The Practice of Note-Taking in Taylor White’s Natural History Collection

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Abstract

Between the 1750s and 1770s Taylor White compiled over 750 manuscript notes to accompany his collection of animal portraits. These notes are written on individual unbound sheets of paper, and offer descriptions of the birds, mammals, and fish that he commissioned to be painted. Examination of the structure and content of White’s notes reveals that he chose and edited information from published sources while supplementing this with his own personal observations, wrote in both Latin and English, and obtained the help of an assistant to copy out many of his drafts in a more refined hand. This article discusses what purpose White might have had for compiling these notes, what relationship they held to his collection of images, and how his note-taking practices aligned with the contemporary eighteenth-century culture of note-taking and information management in natural history.

Key Words
Taylor White; note-taking; paper technologies; natural history; Latin and English; amanuenses

Introduction: The Practice of Note-Taking

Seen as a way to understand, order, and thus control the natural world, collecting became a prominent feature of early modern culture, especially among the elite and highly-educated in society.1 This practice involved not only objects and specimens (both local and exotic), but was also accompanied by an increased interest in collecting knowledge and information as rediscovered ancient texts, greater ease of travel, and voyages of exploration rapidly expanded the known world.2 Individuals with a penchant for science, antiquarianism, and natural history quickly amassed large amounts of paper as a result of the copious notes they took from printed sources that were increasingly becoming available (and published). Their correspondence with
fellow enthusiasts with whom they shared ideas and discoveries, and the recording of their own observations on the world around them, further contributed to these vast stores of paper.

Attitudes towards note-taking had, in fact, begun to change towards the end of the fifteenth century; notes began to be seen as valuable resources that ought to be preserved in order to share important information both with contemporary figures and future generations. While it had been customary to take notes in bound volumes such as commonplace books and notebooks, or as annotations to published texts, in early modern Europe many naturalists and scholars began to experiment with new methods of note-taking, involving the use of files, loose sheets of paper, or paper slips, that could more easily be reorganised as additional information was collected. It was generally common practice for notes to be taken on what one read, but note-taking could also include things ‘seen and heard’ and, by the eighteenth century, greater emphasis was beginning to be placed on the idea that notes could be based on original thoughts. Note-taking was further seen as an important element of scientific observation that allowed individuals to record what they saw and compare this with the observations of others. Such records could combine both written descriptions and sketches, helping to preserve one’s observations as accurately as possible.

Throughout the early modern period, as naturalists began to seek portrayals of nature that were true to life, and new tools and technology in both the preservation of specimens and methods of printing made such portrayals possible, the value placed on illustrations increased. Text, however, was not to be replaced so easily, and verbal descriptions persisted alongside carefully drawn illustrations. It was the combination, then, of text and image that came to be seen as offering the most complete and accurate representation of nature. Even George Edwards (1694-1773) and Mark Catesby (1683-1749), two important eighteenth-century illustrators of natural history, insisted on the careful construction of written descriptions that should accompany illustrations.

Taylor White (1701-72), the subject of the present paper, seems to have shared these views in his own note-taking practices. After being called to the bar in 1727, White pursued a legal career as a judge. He spent the majority of his life in London, where he worked at Lincoln’s Inn and became heavily involved in activities of the Foundling Hospital. A gentleman with a keen interest in science, White was also elected member of the Royal Society in 1725, which allowed him to befriend, and correspond with, prominent naturalists of his day, including Daniel Solander (1733-82), Thomas Pennant (1726-98), and Joseph Banks (1743-1820). White also
Taylor White's Notes: Structure and Format

White follows a standard format more or less assiduously throughout his notes, largely based on that used by Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) in his *Systema naturae*. White begins with the taxonomic classification of the animal acting as the title of the note (this typically includes the ranks of class, order, genus, and species, with sometimes only the species name appearing), followed by the description, which makes up the main portion of the text. In many cases it seems that the taxonomic title was written at a different time to the rest of the note (whether earlier or later is not clear), as it often appears in a different hand. This could suggest both that Taylor White revised and edited his notes over time, and/or that someone else participated in the writing process. After the description White usually seeks to indicate the habitat or geographical origin of the animal, typically presenting this on its own line with the standard Latin construction.
‘habitat in’, i.e. ‘it lives in’. Because determining the correct origin of an animal could at times be quite challenging (see more on this below), in some notes White never actually finalises his entry on origin; the word ‘habitat’ appears but is then followed by a blank space. The note is concluded with the common English name of the animal, xvii and supplemented on occasion with another comment, thought, or personal observation that White had about the animal or the individual specimen (see figures 1 and 2 for examples of typical notes in White’s collection). White also includes throughout his collection what appear to be ‘introductory’ notes for animal genera. These include a description for the genus as a whole as well as a list of species belonging to that genus. Such ‘introductory’ notes are made for the genera of Coracias, Vespertilio, Canis (figure 3), Sciurus, and Pleuronectes, to name but a few, and can help understand the way in which Taylor White perhaps originally grouped and organised his drawings and their corresponding descriptions. This can, in turn, shed light on his particular method of animal classification. xviii

