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SCIENCE. THE NATURALIST
IN NICARAGUA**

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Everyman's Library. Science. The Naturalist in Nicaragua by Thomas Belt

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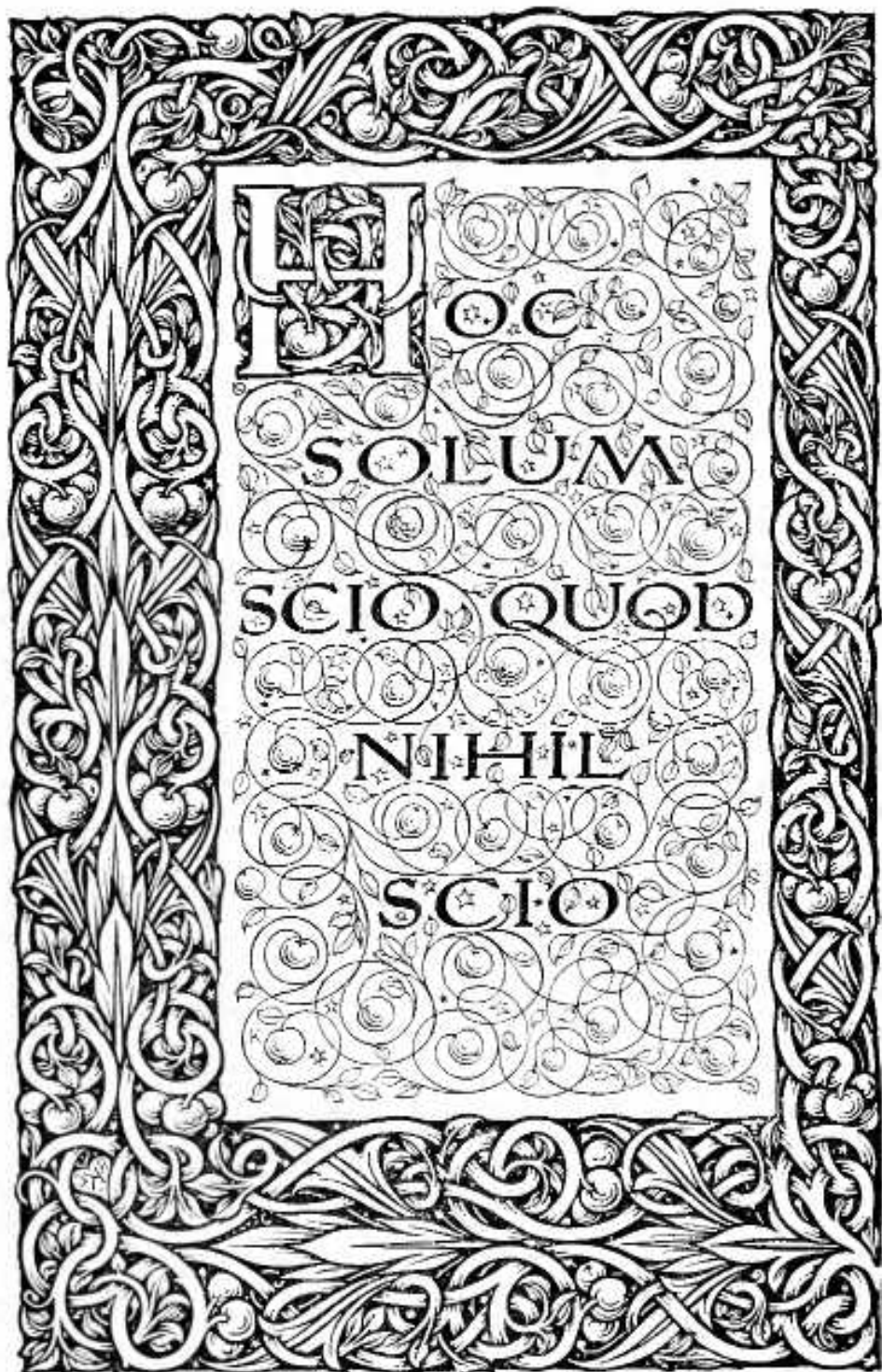
THOMAS BELT

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EDITED BY ERNEST RHYS

SCIENCE

THE
NATURALIST IN NICARAGUA
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ANTHONY BELT, F.L.S.



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The NATURALIST
in NICARAGUA
BY THOMAS
BELT

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INTRODUCTION

IN the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, edited by his son, Mr. Francis Darwin (vol. iii. p. 188), the following passage occurs:—

"In the spring of this year (1871) he read a book which gave him great pleasure, and of which he often spoke with admiration, *The Naturalist in Nicaragua*, by the late Thomas Belt. Mr. Belt, whose untimely death may well be deplored by naturalists, was by profession an engineer, so that all his admirable observations in natural history, in Nicaragua and elsewhere, were the fruit of his leisure. The book is direct and vivid in style, and is full of description and suggestive discussions. With reference to it my father wrote to Sir J. D. Hooker: 'Belt I have read, and I am delighted that you like it so much; it appears to me the best of all natural history journals which have ever been published.'

