

INTRODUCTION: UNDESCRIB'D: TAYLOR WHITE (1701–1772)
AND HIS COLLECTIONS

by

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In 1734 a young Fellow of the Royal Society, Taylor White, made a proposal to the Council that the dried plants in the Society's Repository Museum 'be painted by the hand of Mr Van Huysen'. Sir Hans Sloane, the President, added his support, and the Council adopted Mr White's recommendation and charged him with engaging the botanical artist Jacob van Huysum (*ca* 1687–1740) to depict in watercolour the plants sent from the Chelsea Physic Garden in London. This is the first evidence of an interest in natural history and its representation that would inform the rest of Taylor White's life and lead him to amass a collection of almost 1500 paintings of plants and animals over the course of the next forty years.

Despite his lifelong dedication, Taylor White never succeeded in publishing his collection, nor his speculations on classification of birds and other animals. He is remembered rather for his service to his profession—his coat of arms is executed in stained glass in the chapel at Lincoln's Inn where he was a Bencher (a senior member)—and his contributions to the Foundling Hospital, where he was Treasurer for twenty-five years. His portrait in pastel by the artist Francis Cotes (1726–1770) hung on the walls of the Hospital as did the grand seascape he commissioned from the maritime painter Charles Brooking (*ca* 1723–1759). His collection of natural history paintings was not, however, dispersed at his death, unlike the similar collection of his friend the botanist Robert More (1703–1780), which was sold at auction in 1784. The twenty-nine portfolios of paintings commissioned by Taylor White remained with the White family for over 150 years until 1926, when they appeared at auction in London. Here, in the Sotheby's showroom, the hundreds of brilliantly coloured birds, wide-eyed mammals and intricately patterned fish caught the attention of Dr Casey Wood (1856–1942), founder of the Blacker Wood Library of Ornithology and Zoology at McGill University in Montreal. Wood attended the June 1926 sale of 'Valuable Printed Books, Illuminated Manuscripts and Miniatures, Autograph Letters and Historical Documents', but according to the handwritten notes on the British Library's copy of the sale *Catalogue*, Wood bought only a few small items. On the third day of the sale, however, he was impressed by Lot 657A. The lot was described as 'A Magnificent Collection of Fourteen Hundred and Sixty-Two Original Water-Colour Drawings of Natural History Subjects'. This lot comprised nearly 500 botanical drawings by Jacob van Huysum and Georg Ehret (1708–1770) and over 900 watercolours

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of birds, fish, mammals and reptiles by the best-known natural history painters of the day: George Edwards (1694–1773), Charles Collins (*ca* 1680–1744), Peter Paillou (*ca* 1712–1782) and Eleazar Albin (*fl.* 1690–*ca* 1742). Wood later described this offering as ‘what is in all probability the most notable collection of water-colour drawings that has engaged the attention of natural history devotees for many a year.’¹ Unfortunately, Wood did not purchase the botanical drawings, which have disappeared from public view, and the zoological drawings were purchased by the bookseller Bernard Quaritch. White was evidently so taken by the latter drawings that he shortly thereafter engaged his dealer Wheldon and Wesley to acquire the 938 zoological paintings from Quaritch and ship them to Montreal, where they arrived in 1927.

Once at McGill, the twenty-three portfolios were opened and examined by White’s librarian, the naturalist William Henry Mousley (1865–1949), who assigned scientific names to many of the birds and mammals. The watercolours and their accompanying manuscript notes were placed in paper mounts, carefully laid in green buckram folders and stored on the shelves of the Blacker Wood Library. Here they remained, largely unopened, for another fifty years until Averil Lysaght (1905–1981) examined a selection of the birds for her book, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador 1766*.² Though not unknown to scholars and librarians, only recently has the collection has been thoroughly studied, exhibited, and now published.

