

WATERTON'S WORLD

The First Environmentalist

By **Oliver Houck**

The first environmentalist in the modern world was a man few of us have ever heard of, perhaps because he was born in the 1700s. I discovered him at a flea market in England one rainy day last summer on a table littered with secondhand books, ashtrays, and other items one step away from the trash bin. The cover showed a giant dressed in high suit pants and a billowing white shirt, no shoes or socks, being hauled ashore on top of a large crocodile. Peeking from the jungle around him was an assortment of tropical birds that would be the envy of any ornithological museum.

He, in fact, would go on to create his own museum in England, innovate taxidermy to preserve his specimens, create a large wildlife park open to the public without charge (and to inmates of a local asylum, for whom he mounted a telescope to view waterfowl on the lake), launch tenacious litigation to save the park from factory emissions, write treatises on nature, write passionately in defense of all creatures, and challenge the leading intellects of his day. Darwin

read him. Theodore Roosevelt loved reading him. His name was Charles Waterton.

The fact that Waterton is so little known today is partly his own fault. A contrarian by nature and an eccentric by any measure (he once scaled St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, leaving his glove on top, which the Pope then ordered him to remove), Waterton shunned publicity and rejected offers to join the scientific establish-

ment. He pulled pranks on his colleagues and the press that he then defended with a tongue-in-cheek vigor that few understood, or appreciated. All of which came back to haunt him when those whom he had offended took the stage. Until recently his reputation has focused on his oddity, and only incidentally his astonishing life and thought.

Julia Blackburn's biography *Charles Waterton: Traveller and Conservationist* rebalances the scales. Beautifully written, it paints Waterton fully, warts and all, and helps restore him to our consciousness. In a foreword, the naturalist Gerald Durrell writes that "Waterton was an eccentric . . . but we have always

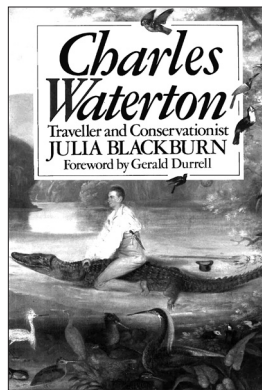
mud, disease, rancid development, and pleasures of the flesh reminiscent of New Orleans at the time, backing into trackless jungle. No one went into the interior save planters, who ventured a few miles up the riverbanks. Young Waterton signed on with one.

Many lives have a watershed, and this was his. He fell in love with the birds, the trees, everything he saw, the "finest opportunity in the world." With a handful of indigent guides he went into those trees and up the streams, winding through them, without shoes, without a firearm, with no protection from biting insects so abundant and varied that many remained unclassified for another century. Some rivers simply disappeared. Others proved impassable. His trip down one set of cascades, his party so weak with fever that portage was out of the question, reads like John Wesley Powell on the Colorado: it looks like hell, we have no option, down the middle we go.

Waterton went to Guyana three times, collecting specimens, studying native religions (and calling for the protection of these "innocent people"), compiling memoirs later published as *Wanderings in South America*, which scarcely mentions the risks and hardships faced. He was ill for long stretches of the time. He slept in a hammock with no shelter from the rain. He coaxed the sources of the deadly poison curare

from indigenous villages and stored them for transmission to England. He preserved his specimens with an ingenious treatment of mercury that produced life-like representations, in lieu of the rag-doll-like exhibits of the time. He was on the front edge of everything he touched.

Blackburn's descriptions here are as good as the literature of exploration gets. What she also gets is the character of this individual who



Charles Waterton 1782–1865: Traveller and Conservationist, Julia Blackburn. Bodley Head Ltd., 1989. \$37.95.

needed the eccentrics to point the way." Point the way he did. The biography contains poignant personal stories, but those most relevant here concern his explorations, his park, and his battle with industrial giants of his day that were smothering the English countryside.

