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Review: Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of *The Natural History of Selborne*.

By Richard Mabey

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Mabey, Richard. *Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of The Natural History of Selborne*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007. 239pp. ISBN 978-0-8139-2649-0. US\$16.50.

Permit me to commence with a little personal reminiscence. I grew up in a rural area, and at 8 years of age (a year prior to attending school as it entailed a three-mile walk), I was given a copy of White's *Natural History*. It confirmed my nascent interest in and feeling for the natural environment, and cemented it firmly into a permanent home within my mind.

White was one of the first to write about natural history with a "sense of intimacy, or wonder or respect – in short, of human engagement with nature." Many of those who read and re-read this wondrous book knew that White was curate in a small English village and that both Thomas Pennant and Daines Barrington had encouraged White to systematically record his observations and descriptive studies of the village. The outcome was the book that so many of us know and love – one of the most frequently published English language books of all time. It appears as a series of letters to each of White's great mentors.

Regrettably White wrote very little, even in his extensive journals and diaries, of his personal life or feelings. Mabey has made an exhaustive search of the available data, and has built a delightful re-construction of the author as a person.

He commences by describing the landscape and lanes of Selborne – which might have been designed to help the human observer to feel a relationship with nature. Gilbert's ancestors had long lived in the village and he had been born there, left for a considerable period, entered the university life at Oxford, but eventually returned to his home village and spent most of his life there. But the early years were full of wandering and seemingly seeking some purpose in life.

On returning, and his appointment as curate of the village, he developed an enthusiasm for gardening, and, in turn, this led him to his painstaking observation of the natural world and a remarkable holism in understanding it. He wrote elegantly of the scenes and creatures of his daily life, but again his approach was a rambling and somewhat directionless one. At one stage he played with the idea of a text but failed to find satisfaction. It is not quite clear why he decided to abandon this, although his regular correction of the errors made by his friend Thomas Pennant may well have been important – he was indeed a font of knowledge, but also had an underlying humility which made him aware of the impossibility of total knowledge. He was delighted in his voyaging through the ocean of ideas, but clearly found the voyage more satisfying than the arrival.

Then he realized that the story of his voyage was expressed in his letters to Pennant and Barrington, and that might be the basis of a real book. So, he devoted great attention to editing his letters. It has long been recognized that, in order to provide the context and introduction, he even wrote but never sent further "letters" to Pennant. Mabey gained access to both the original

letters and the total, often amended, cut and pasted final manuscript that went to publication. So, Mabey gives us not only the diverse life of the writer, but also the tumultuous life of the manuscript. Above all else, he shows how White provided a prototype of scholarship in natural history which serves us well even today.

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