

**THE NATURAL HISTORY OF  
SELBORNE. WITH  
MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS  
AND EXPLANATORY NOTES. PART  
II, PP. 215-430**

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The Natural History of Selborne. With Miscellaneous Observations and Explanatory Notes.  
Part II, pp. 215-430 by Gilbert White

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**GILBERT WHITE**

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THE  
**N**ATURAL **H**ISTORY  
OF SELBORNE,

BY THE LATE  
REV. GILBERT WHITE, A.M.  
FELLOW OF GRIGG COLLEGE, OXFORD.

WITH MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS AND  
EXPLANATORY NOTES.

PART II.



LONDON:  
BELL AND DALDY, YORK STREET,  
COVENT GARDEN.

1868.



## LETTER LVI.

TO THE HONOURABLE DAINES BARRINGTON.



RECEIVED your last favour just as I was setting out for this place; and am pleased to find that my monograph met with your approbation. My remarks are the result of many years observation; and are, I trust, true in the whole: though I do not pretend to say that they are perfectly void of mistake, or that a more nice observer might not make many additions, since subjects of this kind are inexhaustible.

If you think my letter worthy the notice of your respectable society, you are at liberty to lay it before them; and they will consider it, I hope, as it was intended, as an humble attempt to promote a more minute inquiry into natural history; into the life and conversation of animals. Perhaps hereafter I may be induced to take the house-swallow under consideration; and from that proceed to the rest of the British *hirundines*.

Though I have now travelled the Sussex-downs upwards of thirty years, I still investigate that chain of majestic mountains with fresh admiration year by year; and think I see new beauties every time I tra-

verse it. This range, which runs from Chichester eastward as far as East-Bourn, is about sixty miles in length, and is called the South Downs, properly speaking, only round Lewes. As you pass along, it commands a noble view of the wild, or weald, on one hand, and the broad downs and sea on the other. Mr. Ray used to visit a family at Danny, just at the foot of these hills; he was so ravished with the prospect from Plumpton-plain near Lewes, that he mentions those landscapes in his "Wisdom of God in the Works of the Creation" with the utmost satisfaction, and thinks them equal to anything he had seen in the finest parts of Europe.

For my own part, I think there is something peculiarly sweet and pleasing in the shapely figured aspect of chalk-hills in preference to those of stone, which are rugged, broken, abrupt, and shapeless.\*

Perhaps I may be singular in my opinion, and not so happy as to convey to you the same idea; but I never contemplate these mountains without thinking I perceive somewhat analogous to growth in their gentle swellings and smooth fungus-like protuberances, their fluted sides, and regular hollows and slopes, that carry at once the air of vegetative dilatation and expansion. Or was there ever a time when these immense masses of calcareous matter were thrown into fermentation by some adventitious moisture;†

\* Lovers of the picturesque would probably dissent from Mr. White's views on this subject; nevertheless there is something very graceful in the long coast-like lines of hills with their rounded heads heaped summit behind summit, at the foot of which undulating and richly wooded plains or verdant meadows stretch away into distant space. While village spires, cottages, mansions, and woodlands fill up the picture.—*Ed.*

† Chalk is lime and carbonic acid in the proportion of 44

were raised and leavened into such shapes by some plastic power; and so made to swell and heave their broad backs into the sky so much above the less animated clay of the wild below?

By what I can guess from the admeasurements of the hills that have been taken round my house, I should suppose that these hills surmount the wild at an average of about the rate of five hundred feet.

One thing is very remarkable as to the sheep; from the westward until you get to the river Adur all the flocks have horns, and smooth white faces, and white legs; and a hornless sheep is rarely to be seen: but as soon as you pass that river eastward, and mount Beeding-hill, all the flocks at once become hornless, or, as they call them, poll-sheep; and have moreover black faces with a white tuft of wool on their foreheads, and speckled and spotted legs: so that you would think that the flocks of Laban were pasturing on one side of the stream, and the variegated breed of his son-in-law Jacob were cantoned along on the other. And this diversity

parts of the latter to 56 parts of the former, and is insoluble in water. But how would our author's wonder have increased, if he had known, as we may now be said to know, that this girdle of chalk mountains which intersects so large a portion of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire, is the bed of an ancient sea from which the waters have retired: still greater would have been his wonder if it had been demonstrated to him, as it may be said to have been to us, that the chalk owes its origin to organic life; every atom of these chalky masses have circulated in the veins of animals or in the organs of plants which lived and died in the bosom of a cretaceous sea; there are assembled, microscopic shells so minute that ten millions are required, to form a cubic inch of chalk; these mingled with polypora and other testaceous creatures now crumbling into dust, have, in decomposing, formed mountain masses of chalk beds of organic life, which by the wisdom of God now enrich the crust of the earth, and form the sources of organised life.—ED.



