



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA News

Title: Book Review: A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson

Author(s): Thompson, S.

Source: Thompson, S. (2004). Book Review: A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson.
NatSCA News, Issue 2, 39 - 41.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/336>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

thumbnail impressions of isolated male valvae are relatively poorly illustrated.

Distribution maps (not found in Agassiz) are by vice-county and not by more detailed 10km and are based on records from Rothamsted Insect Survey, Biology Records Centre, county recorders, museums, and published and private sources. [A brief look through the maps shows that *E. pusillata* is not recorded for the Burren in Ireland where it has been/is common.] There is a glossary, a table of phenology (stating what stage of the life cycle is expected in which month of the year), ten pages of comprehensive larval host-plant records, 21 pages of References and Bibliography, with a useful brief note on subject matter, and eight pages of index with Latin and English name synonymies.

The text includes a systematic checklist and a checklist of subspecies and aberrations and an historical review. Another useful short chapter covers breeding and rearing. The species accounts consist of a brief British Isles history of records, descriptions of the imago, genitalia, infraspecific variation, comparison with similar species, life histories with descriptions of ovum, larvae and pupae and discussion of flight period, habitat, distribution, collecting and rearing. Eleven species are listed and discussed as erroneous identifications and a further two species discussed as being likely to occur, although the other seven species described by Agassiz et al, as being in this category, have not turned up since 1981 and are not therefore discussed. This is a little short sighted as who can tell what might turn up during the next hot summer and on the next southerly airflow from Europe!

I recommend Riley & Prior as a must for British & Irish lepidopterists', curators and recorders, as it covers all that most would wish to know about our Pug fauna and at £29.50 it is also very good value. Mironov is the other good Pug book of 2003 but at circa £68 is the better choice for 'Pug fanatics' with a broader European Interest.

A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson

Reviewed by Steve Thompson

I very recently heard this described by a friend of mine, himself a science teacher, as the best book he'd ever read. I wouldn't quite go that far, but having now read it twice, I can say that it is well worth a read, and actually better the second time round.

There are, I suspect, many people who don't like, even can't stand, Bill Bryson's books. On the other hand, he was voted by one national paper (The Observer?) a couple of years ago as an honorary national treasure. Their reason was "Ok, so it took a foreigner to show us what we were really like". Well quite so, and in as witty and deeply affectionate way as you could hope for. I suspect that one of the reasons for disliking him is that his style of writing is seen as being rather "downmarket", even childish. I would suggest that it is deceptively colloquial, and that it is this style that also makes him as popular as he is. Furthermore, it allows him to be unashamedly personal in his observations, and to let his enthusiasm, disgust and other feelings show through.

It is a style that lends itself well to the project he undertook with this current book, being as he freely admits, a complete ignoramus about the world of science. All too often, science is interpreted by people who are too familiar with their subject for people who are

unable to grasp the full implications of much of what they are being told. As a result, the real wonders of science are lost on many people, even though the said interpreters are likely to start off by telling us how amazing the universe is.

Bryson shows this nicely in his introduction by telling us the story of seeing an illustration in a book at school that showed a cut away section of the Earth. He describes how he thought it was a miracle that scientists could know what the Earth 4000 miles below our feet was like, and excitedly took the book home that night to find out more. He found to his dismay that it was neither exciting nor even particularly comprehensible. He says of the author, "It was as if he wanted to keep the good stuff secret by making all of it soberly unfathomable".

On the following page, he says, of the question as to whether the oceans were growing more or less salty, and whether this was something we should be concerned about, "I am very pleased to tell you that until the late 1970s the scientists didn't know the answers to these questions either. They just didn't talk about it very audibly". His thesis is, in part, that scientists *should* talk about these things more audibly, that many, if not most people are fascinated by not just the findings of science but the process by which they are found. Science as a process is itself a great drama, with as fascinating and flawed a cast of characters as is found on TV or in films. But most of this is hidden from the layman, and this is very sad. Bryson spent, eventually, three years reading, and asking a lot of very knowledgeable people a lot of "outstandingly dumb" questions, in order to piece together what is an unashamedly personal view of the story of science. Even if the book had not been very good, it deserves to be read for that alone.