One final point needs to be made regarding the overall format of White’s notes, namely that of language used. White wrote in both Latin and English, composing some descriptions entirely in one language, and some in a combination of the two. This would not have been an unusual occurrence. Joseph Banks’ notes from his voyage to Newfoundland (1766) are also written in both English and Latin; xix Linnaeus compiled travel notes and wrote his correspondence primarily in Swedish, while he wrote his major scientific works in Latin; Mathurin Jacques Brisson (1723-1806) composed his descriptions of birds in both French and Latin. This bilingualism can, in fact, be representative of the shift in language used for scientific purposes that became more pronounced during the eighteenth century in several areas of Europe: Latin, which previously had been the dominant language, was gradually being replaced by vernaculars. xx A choice of language for recording one’s findings would thus have been available to researchers, often dependent on conventions of the genre. As Jan Bloemendal remarks: ‘in the speculative sciences works were likely to be written in Latin, whereas works on empirical investigations were often written in the vernacular’. xxi The simultaneous use of Latin and the vernaculars was therefore especially common in natural history, as this was a practice that combined both theory and empiricism. As a native English speaker and a jurist with a thorough education in Latin, and working precisely within this context of accumulating knowledge from
Figure 1. An example of the typical format and contents of Taylor White’s notes. This note is one of the fair copies White had made, and is written in the hand of an assistant or amanuensis. *The Autumnal Parrot* [Blue-fronted Amazon], Note 27, Birds Volume 1 (corresponds to Item 290). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library.
Figure 2. A second example of the typical format and contents of Taylor White’s notes. This note is written in Taylor White’s own hand. It is possible to see here the addition of a comment in English after the description of the animal in Latin. *The White Spotted Stag* [Chital, male], Note 12, Mammals Volume 4 (corresponds to Item 135). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library.
Figure 3. An example of an ‘introductory’ note, here made for the genus Canis and written in Taylor White’s hand. Canis [Canis], Note 11, Mammals Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 49). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library.
published texts and direct observation of nature, Taylor White found himself making use of both
Latin and English throughout his notes.

It would seem, however, that White chose the language for his descriptions fairly
arbitrarily. Selections from published sources are copied out in their original Latin forms, while
comments and observations he added to these appear in both Latin and English. Comments
composed in Latin tend to be very brief, and are often constructed with the phrase ‘ut opinor’,
that is (literally) ‘as I believe’ or ‘as I think’, or else follow the abbreviation ‘obs’, i.e.
‘observatio’ (‘observation’). Examples of these constructions can be seen in his note on the
‘Yellow Crested Black Woodpecker’ where White writes ‘Faemina precendentis [sic] ut opinor,’
and in that of the Abyssinian roller, which he ends by stating ‘habitat in Zeylon ut opinor.’

His note on the gilded barbet, on the other hand, includes an ‘observation’ within the general
description of the bird: ‘[…] Pedes nigri: digitis anticis duobus posticisque Duobus. Obs:
Prope nares setae nonnullae nigrae.’ White’s comments composed in English tend to be
slightly longer additions, generally reserved for the end of a note (see figure 2). Descriptions that
offer no references to published sources, but are based entirely on White’s own observations,
again appear in both languages. It is also worth mentioning here that discrepancies, irregularities,
and errors in spelling and grammar (in both Latin and English) occur frequently throughout
White’s writing. This occurs even when he copied directly from published texts. This is
generally nothing more than a letter or two missing, or the wrong letter appearing (e.g. ‘cirda’ for
‘circa’, ‘faciis’ for ‘fasciis’, ‘vertibus’ for ‘verticibus’, etc.), but sometimes the wrong word
etirely has been written, likely due simply to a moment of inadvertence.

Taylor White’s Notes: Content and Composition

With regard to the actual descriptions, White’s notes cover the shape of the tail (and
prehensility in those of mammals); colour of the feathers, hair, fur, or fins; shape of the beak or
nose; number and shape of teeth; colour and position of the eyes; shape and texture of the
tongue; shape and formation of horns, antlers or other bone-like protuberances; number and
arrangement of toes, fingers, and fins; and overall size of the animal (this is usually made in
comparison with other like animals, but sometimes includes precise measurements). Indeed, for
White the size of animals seems to have been of great importance and he was especially adamant
that the watercolour drawings be made ‘size of life’. Brief comments on animal behaviour
also appear in White’s notes, generally indicating temperament, calls or noises, feeding and sleeping habits (and, for birds, the manner of building nests), reactions to other animals, as well as at times relationship to humans. White’s descriptions thus present details that are not always evident in the watercolour drawings. These would have complemented the images, and would have helped distinguish between particular species that perhaps looked very similar at first glance. Overall, these would seem to be fairly standard descriptions according to contemporary practices of natural history.

