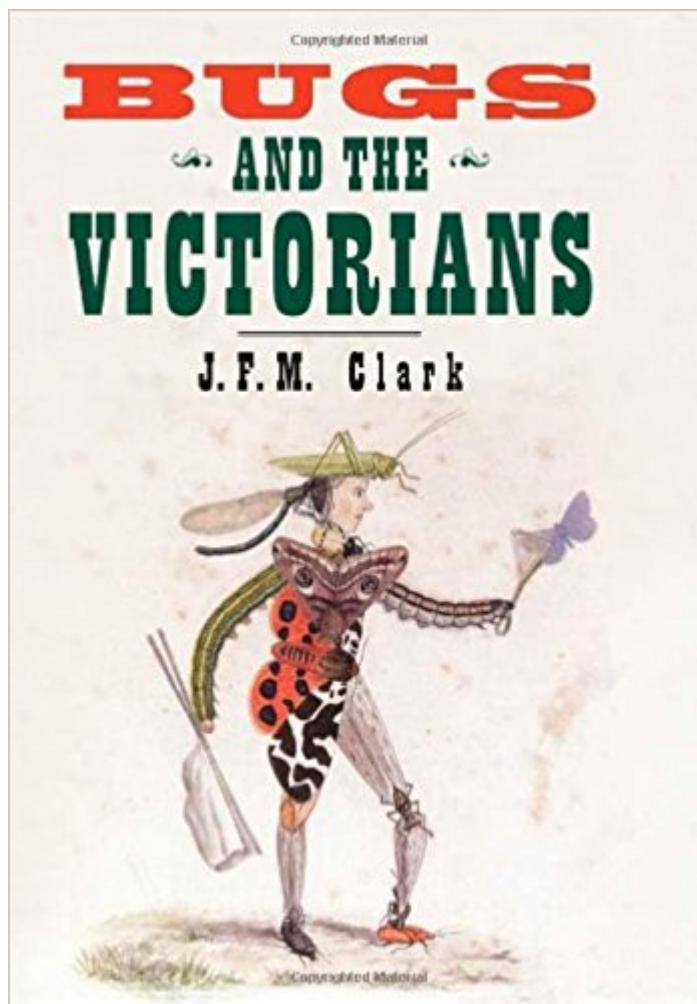


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# Bugs And The Victorians



## Synopsis

In the wake of the Scientific Revolution, the impulse to name and classify the natural world accelerated, and insects presented a particularly inviting challenge. This lively book explores how science became increasingly important in nineteenth-century British culture and how the systematic study of insects permitted entomologists to engage with the most pressing questions of Victorian times: the nature of God, mind, and governance, and the origins of life. By placing insects in a myriad of contexts—politics, religion, gender, and empire—John F. McDiarmid Clark demonstrates the impact of Victorian culture on the science of insects and on the systematic knowledge of the natural world. Through engaging accounts of famous and eccentric innovators who sought to define social roles for themselves through a specialist study of insects—among them a Tory clergyman, a banker and member of Parliament, a wealthy spinster, and an entrepreneurial academic—Clark highlights the role of insects in the making of modern Britain and maintains that the legacy of Victorian entomologists continues to this day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This book gives a fascinating and historically grounded sense of the multiple lives of insects and their students in Victorian Britain. It is beautifully written."—Charlotte Sleigh, *The British Journal for the History of Science* (Charlotte Sleigh *The British Journal for the History of Science*) "Bugs and the Victorians is essential reading for those drawn to the social and economic upheaval of early Victorian life and how that upheaval influenced the development of science and vice versa."—Arthur

John F McDiarmid Clark is director, Institute for Environmental History, and lecturer, School of History, University of St. Andrews. He lives in the Kingdom of Fife, Scotland.

