

From Naturalism to Darwinism

Dr Robin Wootton

The D&EI was founded at a time of intense interest and activity in the natural sciences, and this is amply reflected in its library. There are early editions of many of the leading C18th naturalists: Gilbert White, Thomas Pennant, George Montagu, William Ellis, as well as Carl Linnaeus, the founder of modern systematic biology, and the Comte de Buffon, the great encyclopaedist. The spectacular advances in knowledge of the living world that resulted from expeditions and from the availability of good microscopes in the C19th are reflected in a fine collection of monographs on specific groups of animals, plants and Protista, often published by the still extant Ray Society. Among many others these include the splendid account of the stalk-eyed Crustacea by William Elford Leach, who was the prime mover in the foundation of the Institution, as well as Charles Darwin's monograph of the world's barnacles, published before *The Origin of Species*, and that of Philip Henry Gosse on British sea anemones and corals. Gosse, one of the greatest of all observational biologists, who spent much of his life in Devon, is also well represented by his popular writings.

The early years of the Institution saw one of the greatest of all human intellectual revolutions: the realisation that species were not created in their present form but have evolved from simplest beginnings through hundreds of millions of years. The library's collections provide a fascinating insight into the progressive development of these ideas and the controversies that surrounded them, with works by several pioneering minor writers as well as those by Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace and Thomas Henry Huxley. The most influential opponents of evolutionary ideas, the comparative morphologists Georges Cuvier and Richard Owen, are also well represented, and a remarkable early run of the *Mémoires du Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* with papers by Cuvier, Lamarck and St Hilaire in the thick of evolutionary controversy in Paris in the early years of the century is a rare resource for biological historians.

Since 1900, the library has increasingly concentrated on the South West, and natural history acquisitions have been largely limited to this area. The library would provide a useful resource for students of the changes in the flora and fauna of Devon and Cornwall in the last 200 years, should any such be undertaken.