Now that the book so highly recommended by such an authority is about to be introduced to a public which has hitherto only known it by hearsay, it will be interesting to inquire into the reason of its appreciation by such men as Darwin and Hooker—and Lyall, Huxley, and Wallace, with other leaders of the scientific world of that day, might be quoted to the same effect—and to give some particulars of the author's short active life.

The Belts were an old family which had been established at Bossal in Yorkshire since the reign of Richard II. The main line died out some twenty years ago, but about the beginning of the eighteenth century a member of the family went to the Tyne to join the well-known ironworks of Crawley at Winlaton. He and his descendants remained with the firm for over a century, and he was the great-great-grandfather of the grandfather of Thomas Belt born at Newcastle-on-Tyne on November 27, 1832.

Thomas was the fourth child of a family of seven. His mother possessed a singularly sweet and beautiful disposition; his father, much given to hobbies, was stern and unbending, and he himself combined an almost womanly gentleness with a quiet determination that unflinchingly faced all obstacles. With a high sense of personal honour,

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unassuming and even-tempered, he was only roused to anger by acts of oppression or wanton cruelty. Then his indignation, though not loud, was very real, and he acted with a promptitude which would hardly have been expected from his usually placid demeanour. A story is told of how one day sitting at table he saw through the window a man belabouring a woman. Without saying a word, he rushed out, pinioned the offender by the elbows and, running him to the top of a steep slope in the street, gave him a kick which sent him flying down the declivity. The incident is recalled merely as an illustration of his practical way of dealing with difficulties which stood him in good stead in many an out-of-the-way corner of the world when contending with obstacles caused either by the perversity of man or the forces of nature. He never carried fire-arms even when travelling in the most unsettled districts, and his firm but conciliatory manner overcame opposition in a wonderful way. In ordinary life he was the kindest and most considerate of men, and his transparent sincerity made friends for him everywhere. Nor was he ever happier than when assisting others in those pursuits which occupied his own leisure.

The interesting question as to what led Belt to become a naturalist is difficult to answer. "Environment" nowadays accounts for much, but none of his brothers—and all the family had a similar bringing-up—showed any inclination for what with him became the ruling passion of his life. And yet, in a wider sense, "environment" had probably something to do with it. In the first half of the nineteenth century Newcastle could boast of a succession of field-naturalists unequalled in the country—Joshua Alder and Albany Hancock, who wrote the monograph on British nudibranchiate mollusca for the Ray Society; William Hutton and John Thornhill, botanists; W. C. Hewitson, Dr. D. Embleton, and John Hancock, zoologists; Thomas Athey and Richard Howse, palæontologists—these, and others like them, were enthusiastically at work collecting, observing, recording, classifying. Fresh discoveries were being made every day; what are now commonplace scientific truisms wore then all the charm of novelty; the secrets of nature were being unveiled, and modern science was entering upon an ever-extending kingdom.

Into all this scientific activity Belt was born, and from his earliest years it may be said of him, as in the well-known lines it was said of Agassiz—

“And he wandered away and away
With Nature, the dear old nurse,
Who sang to him night and day
The rhymes of the universe.
And whenever the way seemed long,
Or his heart began to fail,
She would sing a more wonderful song,
Or tell a more marvellous tale.”

“If happiness,” he wrote in his twenty-second year, “consists in the number of pleasing emotions that occupy our mind—how true is it that the contemplation of nature, which always gives rise to these emotions, is one of the great sources of happiness.”

The earliest instance which has been remembered of his fondness for animal life occurred when he was about three years old. He had been in the garden and came running to show his mother what he had found. Opening his carefully gathered up pinafore, out jumped two frogs—to the great dismay of the good lady, for frogs are first cousins to toads, the dire effects of whose glance and venom were known to every one.

He received the best education the town could give, and was fortunate in his schoolmasters—first Dr. J. C. Bruce of antiquarian fame, and then Mr. John Storey, second to none in his day as a north-country botanist.

Belt's father was much interested in horticulture; and, possessing some meteorological instruments, entrusted him, when only twelve years old, with the keeping of a set of observations which showed not only the barometric and thermometric readings twice a day, and the highest and lowest temperatures, but also the rainfall, the state of the sky, the form of the clouds, and the force and direction of the wind. The elaborately arranged columns, full of symbols and figures, look very quaint in the careful boyish handwriting, and must have absorbed much of his spare time.

Insects, however, had the greatest attraction for him. He writes in his journal: “I have made a great improvement in the study of entomology, to which I have an ardent attachment.” And a little later: “I find I have not time