But it is a good book. It takes a delightfully winding route through science, from looking at the beginning of everything through to considerations about our future, moving broadly from the physical sciences through the earth sciences and onto the life sciences, albeit with many diversions along the way. On my first reading, I was distracted in the first half of the book by what I felt were an unreasonable number of silly little mistakes. For instance, at one point he refers to Scheele working with both prussic acid and hydrocyanic acid, which are actually the same thing, and at another that there are about as many neutrons as protons in an atomic nucleus, which is only true for the lighter elements. However, I mention these simply so that I can now say that this is quite irrelevant. Even when they are more notably in error, they do not in any way detract from what he is trying to say. In any event, on second reading, it became quite apparent that, as far as I could tell, there were actually very few such mistakes. In fact (as I was counting), I can tell you that I found just 16 instances in the whole 423 pages, which would be impressive for anybody, never mind someone starting from his position. I suggest that if, when you read the book, you come across such instances, just say, "oops" and carry on reading.

Against that are very nice examples of how he manages to put his message across. On p126, there is a beautifully simple comparison between electrons orbiting nuclei and the blades of an electric fan, possibly the best I have come across. And on p40, he illustrates one of the many delightful ironies in the story of scientific discovery, naming 14 of Edmund Halley's achievements, any small selection of which would have guaranteed his ongoing reputation, and then pointing out that "the one thing he didn't do was discover the comet that bears his name".

It is this particular brand of personal viewpoint and familiar representation that makes this both an excellent book to recommend to people wanting to get a feel for what science is all about and a good read for those of us with more background knowledge. Indeed, my friend's particular enthusiasm was based on the idea that it would be good for all science teachers to read the book to help them see the big picture and to fire their own enthusiasm for the subject.

It also serves the purpose of an introduction in another very valuable way. It has a set of notes to go with each chapter, which themselves contain many references to the literature, and a 14 page bibliography, nearly 300 books, many of which have become standards in the interpretation and popularisation of science. If you are a Bill Bryson fan, you will no doubt have read this book already. And if you can't stand those ignorant amateurs getting into things they were better staying out of, just put that to one side for a while and read it anyway.

Rowland Ward, Taxidermist to the World

Reviewed by Simon Moore

Many of us know of Pat Morris's keen interest in the history of taxidermy and taxidermists and may have attended his lectures on the A-Z of taxidermists. I missed the letter W, unfortunate since it must have been fascinating. His book, covering the biography of Rowland Ward as a person and author plus the history of the firm, is both encyclopaedic and balanced with humour, including much material from the final years of the firm. The fact that the firm outlived its celebrated principal by 64 years is a fitting testament to its work and workforce.



Both the firm of Rowland Ward and the significance of its product come up repeatedly in my own work as natural sciences conservator and adviser. This book will be a most useful tool since it shows many examples that typify Ward taxidermy combined with the paper labels and ivory discs that were used as the firm's stamp of manufacture with date ranges where known. Other Ward artefacts are also listed and show the firm's chronological progression from Piccadilly through Grosvenor Street and finally to Wood Green as social taste in taxidermy gradually dwindled.

The social history is every bit as important as the taxidermy focus, the glittering clientele on the one side but showing how items that we would presently consider either non-PC or kitsch, were quite the norm during the heyday of British taxidermy. The Hall Porter's chair built from a young elephant's body would be reviled today but would have been popular as a rich man's novelty and may still grace the hall of a large property. For me the drinks cabinet (c. 1875) made from an elephant's foot (even with a hinged lid!), typifies the eclectic angle of taste in the High Victorian period when attitudes towards ex-