

## Topic Page: [White, Gilbert, 1720-1793](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/white_gilbert_1720_1793)

Summary Article: **White, Gilbert (1720–93)**

From *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*

NATURALIST GILBERT WHITE was born on July 18, 1720, at a vicarage in Selborne, Hampshire, England, which his family lived in from 1728. Gilbert owned the house from 1763 and lived in it until his death. White graduated with a bachelor of arts from Oriel College, Oxford, in 1743. In 1744 he was elected fellow of Oriel, retaining his fellowship until his death; in the 1750s, he served as junior proctor of the University of Oxford and dean of his college. He was ordained successively deacon and priest in the Church of England and served as curate and vicar of various rural parishes in which his family or college had an interest, but did not seek preferments that would have prevented his living at Selborne.

On January 7, 1751, White began the record of the natural world on which his fame rests. His “Garden kalendar” records the cycle of growth and decay in his garden, with some wider references to natural history such as the migration of birds. From Benjamin Stillingfleet’s *Miscellaneous Tracts* (1759) and especially from the “Calendar of flora” in the second edition (1762), White learned about the natural calendar, from which naturalists hoped that the observation of natural phenomena could guide the timing of sowing and reaping, ensuring reliable harvests for the benefit of all. Such a project required accurate identification of natural forms, and White’s reading of William Hudson’s *Flora Anglica* (1762) persuaded him to adopt Linnaean classification and nomenclature to aid rigorous and easily communicable identification of forms.

Through his brothers Thomas and Benjamin, White made important London scientific acquaintances, including Thomas Pennant. Pennant encouraged Daines Barrington to send White his *Naturalist’s Journal* (1767), which was designed for the recording of meteorological phenomena and the behavior of flora and fauna: The correlation of these observations would lead to the discovery of the natural calendar. The idea of using his local knowledge for a general, disinterested purpose appealed to White, who in 1768 put aside the “Kalendar” in favor of the “Naturalist’s Journal” of Barrington’s design, which he kept until shortly before his death some 25 years later. Barrington’s design required comprehensive, systematic, and precise observation and measurement. Barrington invited White to prepare for the Royal Society monographs on the house martin (*Delichon urbica*), swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), swift (*Apus apus*), and bank martin (*Hirundo riparia*); these were published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, volumes 64 and 65. Barrington further encouraged White to prepare a work based on his journal for publication and suggested Samuel Hieronymus Grimm as illustrator. *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* was published in 1789. White made his last journal entry on June 15, 1793, and died on June 26, 1793.

*The Natural History of Selborne* consists of three sequences of letters: The two to Pennant and Barrington concern natural history and the rest (unaddressed) concern parish antiquities. While his journals, published posthumously, offer a documentary record, *Selborne* is a literary work whose letters were considerably modified and extended for the press. Initially *Selborne* was valued as a new contribution to natural history, but, as its insights became part of general scientific knowledge, it was read more for the inspiration it gave to aspiring amateur naturalists. With numerous 19th- and 20th-century revised editions, *Selborne* entered the literary canon, a reassuring refuge for those troubled by Darwinism. White’s exclusive focus on the local meant that his general discoveries and insights are few,

but it enabled him to fulfill his main aim of encouraging readers to give “a more ready attention to wonders of the Creation.” White’s emphasis on what is accessible to the enquiring observer in any place or time, combined with his gracious style, give *Selborne* its continuing appeal.

**SEE ALSO:**

Darwin, Charles; Linnaeus, Carl; Nature Writing.

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## MLA

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