White used a variety of methods in the composition of his notes. Touched upon briefly above, the first, and seemingly most common, involved copying descriptions word-for-word as they appear in Linnaeus’ *Systema naturae*, followed by a reference to the specific page of the work on which the description could be found. This method also included copying the references Linnaeus made to other authors who also offered a description of the animal in their own published works. At times, if a description was too long, if he was only interested in certain aspects, or if he was unable to verify one of Linnaeus’ sources, White only copied portions of Linnaeus’ text, ‘cutting and pasting’ the pieces of information that suited him best. It is, unfortunately, difficult to tell how thoroughly White analysed Linnaeus’ text and why he chose to include some descriptive elements and not others. His description of the turbot, for example, is copied directly from that of Linnaeus, including one exact line taken from Juvenal’s *Satire IV* (2nd century CE). Linnaeus did not cite Juvenal as a source and White makes no comment regarding this particular aspect of the description. It is unclear, then, whether White knew that these lines originated in the satire. In his description of the osprey (or ‘bald buzzard’), on the other hand, White comments that ‘Linnaeus also said that the left foot is somewhat palmate, but this is not apparent to me.’ This particular remark about the bird’s left foot stems from a myth in which the osprey is described as having one webbed foot and one taloned foot. It is possible that White was aware of the origins of this myth, but his comment was likely made based on first-hand observation of the bird, and descriptions or depictions he would have seen in other naturalists’ work, such as Brisson’s *Ornithologie*, which includes an illustration of the osprey with two taloned feet. In any case, this particular comment shows that White was prepared to question the validity of Linnaeus’ statement, and did not always copy descriptions on blind faith.
A second method favoured by White in the creation of his notes thus involved copying from, or listing references to, published works, and subsequently supplementing this information with his own comments and observations. He sometimes left a blank space specifically for the purpose of being able to return to the note at a later date and record any additional information about the animal he might have discovered. At other times he inserted supplementary information at the end of his note, or else between two existing lines of text. Differences in handwriting and changes in the colour or quality of the ink further demonstrate that White did in fact edit and add to what he wrote over time (see figure 4). His personal observations are quite varied, but tend to fall into two major categories. The first involves offering further information about the provenance or current location of an animal, or acknowledging the individual responsible for its collection. As mentioned briefly above, accurately identifying the geographical origins of an animal could prove to be quite a complicated process. White was sometimes unable to obtain this information, or else questioned that which he had received. About the loon, for example, he writes: ‘this Bird I had from Mr Bank [i.e. Joseph Banks] & I supose he brought it from Canada but am not certain.’ For the majority of animals, White gathered his information on provenance from Linnaeus. With regard to newly-discovered species, however, he likely received much of this information from other naturalist-collectors as well as travellers aboard naval, merchant, or slave ships which carried animal specimens (both alive and dead) collected during their voyages. Confusion or misinformation about the country of origin of a specimen thus often arose due to the long indirect routes taken by these ships. As the last quotation demonstrates, when possible White diligently indicates the particular individual responsible for the collection of his animal specimens. He acknowledges that a ‘Snow Bird’ was brought to him from Russia by Mr. Nettleton, that a ‘Spotted Deer’ was brought from Bengal by Lord Clive (1725-74) and subsequently ‘bred in his park at Greenwich’, and that a ‘hirundo domesticus’ (common house martin) was ‘in the Poss[ess]ion of Mr Penant’. Naming the individuals involved in the creation of one’s collection was for many naturalists a way of reinforcing their social network, and many collectors expected such recognition to appear in published works. Maintaining a wide-ranging network was especially important for naturalists in order to be able to acquire information and specimens from distant areas.
The Practice of Note-Taking

The second category of personal observations included by White involves providing additional details on a pre-existing description, or pointing out features which he thought merited further comment. White makes such remarks as ‘I know not whether the excrescens under the Chin is Natural or Accidental having only seen one of this Species,’ or ‘This beast differs from all Others that I know of in having two nostrills under his Eyes which he opens & shuts at pleasure. this is not taken notice of by Linaeus nor any Natural Historian that I remember.’ White also indicates when his description differs from that of another author, or when he believes another naturalist was incorrect. About the ‘Blue Falcon’ (Pallid harrier) he writes ‘The Falcon with a golden-yellow cere & feet […] it varies from the description of Lineus who describes the cere to be white & the feet fulvus which I suppose to mean a clay colour.’

White also leaves hints throughout his notes that he did in fact see several of the animals he had commissioned to be painted and, subsequently, described, for example: ‘this is the Largest Lyon I have seen. it was in the Menagerie of the late Duke of Cumberland but since in the Tower of London’; or ‘that [Moose] I saw was a Female […] it had five Teeth on each side of the under jaw & I think about 6 Grinders I could not exactly count them as they went to the extremity of the jaw which I could not easily reach.’ In some cases White even acquired and owned the specimens himself, stating, for example, ‘this Bird I bought and kept alive a Considerable time;’ or ‘N.B I shot this bird in the fens in Lincolnshire.’ He could thus quite legitimately include his own personal thoughts and comments, as these were based on first-hand observation. This aligned closely, then, with eighteenth-century attitudes towards personal thoughts in note-taking.

White’s personal remarks and observations tend to point out what he considers are divergences or inaccuracies not only in the physical descriptions of the animals, but also in their taxonomical classification. The latter he addresses especially when he believes a lack of distinction between species has occurred. In his description of the barnacle goose White writes: ‘this Goose is by Linaeus confounded with the Brent gose tho a very different bird. it is better described by Will. orn. p 359.’ As for the speckled cormorant, he comments ‘it is a species entirely different from any described by Lineus. & not a variety arising from age or sex.’ White touches on this matter of classification in particularly great detail in his description of deer, about
which he states: ‘the many Writers of Natural History have left no subject more imperfectly treated on then this Genus of Quadrupeds.’ He then records his doubts as to Linnaeus’ ordering of these mammals:

*Linnaeus says the Tarandus inhabits Europe asia & America chiefly in the Northern Parts. but I am very certain by the horns as well as live beasts brought from America that the Rain Deer […] is vastly different from any American Deer. & that both in the Northern parts of America & of Europe there are very different Species. […] The figure Edwards gives of the Greenland buck differs so vastly from all the figs. I have met with of the Rain deer convinces me it can’t be the same animal. & yet it seems to me almost impossible that so great a man as Linnaeus who lives at Stockholm should be mistaken in this matter. he certainly must have seen the Rain Deer.*

Although White was perhaps not yet prepared to disagree entirely with the eminent naturalists of his day, it does seem that part of his purpose in creating this collection of animal portraits and written notes was to improve on contemporary systems of classification based on his own observations.