Being interested in Victorian science, I assumed that this would be a nice treatise on 19th century entomology similar to other books I have read on Victorian botany and astronomy. To be sure, it is that but surprisingly it turned out to be much more and quite interesting. The author relates how the study of insects became integral to political and ideological issues. For example, could bugs think and reason? If so, this supported Darwinian theories and evolution and undermined Paley's natural theology. And if Darwin were correct, might that indicate that the nice Victorian well-constructed social structure (royal family and wealthy landowners at the top; the poor at the bottom) was not the natural order of things and could be changed. Could bugs be Socialistic? In the wake of the upsetting French Revolution, could intensive studies of insects (particular honey bees) help provide a greater measure of agricultural independence and self-sufficiency for Britain? How could entomology contribute to supporting the Empire through fighting insect-transmitted diseases like Malaria, Yellow Fever, and tsetse fly-related maladies? How did slavery among insects relate to its human counterpart? Therefore, the book is about far more than the development of professional entomology. Nonetheless, the author does a solid job in explaining how these amateur collection activities developed into academic and governmental specialized professions. He discusses the Association for the Advancement of Society, the Entomological Society of London, and other organizations that came into existence as the interest in insects increased. Then the government became interested in this new area of study and eventually even Oxford took a look. The author relates also how the movement for "secularized science" (based on serious observation, quantification, and experimentation) free of theological constraints got seriously moving during this period. I was surprised to learn that as a scientific group, entomologists were among the most severe of Darwin's critics. One of the most valuable contributions made by the bug people was the development of insecticides which came into broad use, particularly in the great 1920's wars on the house fly. An interesting chapter on Eleanor Ormerod showed how this Victorian "spinster" shattered the glass ceiling in science as eventually she became one of the government's key scientific advisors. So, this turned out to be a surprisingly lively book. It runs some 244 pages of text, with 39 pages of notes and a select bibliography of 25 pages. The superb research foundation is evident on virtually every page. The illustrations, which are abundant and sometimes occupy a full

page, are usually drawn from contemporary Victorian sources and add greatly to the value of the book. A valuable read whether one's interest lies in bugs or intellectual history.

great price compared to other places

Insects, even the greatest of couch potatoes knows, are everywhere. If you weighed all the insects and weighed all the people on the planet, insects would win. Insects win in the species race, too; there are something like 800,000 insect species, and only 4,500 mammalian ones. They are influential; everyone knows what pests mosquitoes or cockroaches are, although the benefits of bees and other pollinators are often overlooked. So it is not surprising that the study of insects should not only be important, but historically ought to reflect the influence of our scientific view on the natural world. It is surprising, however, that insects have influenced social or political views. These are among the lessons in *Bugs and the Victorians* (Yale University Press) by environmental historian J. F. M. Clark. The author has traced the influence not of insects but of the study of insects from the nineteenth century into some of the twentieth, mostly within England, charting entomology from harmless but eccentric diversion into a scientific and economic mainstay. Collecting insects started out as a religious exercise: "Like a close reading of the Bible," says Clark, "a close examination of nature afforded proof of the existence of God... The number, diversity, and scale of insects rendered them a favourite subject of natural theologians." Parsons in the Anglican church could find lessons in their tiny objects of study. Bees, for instance, displayed all sorts of good lessons. There was a queen at the top of a hierarchical social order, for instance, although it had taken a century or two to come to some acceptance that it was a queen rather than a king bee. It was possibly best not to take lessons too closely: "... the suggestion that the 'queen' might take multiple mates vitiated the dignity of the monarch." Clearly, the lessons provided from insects told more about the people inspired by the lesson than about the insects themselves. That the study of insects might be much more than just one armchair collector swapping specimens with another was shown in the episode of the Colorado potato beetle in 1877. The beetle caused innovation in science and government when an arsenical poison was found to be effective against it. Pesticides became essential, but also essential were agricultural entomologists, scientists who knew the enemy and tactics against it. The beetle never colonized Britain, but "it left an enduring legacy of technocratic science." The science was carried into the empire in campaigns against flies, lice, and mosquitoes, and became accepted as an acknowledged scientific discipline. It even had martyrs. Harold Maxwell Lefroy was a professor of entomology, who among his other experiments

was working on his own formula for a gas insecticide against flies. His lab, alas, was improperly vented, and he unwittingly got a fatal dose of the poison that was supposed to be used on flies. His final words: "The little beggars got the best of me this time." The Victorians turned entomologists into scientists, and bugs into natural phenomena, eventually stripped of a "higher" meaning. Even the fly had to be taken from its pedestal as a little being designed by its Creator to "keep the warm air pure and wholesome by its swift and zigzag flight". Clark's erudite book has a lot of entomology in it, including reflections from that famous collector of beetles Charles Darwin, as well as the legitimate evolutionary lessons in such things as mimicry that insects can reveal. It is mostly, though, about people - a host of bug fanatics, as well as parsons, philosophers, and legislators who drew such lessons as they could about how people ought to live their lives and how society ought to be run. Many of the lessons are now quaint and funny. The lessons that have made a real difference, though, have come from regarding entomology as a science and bugs as merely a proper target of scientific inquiry.

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