In 2018, the Taylor White Project received funding through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, enabling a research team of established and emerging scholars, librarians and digital humanities specialists to document the collection, and prepare it for exhibition and online publication. The first task was to document in detail the works themselves. The project team worked together to create an exhaustive descriptive catalogue of the drawings that not only includes creator, title, date and medium, but also reproduces all inscriptions on the works. The illustrations bore annotations by White himself, sometimes by his artists or by other eighteenth-century hands, as well as Mousley’s pencilled identifications from the 1920s. Not only were White’s accompanying manuscript notes transcribed, but also those written in Latin were translated. Compiling all this information into a searchable database permitted the research team to examine the collection in myriad ways, including by artist name, date of creation, collector, and specimen origin. Particular attention was given to recording the original scientific name assigned by White, as well as to identifying the animals according to contemporary taxonomic nomenclature, providing a rich and easily searchable resource for biologists and historians of science. At the same time, the drawings and notes were digitized by McGill’s Digital Initiatives department, giving the team access to high-resolution digital versions of the originals, and facilitating research by students and external experts by providing the information and digital images online.

An important initial task was the attribution of each of the drawings to an artist. While some images were signed by the two principal artists, Charles Collins and Peter Paillou, the majority were not signed. (See figure 1 for an example of Paillou’s work.) Using

1 Casey A. Wood. *An introduction to the literature of vertebrate zoology: based chiefly on the titles in the Blacker Library of Zoology, the Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology, the Bibliotheca Osleriana and other libraries of McGill University, Montreal*, McGill University Publications, ser. XI (zoology), no. 24 (Oxford University Press, London, 1931), p. 131.

2 Averil Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: his dairy, manuscripts and collection* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971).

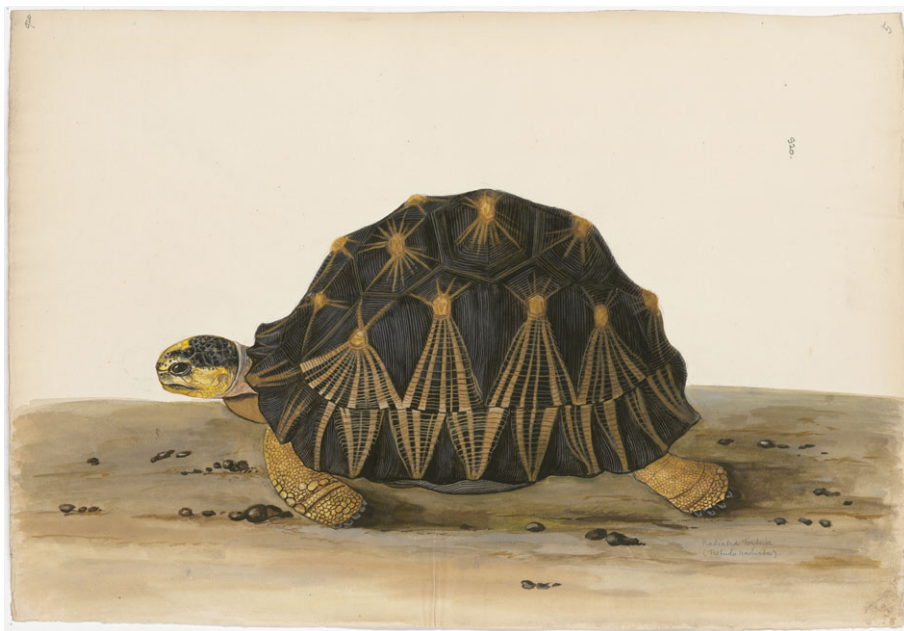


Figure 1. Radiated Tortoise (*Astrochelys radiata*), watercolour on paper by Peter Paillou. (Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002, item 920. Blacker Wood Collection, Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill Library.) (Online version in colour.)

internal visual and textual evidence, Hayley Eaves, a graduate student in art history, worked in collaboration with Jennifer Garland, the Assistant Head Librarian, Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill, to identify the stylistic characteristics of each artist and attribute all 938 works—a massive task—providing valuable information for dating the images.

