

ebay Goldsmith & the Dodo

It all began with one of those leisurely trawls through the many fields of items for sale on Ebay that I take from time to time, often without a particular purpose other than to 'window shop' for the weird and wonderful. It was on one such foray that I saw the picture of the Dodo, a copperplate engraving, obviously eighteenth century in style but in a book described 'The History of Birds' dated 1805. The full details revealed that it was Volume 4 of a series of books called 'The History of the Earth and Animated Nature' by Oliver Goldsmith. Oliver Goldsmith, the name seemed familiar, could this be the same Goldsmith, the eighteenth century writer who had penned such famous titles as 'She Stoops to Conquer' and the 'Vicar of Wakefield'? I hadn't heard of him as a writer on Natural History before and this I now regret because through subsequent research I have found that he has been variously described by Gerald Durrell and others as the 'first true populariser of Natural History' and even as the David Attenborough of his day. The key to this popularity appears to have been his skill as a wordsmith, a fact that is backed up by one of his contemporaries Dr. Johnson who stated that 'Goldsmith is writing a Natural History, and he will make it as entertaining as Persian tale'. Of course as an inveterate book collector and Historian, I had to know more and so my research began with buying the book.

To be honest the bookseller actually had four books from this particular series and so I in fact purchased four books rather than the one, as it seemed such a shame to leave the others behind. Upon arrival the books were a complete joy, old worn leather with a patina that suggested that they had been handled with care but frequently as the centre of the spines and the covers was of a slightly darker colour; possibly the result of natural oils from a hand in the constant action of retrieving them from a shelf.



The interiors of the books were mostly clean with only a little light foxing and occasional rips and tears, nothing at all major especially considering that the books were very nearly 200 years old. However, it was Goldsmith's text, a mixture of description, quotation and lively anecdote that was the ultimate delight. Although Goldsmith relies heavily upon the work of previous naturalists, for example Comte de Buffon, whom he called 'Mr Buffon'

throughout his text; he does use his own knowledge and experiences when feasible. In regards to the Zebra, which Goldsmith describes 'as the most beautiful, but at the same time the wildest animal in nature' he depicts an encounter where he saw a Zebra at 'The Queen's menagerie at Buckingham-Gate', which 'Upon his attempting to approach it, it seemed quite terrified and was preparing to kick, appearing as wild as if just caught, although taken extremely young and used with the utmost indulgence'. Of a group of Zebra's sent to Brazil, one was reputed to have got loose and to have 'actually killed his groom, having bitten him to death'. The reader is also informed that the Zebra will eat almost anything and that Zebras that were earlier transported to England were fed on such items as 'bread, meat and tobacco'. One wonders how long they survived on such a diet and initially I doubted the actual truth of an animal attempting this diet, until I remembered my Father telling me about certain Pit-Ponies who were partial to a ham sandwich, the occasional pinch of snuff and a good nip out off a passing miner when they got the chance!

Goldsmith, it would appear has his favourites among his animal descriptions. The Dodo does not fair very well. He begins 'Mankind have generally made swiftness the attribute of birds; but the Dodo has no title to this distinction. Instead of exciting the idea of swiftness by its appearance, it seems to strike the imagination as a thing the most unwieldy and inactive of all nature'. The body is described as

'massive' and the head and neck to rise from it in 'a manner truly grotesque'. The bill is of 'an extraordinary length' and is brilliantly described as resembling 'two pointed spoons that are laid together by the backs'. It has an overall 'stupid and voracious physiognomy', and that 'one would take it for a tortoise that had supplied itself with the feathers of a bird'. Not the most flattering of description, although combined with the copperplate engraving it does convey a very vivid image of the bird.



In Stephanie Pain's review of a modern publication of Goldsmith's work (New Scientist, 01 December 1990), she states that 'Goldsmith's writing is a model for today's zoologists, clear, informative and lively

- if sometimes wrong. He weaves into his descriptions anecdotes that conjure up colourful pictures of animals that he and most of his readers would never see'. The image of the Dodo is definitely colourful and as the bird had almost certainly become extinct by the early 18th century it was something that neither Goldsmith nor his readership would have actually seen or indeed would ever see. It is interesting that there isn't any mention of the bird's extinction at this point. The book had originally been published in the early 1770s (1771 or 1774?) but the 1805 edition of Goldsmith's *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* that I now owned had 'corrections and additions' by W. Turton, M.D. & Fellow of the Linnaean Society and yet the first edition that I have found to mention this fact in an added footnote to Goldsmith's work was published in 1856. It would appear that the disappearance of the bird went largely un-noticed by the public in general until the bird was made a household name by the inclusion in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which was first published in 1865.

However, despite Goldsmith's dismissal of the Dodo as a 'picture of stupid deformity' or maybe even because of it (in regards to narrative style as opposed to prejudice against Dodos) I find the text wonderful. Stephanie Pain with a description that is worthy of Goldsmith himself states that with his depiction of 'Stinkards' he (Goldsmith) is both 'Attenborough and Fungus the Bogeyman'. She quotes a passage that states 'The smell of our

weasels and ermines, and polecats is fragrance itself when compared to the Skunk', whose smell is 'intolerably foetid and loathsome'. The scent glands on a weasel are effective enough, but 'these glands in the animal now under consideration are much larger and furnish a matter sublimed to a degree of putrescence that is truly amazing'. Fungus the Bogeyman indeed!



Gerald Durrell in his preface to the same modern edition of Goldsmith's work described him as 'an alchemist...turning dull prose into fine elegant writing, and he did this not with a lodestone but with his pen'. Or that 'Goldsmith could take words and use them to construct a wonderful picture in our minds, as a painter can take a palette covered with a multitude of colours like a Persian carpet and, by

dipping his brush into it, produce, miraculously, a scene or portrait of delicacy and beauty' (p.9, Preface, 1990).

In a period before film, television or even photography, the best visual impression a person would have received of any particular creature would have been a copperplate engraving. The somewhat quirky appearance (although still visually appealing today) were often not the most accurate, probably as a result of the image not being taken from studies of the original animal but from a second or even third hand image.

Therefore the use of well-crafted words to convey not only appearance in greater detail but also the sound and smell of an animal were vital in capturing the reader's attention and gaining both their interest and understanding.

It is undoubtedly Goldsmith's ability to create with words such a vivid image of an animal for the reader, which produced the books enduring popularity; remaining in publication from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth century.

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