In addition to including brief original thoughts and questions, a third method Taylor White used in creating his descriptions was to base them entirely on his own observations, without copying any portion of text from the works of other naturalists. He employed this method especially with animals that were, as he believed, ‘undescribed’. Such notes occur fairly frequently throughout his collection, touching on birds, mammals, and fish. To offer but one example, his description, originally written in Latin, of the Jamaican lizard-cuckoo reads:

*Cuculus* with a wedge-shaped tail, a long, black, and very slightly curved beak, a chestnut-coloured crown, red eye-rings, white cheeks, yellow underparts, and black feet; green upperparts, reddish flight feathers on the wings, green flight feathers on the tail, but with two purplish[?] black patches and two white patches. It is in the British Museum. I believe it is not described.

Taylor White was thus not necessarily taking everything he read at face value. He compared and contrasted sources, and added comments and descriptions of animals based on his own careful observations, seeking to contribute to pre-existing knowledge of natural history. This compilation of information meant that White’s collection was far from static, but was constantly evolving as he gained more knowledge, and made new discoveries. His use of
loose sheets of paper allowed him to reorganise his collection as he added notes on ‘undescribed’ species and adapted his taxonomic system of classification. It was precisely the persistence of a manuscript culture that gave scholars and naturalists the opportunity to experiment with new ‘paper technologies’. Many began to favour loose slips of paper over bound notebooks, printed books interleaved with blank pages, or other more restrictive forms of note-taking, as they attempted to cope with vast stores of new information and empirical data emerging from experimentation, observation, and exploration.\footnote{White’s practice would place him, then, at the heart of developments in information management and note-taking that were occurring throughout Europe during the eighteenth century.}

**Drafts and Fair Copies: Handwriting in Taylor White’s Notes**

Another feature that becomes apparent when looking at Taylor White’s notes is the different hands that appear throughout the collection. Some notes seem to be drafts written in White’s own hand (see figure 2), others fair copies, written in a more formal script, and others again neither drafts nor fair copies but something in between, written in what appears to be a slightly neater form of Taylor White’s hand (figure 5). With regard to the fair copies, there are in fact a few different formal scripts throughout the collection (see figures 1 and 6), which suggests that a number of people were involved in the writing process. Although White perhaps at times took greater care with his handwriting and recopied some of his descriptions himself, it seems that he also had others copy out many drafts for him. There is no conclusive evidence regarding who these scribes might have been; one possibility, however, is that at least one of these refined hands belonged to Taylor White’s wife Frances (Fanny) Armstrong or one of his daughters, Anne or Frances. Both his daughters were unmarried and remained in the family home, where White could thus quite easily have enlisted their help in the creation of his collection.\footnote{Works in the history of science have demonstrated that a large part of scientific research and experiments during the early modern period took place within the researchers’ households, and often involved multiple family members, with women especially serving as assistants to their fathers or husbands.\footnote{Martin Lister’s daughters Susanna and Anna are excellent examples of such assistants, together creating hundreds of illustrations and engravings of shells for his work}}

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Figure 5. An example of a note written in a slightly neater form of Taylor White’s hand. *The Gray Fox* [Arctic Fox], Note 35, Mammals Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 61). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library.
Figure 6. Another example of a fair copy. This is written in a different formal script from that in figure 1, suggesting that White had help from multiple assistants or amanuenses in the creation of his notes. [Vernal Hanging-Parrot], Note 26, Birds Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 309). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library.
Women were also often involved in the writing process and were encouraged to learn to use formal scripts. The Italian script, with its slender and delicate characters, was the most recommended for women in eighteenth-century England. Given that at least one of the formal scripts in Taylor White’s notes seems to be a type of Italian script, it is quite plausible that White’s wife or daughters participated in copying out his descriptions. Further support for this could be found in the fact that notes and copies of journals of other scientific researchers and naturalists have been attributed to women. The notebooks of the astronomer John Flamsteed (1646-1719) are filled with his observations recorded in his wife Margaret’s hand. Fair copies of Joseph Banks’ journals from his voyages to Iceland and Newfoundland and Labrador were made by his sister Sarah Sophia Banks (1744-1818), and copies of his journal from his voyage on board the HMS Endeavour have been attributed to Maria Dawson Turner (1797-1872), as well as George III’s daughter Princess Elizabeth (1770-1840). Approximately one century earlier, Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) had also engaged in the practice of transcription, recopying her own personal observations on insects in a neat calligraphic hand in the 1680s and 1690s. Without any other samples of White’s wife’s or daughter’s handwriting, however, it is impossible to determine with certainty if they were truly the creators of these copies.

Another possibility, then, is that one of the refined hands that appears in the notes belonged to an assistant that White hired specifically for the purpose of creating fair copies. As Ann Blair suggests, during the early modern period scholars rarely worked alone, but relied on a wide range of people to help with, among other things, reading, excerpting, and making fair copies of compositions, especially when working with texts. By the eighteenth century, ‘most scholars sought to distinguish themselves from scribing by relying on others to do the copying, which they implicitly considered a mechanical task and a waste of time’. These assistants have been characterised as ‘invisible others’, that is intellectual and social inferiors who were rarely mentioned by name. In the case of naturalists, in particular, such assistants would also have helped with the management of an overwhelming amount of new information that accumulated due to the rapidly increasing discoveries of new species. The people to whom scholars and naturalists would have turned for such help could include individuals outside the family unit who would have been hired and paid for their work, such as amanuenses, servants, or students. Joseph Banks, who employed eleven librarians and assistants to catalogue his collections of
specimens and books, can, once again, serve as an example here. He hired Sigismund Bacstrom (ca 1750-1805) specifically as an amanuensis with the task of copying notes from Hans Sloane’s copy of John Ray’s *Historia plantarum* into his own (i.e. Banks’) personal copy. To a similar but lesser extent, Linnaeus also began working closely with his son and two amanuenses towards the end of his life. The latter of these he employed to copy out what he had written on his paper slips into a notebook in a neat hand. It is entirely possible that Taylor White, too, hired external help if only because it was convenient and time-saving to have someone else copy draft notes in a more refined hand.

