

greatly adds to our understanding of this aspect of medical practice.

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Ted Dadswell, *The Selborne pioneer: Gilbert White as naturalist and scientist, a re-examination*, 2nd rev. ed., London, Centaur Press, 2006, pp. xix, 256, illus., £14.95 (paperback 978-0-900001-56-7).

Gilbert White is one of the few eighteenth-century writers to have gripped both academic and popular audiences. His *Natural history of Selborne*, published in 1788, has never been out of print, and his portrayal of a pre-industrial, perhaps prelapsarian, Britain has inspired generations of readers in search of lost times. Selborne—the Hampshire village in which White was born, lived and died—has become something of a shrine to this unassuming, Austen-esque country curate.

But Ted Dadswell, a teacher turned freelance historian, takes an ambivalent view of White's posthumous reputation. The "popular mythology" of White as an enthusiastic ingénue, and his charm as a "gifted and an unspoilt stylist" (p. x), have, Dadswell argues, hampered assessments of his work as a naturalist. Dadswell's aim is to rehabilitate White as "an early and quite extraordinary exponent of modern behavioural biology" (p. xvi), an innovator comparable in stature to Gregor Mendel or Charles Babbage. *The Selborne pioneer* is a modern "field guide" to the many faces of this gentleman-naturalist: the gardener, the theorist, the antiquarian, the sky-watcher, the consummate correspondent.

Dadswell approaches this task with the mindset of a modern naturalist. He explores the ways in which White both worked within and transcended the eighteenth-century taxonomical tradition. Record-keeping, a massive correspondence network and White's own "outdoor method" were central factors in the development of his idiosyncratic approach to natural history. Dadswell insists upon White's "self-contradictory" character (p. 8) as the key to understanding his writings, and highlights the

often-overshadowed socio-economic aspects of his life. Market gardening, for example, became a crucial means of supplementing White's clerical stipend and Oriel fellowship, helping him to "fulfil his responsibilities as a senior family member" (p. 14).

For the most part, however, Dadswell follows what might in his terms be called the "historical mythology" of White—the tendency to view his work primarily as a precursor to nineteenth-century natural science in general, and the work of Charles Darwin in particular. He frames White's natural history in terms of its relationship to current scientific thinking, correcting his "mistakes" and praising his anticipations of modern practices such as the use of "controls" in experiments. Though White was a professional Anglican for most of his life, Dadswell tries to interpret his work as an essentially secular scientific project, divorced from the wider context of eighteenth-century natural theological thought. There are clear problems with applying the concept of secular science, an ideology of the mid-nineteenth century, to the work of a clergyman-naturalist who died in 1793. Dadswell acknowledges this problem in his introduction but, despite repeated invocations of Locke, Hume and Paley, never really gets to grips with it.

Those who read White for pleasure will find little here to enhance their enjoyment. *The Selborne pioneer* is too descriptive, lacking focus, often content merely to repeat White's own observations. Historians will balk at the anachronistic appeals to present scientific practice. And even if modern naturalists—apparently Dadswell's intended audience—find his spirited polemic convincing, it is difficult to see what this presentist redescription of White as an exemplary field biologist will bring to their work. There remains a crying need for historians to return White to his own historical habitat, without any irritable reaching after contributions or "firsts". Much is lost when the Selborne curate is fixed and wriggling on a pin.

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