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978-1-108-07649-4 - The Life and Letters of Gilbert White of Selborne: Volume 2

Edited by Rashleigh Holt-White

Excerpt

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THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF
GILBERT WHITE
OF SELBORNE

CHAPTER I.

ON September 27th, 1776, Mulso writes that he was unable to visit his friend this year, because—

“I have a great variety of businesses now on my hands, . . . I have all my farmers to compose. . . . I am horribly provoked, for curiosity as well as affection draw me towards you: and Mrs. Mulso, hearing of practicable egress and regress, remits her apprehensions of walking to Selborne: as to my girls, the thought of it is a banquet. . . . Oh! how unlike is the visit of Bloxam* and attorney Knott to the elegant attendance of Mr. Grimm, who came to perpetuate scenery so dear to you? Yours is a life of virtù, and mine of carking and caring.”

The influence of Mr. Grimm is perhaps apparent in the following entry in the *Naturalist's Journal*:—

“Oct. 12. The hanging beech-woods begin to be beautifully tinged, and to afford most lovely scapes very engaging to the eye and imagination. They afford sweet lights and

* A surveyor.

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shades. Maples are also finely tinged. These scenes are worthy of the pencil of a Rubens.”

“Nov. 1. [Fyfield.] Four swallows were seen skimming about in a lane below Newton. This circumstance seems much in favor of hiding, since the *Hirundines* seemed to be withdrawn for some weeks. It looks as if the soft weather had called them out of their retirement.”

From Fyfield his uncle wrote—

To Samuel Barker.

Fyfield, Novr. 1, 1776.

Dear Sam,—Just as I thought you had been master of the manners and customs of the bank-martin, you write me word that you do not know it when you see it. The case is, you did not begin to look 'til the decline of summer, when all the *Hirundines* cease to frequent their nesting-places. If you will pay some attention to those holes in the spring, you will probably see the owners busied in the matters of nidification: besides they are to be distinguished from their congeners by their *small size*, their *mouse-colour*, and their *wriggling, desultory* manner of *flying*. Pray observe when they come first.

The instance you give of the swiftness of an hawk was somewhat extraordinary. But a very intelligent person once assured me that he saw a more extraordinary instance of command of wing in a daw, which is not very remarkable for feats of activity of that kind. As this person was riding on Salisbury plain he saw a bird on the wing dropping something from its bill, and catching it again before it came to the ground, several times repeatedly: this unusual sight drew his attention, so that he rode nearer, and saw still the same feat repeated to his great surprize. It appeared to him that the ball dropped and recovered was a walnut. Now a walnut, I should think, would fall much faster than a dead

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GRIMM'S DRAWINGS

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bird, whose feathers would meet with resistance from the air.

In 24 days Mr. Grimm finished for me 12 drawings; the most elegant of which are 1, a view of the village and hanger from the short Lithe *; 2, a view of the S.E. end of the hanger and its cottages, taken from the upper end of the street; 3, a side view of the *old* hermitage, with the Hermit standing at the door, † this piece he is to copy again for Uncle Harry; 4, a sweet view of the short Lithe and Dorton from the lane beyond Peasecod's house. He took also two views of the Church ‡; two views of my outlet; a view of the Temple-farm §; a view of the village from the inside of the present hermitage; Hawkley hanger, which does not prove very engaging; and a grotesque and romantic drawing of the water-fall in the hollow bed of the stream in Silkwood's vale to the N.E. of Berriman's house. You need not wonder that the drawings you saw by Grimm did not please you; for they were 3*s.* 6*d.* pieces done for a little ready money: so there was no room for softening his trees, &c. He is a most elegant colourist; and what is more, the use of these fine natural stainings is altogether his own; yet his pieces were so engaging in Indian-ink that it was with regret that I submitted to have some of them coloured. Mr. Wyndham of Sarum has engaged Grimm next summer for eight or nine weeks in a tour round N. and S. Wales. I rejoice to hear you are so deep in French.

I am wonderfully delighted with the addition to my Brother's little common parlor; "Nequeunt expleri corda tuendo"; it now altogether gives much ease to such a numerous family; and is very peculiar, light, roomy and

* The large folding frontispiece to 'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne,' first edition.

† The vignette on the title-page, *op. cit.*

‡ Placed opposite pp. 315, 323, *op. cit.*

§ Placed opposite p. 342, *op. cit.*

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convenient, containing 450 square feet. Mr. Amyand is a very genteel pleasing youth; he puts me in mind of Mr. Brocket.

Yours affect.,

GIL. WHITE.

Pray write soon to Selborne.

When the children are buzzing down at their spinnet, and we grave folks sit round the chimney, I am put in mind of the following couplet, which you will remember:—

“ . . . all the distant din that world can keep
Rolls o'er my grotto, and improves my sleep.”