One question still remains: why would Taylor White have had these fair copies made at all? One possibility is that he wanted to display his notes alongside his collection of animal portraits as part of an exhibition that he would have opened to visitors. It was fairly common during this period for collectors to invite others to view their latest curiosities. It is, however, rather more likely that he was preparing his descriptions in order to publish these together with his watercolour drawings. White did in fact at one time intend to publish his collection, as can be seen in a letter from Daniel Solander to John Ellis in March 1762, in which Solander writes: ‘Mr. White told me that he intends to publish his figures in a large work, and has hope that the King will be at the expenses.’ This publication, however, never came to be. In fact, it appears that fair copies were made only of his notes on birds, with those on mammals and fish remaining either in draft form or written in Taylor White’s slightly neater hand. Given that birds appeared first in his system of classification, it would seem that he was having fair copies made gradually while he continued to compile his draft notes for the later volumes on mammals and fish. This process was then interrupted part way through and never completed. It should also be mentioned that where these fair copies were made, the original draft versions no longer seem to exist.

The fact that White never realised this publication, despite amassing such a large collection of drawings and written descriptions and fully intending to publish, is not necessarily unusual. It could even be argued that this was a common turn of events. As David Allen stated, this lack of publication is ‘a story, alas, which in the history of science is only too familiar.’ This can be seen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with Conrad Gessner (1516-65), Thomas Moffett (1553-1604), and Jan Swammerdam (1637-80), all of whom had at least one project never reach publication due (presumably) to illness, death, or high costs of publication. This was also an experience shared by several of Taylor White’s contemporaries.
John Michell (1724-93), for example, did a great deal of research in stratigraphy and especially on the divisions of bedded rocks in Britain but never published his findings. Joseph Banks, likewise, published neither his travel accounts nor the botanical text on which he was working with Daniel Solander, despite having 700 folio plates as well as a fair copy of Solander’s manuscript text prepared for the latter project. In the case of John Michell, it has been suggested that his lack of publication was due either to ‘modesty or mere inertia’. With regard to Banks, on the other hand, many explanations have been put forward for the absence of publication, including a lack of confidence in his writing skills, or that he did not have the ‘literary mind’ and the patience necessary to edit and prepare a text for publication. Scholars have also suggested that Banks was part of those who viewed publication as ungentlemanly, that his reputation was not reliant on publication, that he did not wish to align himself with any particular scientific ideas or political views, or that he was simply too busy with his work at the Royal Society, the Royal Gardens at Kew, and with the management of his estates.

Naturalists especially were faced with a constant dilemma throughout this period of wanting to share their knowledge and discoveries with a larger audience but feeling constrained by the sense of finality that came with publishing a text in print. Many scientists and natural historians preferred to share their research by means of manuscript texts or private correspondence as this allowed for a continual accumulation of knowledge and offered more control on the dissemination of such knowledge. Several reasons could be given to explain why the fair copies of Taylor White’s notes stop part way through the collection. Perhaps he began to fear that publication would tarnish his reputation as a gentleman, or he succumbed to the fear of finality and changed his mind about wanting to publish his collection. That some draft notes appear within the early volumes on birds, which are otherwise all fair copies, and that additional comments in White’s hand have been added to fair copies, demonstrates that White was constantly editing and reworking his collection. He did, in fact, continue to edit and compile notes until 1771, the year before his death. Perhaps, instead, he had only ever intended to publish his volumes on birds; or perhaps, quite simply, he died before the project could be completed.

Conclusions

It is clear that with regards to his note-taking practices Taylor White shared many similarities with other natural historians of his day: he collected and compiled information from
published sources, wrote in both Latin and English, turned to others to create fair copies of his notes, and toyed with, but never brought to fruition, the idea of creating his own publication based on his collection of drawings and notes. White was not, however, satisfied with creating an exact copy of other naturalists’ descriptions, nor their systems of organisation and classification. He sought to describe animals that were relatively unknown, and was keen to identify accurately their geographical origins. He also added his own comments and created some descriptions entirely from his own observations. Making use of loose sheets of paper further allowed him to edit and reorganise his collection as he acquired more information and made new discoveries.

White was an avid naturalist-collector and clearly enjoyed the process of collecting, observing, and writing about the natural world. He was also very interested in participating in contemporary scientific discourse. He created his notes to complement his collection of watercolour drawings, thus combining both visual and verbal descriptions in order to produce a portrayal of nature that was as complete and effective as possible. At the same time, however, his notes served as more than simply a second form of description; they offered him the opportunity and the space to question, comment, and contribute to pre-existing knowledge about well-known, ill-described, and ‘undescribed’ birds, mammals, and fish.

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iv Blair, Too Much to Know, at pp. 63, 70, 86.


vi Blair, Too Much to Know, at p. 72.


xi This paper stems from work that was part of a larger project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The remainder of this special issue of Notes and Records is devoted to research that was completed on Taylor White and his ‘paper museum’.
My thanks go to Dr Victoria Dickenson for these biographical details of Taylor White.

For more on White’s personal collections see Victoria Dickenson’s article in this issue.

