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From United Kingdom



Merganser

4.0 out of 5 stars Fascinating study of William Yarrell - a legend of British ornithology

Reviewed in the United Kingdom  on 25 July 2022

Back in the 1960s when I was a teenage schoolboy and junk shops were plentiful, I forked out ten shillings (50p) on the three volumes of Yarrell's History of British Birds.

The contents captured my imagination and further stimulated my already strong interest in ornithology and birds. Whenever, I opened the covers, I was completely absorbed. Yarrell became my hero.

Fast forward to the 1970s when I was an impoverished student, and I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life (one which I still regret) - I sold all three volumes to a London antiquarian bookdealer for £20.

Yarrell's work is now available online, but reading it that way does not compare with the authenticity of my 19th hardcopy version.

Now, however, a hugely welcome consolation has arrived in the form of this wonderfully-written and beautifully-produced biography of the great man.

As far as I am aware, it is the first in-depth study of one of the great Victorian pioneers of natural history - a man who, with his lucid writings, made ornithology appealing to his contemporaries.

Writes the author: "His book on birds, and another on British fishes, filled gaps in nature and fulfilled a need for up-to-date data.

"As such, his work formed an accurate basis on which to build modern scientific taxonomic advances and distribution records."

But the Yarrell described by Ms Jackson is much more than a naturalist.

A highly sociable individual, he played the piano and loved theatre, the popular music of his day and fine dining and wining. He had no shortage of what is today sometimes referred to as 'hinterland'. What is more, he enjoyed robust health up until his death, aged 72, in 1856.

This is a really enjoyable study, and credit it is due not just to the author for her inspired research and fluent writing but also to the team at John Beaufoy Publishing for the care and craft with which they have produced what is a very welcome and thoroughly enjoyable book.