

# THE EXTRAORDINARY NATURAL HISTORY BOOKS OF SAMUEL GALTON JNR.

Peter Allen

Samuel Galton Jnr (1753-1832), a member of a Birmingham Quaker dynasty of gun-makers and merchants, is perhaps the most enigmatic member of the Lunar Society. Part of his business involved the manufacture of cheap muzzle-loading guns, commonly exchanged for slaves on the West Coast of Africa. Yet this activity came in for no comment from any of the prominent abolitionists in this illustrious body; or from his eldest daughter, Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, who, as her memoirs make clear, was an opponent of the slave trade and slavery.

Between 1785 and 1797 Galton lived at Great Barr Hall, Staffordshire, one of the meeting places for the Lunar men. He was particularly interested in natural history, a subject taught in Quaker schools, and also one of the earliest members of the Linnean Society, formed in London in 1788 to promote the new system of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus for ordering the natural world.

## ***The Natural History of Birds***

In 1786, a year after moving to Barr, Galton began writing *The Natural History of Birds: containing a variety of facts...for the amusement and instruction of children*. This three-volume work was intended principally to benefit the younger members of his family and has the distinction of being the first natural history text of its kind for children.



Original image UCL Archives - GALTON/11/19/1/1

Great Barr Hall at the time of Galton's residence. Artist unknown.

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It was compiled from a number of sources and there was no pretence at making any significant ornithological contribution, but it was arranged according to strict Linnaean principles, with brief descriptions and discussions of habitat. It was peppered with platitudes and moral reflections. Galton chose to publish anonymously, but his authorship is confirmed in Karl Pearson's *Life of Francis Galton*.

Joseph Johnson, eulogised as 'the father of the book trade', was chosen to see the work through the press. He was the close friend and life-long publisher of Joseph Priestley, who almost certainly brought the two men together.<sup>1</sup>

## The Publishing History of *The Natural History of Birds*

The publishing history of Galton's *Birds* is a conundrum. The first of its six constituent parts, covering the first and second of the six orders into which Linnaeus had formed the whole class of birds, was first released as a market test in 1786. It ran to just 80 pages and 20 uncoloured copper-plate engravings, about half of the eventual first volume. The announced plan was to release the second part the following month, and this would complete the first volume. The remaining four parts, making up volumes two and three, were said to be in 'great forwardness'. Neither WorldCat nor COPAC record anything other than this first part.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the plan was certainly accomplished, since I have