This dating is based on a variety of factors. The watermark on the paper is that of ‘pro patria’, commonly used in Holland during the eighteenth century. Large quantities of this paper were exported to England during the first half of the century, which suggests that White could have accumulated a provision for personal use. White also records dates on the notes themselves (e.g. the date of acquisition of particular specimens) ranging from 1759-71, and makes repeated references to the 10th and 12th editions of Carl Linnaeus’ Systema naturae, published in 1758 and 1766 respectively. This dating of Taylor White’s notes is especially interesting as this would place White within the contemporary trend of reorganising collections according to Linnaean practices which occurred throughout Europe during the 1750s and 1760s. See Rose, ‘Specimens, slips and systems’, at pp. 207-08. For more on White’s use of Linnaeus, see below. For the dating of his work in relation to his use of Linnaeus more specifically, see Céline Stantina’s article in this issue. I would like to thank Jennifer Garland for providing me with details about the watermark on White’s paper.

Not every painted animal, however, has a matching written description. Some of these notes were likely lost or misplaced before the collection was sold in 1926.

Comparison is made more directly to Linnaeus throughout this article due to the fact that White relied heavily on the Swedish naturalist’s publications (primarily the 10th and 12th editions of his Systema naturae) when composing his notes. It is possible, however, that he modelled his note-taking techniques on those of Daniel Solander, with whom he was acquainted through the Royal Society. During the same period when White would have been composing his notes, Solander was also working on reorganising Hans Sloane’s (1660-1753) collection at the British Museum. For this purpose, Solander created a manuscript slip catalogue, based on Linnaeus’ own method of using paper slips (and using Linnaeus’ binomial system of classification). White could have found inspiration, then, from a model closer to home. Rose, ‘Specimens, slips and systems’, passim; Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at pp. 228-229.

That is, the common English name as it was known at the time; these are not necessarily all common names that are still used today. For more on the contemporary identification of animals (especially birds) depicted in Taylor White’s collection and its challenges, see the article by Vida Javidi and Robert Montgomerie in this issue.

For a more in-depth analysis of Taylor White’s taxonomical practice and system of classification, see Céline Stantina’s article in this issue.


The process by which the vernaculars overtook Latin as the dominant language involved a variety of factors, occurred at different speeds in different geographical areas, and is, overall, one that is much more complex than can be adequately described here. For detailed accounts and discussions of this process see Jürgen Leonhardt’s Latin: Story of a World Language (trans. Kenneth Kronenberg), (Belknap Press, Cambridge and London, 2013); Jan Bloemendal’s edited volume Bilingual Europe: Latin and Vernacular Cultures - Examples of Bilingualism and Multilingualism c. 1300-1800 (Brill, Leiden, 2015); and Peter Burke’s Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004). On the persistence of Latin throughout this period see also Sarah Knight and Stefan Tilg (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin (Oxford University Press, New York, 2015).


Out of the entire collection, 91 notes include a mixture of both Latin and English. Only 22 are written entirely in English; the vast majority then, are written entirely in Latin.

Again here it is possible to see similarities between Taylor White’s note-taking practices and those of Linnaeus; Linnaeus also used the abbreviation ‘OBS’ to indicate particular characteristics of a specimen that he observed or to offer additional taxonomical information. Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at p. 221.

‘I believe it is the female of the previous [bird].’ The Yellow Crested Black Woodpecker [Pileated Woodpecker, female], Note 68, Birds Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 322). Taylor White Collection: MSG BW002. Blacker Wood Collection, McGill Library; ‘I believe it lives in Ceylon.’ [Abyssinian Roller], Note 21, Birds Volume 5 (corresponds to Item 437), Taylor White Collection. For the remainder of the article cataloguing information for
White’s notes will be presented simply as ‘Taylor White Collection’. Digital reproductions of the notes and paintings in Taylor White’s collection can be found in the McGill Library Archival Collections Catalogue (AtoM) at: https://archivalcollections.library.mcgill.ca/index.php/taylor-white-collection. In the references provided here, ‘Note #’ refers to the page of the digital volume in which the note is found, while ‘Item #’ refers to the number written in pencil on the note itself. I will be using diplomatic transcriptions throughout this article. All transcriptions and translations are my own. There are numerous irregular spellings throughout Taylor White’s notes; I have added ‘[sic]’ or other clarifications only when particularly necessary.

**xix** [Gilded Barbet, male], Note 58, Birds Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 318), Taylor White Collection. The bold font is my own addition. ‘The feet are black: with two toes forward and two back. Obs[ervation]: Near the nares there are several stiff black bristles.’

**xxvi** English spelling and grammar could still be quite varied in the mid-eighteenth century (especially in personal and private documents); the standardisation of written vernacular languages was a very long and slow process. Interest in, and attempts at, normalising and codifying the English language greatly increased in the latter half of the century, however these did not immediately take effect, and variation continued well into the nineteenth century.


**xxvii** Both these types of errors can be seen in White’s note on ‘the house swallow’ for which the description reads: ‘recticibus, exceptis duabus intermediis, macula alarum notatis’, followed by a reference to page 191 of Linnaeus’ Systema naturae. The first error was fairly easy to spot and repair: the word ‘recticibus’ here should in fact be ‘recticibus’. As it stands, however, the translation of the whole phrase would be ‘with the flight feathers on the tail, except the two in the middle, marked with a patch of the wings’. There was quite clearly, then, another error in the final portion of the description. A comparison with Linnaeus’ original text showed that the word ‘alarum’ was incorrect and should instead be ‘alba’, thus making the meaning of the latter portion of the description ‘marked with a white patch’. The House Swallow [Common House Martin], Note 21, Birds Volume 12 (corresponds to Item 714), Taylor White Collection.

