

SOME EARLY BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS  
AND THEIR WORKS.

BY

W. H. MULLENS, M.A., LL.M., M.B.O.U.

VI.—THOMAS PENNANT (1726—1798).

ALTHOUGH the fame of Thomas Pennant both as a naturalist and as an author, has suffered somewhat by the lapse of time, he nevertheless must ever hold a somewhat prominent position amongst the British ornithologists of the past. This he would, perhaps, be entitled to by reason of his being the author of the first important history of British birds, which was illustrated with coloured plates\* (*i.e.*, *The British Zoology*, London, 1766, one vol., folio). But this point, interesting as it is, is quite overshadowed by the fact that it was owing to Pennant's undoubted position as the leading British zoologist of his time that Gilbert White was led to address to him, in the shape of letters, those notes and observations which afterwards formed part of the immortal "Natural History of Selborne." The numerous zoological works of Pennant had, moreover, a very marked effect on the production of ornithological literature in Great Britain. The period which had elapsed from the death of the celebrated John Ray in 1705, till the publication of Pennant's "British Zoology" in 1766 is among the leanest in the history of British ornithology, but the publication of Pennant's works seems to have given an impetus to the production of such literature, and though many of the books that followed his "British Zoology," in quick succession, such as John Berkenhout's "Outlines of the Natural History of Great Britain" (London, 1769, three vols., 8vo); William Hayes' "Natural History of

\* The first book treating of British birds, illustrated with coloured plates, would appear to be "A Natural History of English Song Birds," by Eleazar Albin, London, 1737, 1 vol., 8vo.

British Birds ” (London, 1775, one vol., imp. folio); John Walcott’s “Synopsis of British Birds ” (London, 1789, two vols., 4to); William Lewin’s “Birds of Great Britain ” (London, 1789, seven vols., imp. 4to); Thomas Lord’s “Entire New System of Ornithology, or Œcumenical History of British Birds ” (London, 1791, 1 vol., folio); Bolton’s “Harmonia Ruralis ” (London, 1794, two vols., folio); and Edward Donovan’s “Natural History of British Birds ” (London, 1794, ten vols., 8vo); were little more than compilations, and of no particular interest save to the collector and bibliographer. Exception must be made in favour of such valuable works as John Legg’s “Discourse on the Emigration of British Birds ” (one vol., 8vo), anonymously published at Salisbury in 1780, and afterwards erroneously attributed to George Edwards; Tunstall’s “Ornithologia Britannica,”\* which also appeared anonymously in 1771 (London, one vol., folio); the well-known “General Synopsis of Birds,” by John Latham (London, 1781), which contained in the second volume of its supplement “A List of the Birds of Great Britain,” and the still more famous “History of British Birds,” by Thomas Bewick, the first volume of which appeared in 1797.

Thomas Pennant, the son of a country gentleman, was born at Downing, in Flintshire, in the year 1726, and was educated at Queen’s College, Oxford. Our principal source of information for the particulars of Pennant’s life is his own work :—

“The / Literary Life / of the late / Thomas Pennant, Esq. / By Himself. / [Latin quotation] London : / Sold by Benjamin & John White, Fleet-Street, / and Robert Faulder, New Bond-Street. / MDCCXCIII.

1 vol., 4to, pp. 144 & IV. Plates.

From this quaint and somewhat self-laudatory work we learn that Pennant having received as a present from a kinsman, when twelve years old, a copy of the

\* A similar but much rarer work by Charles Fothergill was published at York in 1799.

