

*An Exquisite Legacy - The Life and Work of New Zealand Naturalist G.V. Hudson*  
By George Gibbs. Nelson: Potton and Burton, 2020.  
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Reviewed by Julia Kasper

### **An Exquisite Legacy - another exquisite piece by George Gibbs**

This book is about one of New Zealand's greatest pioneering entomologists, George Vernon Hudson, whose story and legacy has an impact on everyone who is interested in the insects of Aotearoa. Beyond this, it will also doubtlessly fascinate anyone, even those not particularly fond of bugs, since Gibbs paints a powerful picture of his grandfather in his usual eloquent style. (Readers may also like *Ghosts of Gondwana*).

It all starts with the story of a restless adventurous artistic father, who inspired his youngest son, George Hudson. We feel for the child suffering poor health, terrified by convention and the schooling system, but finding peace in his own world of insects and astronomy, studying, writing and drawing. The reader is taken into the past on a journey alongside Hudson as he sets off an adventure to the other end of the world, settling in New Zealand during a time when naturalists laid the scientific foundations of our knowledge of a unique nature. This all comes to life in Hudson's own voice, thanks to the diaries he kept for many years. We also learn that artefacts that were important for the family and still exist, such as a Rolfe and Clerkville mantle clock. We can almost see how Hudson flourished on his arrival in Aotearoa. Reunited with his brothers, equipped with their and his father's support, he voraciously collected insects, reared them, drew them and meticulously recorded all his observations.

Hudson grew into an extraordinary amateur entomologist but had little time for professionals. He created seven books full of his knowledge and insect illustrations, not particularly for the science community, but for everyone! *An Exquisite Legacy* beautifully reproduces Hudson's superbly detailed paintings of insects in a way that the print technology of days gone by simply couldn't do justice. Gibbs focusses in the homage to Hudson especially on his artistic skills and passion of drawing. Hudson's father crafted leadlight windows for churches and mansions, so the foundation of his talents was laid in early childhood. Hudson started his amazing drawings in his diaries back in England, and they were already remarkable. Typically he would draw on tiny pieces of cardboard that were later printed in his books at scale. For him it was "clear that the art itself became a focus of what natural history was all about". So we are very lucky that the original watercolors, all slightly bigger than "a stamp", still exist and are part of the art collection at Te Papa. Gibbs describes Hudson's unique technique of drawing precisely, following the memory of Hudson's daughter Stella, Gibbs' mother, whom the book is dedicated to. Stella and Hudson's wife Florence are mentioned a lot in the book, two important women in Hudson's life, who had barely any memories of his own mother.

As an amateur, Hudson collected and studied insects in his spare time, and he earned his money as a post clerk. In this job he was used to shift work, which enabled him to go on insect hunts during the day and used natural light when he prepared his artwork. As described in chapter 9 of *An Exquisite Legacy*, Hudson was also an astronomer. He was well prepared in proposing the seasonal time adjustment that we know as daylight saving. Needless to say, this benefited his entomological work.

In photographs of Hudson, you can see how neatly dressed he always was, humble maybe, but always tidy and with a chained pocket watch. Gibbs once told me, that Hudson always used his

retired suits for fieldwork, wearing his newer clothes for office work. But never was he dressed less than respectably, even on his trip to the Sub-Antarctic Auckland Island.



So you can imagine, being dressed neatly, drawing precisely and taking notes meticulously, how his insect collection was prepared. Opening one of his nine kauri cabinets, full of pinned insects, is definitely a revelation. Never have I seen such an array of perfectly pinned insects before. The nine cabinets house one of the largest and most important private collection in New Zealand. It is extremely valuable, not only as a research and reference collection, but also as an early record of the New Zealand insect fauna, especially of the Wellington region. It is now held, along with Hudson's watercolours and diaries, at Te Papa. Gibbs describes the moment Hudson decided to become an insect collector and we are grateful of the sacrifice of a particular dragonfly that passed pass his way when he was eleven years old.

There is something else that is unique about Hudson's collection, which might have been influenced by his work as a post clerk. Instead of recording information such as species, locality and date of collecting on a small label pinned together with a specimen on long pins, he used short pins and noted all this information in register books. Each specimen received a code that linked it to collection data in one of three registers. Each register is about 350 handwritten pages long and this forms the only record of Hudson's specimen data. Since Hudson had a very idiosyncratic handwriting style and wrote between lines when he ran out of space, his registers can be challenging to read. Also, he changed names, deleted numbers of specimens that were given away and reused those numbers. In short, these registers were living documents that changed with the collection, and often included so much more information than a standard label. Thanks to Hudson's diaries, Gibbs can offer us even more anecdotes and insight into Hudson's collecting trips and how he lured or reared specimens. Readers, familiar with some of Hudson's original books, will know that he was obsessed with moths. Capturing moths can cause damage to the fragile wings and also is it difficult to match caterpillar and adults. Collecting caterpillars and rearing them to the adult moth stage allowed Hudson to pin perfect specimens. Not only did this practice allow us to associate caterpillars with moths, but it also led to very realistic coloured and postured drawings. Speaking of rearing, given my personal interest lies with flies, I loved chapter 4. Here, Gibbs describes very noteworthy discoveries made by Hudson so detailed that you re-experience the excitement of the journey to unveil the life cycle of glow-worms and other mysteries. This shows us that a good naturalist is a detective: observing, laying traps, recording, sampling, and digging to add bits and pieces to the knowledge of our planet, and for the satisfaction of sharing this with other people.