**xxviii** Peter Paillou (ca 1720-90), one of the artists hired by White, included the measurements of some birds directly on the verso of the portraits. This concern also appears in some of White’s notes, in which he records about ‘the Small Guinea Deer’, for example, that ‘This Drawing is as big as the Life.’ The Small Guinea Deer [Royal Antelope, female], Note 26, Mammals Volume 4 (corresponds to Item 151), Taylor White Collection.

**xxix** This is the published text to which White refers the most, appearing most often with the abbreviation ‘LSN’ (as mentioned above, White refers primarily to the 10th and 12th editions of the text). Other authors to whom he makes direct reference include Francis Willughby (1635-72) and Mathurin Jacques Brisson (1723-1806). Unfortunately, there is no concrete evidence of the books White might have owned in his own personal library. It seems likely, however, that he owned both editions of Linnaeus mentioned here, as well as those by Willughby and Brisson.

Céline Stantina’s article in this issue offers a greater discussion of White’s textual sources.

**xxx** The description in both Linnaeus’ text and White’s note reads: ‘Maximus Domitiani tempore captus, unde senatus consult.: Ex hoc tempore, jam Caesar figuli tua castra sequuntur.’ This translates roughly as: ‘The great [turbot] caught in the time of Domitian, from which [i.e. because of which] the Senate decreed: From this time, Caesar, may potters now attend your military camp.’ The Turbot [Turbot], Note 11, Fish and Reptiles Volume 1 (corresponds to Item 930), Taylor White Collection; Caroli a Linné, Systema naturae per regna tria naturae, 3 vols (Laurentii Salvii, Holmiae, 1766), vol. 1, p. 458. The second part of the description (beginning ‘Ex hoc tempore’) matches lines 134-35 of Juvenal’s Satire IV, while the first part seems only to have been loosely based on the satire. Juvenal mentions ‘potters’ here because a very large dish was needed for the very large fish.

**xxxi** ‘Lineus dixit etiam Pes sinister sub palmatus. sed mihi non apparet.’ The Bald Buzzard [Osprey], Note 3, Birds Volume 3 (corresponds to Item 378), Taylor White Collection.

This myth dates back at least to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, appearing in Gerald of Wales’ description of Ireland (ca 1188), as well as in the writings of Albertus Magnus (d. 1280). Rachel Warren Chadd and Marianne Taylor, Birds: Myth, Lore and Legend (Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2016), at p. 49; Gerald of Wales, The History and Topography of Ireland (trans. John O’Meara), (Penguin Books, London, 1982 [1951]), section 12.

**xxxii** See plate XXXIV. Ornithologie ou méthode contenant la division des oiseaux, tome 1 (Chez C I. Jean-Baptiste Bauche, A Paris, M.DCC.LX.).

**xxxiv** [Red-throated Loon, juvenile or nonbreeding], Note 35, Birds Volume 15 (corresponds to Item 849), Taylor White Collection. On Joseph Banks’ voyage to Canada see the work by Averil Lysaght, Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: his diary, manuscripts and collections (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971).

The Snow Bird [Snow Bunting], Note 29, Birds Volume 10 (corresponds to Item 639), Taylor White Collection; The Spotted Deer [Chital, male], Note 22, Mammals Volume 4 (corresponds to Item 147), Taylor White Collection; [Common House Martin], Note 87, Birds Volume 10 (corresponds to Item 655), Taylor White Collection. ‘Mr. Nettleton’ refers here to Robert Nettleton (d. 1774), a merchant and governor of the Russia company, acquainted with Taylor White through the Foundling Hospital in London. ‘Mr Penant’ refers to the Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant (1726-98). I would like to thank Céline Stantina for providing me with the information on Robert Nettleton.

Smith, ‘On Toucans and Hornbills’, at pp. 77, 104; Yale, Sociable Knowledge, at pp. 85, 196. Kathleen Murphy has also demonstrated that naturalists like James Petiver (ca 1665-ca 1718) hoped that naming informants and donors in their published works would encourage others to become collectors, and thus expand their social and scientific networks. Murphy, ‘Collecting Slave Traders’, at p. 656. On the circulation of exotic specimens and its impact on taxonomy, see Daniel Margócsy, ‘Refer to folio and number’: Encyclopedias, the Exchange of Curiosities, and Practices of Identification before Linnaeus’, J. Hist. Ideas 71, 63-89 (2010).

The Siberian Rabbit [European Rabbit], Note 45, Mammals Volume 6 (corresponds to Item 229), Taylor White Collection; The Antelope [Blackbuck, male], Note 30, Mammals Volume 4 (corresponds to Item 153), Taylor White Collection. This remark on the rabbit appears to be the only instance in which White explicitly mentions having seen only one individual of a species.

The Blue Falcon [Pallid Harrier, male], Note 58, Birds Volume 4 (corresponds to Item 416), Taylor White Collection. ‘Falco cera & pedibus flavis […]’. The remainder of the quote is originally in English. In Linnaeus, the first part of the description reads ‘F. cera alba, pedibus fulvis’, i.e. ‘[Falcon] with a white cere, tawny feet’. Systema naturae (1766), vol. 1, at p. 126. ‘Cere’: ‘the naked wax-like membrane at the base of the beak in certain birds, in which the nostrils are pierced.’ ‘cere, n.’. OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press.

The Rhinoceros bird [Rhinoceros Hornbill], Note 50, Birds Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 315), Taylor White Collection; The Bezoar Goat [Urial (Mouflon), female], Note 6, Mammals Volume 5 (corresponds to Item 175, verso), Taylor White Collection.