It is very extraordinary that the new chimney does not smoke in the least. Mr. Henry Woods has been at my house, and has taken his daughter to Chichester; so there are now no children at nurse at Selborne or Newton!

To the Rev. John White.

Fyfield, Novr. 2, 1776.

Dear Brother,—As you have experienced so often how very necessary exercise is for your health, you will no doubt be careful how any avocation or pursuit, how laudable soever, shall again interrupt that regimen so essentially needful. Our brother Thomas has found vast benefit from his journey to Bath: the waters, and the bathing have quite removed for the present both his internal and external ails. He advises, I find, if your rheumatism returns, a journey to Buxton.

Jack is very tall indeed! but if he continues healthy, it will be esteemed an advantage to be a well-grown man. You have never told me whether he was bound for five or seven years.

With respect to your MS. you seem a cup too low; and do not assume the importance of an author. If Mr. Pennant had got such a work ready, he would feel little diffidence; and would expect it would produce some money. If you desire it, I shall be willing to look it over; and

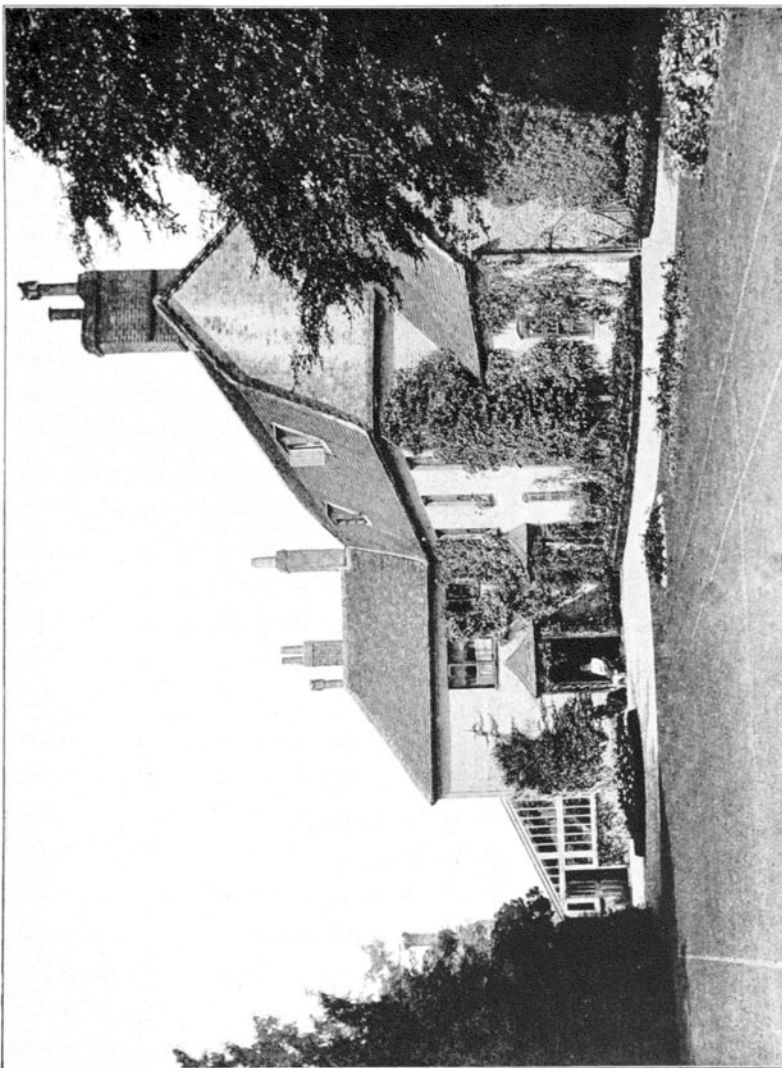
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[To face p. 4, Vol. II.]

HENRY WHITE'S HOUSE AT FYFIELD

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perhaps brother Thomas will do the same when at leisure. By what I saw perhaps some articles may be thought too long. The whale-fishery is a fine new circumstance, and worthy of a national attention; especially as we may soon possibly have nothing to do with the N. American seas. But in such narrow limits, and so warm a climate, how can such an offensive occupation be carried on without proving a vast nuisance to the garrison? Train-oil, and whales flesh must smell very vigorously in lat. 36. How wise have all the Naturalists proved themselves to be by laying it down for granted that there were no whales in the Mediterranean.

Brother Harry has now a fine annual income; and will, I trust now, when he comes to rest a little from his labours of building, be able to lay up money for his family. His new pupil is a very pleasing, ingenuous youth. Mr. Halliday, though upwards of six feet high, does not leave him 'til Feb. We are now sitting in the new edition of his old parlor enlarged; it is odd and peculiar, but very roomy, light and convenient, and every way suitable to a vast family.