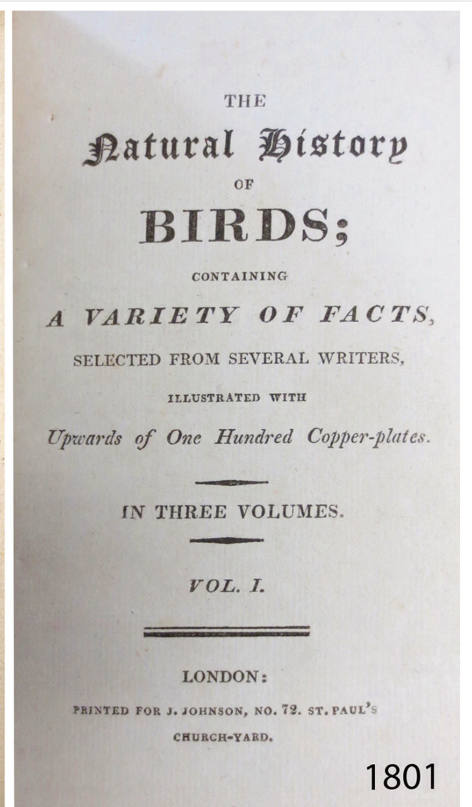
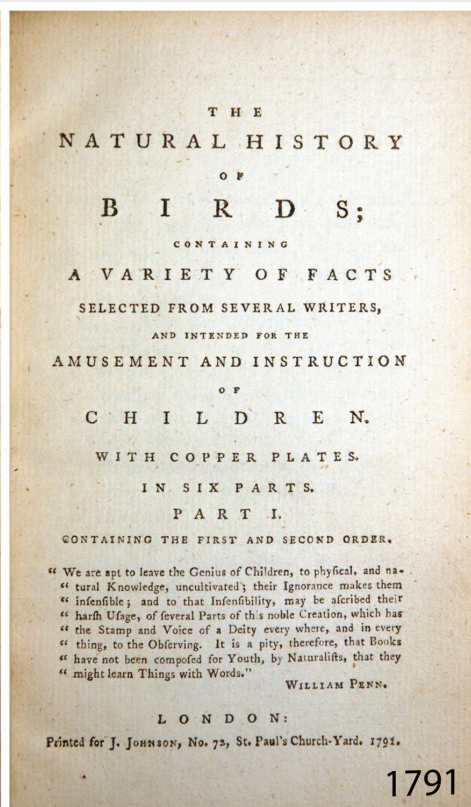
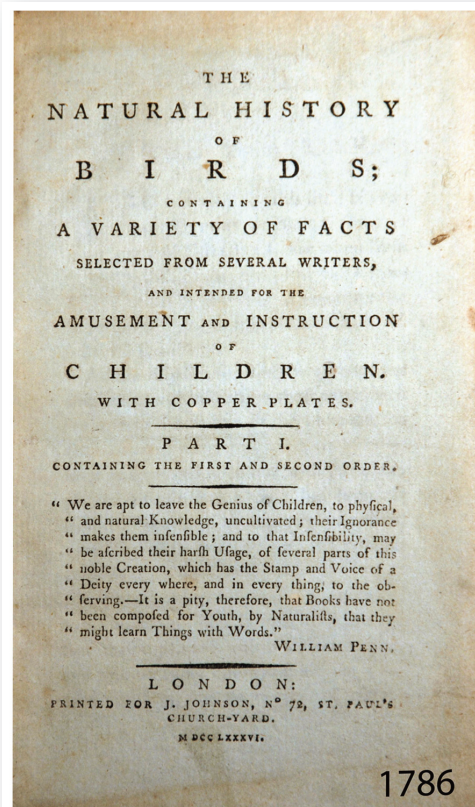
volume 1 (1786) and volume 3 (1789) of this first edition in my possession.

It was not until 1791 that Galton's *Birds* was properly marketed. Part 1, originally issued in 1786, was completely re-set in what is essentially an undeclared second edition. Errata were corrected and a few minor textual changes made. The preface was enlarged and other additions made to the prelims. Otherwise, the rest of this three-volume work is made up from exactly the same printed sheets as used in the first edition, with new tipped-in title-pages inserted in volumes 2 and 3. The full complement of 116 copper-plates, all dated in the plate, were engraved in three batches. Most copies met with are exquisitely hand-coloured. There are nineteen recorded copies of the 1791 edition in world libraries.

Four known critical reviews are dated between March 1793 and September 1794, which suggests a considerable further delay in publication.

This first work in the new genre of children's natural history literature was received with considerable enthusiasm by critics. Remarks made in *The Critical Review* of September 1794 were particularly noteworthy:

On the whole, we strongly recommend this agreeable work to the notice of parents... and we shall be happy to hear that the author has extended his plan to the other classes of natural history.



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The Dodo, from *Birds* by S Galton. Unbeknown to Galton, the Dodo had been extinct for over a century.

### Galton's new book project

Seduced by such encouraging words, Galton began the difficult task of compressing the whole class of Mammalia into a manageable publication for children. Little progress was made over the next seven years or so and Galton was eventually propelled into action by the publication in 1800 of the first volumes of George Shaw's monumental work on the whole field of zoology, also based on Linnaean principles.<sup>3</sup>

Shaw was well equipped for the task. He was assistant keeper of the natural history section at the British Museum and had unrestricted access to its unrivalled collections. The engraved plates, on very fine paper, were executed by the celebrated engraver, James Heath. Many were reproduced for the first time

from original drawings preserved in the British Museum. It was most unfortunate for Galton that the opening two volumes of this colossal work should be devoted to Mammalia.

