

On Accumulating a Butterfly (Book) Collection – Alan Hyman

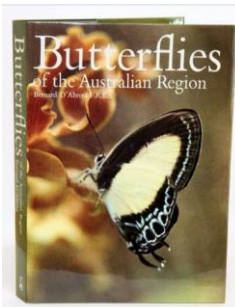
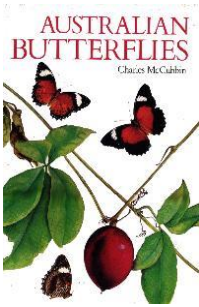
Someone who builds a traditional printed library these days is likely to be seen by ‘progressive’ sections of society as quaint, old fashioned or retrograde. If the library’s components happen to include butterfly books, add ‘eccentric’. Be that as it may, for the lepidopteran enthusiast there is always something rather special in unearthing a new, unusual or rare book on this eclectic subject. Whether it is a scientific reference field guide, photographic essay, popular work, historic art volume or biography, I’ve found much satisfaction and excitement over the years in each new discovery and some of these I’ve mentioned below. Perhaps there are other collectors who have had similar experiences.

Having become interested in collecting butterflies at an early age, it seems appropriate that a 10th birthday present from my father was a butterfly book. This was ‘The Butterflies of Australia & New Guinea’ by Charles Barrett and Alex N. Burns, a 1951 publication and the first substantial work available on the subject since Dr. G.A. Waterhouse’s (1932) ‘What Butterfly is That?’ Shortly afterwards, I was due to have a tonsillectomy and the book became a comforting companion during my hospital stay. (A few years later I was to meet a tolerant Alex Burns at the Australian Museum (Sydney) where he patiently showed an eager young teenager a few drawers of *Papilio aegaeus* from the Museum’s ‘official’ collection and hand wrote in a mature script, addresses where I might obtain such items as entomological pins.)

While I maintained a background interest in the subject – school studies, then work and tennis predominated and nothing more was obtained until the early 1970’s when several major books on Australian butterflies were unleashed within a short space of time. There had been talk of reprinting the Waterhouse volume for some years but the major factor in preventing this was that neither Neville Cayley’s original illustrations nor the printing blocks could be located by the publishers. When these finally resurfaced in 1967, Ian Common and Douglas Waterhouse (nephew of the original author) undertook to revise the work, ultimately becoming a complete rewrite but utilizing Cayley’s colour and black and white plates. These were supplemented by new additional plates illustrating species not covered in the original work. The book appeared in 1972 and a friend in the trade ordered a copy for me, selling it at a discount. His boss objected to him lowering the retail price and the two had a heated exchange. My friend quit his position on the spot and consequently I felt rather guilty about him losing his job – until he explained that he had been unhappy with the bookshop management anyway and this incident was merely a catalyst for the termination! I wonder if any other butterfly books have triggered similar crises.

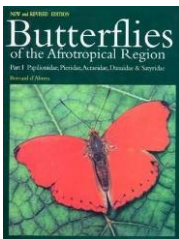
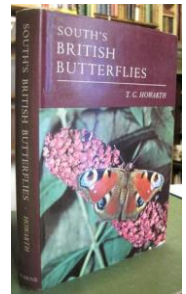


At about the same time, the ‘Nature and Field Hobby Centre’ at Crows Nest in Sydney was selling all kinds of natural history paraphernalia and books. The proprietor, Lew Simpson, alerted me to two massive upcoming volumes – Charles McCubbin’s 1971 ‘Australian Butterflies’ (exquisite water colour illustrations and descriptive text) and Bernard D’Abrera’s 1972 ‘Butterflies of the Australian Region’

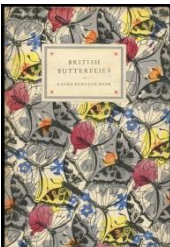
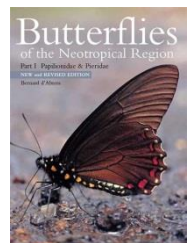


(same size set specimen colour photographs of every known regional species). Both were priced at the princely sum of \$25 but bearing in mind that back then the cost of a cappuccino was about 25c, the relative expense becomes apparent. Which to buy? (Eventually, both – my financial situation consequently taking a battering at the time.)