holds good respectively on each side from the valley of Brambler and Beeding to the eastward, and westward all the whole length of the downs.\* If you talk with the shepherds on this subject, they tell you that the case has been so from time immemorial; and smile at your simplicity if you ask them whether the situation of these two different breeds might not be reversed? however, an intelligent friend of mine near Chichester is determined to try the experiment, and has this autumn, at the hazard of being laughed at, introduced a parcel of black-faced hornless rams among his horned western ewes. The black-faced poll-sheep have the shortest legs and the finest wool.

[The sheep on the downs in the winter of 1769 were very ragged, and their coats much torn; the shepherds say they tear their fleeces with their own mouths and horns, and they are always in that way in mild wet winters, being teased and tickled with a kind of lice.

After ewes and lambs are shorn, there is great confusion and bleating, neither the dams nor the young being able to distinguish one another as before. This embarrassment seems not so much to arise from the loss of the fleece, which may occasion an alteration in their appearance, as from the defect

\* Whatever may have been the fact at the date of this letter, the Southdown, or hornless race of sheep, are now found not only existing west of the Adur, but in all the upland parts of England; and it was calculated a few years ago that 861,000 ranged on the South-downs alone, having almost superseded the Dorsets or horned sheep, chiefly in consequence of the improvement both in the wool and as mutton. The great improver of the breed, Mr. Ellman, commenced his operations in 1780, and in eight years the market price of sheep had increased rather more than one-third. They are smaller in the bone, equally heavy with the Dorsets, apter to fatten, and heavier when fat.—Ed.

of that *notus odor*, discriminating each individual personally; which also is confounded by the strong scent of the pitch and tar wherewith they are newly marked; for the brute creation recognize each other more from the smell than the sight; and in matters of identity and diversity appeal much more to their noses than their eyes. After sheep have been washed there is the same confusion, from the reason given above.]—OBSERVATIONS ON NATURE.

As I had hardly ever before travelled these downs at so late a season of the year, I was determined to keep as sharp a look-out as possible so near the southern coast, with respect to the summer short-winged birds of passage. We make great inquiries concerning the withdrawing of the swallow kind, without examining enough into the causes why this tribe is never to be seen in winter; for, *entre nous*, the disappearing of the latter is more marvellous than that of the former, and much more unaccountable. The *hirundines*, if they please, are certainly capable of migration; and yet no doubt are often found in a torpid state:\* but redstarts, nightingales, white-throats, black-caps, which are very ill provided for long flights, have never been once found, as I ever heard of, in a torpid state, and yet can never be supposed in such troops from year to year to dodge and elude the eyes of the curious and inquisitive, which from day to day discern the other small birds that are known to abide our winters. But, notwithstanding all my care, I saw nothing like a summer bird of passage; and, what is more strange, not one wheat-ear, though they abound so in the autumn

\* The author seems to have argued himself into this belief, for they never have been so found.—ED.

as to be a considerable perquisite to the shepherds that take them; and though many are to be seen to my knowledge all the winter through in many parts of the south of England. The most intelligent shepherds tell me that some few of these birds appear on the downs in March, and then withdraw to breed probably in warrens and stone-quarries: now and then a nest is ploughed up in a fallow on the downs under a furrow, but it is thought a rarity. At the time of wheat-harvest they begin to be taken in great numbers; are sent for sale in vast quantities to Brighton and Tunbridge; and appear at the tables of all the gentry that entertain with any degree of elegance.\* About Michaelmas they retire and are seen no more till March. Though these birds are, when in season, in great plenty on the south-downs round Lewes, yet at East-Bourn, which is the eastern extremity of those downs, they abound much more. One thing is very remarkable—that though in the height of the season so many hundreds of dozens are taken, yet they never are seen to flock; and it is a rare thing to see more than three or four at a time: so that there must be a perpetual flitting and constant progressive succession. It does not appear that any wheat-cars are taken to the westward of Houghton-bridge, which stands on the river Arun.†

I did not fail to look particularly after my new migration of ring-ousels; and to take notice whether they continued on the downs to this season of the

\* The South-down shepherds complain that this source of profit to their predecessors has disappeared under improved agriculture.—ED.

† This is an error which Mitford corrected in a note to the second edition.—ED.