"Ornithology of Francis Willughby," early developed a "taste for that study, and incidentally a love for that of natural history in general, which I have since pursued with my constitutional ardor." Pennant began the first of his many "Tours," his accounts of which from their topographical interest are more read at the present day than his other writings, from Oxford in 1747. His first literary work, an extract from a letter written to his uncle, James Mytton, concerning an earthquake at Downing in 1750, appears in the 10th volume of the "Abridgement of the Philosophical Transactions," and thenceforward his active pen knew no rest until the time of his death, when he was engaged on an ambitious work entitled "Outlines of the Globe," of which he had projected some fifteen quarto volumes, only four of which would seem to have been published. It is here only possible to deal with a few of the zoological books of this prolific author, but it may afford some idea of the vast output of his writings if we mention that the number of plates engraved for his several works totals no less than eight hundred and two (*cf. Literary Life*, p. 38). In 1755 Pennant commenced a correspondence with the great Linnæus, and in 1757, as he tells us, received "the first and greatest of my Literary honors," being elected "at the instance of Linnæus himself," a member of the Royal Society of Upsal. In 1761 Pennant began to publish his "British Zoology," which, when completed in 1776, contained one hundred and thirty-two coloured plates, engraved by Peter Mazel, and coloured by Peter Pallou, "an excellent artist, but too fond of giving gaudy colours to his subjects." This work which, as Pennant himself observes, would have been more useful in quarto size, he produced chiefly at his own expense, devoting the proceeds to the "benefit of the Welch Charity-School on Clerkenwell Green" (*cf. adv. to the second edition of The British Zoology*, 1768). The publication of the first edition of the "British Zoology" had been delayed by a journey, which Pennant made to the continent in

1765. In the course of his travels he visited Buffon (1707-1787) at Paris, and informs us that "the celebrated naturalist was satisfied with my proficiency in natural history, and publickly acknowledged his favourable sentiments of my studies in the fifteenth volume of his 'Histoire Naturelle.' Unfortunately long before I had any thoughts of enjoying the honour of his acquaintance I had in my 'British Zoology' made a comparison between the free-thinking philosopher and our great and religious countryman, Mr. Ray, much to the advantage of the latter . . . . but such was his irritability, that in the first volume of his 'Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux,' he fell on me most unmercifully, but happily often without reason." From France, Pennant passed on to Germany and Holland, and at The Hague met Pallas (1741-1811), the famous traveller, "a momentous affair, for it gave rise to my 'Synopsis of Quadrupeds,' \* and the second edition, under the name of the 'History of Quadrupeds,' † a work received by the naturalists of different parts of Europe in a manner uncommonly favourable."

To return to the "British Zoology," the full title is as follows:—

"The / British Zoology / Class I. Quadrupeds. / II. Birds. / Published under the Inspection of the / Cymmrorodorian Society, / Instituted for the / Promoting Useful Charities and the knowledge of / Nature among the Descendants of the / Ancient Britons. / Illustrated with / one hundred and seven Copper Plates. / London: / Printed by J. & J. March, on the Tower Hill, for the Society: / and sold for the Benefit of the British Charity School on / Clerkenwell-Green. MDCCLXVI.

1 vol., imp. folio. Collation: pp. 14, un. + pp. 162 + pp. 4, Index and list of "Encouragers to this Undertaking," + CXXXII. Plates. (A fifth part containing twenty-five plates was added to the one hundred and seven enumerated in the above title, thus making one

\* Chester, 1771, 1 vol., 8vo.

† London, 1781, 2 vols., 4to.

hundred and thirty-two in all, viz., eleven of quadrupeds and one hundred and twenty-one of birds.)

In 1768 appeared the second edition of the above. This was published in two volumes by Benjamin White (brother of Gilbert White, the naturalist), who paid Pennant £100 for the right of publication.

In 1770 an octavo volume was published of ninety-six pages, "including a list of European Birds extra Britannic," and CIII. Plates. This must rank as the third edition of the "British Zoology"—it was incorporated in the fourth edition, published in 1776, four volumes 4to and 8vo. This edition was printed at Warrington for Benjamin White, and is sometimes found with the plates coloured. A fifth edition, also in four volumes, 4to and 8vo, appeared in 1812.

It may here be mentioned that the folio edition of the "British Zoology" had been translated into German and Latin by "M. de Murre, of Nurenbergh," and published in the same size as the original, but the colouring of the plates is an improvement on that in the English edition.

