

British Butterflies: A History in Books

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Source: The Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society, 65(1) : 58

Published By: The Lepidopterists' Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.18473/lepi.v65i1.a7>

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Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society
65(1), 2011, 58

BRITISH BUTTERFLIES: A HISTORY IN BOOKS. By David Dunbar. 176 pp. Hardbound; approx. 7 x 10 in; nearly 60 color and 20 halftone illustrations; ISBN: 978-0-7123-5096-9; £45.00 (\$72.00 in US); The British Library, London. 2010. Available principally from the British Library (<http://shop.bl.uk/mall/BritishLibrary/>), Aurelian Books (<http://www.aurelianbooks.com/index.php>), and the University of Chicago Press (US orders; <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/>).

After visiting my home for the first time, a friend recently observed that the size of my library exceeds that of my Lepidoptera collection—the antithesis of most lepidopterists. As a young man I acquired an intense passion for books, particularly those that contain references to North American butterflies. This interest extends, to a lesser degree, to publications about the butterflies of Britain and Europe. Not only do our faunas share affinities, but the study of entomology in America is rooted in the Old World. My own historical research would not be possible without consulting the many works of British naturalists. Electronic publications and digital libraries are now commonplace, but many of us still sense a connection to books that cannot be conveyed through the glowing screens of computer monitors or handheld reading devices. If you share this bond, then *British Butterflies* is the book for you. A decade ago Michael Salmon's *Aurelian Legacy: British Butterflies and Their Collectors* became the quintessential reference on British lepidopterists. David Dunbar has done for British butterfly books what Salmon did for those who wrote them.

A lepidopterist since his youth and a London bookseller for nearly 30 years, Dunbar is intimately familiar with the topic. The stated purpose of this book is “not to repeat well-known and documented information on Lepidoptera, but rather to point the reader in the direction of source or background material that is more comprehensive.” The small size of this book is misleading, as Dunbar adeptly covers the most relevant works published since the year 1634, mentioning nearly 600 titles in the process. He documents over four centuries of butterfly books in Britain, writing in a non-technical style that demonstrates his passion for the subject. It is astonishing that several hundred books have been published about British butterflies, despite the fact that the region is inhabited by fewer than 60 resident species.

Often lacking in historical treatments, Dunbar briefly examines the manufacture of books, including early methods of engraving and lithography, as well as advances (and budget-conscious shortcuts) in the binding process. Included are discussions on classification, scientific lists, the

Linnaean system, and the importance of butterflies in art and romance. Dunbar also examines recent books that advocate practical fieldwork and the conservation of butterflies. His bookseller's perspective is evident in remarks about print runs and overstock pricing. Reaching beyond books, Dunbar includes sections on wall charts, as well as cigarette and trade cards that feature butterflies. To me, Dunbar's most valuable contribution is his overview of older works, from the 17th through the 19th centuries, arranged chronologically and by theme (e.g. science & systematics, collecting & fieldwork, and children's books). Many full color illustrations accompany the text.

I found very little to criticize about this book. It is unfortunate that the figures are too small to permit a full appreciation of the many illustrations that are reproduced, but I prefer the smaller format of this book to that of an unwieldy coffee table volume. Dunbar could have cited a couple of additional publications, such as Pamela Gilbert's *A Source Book for Biographical Literature on Entomologists* (2007). He mentions that the frontispiece included in early issues of *The Aurelian* by Moses Harris is dated 1780, but this date is actually associated with a self portrait of Harris that appeared in another book by Harris entitled *An Exposition of English Insects* (the frontispiece in the *Aurelian* is undated). In light of Dunbar's inclusion of cigarette and trade cards, it is somewhat surprising that he did not incorporate a section about postage stamps. This is especially true considering the popularity of philately and the fact that Britain has issued a number of stamps that feature butterflies, including a series in 2008 that showcased endangered species. A set of four butterfly stamps, issued by Britain in 1981, is currently offered for sale by Dunbar's own business, *Aurelian Books*. Considering the large amount of helpful information presented in this book, these issues are of minor importance.

Many of the books featured by Dunbar are very rare, but the majority of the titles published prior to 1900 are now available for viewing online through such websites as Internet Archive, Biodiversity Library, and Google Books. Although scanned images are valuable to researchers who lack access to the original publications, they rob us of the pleasure of holding the books in our hands, turning the pages, smelling the aromas of print and paper, and experiencing firsthand the splendor of their illustrations. Not only is *British Butterflies* a valuable compendium, it reminds us how easy it can be to reconnect with our past. All we have to do is open a book.

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