Galton had dallied far too long. As a consequence he was forced to engage the services of another writer, identity unknown, to complete the venture from page 157. This contributor was responsible for some two-thirds of the two-volume work. In the Advertisement at the head of the prelims Galton offers the excuse of ill-health for his painfully-slow progress.

The particularly forthright remarks in the Introduction show that Galton had come in for sustained criticism from contemporaries:

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I have...entered into the obscure and entangled wilds of Nature. I have endeavoured to avoid, as much as possible, its thorny brakes. From experience, I have learnt that none are so circumspect, but that their diligence sometimes fails them, and they are liable to error. This consideration has enabled me to support the scoffs of the ignorant and malicious, who like grinning Satyrs, and chattering Monkeys, have beset me in my progress. I have begun my course, and with perseverance pursued that track which Fortune has pointed out.

### ***The Natural History of Quadrupeds***

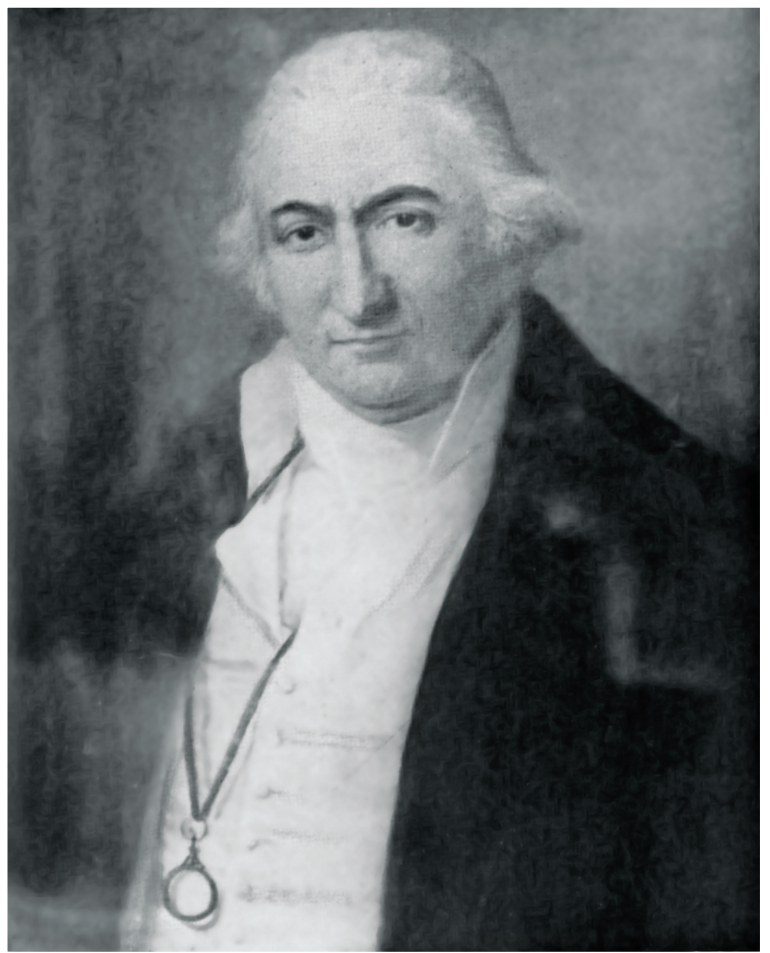
*The Natural History of Quadrupeds; including all the Linnaean class of mammalia...For the instruction of young persons* was eventually published in 1801. It was embellished with 72 plates. Astonishingly, there is only one complete copy of Galton's *Quadrupeds* in world libraries. This rarity resides in the Baldwin Library, University of Florida.<sup>4</sup> It is a presentation copy from the author to a relative, William Dickinson Jnr (1771-1832).<sup>5</sup> The existence of this work has escaped the attention of all previous Lunar Society scholars, including Robert Schofield.<sup>6</sup>

Galton's authorship of this anonymous publication is confirmed from the Preface:

This *Natural History of Quadrupeds*, may be considered as a Companion to the *Natural History of Birds for the Instruction and Amusement of Children*, published by Mr. Johnson, in London. It was composed for the same Family, and like that, is offered to such as may incline to avail themselves of it.