The ceiling of the new part is eleven feet high. This new building is thirty feet long; so that my sister gets the N. end for a store-room: and over all are to be two small lodging-rooms; so there are now in this house twelve chambers. The whole room is wainscotted with deal.*

Last night my brother received a letter from the attorney near Manchester, who wishes to be curate of Darwen. He is urgent for matters to be brought to a bargain. Sure the injunctions and provisions against simony have never reached your part of the world. If disappointed he will not, I hope, stir up a clamour against the southern non resident.

* Henry White's house at Fyfield still exists, apparently not much altered externally. It stands near the Rectory (partially rebuilt in 1830), which he used as a schoolhouse. His enlarged parlour cannot now be certainly identified owing to internal alterations.

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Dick* is with me; he is good-natured, and some what heady at times. It is well he is intended for trade, since he loves anything better than book: bodily labor he does not spare; for rolling, wheeling, water-drawing, grass-walk-sweeping are his delight. I have taught him to ride; and perhaps a good seat on an horse may be more useful to him than Virgil, or Horace. I tryed Phædrus; but my patience failed. However he may procure health and strength, and a little behaviour at my house.

We all join in respects. My brother's outlet is still pleasing.

Y^{rs} affect.,

GIL. WHITE.

Early in the year 1777 Gilbert White visited his brother Thomas in London, whence he wrote—

To the Rev. John White.

Thames street, Feb. 27 [1777].

Dear Brother,—Many thanks for your letter of the 18th and for your extract from Reaumur. We all much approve of what you intend to *inscribe* to the Archbishop, thinking it neat and polite: but like yourself we do not much like your title-page. Brother Ben. says he thinks that 'Hist. nat. observations in Lat. 36' should all be left out; and that it should begin with 'An Essay,' &c., but it is not worth while to be solicitous about a title-page: Swift says, "for a title-page consult your bookseller." But the term 'Fauna Calpensis,' tho' judged to be too quaint and pedantic for the beginning of a title, yet, I think, must by no means be sunk for the following reason, because I believe you have always told Linnæus that you should call your book by that name; and therefore if he mentions your work in his last edition (as he certainly will) you will lose all the credit

* His nephew Richard, son of Benjamin White, now aged 15.

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CONSULTS AN ENGRAVER

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to be derived from such notice of you, if you mention no such title. Supposing Linn. to be dead, there can be no doubt but that his son will put forth the new edition. By what we remember of the specimen of your work, we thought some articles too diffuse. It is natural for you to fall a little into this extreme from the regard you express for Reaumur; since all the French in Natural History are very circumstantial. Be so good as not to forestall my cobweb-shower;* I wish I had two or three dozen more of such anecdotes. An engraver has been with me; and I have been talking with him about his taking off five or six of my drawings: he says that my quarto drawings cannot be well executed under eight guineas a piece: now five times eight is forty! Grimm is reducing my Hermitage-view in order to bring it to a proper size for a *vignette*: he is also to take it in a large scale for brother Henry. You will see in the papers a remarkable cause in the Commons between a Patron and a Rector who took two *distant* perpetual curacies: the matter was determined in favor of the Rector; had it gone against him the Rector of Fyfield would have had cause to quake. I propose staying in town 'til the 14th of March. Respects to my sister.

Your aff. brother,

GIL. WHITE.

If you think the mention of your degree of A.B. will occasion any inconvenience you may easily drop it. Brother Thomas waits on the Dean of Ely to-morrow at Lambeth: and will be sure to desire him to represent you and Harry in a favourable light to the new Bishop of Chester. Poor Nanny White † declines very fast, and is in a very languishing state.

* *Vide* 'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne,' Letter XXIII. to Pennant.

† Daughter of Benjamin White, senr.

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A somewhat serious attack of illness occurred during the London visit.

To the Rev. John White. Selborne, May 2 [1777].

Dear Brother,—I should have wished that you had found your book more marketable, and that you could have sold it *outright*. Yet if Benjⁿ offers to *join*, it looks as if he did not fear the want of success in the publication: besides booksellers have ways and means of subscribing off among the trade in which authors cannot avail themselves.

My thanks are due for your calling on Edm. Woods, who will, I think, soon supply me with some windows.

I wish I could prevail on you to come down and spend a little time with us before you return Northward.

As soon as I got to town I sent your *Hortus siccus* by my brother Thomas's boy to Mr. Curtis's own house; and was in hopes he would have examined the plants.

No swifts appear yet, though we have soft weather.

My left hand is full of gout: all my fingers look red, and shoot and burn. If I have gout about me it is best to come out. I hope you found and left Mrs. Snooke well.

The spirit of building prevails much in this district; Rich^d Butler, the thatcher, is going to enlarge his house; John Bridger of Oakhanger builds a new one next spring; and Mr. P.[owlett] of Rotherfield began pulling down yesterday.

“The child that is unborn may rue
The *pulling* of that day.”

I am your loving brother,

GIL. WHITE.

Pray write often, and let me hear what steps you take respecting your book.

On June 1st, 1777, Mulso wrote:—