White's own role in commissioning and collecting work by contemporary artists also deserves to be better known. In her 1996 article 'Recording the aloes at Chelsea', Ruth Stungo noted White's recommendation of van Huysum to the Royal Society in 1734, and David Allin highlighted his role in establishing the art collection at the Foundling Hospital, the earliest public venue for contemporary artists in Britain.³ (White's personal art collection—exclusive of the illustrations of plants and animals—was sold at auction in 1774.) White not only collected for himself but also facilitated the collecting of colleagues and friends such as Sir Joseph Ayloff (1708–1781) and Robert More. The research team also located unpublished correspondence between White and More that included notes from Charles Collins and Philip Miller of the Chelsea Physic Garden, and these provided exceptional insights into the relationship between patron and artist and the practice of natural history painters. Garland and Dickenson have explored this correspondence and the material culture of depiction in their article on the artists whom White commissioned.

The remarkable quality and condition of the watercolours also permitted a team of undergraduate students in biology, under the supervision of curators from the Redpath

³ Ruth Stungo, 'Recording the aloes at Chelsea—a singular solution to a difficult problem', *Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond.* **50**, 47–57 (1996); David S. Allin, *Taylor White (1701–1772); Treasurer of the Foundling Hospital (1746–1772)* (D. S. Allin, London, 2019).

Museum at McGill, to begin the difficult task of identifying the painted subjects and assigning current scientific and common names to all the birds, mammals and fishes. They were aided in part by previous identifications made by White and Mousley, but also by White's own notes, which included records of size (he frequently measured the specimens, noting dimensions on the verso of the drawings), presumed geographic origin of the specimen, or the collection from which it was borrowed. The content of the images and accompanying notes makes the White collection a significant resource for evolutionary biologists who mine the legacy literature of natural history for evidence of extinct species or possible phenotypic changes in the relatively short period between then and now.

White insisted his artists draw from a living animal or a mounted specimen or skin. He also preferred his subjects painted life-size, though in the case of large mammals and birds, he included measurements or comparative size in notes, or engaged the artist to draw at least the head 'size of life' on the verso. This practice allowed Vida Javidi, an undergraduate member of the team, to work in collaboration with Robert Montgomerie, a biologist at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, to assess the accuracy of the illustrated birds and provide an overview of the current scientific value of these paintings as well as their importance to ornithology in the eighteenth century. Javidi and Montgomerie noted that the 661 paintings of birds in the Taylor White collection show 443 different species, representing at least one-quarter of the bird species known in the 1700s, making this the most comprehensive collection of bird illustrations in colour that was available at the time. That White's collections were valued and consulted by his contemporaries is evident in the notes and acknowledgements in contemporary publications by George Edwards and the French scientist Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680–1765) and in the correspondence of Thomas Pennant (1726–1798), Joseph Banks (1743–1820) and John Latham (1740–1837).

Reconstructing the White collection not only makes visible a hitherto little-known collection but also opens a window on the process of collecting natural history specimens—acquisition, preservation, documentation. The research has revealed two geographies associated with the images—a geography of origin (animal), and one of acquisition (collector). White's notes delineate the network of naturalists and collectors who acquired specimens, or who shared their homes, their gardens, and their estates with strange and wonderful birds, reptiles and mammals. Recent research on Sloane's collecting activities by James Delbourgo and the activities of other global collectors provide context for understanding White's ability to source skins and living specimens not only from Europe but also from the Americas and South and East Asia.⁴ Research on early menageries and animal co-habitants also show the diversity of living creatures available to White and his artists, which complemented the fragile skins and mounted specimens they collected.⁵ White's collection also reveals unexpected connections, not only with Joseph Banks but also with William Harrison (1728–1815) and the sea trials of the Harrisons' timekeeper. According to White the birds in figure 2 were 'brought me by Mr Wm Harrison with many

4 James Delbourgo, *Collecting the world: Hans Sloane and the origins of the British Museum* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018); Peter C. Mancall and Daniela Bleichmar (eds), *Collecting across cultures: material exchanges in the early modern Atlantic world* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2011); Vinita Damodaran *et al.* (eds), *The East India Company and the natural world* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014).