The proposed plan was to unite the new taxonomic system of Linnaeus with "the amusing details of Buffon". This was a reference to Buffon's *Natural history: Containing a theory of the earth, a general history of man, of the brute creation, and of vegetables, minerals, &c. &c. From the French*. Here again, there was no pretence at originality: it was professedly a compilation. Included were sections from Buffon which would now be considered as 'scientific racism'.<sup>7</sup>

In one section Samuel Galton Jnr attempts to engage with his young readers by emulating the type of master-pupil dialogue earlier used by Professor Raff of Göttingen in his *System of Natural History*, a work specifically adapted for youth.<sup>8</sup> Galton chose to use the name of one of his young sons, Hubert, in the exchange. The dialogue, meant to have a didactic purpose, ends up as clumsy and verbose.



Samuel Galton Jnr.

### ***The Publishing History of The Natural History of Quadrupeds***

A further variant of Galton's *Birds*, effectively the third edition, was re-issued with *Quadrupeds* in an attempt to shift remaining copies. A press notice from the *Morning Post*, 9 June 1802, reveals all. Shrewdly, it was issued with undated title-pages to give the illusion of recent origin. The sub-title was truncated, with all references to children's literature omitted. Apart from reset title-pages, this variant is identical to the 1791 edition. A copy recently sold at Bonhams for £2800.<sup>9</sup>

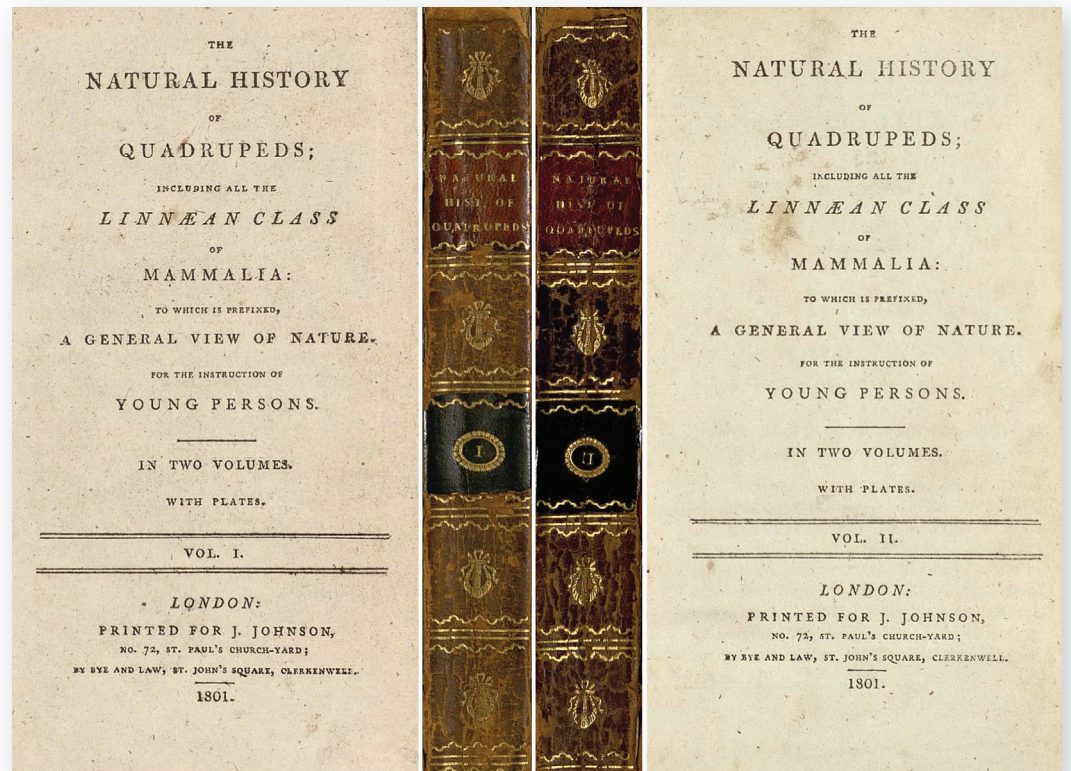
Only one in-depth review has been traced for *Quadrupeds*. It is highly critical of the long-winded first section compiled by Galton, which was choked with anecdotes.

