The Aurelian Legacy. British Butterflies and their Collectors

by Michael A. Salmon
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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 physics 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.

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