

Butterflies & Other Insects. My Enduring Impressions

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Source: The Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society, 67(3) : 231-232

Published By: The Lepidopterists' Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.18473/lepi.v67i3.a13>

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Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society
67(3), 2013, 231–232

BUTTERFLIES & OTHER INSECTS. MY ENDURING IMPRESSIONS, by Phillip R. Ackery, 193pp., ISBN 978-09564692-2-9, size approximately A4, cardback, published by Forrest Text, Cardigan, Wales, in association with the Natural History Museum, London; 2012; cost approximately £40 sterling (US\$61).

Prior to his retirement in 2006, Phil Ackery was employed for over four decades in the Entomology Department of the Natural History Museum (formerly the British Museum (Natural History)), primarily associated with the butterfly collections. His many achievements include the (joint) award of the Karl Jordan medal in 1989, presented in Albuquerque. Unlike so many of his peers, Phil was not a butterfly nerd (his word, not mine!) in his early years, taking no interest in insects until the age of 18. But by the time of his retirement his knowledge of the “BM” butterfly collections was unrivalled, as visitors during his time as the Museum’s “butterfly man” will testify.

The book consists of three main parts: “An insect vocation”, “Butterflies and moths”, and “An insect miscellany”. The first begins with Linnaeus and his students, discusses the ‘mystery’ and metamorphosis of taxonomic names, novelist and entomologist Vladimir Nabokov and his butterflies, ‘great’ private collections, butterfly hunters historical and modern, and the circumstances of some odd butterfly fakes and fixers—the last including an account of the destruction of the Linnaean “Piltdown butterfly” *Papilio eclipsis* by Edward Gray, in an uncharacteristic display of emotion that may have represented “probably the only positive action [he made] in an otherwise undistinguished museum career”. The second contains a potted history of research, liberally sprinkled with anecdotes, on the subject of Phil’s main research interests – milkweed, apollo and birdwing butterflies – and other Lepidoptera interests including hawkmoths, silkworms and the famous story of Ford, Kettlewell and ‘industrial melanism’ in the Peppered Moth. Finally, a diverse selection of miscellany skips from forensic entomology to honey production, bubonic plague in the 14th century, and creepy-crawlies generally. Scattered throughout the book are almost 70 full page plates, largely colour, mostly butterflies or their early stages, taken from some of the

most historically significant works published from the early 18th century to modern times, reproduced from the unparalleled library collections of the NHM. Many have informative annotations. Sadly, some of the plates look a little ‘faded’, lacking the sharpness and bright colours of the originals.

The book is well researched and full of anecdotes, making it a comfortable place to meander at your leisure. Two things make this book a real pleasure: firstly the uncomplicated, unpretentious, and relaxed style; secondly the author’s knack for plucking the most apt and amusing anecdotes from the ramblings of denizens of a bygone age and skilfully weaving them, in a personal and highly readable style, into an engaging series of connected stories. The book brings people to life, in all their glorious eccentricity, from a combination of the author’s experience and a literature which at its worst can be dry as dust. Researching the content has clearly given Phil Ackery a great deal of pleasure. Reading it has provided the same for the reviewer—this is one of very few books that can and should be picked up regularly during a lifetime. The diverse content, with the author’s sharp perception combined with dry delivery, will invariably raise a smile.

I noticed no obvious errors and have no complaints of substance, although a scarcity of direct reference to cited sources becomes mildly frustrating. I also believe the unremarkable title belies a content that is stuffed full of life and dry humour, and it defeats me why such an expensive (and it is rather expensive) book is produced in a card cover. It deserves to be in hard back.

It is depressing to think that the “characters”—in the best sense—inhabiting the pages of this book are ghosts from an age that can never be recovered or be repeated. We live in an age of modern molecular researchers, tied to their microscopes, many of whom have never got their boots muddy or slept under the stars with the mosquitoes (there are some notable exceptions). Notwithstanding the minor issues noted above, this must be regarded as a prominent contribution to the history of western entomology over several centuries.

Buy it now—you really won’t be disappointed.

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