5 Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: the history of exotic animals in England 1100–1837* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016); Christopher Plumb, *The Georgian menagerie: exotic animals in eighteenth-century London* (I. B. Tauris & Co., London, 2015); Hannah Velten, *Beastly London: a history of animals in the city* (Reaktion Books, London, 2013).



Figure 2. 'The Toucan with a Black Beak Striped with White', Black-necked Aracari (*Pteroglossus aracari*), watercolour on paper by Peter Paillou. (Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002, item 314. Blacker Wood Collection, Rare Books & Special Collections, McGill Library.) (Online version in colour.)

others in ye year 1764 when he returned from Barbadoes after the trial of his time keeper for the discovery of the Longitude'.

Whereas the life and collecting activities of his contemporaries such as Sir Hans Sloane or Richard Mead are well documented, White the collector is more elusive. As project director, I used the evidence in White's inscriptions on the drawings and his manuscript notes as well as the few surviving letters to explore White's life and his preoccupation with natural history, illuminating his participation in the activities of the Royal Society and his engagement with the community of eighteenth-century naturalists and collectors. This work was made possible by the transcription and translation from the Latin of White's notes, undertaken by Emilienne Greenfield, an emerging scholar in garden history. She has placed White's records within the context of note-taking particular to eighteenth-century natural history, examining how Linnaeus and other naturalists used their notes to record what they saw and compare their observations with those made by others. The fact that the manuscript notes in White's collection are written in different hands also underlines the contributions of the

anonymous assistants—often wives and daughters—to the management of information and collections.⁶

This detailed analysis of White's collection is situated within the context of research by historians into the work of collecting and its contribution to the production of knowledge.⁷ Two current projects—the catalogue raisonné of the *Paper museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* at the Warburg Institute, and *Enlightenment architectures: Sir Hans Sloane's catalogues of his collections*, based at the British Museum—provide important examples of approaches to rich, undocumented collections of visual and manuscript materials, the latter notably using metadata to uncover ways of thinking and ordering. Céline Stantina, an emerging scholar in the history of science, has worked to resurrect the 'information architecture' used by White to describe and order his images.⁸ White's use of contemporary taxonomic literature, his concordances of descriptions, and speculations about undescribed species, as well as the very order of pages, contribute to understanding the 'metadata' of the Enlightenment. White commissioned images from his artists according to the availability of specimens, later rearranging and renumbering the drawings to reflect his evolving ideas on classification.

White never published either his drawings or his catalogue, but thanks to the efforts of Emily Zinger, now Southeast Asia Digital Librarian at Cornell University, working with Lauren Williams, Blacker Wood Librarian, and the staff in Digital Initiatives and Collections Services at McGill, the images and texts are available through the McGill Archival Collections Catalogue (<https://archivalcollections.library.mcgill.ca/index.php/taylor-white-collection>) and as a virtual exhibition (<https://taylor-white.library.mcgill.ca>). Zinger describes both the development of these projects and the importance of contemporary metadata in providing scholars with access to a collection whose scale, fragility and rarity make it difficult to view in the traditional setting of the rare books reading room. Robust metadata also make it possible to reconstruct in virtual form White's original volumes, according to his own numbering system, which was obscured by later cataloguers.

