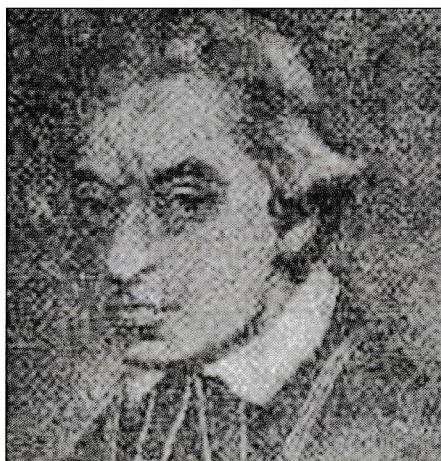


There is a close parallel to Gilbert White and his nearly exact contemporary, Aleš Pařízek (1748-1822), whose accomplishments ranged from composing and performing music to drawing and painting and supplying illustrations for some of his own books.

Aleš Pařízek was born on November 10 1748. Although his parents were not wealthy, they ensured that he had a good education at a Prague gymnasium and schools run by the Jesuits. In 1765, aged 17, he entered the Dominican order, studied philosophy and theology in Prague, Brno and Znaim, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1771, serving in Prague as a confessor, preacher and monastery librarian.

However, he had already shown a strong interest in education, and when a new teacher training college was established in Prague he studied the Socratic method, attended lessons on pedagogics, and was appointed to conduct catechism classes at the parish school of St Aegidius. He was subsequently engaged to teach calligraphy, natural history and history at the college, and in 1783 became head of the newly-opened high school in Klatovy. His



Aleš Pařízek

plement his account where relevant.

From the outset Pařízek emphasises that this is not a work of scholarship, and that details of specific types of teeth and claws, for example, have no place in a book intended for youthful readers and would only render it dry

because of any utilitarian aspects. While he devotes a lengthy paragraph to the praises of the faithful dog, 'almost indispensable to the household', he dismisses the cat in a mere four lines, stating that although it is 'crafty, cunning and false', it has its uses in driving away mice, rats and toads. Clearly Pařízek was not a cat-lover.

Turning to wild animals, Pařízek describes many species which are still to be found in the region today or, like the lynx, are making a come-back. He notes that the bear is generally peaceable except when disturbed, and that the wolf, though so fierce that on occasion it does not even spare human beings, generally only shows itself in especially harsh winters. Plentiful details are provided of 'red game' (various species of deer) and 'black game' (boar), and the reserves where they are protected for hunting purposes. Birds, fish and insects are similarly described, and if we may raise an eyebrow at the lip-smacking relish with which the author evokes the 'delicious' or 'extremely tasty' nature of certain types of fish such as salmon or trout, this may be forgiven when we recall that as a good son of the Church he would have consumed these regu-

Aleš Pařízek: *The Gilbert White of Bohemia?*

As we prepare to celebrate the 300th anniversary in July of the birth of Gilbert White, whose book *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* has proved so popular that it has never been out of print since it appeared in 1789, did a similar figure ever emerge in Bohemia?

by Susan Reynolds

distinguished career included a summons to Vienna to design improvements to the Austrian educational system, leading to an honorary doctorate in 1802 and his appointment as director of a Prague orphanage. By the time of his death on April 15 1822, he had risen to become dean of the faculty of theology at the University of Prague.

He seems to have had a lifelong affinity with children, and many of his musical compositions as well as his writings were aimed at the young. He wrote in both Czech and German, publishing, for example, a book of prayers in Czech for children (1789) a concise history on world history for young readers (1782), handbooks on religious education for parents and teachers, and a book detailing the rules of Czech orthography for use in schools in Bohemia (1812). Of special interest here, however, is the *Kurzgefaßte Naturgeschichte Böhmens, zum Gebrauch der Jugend* (Concise Natural History of Bohemia, for the Use of the Young), published in 1784, of which the British Library possesses a first edition.

As we have already seen, by this time Pařízek had some experience of teaching this subject, and knew how to make it attractive to his young readers. He explains in the preface that his aims are twofold: to provide young people with information which may be of practical use to them in their future careers, but also to inspire them with wonder at God's creation and the natural history of their homeland. The word 'patriotic' recurs frequently in the preface, and Pařízek's adult readers are asked to send him additional material to sup-

and tedious. It is divided into three sections on the minerals, plants and animal life to be found in Bohemia, with an appendix on a creature found far beyond its borders – man – noting the similarities between human beings and other living creatures. In keeping with his intentions, Pařízek explains the useful properties of different types of minerals, plants and timber, possibly foreseeing a day when his juvenile audience might take up careers as mining engineers or physicians.

This raises the question of the type of readership for whom the book was intended. As it was written in German, it seems likely that it was aimed at the educated middle classes, and this may explain a curious feature of the third section, in which domestic animals are given much more coverage than the wildlife of Bohemia. Presumably Pařízek was envisaging his readers becoming estate managers or gentleman farmers rather than actually doing the work of the farm with their own hands; he devotes considerable amounts of space to accounts of the various diseases which may affect livestock, firmly explaining that poor hygiene and husbandry is generally to blame (keeping animals in dirty stables and sties, or driving cattle to pasture when the ground is frozen), rather than the activities of witches and suchlike, as 'foolish and superstitious' people believe. His statements are supported by practical observation, but his scientific objectivity is not always unblemished. Curiously, he includes bats and stone-martens among domestic animals, probably because they frequent human habitations rather than

larly on Fridays or fast-days.

His awe and reverence on beholding God's creatures, however, seems to be limited when he considers certain amphibians. Turning to the toad (included in the section on quadrupeds), he describes it as looking 'much uglier than the frog', covered with yellow and green warts and spots all over its body. The equally luckless frog is 'a small, naked amphibious creature, of a somewhat disgusting appearance', although he comments 'some of them are eaten by us', unlike the toad.

Yet even these less appealing beings do have one attribute which might startle many theologians – a soul. Although man is 'the masterpiece of creation, and the noblest and most splendid creature on the whole earth', he shares an immortal soul with other living creatures, distinguished only by the fact that while the human soul is endowed with reason, those of animals are not. They do, however, have the power to feel emotions such as affection, sorrow and pain, and the underlying message to the young reader is that all sentient beings deserve humane and respectful treatment.

Just four years before Pařízek's death, the National Museum in Prague opened its doors, displaying magnificent collections of mineral, plant and animal specimens as well as antiquities and coins and medals like those which he collected in the form of casts and donated to the museum. It is fascinating to reflect on how many of its visitors, and possibly contributors, first had their love of natural history kindled by reading Pařízek's little book.