundation of all our labors and our love of science.

Beebe charts this intellectual progress from Aristotle through Darwin to Rachel Carson, and lists the "ideal equipment" for a writer of literary natural history: enthusiasm, tempered with infinite patience and an absolute devotion to truth; keen senses; opportunity for observation; "thorough training in laboratory technique"; and so on.

With these criteria there is no room for writers such as Richard Jefferies and John Clare, exceptional observers who were nonetheless not prepared to see our relationships with nature in purely scientific terms. But it is a rich and intriguing anthology for all that, especially when its contributors are shown with their soft parts exposed. There is Frederick II explaining bird migration in 1245 — a remarkable insight not least because these vast, intricately navigated flights must have seemed so much less reasonable than, say, hibernation; Leeuwenhoek becoming quite soppy about the "little animals"

bustling about under his microscope; Linnaeus off-duty, describing the sloth in a footnote: it "turns its head as though in astonishment; call, an exciting sensarius; noise frightful, tears pitiful".

Charles Waterton's 1825 essay on the same animal is ponderous and affected by comparison; and the editor's preference, when it comes to the point, for the literal rather than the literary, means that there are also plenty of examples of the more pompous and domineering face of scientific natural history: Audubon omniscient on wild turkeys; Theodore Roosevelt preaching the masculine virtues of wilderness; Edward Armstrong patronizing the black guillemot ("a quaint, jolly, little fellow"). John Muir's lyrical account of the water ouzel (1894), in which he imagines the bird as an extension of its white-water habitat, is much better. But pushing the image as far as he can (the bird's form is "as smoothly compact as a pebble that has been whirled in a pot-hole") he obliterates the real bird by the metaphor.

Problems of this kind are endemic to nature writing. There are just no easy ways across the species barrier as there are in other kinds of literature. Empathy too easily degenerates into anthropomorphism. Minutely detailed objective descriptions can take the subject out of the land of the living altogether. The one constant is the observers themselves, and it may be that the proper — and certainly the most honest — subject of literary nature writing is not a biological 'object' but an encounter.

There is one outstanding example of this in Beebe's anthology, a moving account (1932) by Gustav Eckstein of some days shared with two pet rats. It is an extraordinary piece, affectionate, intuitive, piercingly observed, yet refusing to be contained within purely human terms of reference — nature writing for a world in which the kindredness of life has been realized.

Towards ten every evening the two take turns to bathe. I have fitted a board across the basin under the tap where the water drips one drop at a time. To be wet all over makes them very weak and very unhappy, but to catch one drop, and wash vigorously with that, and then catch another, that is different. I myself look forward to it — to see the way they rise from the board, put out those marvelous hands, and wait for the drop. □

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● On the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Aldo Leopold, the American conservationist, Oxford University Press have issued a commemorative edition of his *A Sand County Almanac*, first published in 1949. The book describes the changes in the Wisconsin countryside over a year. Price is \$17.95, £12.95.