The history of butterfly study is intrinsically bound up with the British Empire, the British scientists and collectors who sought out butterflies both at home and abroad, and the books they wrote, illustrated and published. David Dunbar, a butterfly conservationist, tells that story in this neat and concise book, beginning the tale in 1634 with the publication of Theatrum Insectorum, generally credited to Thomas Muffet (1553-1604) who died thirty years before its eventual publication. Dunbar then takes us on a well-illustrated and mostly chronological journey from the 17th century through 2008 charting the course of butterfly discoveries, classification, research and, eventually, the conservation efforts being taken to protect British butterflies, all through the lens of the books written about them.

As in the USA, British butterfly books shifted away from books for butterfly collectors to books for butterfly watchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “Butterfly Watching” by Paul Whalley first appeared in 1980, but the emphasis on observing and conserving butterflies in Britain stretches back considerably longer. As a butterfly conservationist, Dunbar’s enthusiasm for the books he is writing about is evident in the way he presents the information. Dunbar’s book is well-researched and concise, and it covers the last quarter of the 20th Century and the first years of the present century. He knows all of these books and their authors and knows all of these books and their authors first hand and is an author on butterfly conservation himself. Indeed, raising interest in collecting butterfly books as opposed to specimens is sumptuous illustrations (often hand-colored) of butterflies and their eggs, caterpillars, chrysalids, host plants and nectar sources. Very often, the artists and authors were one, and in at least a few cases, painters who made a living on society portraits became fascinated with Lepidoptera and spent the rest of their lives painting butterflies and moths for the books they wrote.

The historical and biographical material in Dunbar’s book was in large part covered previously in The Aurelian Legacy: British Butterflies And Their Collectors by Michael A. Salmon (2000). (“Aurelians” by the way, is a word that meant lepidopterists and is derived from the Latin word for gold, “aurum”, just as the world chrysalis is derived from the Greek word for gold “chryso.”) Whereas Salmon’s book focused on the lives of the English men and women who studied butterflies, Dunbar’s book examines the books they wrote. So this book operates at a disadvantage inasmuch, at least for me, people are more interesting to read about than books. Indeed, much of what Dunbar has to say appears to be addressed to book collectors who, not unlike other kinds of collectors, place inordinate value on rarity and condition. But these are quibbles, and the book contains far more useful information than chaff and it is hard to view the plates from the books under discussion without coming under their spell.

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