



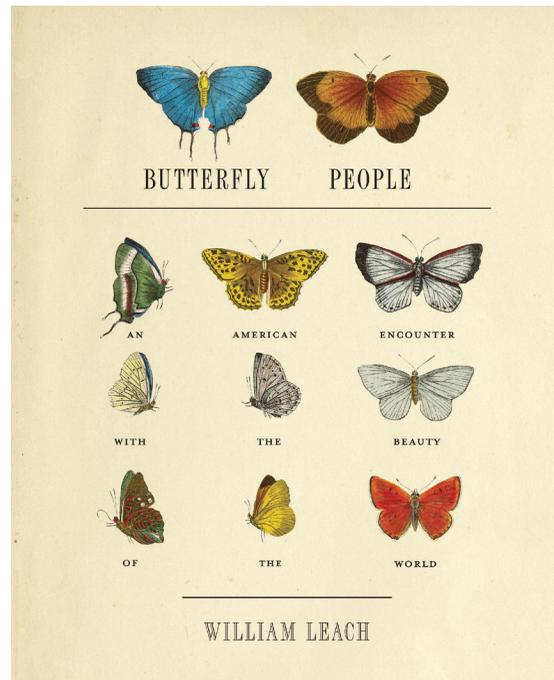
Butterfly People: An American Encounter with the Beauty of the World. William Leach. 2013. Pantheon. Hardcover 388 pp. 32 color plates. \$32.50.

Review by Harry Zirlin

Here is a book that was written with you in mind. While others can, and will, enjoy this book, I doubt that those who have not spent a significant portion of their lives contemplating the beauty, complexity and mystery of butterflies will be as captivated by this work as you will be. In a way, Professor Leach (he is a professor of history at Columbia University) has set out to explain us to ourselves. That is, why are we so fascinated (obsessed) with butterflies?

He explores this question by focusing on the great “butterfly people” in the United States who worked and published after the Civil War; primarily William Henry Edwards, Samuel Scudder, Henry Edwards, Herman Strecker and Augustus R. Grote but with intriguing chapters on the lives and work of Will Doherty, William Jacob Holland and others as well.

Leach’s writing is neither ponderous nor breezy as he sets out in detail (283 pages and



another 88 pages of notes) how the Nineteenth Century American lepidopterists advanced all of the life sciences both here and abroad through meticulously studying butterfly life histories, distributions and behaviors.

Some of this material has been covered before, e.g., *Brethren of the Net: American Entomology 1840-1880*, by W.C. Sorensen (University of Alabama Press 1995) but Leach’s work is more focused on butterflies and moths and the periods covered do not completely overlap.

While the progress made in butterfly studies during this period was a collective effort of many men and women, all given their due, it is W.H. Edwards and Scudder who dominate Leach’s account. Indeed, W.H. Edwards continues to exert a strong influence over the study of Lepidoptera to this day.

Scudder, who almost certainly was the intellectual equal of W.H. Edwards, was, according to Leach, hampered by the bond to

his mentor Louis Agassiz, who harbored an antipathy to Darwin’s theories and Scudder did not free himself from that leash until after the death of Agassiz in 1873.

W.H. Edwards, in contrast, embraced Darwin’s theory immediately and understood that butterflies had to be understood as living (evolved and evolving) animals and not as “*desiderata*” and “*offerata*” to be acquired and bartered after their deaths.

Herman Strecker, a stone-cutter of burial monuments by trade, and brought back to life here by Leach’s vivid portrayal of him through his correspondence, apparently did not care about theories. He comes across as a man determined to possess as many kinds and examples of dead butterflies and moths from as many places on the planet as it was humanly possible to do so at the time and he probably succeeded in this.

Leach’s account of Strecker’s work here is very favorable and, to be fair to Strecker, he described many species of moths new to science (particularly the fascinating underwings) and his massive collection, in large part acquired from contacts throughout the world, is still an important scientific resource at the Field Museum in Chicago. Indeed, Strecker’s acquisitiveness resulted in accusations that he stole specimens, but Leach’s extensive research turned up no hard evidence to back up the allegations and, in fact, turned up correspondence in which the original allegation was retracted by his accuser (Grote).

But whatever Strecker’s talents at building a collection, and whatever his talents as an artist (and they were considerable as the color plates here – alone worth the price of the book -- attest) Strecker was not on the same intellectual plane as W.H. Edwards and Scudder. Impulsive, eccentric and temperamental, Strecker’s personality and exploits make for great reading here, but he was a romantic at bottom.

Scudder sensed the problem inherent in the romance associated with butterflies and even wrote that the beauty of butterflies was

getting in the way of science, although Leach notes that he later backed away from this view.

While I had a hard time putting this book down, it was not a quick read either. So many times I sat with the book in my lap, pondering what we have lost. Leach believes that much of the American connection to nature during the Nineteenth Century, made manifest in the works of the butterfly people, stemmed from farming and farm life. The untidy edges of farm fields, the unmowed grazing land and the haphazard patchwork of woods and meadows was good for butterflies and those who would study them. Each technological advance caused a corresponding decrease in butterfly diversity and a decrease in people’s (particularly children’s) opportunities to connect with butterflies.

Whether or not you wind up accepting that explanation, it still hurts to read of the “clouds” of butterflies that would rise into the air from puddle parties disturbed by a passing carriage or fields of clover covered with fritillaries two and three to a blossom.

For all that is gone, both W.H. Edwards (*Butterflies of North America*) and Scudder (*Butterflies of the Eastern United States and Canada*) produced lasting works that are masterpieces on the North American fauna. Above all, it was W.H. Edwards’ and his followers’ insistence on studying living butterflies from egg to the adult, their concern for conservation of butterfly populations (Edwards himself attempted to reintroduce Baltimore Checkerspot to a West Virginia fen that had been drained) and the rigor they applied to science, that makes this book so relevant to the “butterfly people” of today.

