

Book Review

Gavin Bridson, *The History of Natural History: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Linnean Society of London, 2008), 2nd ed., xxxii + 1032 pp., illus., £65.

I suspect that most of us find something immensely satisfying about consulting a well-constructed reference work, whether for a quick focused query or a more leisurely perusal; within the covers of bibliographies and encyclopedias, there are almost always hidden gems waiting to be discovered and mined. So, I was delighted to hear that the Linnean Society of London had decided to issue a second edition of Gavin Bridson's *The History of Natural History: An Annotated Bibliography*. The first edition, issued in 1994, was a hefty tome that weighed in at just over 7,500 citations. This version, with more than 12,800 references, is even more ponderous. To make the book doubly appealing, the Linnean Society has incorporated several dozen color images illustrating the evolution of natural history, including depictions of the individuals who have struggled to name, describe, illustrate, catalog, exhibit, and utilize the world's flora and fauna; the specimens they gathered; the institutions they created; and the publications they produced.

The compiler of this lavish bibliography was the late Gavin Bridson. The son of an avid book collector and the grandson of an antiquarian bookseller, Bridson seems destined to have been drawn into the world of books. Following a stint in the British military as a young man, he joined the police force for a spell before attending technical college in North Devon. In 1960, at the age of 24, he signed on as an assistant at a local antiquarian bookstore before moving to the prestigious London book dealer Bernard Quaritch, who specialized in natural history and fine arts publications. Soon he was recruited to work as a librarian at the British Museum (Natural History), now known as the Natural History Museum, and then the Linnean Society. In 1982, he migrated across the Atlantic, to the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh, where he worked to update the massive botanical bibliography, *BPH: Botanico-Periodicum-Huntianum*, while pursuing various other projects, including both editions of *The History of Natural*

History. Unfortunately, Bridson died before the release of the second edition of this volume, which stands as a fitting memorial to his bibliographic skill, discerning judgment, and obvious dedication.

Following a brief introduction, the bibliography proper is divided into four sections. Part I, "Introductory Material," includes citations to previous bibliographical guides; directories of historians of natural history; institutions, periodicals, and newsletters devoted to the history of science; guides to dissertations; and periodic history of science meetings. Part II, "Background Material" contains references to the biographies of naturalists, histories of natural history institutions, and library histories and resources. Part III, the "Core Bibliography," offers citations to the history of natural history more generally, and to the history of botany and zoology (along with various subfields and specialties). What had once been considered the third leg of the natural history tripod – geology – receives no coverage in this volume, which is unfortunate but also quite understandable. Part IV, "Supplementary Guide," covers publications on historical and bibliographical methods. By far largest sections are Parts II and III, which account for more than 90 percent of the bibliography's total page count. Rounding out the book are three useful indexes, to subjects, places, and names.

A reviewer might quibble with the organizational structure of the volume (which I found a tad confusing) or the failure to include a publication here and there (actually Bridson cited the vast majority of really obscure books I searched for). But to do so would be to miss the point. This comprehensive and incredibly useful bibliography ought to be a starting point for any future research in the history of natural history.

Despite its obvious utility, what the book fails to do is come to terms with the digital revolution that is beginning to transform the way historians work. I noticed only one reference to an online source – WorldCat – in the more than 1000 pages of this immense bibliography. Undoubtedly Bridson's cut-off date for the project – the end of 2004, when only a smattering of major web projects were up and running – accounts for his neglect of digital sources. I hope *The History of Natural History* will be made available online, and I would love to see someone compile and maintain a listing of the many websites related to the history of natural history that seem to be proliferating on the internet (like the Complete Works of Charles Darwin Online; the Darwin Correspondence Project online database; the Aldo Leopold Archives; the Alfred Russel Wallace Page; Some Biogeographers, Evolutionists and Ecologists: Chrono-Biographical Sketches; *Evolution: A Journal of*

Nature, to name just a few such sites that immediately come to mind). While the traditional published book remains far from obsolete, these days it's getting increasingly difficult not to feel the tug of the web's vortex.

Mark V. Barrow, Jr.
Virginia Tech