

MISCELLANEOUS

Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of *The Natural History of Selborne*

By Richard Mabey. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville. 2006. 239 pages. U.S.\$16.50 Paper.

In his introduction, Mabey admits that, at his first reading of Gilbert White's *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, he could barely cope "with its rambling disorder." Only on visiting Selborne in person did Mabey change his view decisively. I marvel, as Mabey did, that White "could produce something so wholly original and appealing out of such unpromising ingredients."

In this Whitbread Prize-winning biography, the painstaking research of Mabey – whom the *Times* has called 'Britain's foremost nature writer' – results in a remarkably detailed account of the life of Gilbert White. Born in the tiny village of Selborne, White obtained his university education in theology at Oriel College, Oxford, beginning in 1739. Here he met John Mulso, in the year behind him. Although "constitutionally lazy and hypochondriacal," Mulso's life-long correspondence to and from White became a major source for Mabey. Perhaps it was equally providential that White was not particularly successful in his first three appointments to curacies at a distance from his home. When he returned to Selborne he began, somewhat inauspiciously, to commit his nature observations to paper in 1756.

White was patient and inquisitive. His early description in 1761 of the life of crickets was both "vivid and sensuous." In 1767 he began writing to the naturalist and author, Thomas Pennant; two years later he began

his original observations that helped prove that birds migrate. In 1774, White's lively letters to Sir Daines Barrington included one about house martins, which Barrington read to a meeting of the Royal Society. The result was publication of these "models of lucidity and insight" in Britain's earliest scientific journal, *Philosophical Transactions*.

Finally, late in 1788, at age 68, White had the satisfaction of seeing his book in print. He died in June 1793, a month short of his 73rd birthday, modestly unaware of the prominence his book would achieve in the centuries to come. Second and third editions did not appear until 1802 and 1813, respectively, but there have been more than two hundred subsequent editions, one of the most published books in the English language.

I appreciated Mabey's delightful biography all the more because I, too, have visited Selborne. By learning more about Gilbert White, we can better appreciate White's impact on all subsequent nature writing. I congratulate the University of Virginia Press for making this inexpensive reprint, first published in hard cover in 1986, readily available to North Americans. I heartily recommend it to anyone with the slightest interest in English literature or the history of natural history.

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A Paddler's Guide to Quetico and Beyond

By Kevin Callan. 2007. The Boston Mills Press, Erin, Ontario Canada. 192 pages. U.S.\$24.95 Paper.

It's the dead of winter on a Friday evening when friends lay out the maps on the floor in front of a burning fire. Over wine, possible routes are discussed and commitments are made for a canoe trip six months hence into one of the most intact, accessible and largest protected wilderness areas in North America: Quetico Provincial Park. This is a book that will lead you beyond your usual canoe routes; in fact, it may inspire you to plan a trip celebrating Quetico's 100th anniversary in 2009!

Kevin Callan is no stranger to writing books on wilderness canoeing with seven "Paddler's Guides" for Ontario canoe routes to his name. Kevin reminds us that there is a great story to be told after every canoe trip we make, as a result of spending quality time with a group of family or friends on a journey through the natural world of wind, water, wildlife and plants, complete with portages, bannock and fireside stories. Each of the sixteen canoe routes described in this book is a well-written informative story, weaving important prac-

tical information such as the take-out and put-in spots for portages, special sites to see, and danger spots – into historical accounts of those who were here long before our forays using Kevlar canoes and Gortex. The stories also convey the hardships and joys shared by the group traveling with Kevin; the "real stuff" that makes canoe trips memorable.

The book does not overwhelm the reader with unnecessary detail on the gear to bring, what kind of canoe paddle is better than another, etc., rightly assuming someone heading to Quetico is not a novice. At the same time, simple, straightforward descriptions of canoe routes make them immensely doable for the average paddler. Exceptional pictures and tidy maps are also included, with references for the "proper" maps a canoeist must purchase in order to undertake these trips.

Sixteen canoe routes are described in *Quetico and Beyond*; eleven in Quetico Park and five within neighboring areas of northern Ontario. Most routes require about one week to complete, although some are as short as 2-4 days and others as long as 28 days. Summaries provided for each of the canoe routes includes