This fruitful collaboration between librarians, historians, biologists and curators, which made the Taylor White Research project possible, is uncommon even in specialized research libraries.⁹ Lauren Williams, the Blacker Wood Librarian, examines not only the initial acquisition of the collection by Casey Wood, but also its place in the library he founded and cultivated, which remains today one of the finest natural history rare book and

6 See, for example, Martine van Elk, *Early modern women's writing: domesticity, privacy, and the public sphere in England and the Dutch republic* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017); Paola Bertucci, 'The in/visible woman: Mariangela Ardinghelli and the circulation of knowledge between Paris and Naples in the eighteenth century', *Isis* **104**, 226–249 (2013); and Margaret Carlyle, 'Invisible assistants and translated texts: D'Arconville and practical chemistry in Enlightenment France', in *Women and science, 17th century to present: pioneers, activists and protagonists* (eds Donna Spalding Andréolle and Véronique Molinari), pp. 19–34 (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2011).

7 Kim Sloan, 'Sir Hans Sloane's pictures: the science of connoisseurship or the art of collecting?', *Huntington Libr. Q.* **78**, 381–415 (2015).

8 For the Cassiano del Pozzo Catalogue raisonné project, see <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research-projects/archived-research-projects/paper-museum-cassiano-dal-pozzo-1588-1657>. For the digital editions of Sir Hans Sloane's catalogues and the Enlightenment Architectures project, see 'Reconstructing Sloane': <https://reconstructingsloane.org/enlightenmentarchitectures/>.

9 Whereas these collaborative projects are uncommon, there are notable recent examples. See Professor Tim Birkhead's 2011 project, 'The contribution of Francis Willughby (1635–1672) to the study of zoology', funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which brought together ornithologists, historians and librarians, resulting in the excellent book, edited by Birkhead, *Virtuoso by nature: the scientific worlds of Francis Willughby FRS (1635–1672)* (Brill, Leiden, 2016). The 'Making Visible' Project at Cambridge also involved art historians, historians, librarians and scientists and was sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) and the Royal Society: <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/programmes/making-visible-the-visual-and-graphic-practices-of-the-early-royal-society>.

image collections in North America. Williams also suggests that the Taylor White initiative might serve as a model for the way in which scholars and librarians can work together not only to document legacy natural history collections but also through research to highlight and increase their utility to a broad range of disciplines. Such research collaborations serve not only to bridge the divide between humanities and the natural sciences but also to link historical research and information sciences.

This Special Issue of *Notes and Records* provides an opportunity to share the treasures of the White collection, establishing it as an important and hitherto unpublished resource for scholars working on the history of science and learning in the mid-eighteenth century. It also showcases the new knowledge generated by the multidisciplinary research team and derived from close reading of image and text. This work would not have been possible without the support of McGill Library Rare Books and Special Collections, particularly Christopher Lyons, the Head Librarian, as well as Professor Nathalie Cooke, the Associate Dean responsible for these remarkable collections. The project also wishes to acknowledge the McGill Library digitization department led by Greg Houston, which made the superb high-resolution digital files. Without the collaboration of the staff at the Redpath Museum, in particular Dr David Green and Dr Virginie Millien and Research Assistant Jessica Ford, we would not have been able to engage with the enthusiastic team of undergraduate researchers—Emily Brown, Audrey Gray, Emily Young and Vida Javidi, each of whom went on to become a co-author to one of the papers included in this volume.

I would also like to acknowledge the late Eleanor MacLean, Blacker Wood Librarian for almost forty years, who allowed me as a doctoral student in the early 1990s to open the Taylor White portfolios and marvel at the painted birds and beasts. I want to add my personal appreciation for the support of Christopher White, Taylor White's descendant and the White family historian, who opened his files and coffer of old parchments and papers (sadly none written by Taylor White), and is, I hope, as pleased as we are to learn so much more about his illustrious ancestor. Finally, I thank my collaborators—librarians, students and mature scholars—who worked with enthusiasm and boundless energy and made the entire project a pure delight.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY

The Taylor White Collection is available in the McGill Archival Collections Catalogue (<https://archivalcollections.library.mcgill.ca/index.php/taylor-white-collection>).