The journey began in 1804, when the twenty-something Waterton visited British Guyana on the coast of South America, a narrow strip of

seemed inhumanly resistant to pain. Back in England he slept for only a few hours each night, on a hardwood floor, under a cloak, with a block of wood for a pillow and the windows open in all seasons to admit birds, bats, and other creatures. Each evening in the jungle he would undertake to rid himself of insects that latched onto his body during the day, the most noxious of which was the “chegoe,” which could “raise a large family under a toe-nail within twenty-four hours.” He provides a minute description of cutting from his flesh, “very carefully so as to leave no eggs,” at knife point. “Sometimes I have taken four nests out of my feet in the course of the day.” When one reads of the early naturalists in South America and Africa, the western adventures of, say, Lewis and Clark seem like child’s play. More to the point, his adventures brought back a treasure of natural history to an ignorant world.

Waterton’s park reveals another side, a deep compassion for the lowliest members of the landscape, the hunted and the persecuted, the seeming enemies of humankind. He himself knew no enemies in nature. He handled rattlesnakes with his bare hands, entered the enclosures of wildcats, and even of a distempered gorilla, soothing the beast — an animal-whisperer on a wavelength that modern society has forgotten to understand. In Guyana he described the giant sloth, whose “looks, his gestures, and his cries all conspire to entreat you to take pity on him. . . . Do not level your gun at him, or piece him with a poisoned arrow — he has never hurt one living creature.” He took particular umbrage at James Audubon, whose star was then rising in America, and wrote of the “rare sport” of shooting pelicans on their nests, and of the bald eagle who “shrieks with delight as he feels the last conclusions of his

prey” — in this case a swan — “sunk under his increasing effort to render death as painfully felt as it can possibly be.” Exactly whose diabolical emotions Audubon was describing is unclear, but to Waterton, “Were I an American I should think I had committed a kind of sacrilege in killing the white-headed eagle.”

Waterton’s park was not merely land set aside. It was land he carefully managed to restore local wildlife populations that were fast disappearing from the English countryside, victims of land development and of more efficient guns. There was no reason to kill ravens, herons, badgers, and the most classic symbols of natural England. They were not food. They threatened no one. He would rail against the shooters without effect but he could provide a sanctuary, build it really, with rock piles for the weasel, open sheds for the owl, lakes and marshes for the ducks, thick vines for the nesting birds, fruit and food plants over the grounds. Slowly they came in, and thrived. It was no wilderness, and he more than anyone knew the difference, but it was a living

museum of what was and what could be again.

Waterton’s final battle resisted the burgeoning soap manufacturing industry, whose emissions spewed from stacks 300 feet high, laced with hydrogen sulfide, hydrochloric acid, and other toxins. The trees died. The fields died, all over England. So did human beings. Waterton wrote of encountering “thirty men on the highway. They looked like skeletons from the grave.” They had come from wasted farmlands up-county “to see if they could beg for bread.”

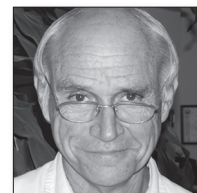
When a man named Simpson built a large factory at the edge of his carefully nurtured park, Waterton turned to the courts with a quixotic faith that the system would grant relief. (He even used newly invented lit-

mus paper to show chemical effects). Simpson in turn produced highly paid academics who denied both the fact of the pollution and its effects. He produced no fewer than 80 well paid locals as well, “who swore that they could neither see the smoke nor smell it.” It was everything toxic tort litigation is today, add new price tags.

He sued three times, the first resulting in trivial damages and the second, in which Simpson produced 89 solemnly swearing local witnesses, no award at all. Finally, after 10 years, both sides weary, Simpson agreed to move his plant to another unlucky community several miles away. No damages were paid. Waterton then learned to his surprise that his trusted solicitor was switching sides to represent soapwork manufacturers, which prompted him to write, “Knowing as I do your prowess in attacking long chimneys, I am quite at a loss to conceive how you will manage to defend those of the notorious Muspratt.” It is, of course, the surprise of our profession.

At book’s end I found myself thinking what Waterton would think of us in our time. On a brief visit to America, witnessing rapacious lumbering eating its way through native forest, he implored, “Spare it, gentle inhabitants, for your country’s sake.” We did spare some, and we have set aside large refuges for wildlife and wilderness as well. But we consume the rest of the landscape and its creatures with abandon, now stripping even agricultural areas of all life in the name of food safety. In the name of highways. In the name of illuminated tall buildings, high-tension power lines, and oil-well canals. We kill wherever we go, the list is long and the slaughter is tremendous.

Waterton’s 1847 suit was everything toxic tort litigation is today, add new price tags



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