

Born on the pampas

It is a trivial literary fact that some authors are best known to us by their initials rather than their full names – W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, C. S. Lewis and A. A. Milne . . . and so it is with W. H. Hudson. But William Henry Hudson had other names too, by which he may once have been better known, Guillermo Enrique. Hudson was born in Argentina and did not come to England until 1874, at the age of thirty-two. It was in England, of course, and writing in English that he made the great reputation by which he is now remembered, but it is the purpose of Jason Wilson’s new biography to place this achievement in context by looking at the earlier life of Guillermo Enrique, brought up wild, poor and self-educated on the pampas, living a rough frontier life among the gauchos.

This is an original project and a worthwhile one. Hudson remained something of a mystery throughout his time in England: he hated London, but never lived in the country; he had a marriage and subsequently a long “affair”, in both of which the physical and emotional relationships were very unclear; he was secretive but also very outgoing; he was publicly active, but fiercely defended his privacy; and as an author he transgressed all the conventional labels and genres. In fact, he liked to represent himself not as a literary man at all, but as a field naturalist (the profession he declared on the British Library reader’s ticket he took out in 1875); he was probably nearer the truth, however, when he said he wished to be seen as “an unclassified person”. His friend Morley Roberts said that Hudson kept his soul “in a strong secret place”.

Nor did he ever return to South America, despite later writing such evocative books about its wildlife as *The Naturalist in La Plata*

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LIVING IN THE SOUND OF THE WIND

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(1892) and *Idle Days in Patagonia* (1893). Jason Wilson thinks that some of the clues to Hudson’s identity can be found in his unusual upbringing. He admits that the evidence is thin. Hudson’s own memoir *Far Away and Long Ago* (1917) is the only real source about his family life, since he later destroyed all his notebooks and letters (deliberately to thwart future biographers like himself, Wilson complains). But Wilson does succeed in the first half of this biography in giving a vivid and believable account of what life must have been like for Hudson, growing up with no formal schooling but immersed in a wonderland of nature. Like any gaucho child of the pampas he was pretty much born on a horse and wandered freely on horseback through the immense spaces of the plains, gaining an intimate knowledge of its wildlife, which he could later recall in astonishing detail, both visually and aurally. In preparing his list of species descriptions for *The Naturalist in La Plata*, for example, he found he could replay in his head the songs of 154 bird species, some decades after last hearing them. He also came to know the harsh realities of human life, working alongside the tough gaucho herders and serving in the military to protect the frontiers against marauders.

Wilson is well qualified to investigate this background. He, too, has divided his time between England and Argentina and has a “conflictive identity”, as he puts it. He has written works on Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda and various travel guides to Latin America. He has been assiduous in following the faint trails Hudson left in Argentina and feels an instinctive sympathy for his later experiences in Britain as a permanently “displaced person”. He draws various parallels with his own experiences, but perhaps goes a little too far here in intruding himself into the narrative, gratuitously so at times. As he confesses, he also lacks the patience or interest to share in Hudson’s absorption with birds, and that shows at times. But overall Wilson does a very good job in his first six chapters in portraying formative aspects of Hudson’s upbringing and development that will be new to many English readers.

In the second half of the book he rehearses Hudson’s career in England from the time of his arrival in 1874. This is more familiar territory, though here, too, Wilson offers many enlivening insights, particularly through the deft use of direct quotations from Hudson. These take us back to the books themselves and remind us of the qualities that give him a secure place in the great tradition of English-language nature writers running from Gilbert White through John Clare, Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas in Britain, and through Thoreau and John Muir in North America. Hudson shares with all these writers the habit of close attention to the details of the natural world, combined with a larger, imaginative vision of its intrinsic importance. The literary ambition, and the challenge, was to express how the habit served the vision and was in turn

nourished by it.

Hudson himself began by writing poetry, whose forms must have seemed best suited to his deeply emotional responses to nature. But he also had a scientist’s curiosity about the natural world and how it worked, and was concerned to give readers an exact sense “of the thing itself” in his descriptions. He turned to prose genres, partly to try that mode of expressing himself, and partly for the brute reason that prose paid better and in the early years in London he badly needed the money. Walter de la Mare observed that in spirit, however, Hudson remained a sort of prose poet, and Wilson detects further evidence of his origins in the cadences some of his prose shares with the gaucho ballads and romances he was brought up on. Others would find a more defining character in the rambling, digressive style of *Adventures with Birds* (1913) and his posthumous work, *The Hind in Richmond Park* (1922). In short, Hudson evades easy categorization.

He was, in the end, successful in worldly terms. When he died in 1922 he had a leader and an obituary in *The Times*, declaring him “unsurpassed as an English writer on nature”; he was honoured with a monument in Hyde Park opened by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, who delivered a moving eulogy; he was the successful author of some thirty books on natural history, including a best-selling novel *Green Mansions* (1904); he was a crusading conservationist who played an important role in the early work of the Society for the Protection of Birds (later the RSPB); and through all this, after great initial hardship and difficulties, he eventually realized the “English dream” he had left Argentina to fulfil. If he remains an elusive figure, our best chance of understanding him, Wilson concludes, is in exploring the insight expressed by Hudson’s friend, the poet Edward Thomas: “Mr Hudson began by doing an eccentric thing for an English naturalist. He was born in South America”.