The author of the latter part has studied greater brevity [and] we are decidedly of opinion that the work would be greatly improved in real excellence, as well as in uniformity, if in a future edition, the former part [i.e. Galton's contribution], as it now stands, were expunged and new written.<sup>10</sup>

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What a blow to Galton's pride! Was the book suppressed as a consequence? We may never know the true reasons for the book's rarity. Certainly, there were no further copies of Galton's *Quadrupeds* available for sale after January 1806, when Johnson's premises and entire book stock were destroyed in a fire.<sup>11</sup>

Galton's *Birds* was a bold experiment, crippled by an unfocused lack-lustre marketing strategy. Nevertheless, much credit is due to Galton for pioneering this genre and for introducing his young readers to Linnaeus. His *Quadrupeds*, on the other hand, has all the hallmarks of a personal indulgence gone wrong. ●



Only one complete copy of Galton's *Quadrupeds* is recorded in world libraries.

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## References

- 1 Tyson, Gerald P, *Joseph Johnson: a liberal publisher* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1979).
- 2 WorldCat (OCLC), the world's largest bibliographic database, is an incredible resource containing over two billion items from 72,000 national and academic libraries in 170 countries. The database maintained by COPAC, draws together the catalogues of over 90 UK and Irish academic, national and specialist libraries.
- 3 Shaw, George, *General Zoology or Systematic Natural History. With plates from the first Authorities and most select specimens. Engraved principally by Mr Heath* (London, 1800-1826).
- 4 I am greatly indebted to Baldwin Library staff for arranging digitisation.
- 5 Thanks are due to Dawn MacQueen for deciphering the inscription and providing genealogical insights.
- 6 Schofield, Robert E, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham: a Social History of Provincial Science and Industry in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1963).
- 7 (Buffon, Georges Louis Leclerc), *Barr's Buffon*. In ten volumes (London, 1797). See in particular extracts relating to negroes on pages 282, 291 and 292 of volume 4 used by Galton.
- 8 Raff, Georg Christian, *A system of natural history: adapted for the instruction of youth, in the form of a dialogue. Originally written in German, by Prof. Raff ... now first translated into English* (Edinburgh and London, 1797).
- 9 Bonhams, *Sale of Printed Books, Maps and Photographs*. Oxford 25-26 March 2014. Lot 67.
- 10 *Annual Review, or Register of Literature*, v1 (January 1802), 913.
- 11 Chard, Leslie, 'Joseph Johnson: Father of the Book Trade', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 78 (1975), 51.

## Further Reading

- (Samuel Galton Jnr.), *The natural history of birds; containing a variety of facts selected from several writers, and intended for the amusement and instruction of children. With copper-plates*. Six parts in three volumes (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791).
- (Samuel Galton Jnr.), *The Natural History of Quadrupeds; including all the Linnaean class of Mammalia: to which is prefixed, A General View of Nature. For the instruction of young persons* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1801).
- Mary J. Morris & Leonie Berwick, *The Linnaean legacy: three centuries after his birth* (Linnaean Society of London, 2008).
- Karl Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton* (Cambridge University Press, 1914).
- Barbara M.D. Smith, 'The Galtons of Birmingham: Quaker gun merchants and bankers, 1702-1831', *Business History* IX (2) 1967, 132-150.
- Samuel Galton, *Quadrupeds* can be downloaded via The University of Florida Digital Collections website: [www.ufdc.ufl.edu](http://www.ufdc.ufl.edu).
- Harry Smith, 'Galton, Samuel (1753-1832)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2013: [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/105102](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/105102)  
[www.greatbarrhall.com](http://www.greatbarrhall.com)



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