The summer of the year following the publication of the "British Zoology," viz., August, 1767, saw the commencement of the celebrated correspondence between Gilbert White and Thomas Pennant; White's share of which (Pennant's is lost) was afterwards published in his "Natural History of Selborne." This correspondence continued down to November, 1780, and consisted in all of forty-four letters, the first actually addressed to Pennant by White being numbered ten in the series, the preceding nine being added for the sake of uniformity when White published his book in 1789. The correspondence was commenced by White, who was prompted to address his observations to Pennant both on account of the latter's leading position as a naturalist, and also because "of your repeated mention of me in some late letters to my brother" (*i.e.*, Benjamin White, Pennant's publisher). There does not seem to have been any great friendship between White and Pennant—Gilbert White appears to

have been hurt at Pennant's making full use of the material contained in White's letters for his second and subsequent editions of the "British Zoology," without due acknowledgment;\* and Pennant makes no mention of the Selborne naturalist in his "Literary Life." "Little did he anticipate," says Professor Bell, . . . . "that his correspondent would be commemorated with ever-increasing admiration and esteem, while his own more pretentious book is only regarded of value because, at the time of its publication, it filled a gap in British Natural Science, and contained some matter of importance, the best of which was really not his own."

It was, however, probably to Pennant that White owed his first introduction to Daines Barrington, his other correspondent; and to whom the remaining sixty-six letters of the "Natural History of Selborne" were addressed. Writing to Pennant in 1768, White says, "I have received from your friend Mr. Barrington one of the naturalist's journals, which I shall endeavour to fill up in the course of the year."

In 1766 Pennant made the acquaintance of another very eminent man, Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), the zoologist, and companion of Cook in his circumnavigation of the globe. The commencement of Pennant's friendship with Sir Joseph Banks was signalled by a gift from the latter of a copy of Turner's "Avium Historia," a book which even at that time was described as scarce. From Sir Joseph Banks, Pennant received much kindness and help, notably in the case of his "Arctic Zoology," published in 1785 (three volumes and supplement, 4to), which, although mainly a compilation, proved to be by far the most valuable of Pennant's zoological works, and which was translated into German, French, and Swedish. Of Pennant's contributions to natural history there is but little to be said; they derived their great

\* But such acknowledgment was rare at that time, and Pennant does refer to the help he received from White, p. xiii., preface, and p. 498, appendix to the 1768 edition of the "British Zoology."



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*(From the Engraving by J. Romney, after the Painting by T. Gainsborough.)*

popularity partly from their very brief and formal descriptions, and partly from the lack of standard works available both at that time, and for many years to come. The charm of Gilbert White had yet to be discovered, and though the woodcuts of Thomas Bewick proved a great incentive to the study of ornithology, it was not until the genius of George Montagu produced in 1802 the "Ornithological Dictionary" that the work which had been begun by Willughby and Ray, was properly continued. The very productiveness of Pennant's work no doubt also detracted from its utility—as he himself tells us, "I am often astonished at the multiplicity of my publications, especially when I reflect on the various duties it has fallen to my lot to discharge, as a father of a family, landlord of a small but very numerous tenantry, and a not inactive magistrate." \* Towards the close of Pennant's active life he was confined to his ancestral seat at Downing by an accident which broke the patella of his knee, but he continued to work with unabated energy at the revision of his "Outlines of the Globe," but his health was rapidly failing, and he passed away on December 16th, 1798, at the advanced age of seventy-two.

\* Besides the Zoological works already mentioned, Pennant wrote "Indian Zoology," 1769-1796; "Genera of Birds," Edinburgh, 1773, and London, 1781; "Indexes to the Ornithologie of the Comte de Buffon," 1786, while the observations on natural history contained in the various Tours, notably in "The Tour to Scotland," 3 vols., 1776, and that "in Wales," 3 vols., 1810, are of considerable interest, and this principally from the fact that they were jotted down without any attempt at scientific treatment.