The yellow or Cream Coloured Lyon [Lion, male], Note 53, Mammals Volume 2 (corresponds to Item 69), Taylor White Collection; The Moose Deer [Moose, female], Note 81, Mammals Volume 3 (corresponds to Item 123), Taylor White Collection.

The Steel Bird [Blue-Black Grassquit], Note 27, Birds Volume 10 (corresponds to Item 638), Taylor White Collection; The Greatest Speckled Diver or Loon [Red-throated Loon, nonbreeding], Note 57, Birds Volume 15 (corresponds to Item 860), Taylor White Collection.

The Bernard [White-winged Scoter, female], Note 5, Birds Volume 16 (corresponds to Item 878), Taylor White Collection.

The Speckled Cormorant [European Shag, juvenile], Note 23, Birds Volume 15 (corresponds to Item 846), Taylor White Collection. As this example further demonstrates, White does address the question of sex at various times throughout his notes. In many cases this involves more than identifying the female of a particular species, stating simply ‘femina praecedentis’, i.e. ‘the female of the previous’, or including the sex in the species name, e.g. ‘The Hen Francolin’, or ‘The Female rock Goat’. At other times he does note a characteristic that is distinct either to the female or the male. In his description of the ‘Hen of the Great Benghal Parroquet’, White writes ‘In Femina hujus Species Lineae Circulares nigrae desunt,’ i.e. ‘the black curved lines are absent in the female of this species.’ [Alexandrine Parakeet, female], Note 8, Birds Volume 1 (corresponds to Item 264), Taylor White Collection.

of Deer, Notes 83-84, Mammals Volume 3 (corresponds to Item 123), Taylor White Collection.


Jamaicen Lizard-Cuckoo, Note 1, Birds Volume 6 (corresponds to Item 462), Taylor White Collection.

‘Cuculus cauda cuneiformi [cuneiforma] rostro longo nigro paululin [paululo] in incurvato vertice Castaneo circulis occulorum rubris Genis albidis parte inferiore lutea pedibus nigris. parte superiore virescente remigibus
The idea of collections existing as ‘fluid entities’ is further discussed by Nick Grindle in reference to Willughby and Ray’s collections of drawings. Irregular pinning and numbering, as well as annotations left on the drawings, suggest that the collections were frequently altered and reorganised based on newly acquired materials, information, and understanding of classification. Grindle, “No other sign or note than the very order”, at pp. 16–17.


I would like to thank Dr Victoria Dickenson for her suggestions on this topic and for providing me with these biographical details of White’s family.


Cooper, ‘Homes and Households’, at p. 235. Cooper further notes that this seems to have been a fairly common occurrence in the practice of astronomy.


This is the daughter of Dawson Turner (1775-1858) and wife of William Jackson Hooker (1785-1865), both botanists. Ann Shteir further notes that Maria Dawson Turner also served as her husband’s amanuensis and helper for fifty years. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996), at p. 179.


I was unable to see this source myself, and I would like to thank Dr Victoria Dickenson for bringing it to my attention.


Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at p. 219; Rose, ‘From the South Seas to Soho Square’, *passim*.

Blair, *Too Much to Know*, at pp. 7, 102, 104. As Staffan Müller-Wille further notes, the status of amanuenses in the field of natural history evolved over time; by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many amanuenses began to be employed as administrators and collectors for museums. Müller-Wille, ‘Names and Numbers’, at p. 113.

This work was later completed by Jonas Dryander (1748-1810). Rose, ‘From the South Seas to Soho Square’, at pp. 499, 501, 504.

Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at pp. 219, 225.

In a manner similar to Carl Linnaeus, however, White perhaps changed his mind about discarding notes later on as the verso of some drafts has been reused for the description of a different animal. Isabelle Charmantier and Staffan Müller-Wille have demonstrated that Linnaeus sometimes crossed out notes on his paper slips to indicate that a passage had been copied out or published, and sometimes reused the verso of slips, showing that discarding slips was originally part of his process. Later on, however, he decided that these slips might be useful and began adding to his draft notes rather than discarding them. Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at p. 221.

The Practice of Note-Taking

Daniel Solander, Letter to John Ellis, 5 March 1762, L5552, ff. 434v–435r, The Linnean Society of London, http://linnean-online.org/777774128/, f. 434v. Commissioning paintings during this period was expensive and Taylor White would have spent a substantial amount of money on his collection. This could explain why he was seeking external financial assistance. For more on the cost of art see the article by Victoria Dickenson and Jennifer Garland in this issue.

In a manner similar to Carl Linnaeus, however, White perhaps changed his mind about discarding notes later on as the verso of some drafts has been reused for the description of a different animal. Isabelle Charmantier and Staffan Müller-Wille have demonstrated that Linnaeus sometimes crossed out notes on his paper slips to indicate that a passage had been copied out or published, and sometimes reused the verso of slips, showing that discarding slips was originally part of his process. Later on, however, he decided that these slips might be useful and began adding to his draft notes rather than discarding them. Charmantier and Müller-Wille, ‘Carl Linnaeus’s botanical paper slips’, at p. 221.

The Naturalist in Britain, at p. 49.


Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, at p. 49.


Printing would mean an end to one’s research and having to exclude new discoveries and knowledge that would inevitably be made. Many authors managed to get around this, however, by publishing multiple editions of their works in revised and expanded formats. Yale, Sociable Knowledge, at pp. 9, 11-12.

Thompson, ‘Women Travellers and the Banksian empire’, at p. 437; Yale, Sociable Knowledge, at pp. 3-9.