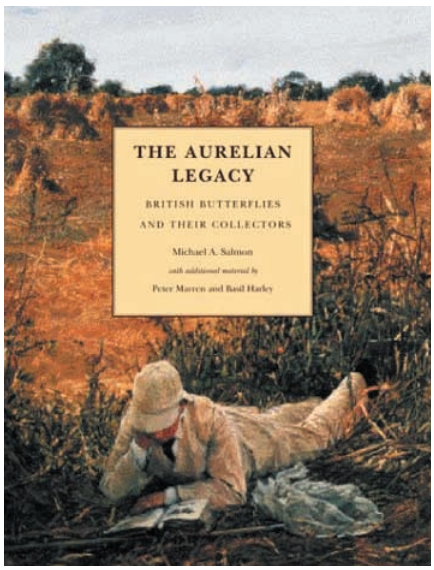
Book Reviews

The Aurelian Legacy. British Butterflies and their Collectors

by Michael A. Salmon
Harley Books, Great Horkesley, Essex, 2000.
£30.00, (432 pages)
ISBN 0 946589 40 2



Pioneers, dandies and frauds: 300 years of British butterfly collectors

Book titles such as 'Intrepid Explorers', 'Great Inventors' and 'Lives of the Presidents [of the USA]' are a staple of dusty school libraries and spare-bedroom bookshelves, and were written to improve young minds using biographies of exemplary men. Somehow, 'Great British Bug-collectors' doesn't have quite the same ring about it, but this was not always so. As Michael Salmon describes, in the 17th and 18th centuries, men such as James Petiver and John Ray, who were the first to collect and classify British insects, were Fellows of the Royal Society; and associated with the likes of Isaac Newton, Robert Hooke, Christopher Wren and Edmond Halley. Three hundred years later, the laws of biodiversity are only just beginning to be understood, whereas the much simpler physical laws[!] have long been known. Salmon's historical analysis shows that our current perception of bug-collecting as dull and slightly eccentric is more likely an example of a periodic downturn in the fashion for entomology and natural history than a real long-term decline in importance. Systematics and the cataloguing of living things was believed to be as vital for an understanding of the 'Wisdom of God' as the motion of planets, and the nature of light, heat, electricity and matter. In my view, systematics still has this kind of importance, but the incompleteness of data and greater complexity of biology have made its laws much more difficult to reveal.

The taxonomy of British butterflies is today, of course, hardly a scientific frontier. Nevertheless, the detailed knowledge of British species is extraordinary: for example, British butterfly mapping data are foremost in showing the effects of global warming. However, several hundred years ago, the reward for lugging an unwieldy 'clap-net' or 'bat-fowler' out to your local meadow would be to explore an unknown world. As you pinned your catch, and perhaps stored it inside your stove-pipe top-hat (hopefully, you would not have to salute any ladies on your way home), you might have the satisfaction of knowing that a butterfly collected in the suburbs of London was new to science. John Ray had this enviable experience with insects and plants around Cambridge, and later near his home at Black Notley, Essex. His many publications on flora and fauna were to become an important basis for Linnaeus' own work.

the cataloguing of living things was believed to be as vital for an understanding of the 'Wisdom of God' as the motion of planets

'Aurelian' refers to the golden spots on the chrysalides of many nymphalid butterflies, and it was used as the name of the first society for lepidoptery founded in London in the early 18th century. To be an Aurelian featured here, you must have worked on British Lepidoptera, and have left some evidence in the form of an early butterfly collection, a set of diaries, or published work. And, above all, you must be dead. Apart from that, whether you were philanthropist, dandy, artist, or fraud, it seems to help if you were colourful during your lifetime, or perhaps they just all were colourful. But every one of the men and women from all classes described here had the common bond of addiction to butterfly natural history, called by fellow-entomologist Vladimir Nabokov the '*passio et morbus aureliani*'.

It takes a special intellect to be infected with the *passio aureliani* and still be able to make a mark on the future. As Miriam Rothschild details in her foreword, it is probably fortunate that butterfly collectors are rarely let loose on affairs of state. Interestingly, she neglects to cite an important example of the potential consequences from her own family history. The 'Balfour Declaration' began the process of the establishment of Israel (while disregarding the rights of the resident Palestinians), and was written in 1917 as a letter from Arthur James Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, to Miriam's uncle, Lionel Walter Rothschild. It is of course unfair to blame the subsequent violent struggles in the middle-east solely on this brief appearance by Lord Rothschild in international politics, since his involvement was inevitable, albeit somewhat reluctant, given his position as the most influential British Zionist of his time. Walter Rothschild's most valuable achievement for posterity is simply that he was the greatest collector of butterflies and birds of all time. His butterflies formed a massive nucleus for The Natural History Museum in London, while his birds, which he sold to fund a mistress' blackmail payment, helped establish the American Museum of Natural History in New York as a major taxonomic centre. Through these worldwide collections, Rothschild and his assistants Karl Jordan and Ernst Hartert were the catalysts of a relatively stable modern taxonomy of species and subspecies. From Thomas Moffett who started it all and was probably father of the arachnophobic 'little miss Muffet', through Rothschild, to John Heath who enthused schoolchildren of my own generation with his Field Studies Council courses and Lepidoptera Mapping Scheme, all the main deceased lepidopterists are in this book, as well as their collecting methods, their butterfly specimens and collections, and their societies. Michael Salmon has done us a great service with his witty and sensitive portrayal of our forebears. The book brings to life the beginnings and subsequent development of this extraordinary and still important area of science.

James Mallet