

THE CONCHOLOGIST'S FIRST BOOK

or A SYSTEM OF TESTACEOUS MALACHOLOGY

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THE TERM "*Conchology*," in its legitimate usage, is applied to that department of Natural History which has reference to animals with testaceous covering or shells. It is not unfrequently confounded with *Crustaceology*, but the distinction is obvious and radical, lying not more in the composition of the animal's habitation, than in the organization of the animal itself. This latter, in the *Crustacea*, is of a fibrous nature, and has articulated limbs; the shell, strictly adapted to the members, covers the creature like a coat of mail, is produced at one elaboration, is cast or thrown aside periodically, and, again at one elaboration, renewed; it is moreover composed of the animal matter with phosphate of lime. In the *Testacea*, on the contrary, the inhabitant is of a simple and soft texture, without bones, and is attached to its domicil by a certain adhesive muscular force; this domicil, too, is a permanent one, and is increased, from time to time, by gradual additions on the part of the tenant; while the entire shell, which is distributed in layers, or strata, is a combination of carbonate of lime, with a very small portion of gelatinous matter. Such animals, then, with such shells, form, alone, the subject of a proper "Conchology."

Writers have not been wanting to decry this study as frivolous or inessential; mostly unjustly assailing the science itself, on account of the gross abuses which have now and then arisen from its exclusive and extravagant pursuit. They have resigned much after this fashion:—that Conchology is a folly, because Rumphius was a fool. The *Conus Cedo Nulli* has been sold for three hundred guineas; and the naturalist just mentioned gave a thousand pounds sterling for one of the first

discovered specimens of the *Venus Dione* (of Linnæus). But there have been men in all ages who have carried to an absurd, and even pernicious extreme, pursuits the most ennobling and praiseworthy.

To an upright and well regulated mind, there is no portion of the works of the Creator, coming within its cognizance, which will not afford material for attentive and pleasurable investigation; and, so far from admitting the venerable error even now partially existing to the discredit of Conchology, we should not hesitate to acknowledge, that while few branches of Natural History are of more direct, *very few* are of more adventitious importance.

Testaceous animals form the principal subsistence of an immense number of savage nations, inhabitants of the sea-board. On the coast of Western Africa, of Chili, of New Holland, and in the clustered and populous islands of the Southern seas, how vast an item is the apparently unimportant shell-fish in the wealth and happiness of man! In more civilized countries it often supplies the table with a delicate luxury. Nor must we forget the services of the *pinna* with its web, nor of the *purpura* with its brilliant and once valuable dye, nor omit to speak of the pearl-oyster, with the radiant nacre, and the gem which it produces, and the world of industry which it sets in action as minister to the luxury which it stimulates.

Shells, too, being composed of particles already in natural combination, have not within them, like flowers and animals, the seed of dissolution. While the preparation of a specimen for the cabinet is a simple operation, a conchological collection will yet remain perfect for ages. These important circumstances being duly considered, in connexion with the universally acknowledged beauty and variety, both of form and colour, so strikingly observable in shells, it is a matter for neither wonder nor regret that these magnificent *exuvie*, even regard merely as such, should have attracted, in a very exclusive degree, the attention and the admiration of the naturalist. The study of Conchology, however, when legitimately directed, and when regarding these *exuvie* in their natural point of view, as the habitations, wonderfully

constructed, of an immensely numerous and vastly important branch of the animal creation, will lead the mind of the investigator through paths hitherto but imperfectly trodden, to many novel contemplations of Almighty Beneficence and Design.

But it is, beyond all doubt, in a geological point of view that Conchology offers the most of interest to the student; and here, by reference to the fair pages of a profound and mighty knowledge, to which it has pointed out the searcher after truth, are triumphantly refuted all charges brought against it of insignificance or frivolity.

“In fine, the relations of the mollusca,” says De Blainville, “with the mineral kingdom, and consequently with the mass of the earth which they contribute to form, are not devoid of interest, for without seeking here to resolve the physiological question—whether the conchyliferous Mollusca borrow of the inorganic kingdom the calcareous matter which composes their shells, or whether they form it of themselves, it is still certain that they produce, at least, changes upon the surface of the earth by accumulating this material in some places more than in others, and in consequence that they alter the physiognomy of the superficial structure of the globe, the study of which constitutes geognosy.”

“By this,” says Parkinson, “we are taught that innumerable beings have lived, of which not one of the same kind does any longer exist—that immense beds composed of the spoils of the animals, extending for many miles under ground, are met with in many parts of the globe—that enormous chains of mountains, which seem to load the surface of the earth, are vast monuments, in which these remains of former ages are entombed—that, though lying thus crushed together, in a rude and confused mass, they are hourly suffering those changes, by which, after thousands of years, they become the chief constituent parts of gems, the limestone which forms the humble cottage of the peasant, or the marble which adorns the splendid palace of the prince,” Fossil, wood, coral, and shells, are, indeed, as Bergman very forcibly observes, the only true remaining “medals of Creation.”

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