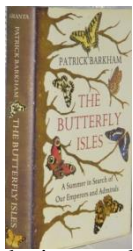
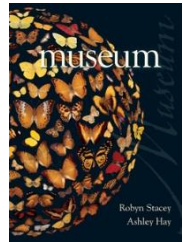
Another find, T.G. Howarth’s 1973 edition of ‘South’s British Butterflies’ was a major update on a British entomological classic. One curious entry concerns a species, said to have been taken at Hampstead called ‘Albin’s Hampsted Eye’. Described by James Petiver in 1717 from a single specimen, Howarth comments: ‘...it is interesting to speculate on how it came to be recorded from such an unlikely locality and at that period of leisurely travel. At the present time of rapid travel accidentally introduced specimens are much more likely to become frequent’. The point is that today we know this butterfly as the familiar Indo-Australasian species, the Meadow Argus (*Junonia villida*)!



Book browsing can occasionally yield the odd treasure when least expected. For example, in a Chatswood discount bookshop in the early 80’s, I came across a whole stack of D’Abrera’s ‘Butterflies of the Afrotropical Region’ – price \$35 each! Affordability aside, its size and approximately 5 kilogram weight ensured a logistic limit of ‘one per customer’. That such a work was considered by someone to be a ‘remainder’ seemed inexplicable! On another occasion in 1984, I glimpsed an interesting looking item in a second hand bookshop window from my homeward-bound 257 bus. A lunch hour expedition there the next day delivered another bargain D’Abrera – ‘Butterflies of the Neotropical Region Vol.1’ in virtually new condition. In more recent times, a NSW country book barn yielded the classic work, ‘British Butterflies’ (1946 edition), by E.B. Ford, in quite good

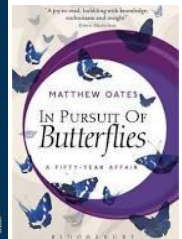


order and just \$11. The original owner's name was stamped on the top of the flyleaf and at the base, 'Sold by Kelly and Walsh Ltd. Singapore'. The historic travels of this book would probably make an epic tale in its own right! The Canadian volume 'A World for Butterflies – their lives, behavior and future' by Phil Schappert, was extracted for a modest price from the trestle table of a pop-up pre-Christmas book outlet. A few years ago, I found a pristine copy of 'Museum' (Robyn Stacey and Ashley Hay, 2007) the richly illustrated story of the (Sydney) Macleay Museum's natural history collection, including its historic butterflies. This was in a Glebe bookstore for less than a third of its original almost \$80 price tag. More recently still, a popular Sydney city discount bookstore yielded a copy of 'The Butterfly Isles'



(2010) by Patrick Barkham, a Cambridge educated features writer. In the book, the author sets out to find every species of British butterfly (there are 60) in a single summer. Beautifully written as an engaging adventure and including colour images of all species, the book is just one of a genre which document a personal passion for, and association with British butterflies. (Did Patrick succeed in his quest? I'll keep you in suspense.) I am not especially a fan of

the internet but this medium recently provided the source for two more books in the same mould – 'Rainbow Dust' by Peter Marren (2015), subtitled 'Three Centuries of Delight in British Butterflies', and 'In Pursuit of Butterflies' by Matthew Oates (2015),



tracing fifty years of his meticulous diaries as a detailed narrative. All three of these authors are experts in the field, have had an association with the charity Butterfly Conservation in the UK and write in personable, articulate but individual styles. While not autobiographies, the books include enough personal incidents, details and wit to engage the reader on an intimate level. The common subtext for each work is an intense love for butterflies, their physical and philosophical place in the scheme of things, their conservation, the species we are losing and those unfortunately lost. The implications and lessons here are universal.

There are many more new books on lepidoptera available today, across a range of genres and prices. The common theme is the overarching need for butterfly conservation in increasingly hostile local and global environments. Hopefully, proliferation of these books will help create a greater understanding of these benign insects in the wider community and consequently increased awareness of our planet's predicament. The beauty and fragility of butterflies are somehow symbolic of nature generally. This might at least partially explain, (to borrow Sharman Apt Russel's book title), my 'obsession with butterflies'.

