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A general natural history

A history of plants

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The preface.

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T H E
P R E F A C E.

THE former volume of this *Work*, containing the *History of Fossils*, has fallen under the censure of some people, who have had less acquaintance with the learned languages, than seems necessary to the reading on any of the improved Sciences, on account of the many new generical terms contained in it, and formed out of the Greek: others have also objected to it, as too much out of the usual manner of writing on the subject; too unlike all the other treatises on the mineral or fossile kingdom.

I could wish to make a work of this kind of general use, and to obviate, as much as possible, even injudicious or unfair objections. What I have to plead, in justification of the former volume, is short: That all new systems must have the assistance of new words; that not only reason, but custom, time immemorial, has established it as a law, that these are to be derived from the Greek; and that no author had written what could be called a *History of Fossils* before.

In regard to the subject of this volume, it is much otherwise: Botany has been, in a great measure, reduced into a system already by *Linnaeus*; and generical names are established, in the greater part of it, expressive of the necessary distinctions. In the distributions and characters of what are called the imperfect plants, *Linnaeus*, and indeed all who have written on the subject, appear to me to be greatly defective: so much of this *Work*, therefore, as regards these, will, I am afraid, be liable to the same objections with the former volumes; but in all the rest I have everywhere retained the already established names; I have kept up to the arrangement of the plants in the *Linnaean* system, the author of which deserves infinite praise; and have preserved his classical as well as his generical names, his classical characters, and, so far as nature warrants it, have kept up to even his very terms in the generical distinctions. I have always, where it has been possible, examined the plants themselves, in the time of their flowering: where they have agreed with his characters, I have never failed to adopt them; and, even where they have differed from his descriptions, I have given the account, in terms as like his own as might be.

Where some of his generical characters have contradicted a part of the classical ones, I have reconciled them; and, where some new discovered, or before not accurately examined, species has deviated from a part of the established distinction of the genus, I have made no scruple of making that conform to nature. Of this kind will be found all the variations made, in this Work, from that excellent Writer's method; for the rest, every one who understands him, or any of the botanists of reputation, who have written since the establishment of his method, will meet with no difficulties in this point.

This, however, regards only the more abstruse and dry part of the Work: the descriptions of plants, which are all the generality of the world regards, have never fallen in his way.

The difficulty of comprising a General History of Plants, in the compass of so small a volume as this was engaged to be, must have appeared very great to every one, who is at all acquainted with the nature of the subject. The method by which it has been executed is no other, than the cautious avoiding of repetitions, and the necessary reduction of the supposed number of species.

As to the first article, the classical and generical characters of a plant are always understood to make a part of the description of the species; and these are so considerable a part, that little more is in reality necessary to be added to them, than the size of the plant, and of it's several parts; the form of the leaves, and the colour of the flowers. After succinct descriptions of this kind, of three or four species of each genus, and those as distinct and different in their general form as could be chosen, the others can hardly be mistaken on a bare recital of their names, which always convey their principal, or more obvious, distinctions. I could have wished to have made the names, under which I have mentioned these legitimately specific ones, as has been done in regard to those which are described, and where a synonymon of another author is given; but, where one name only could be given, it was necessary to give that by which the plant is now known in our own fields or gardens.

The number of plants, as they stand in the generality of authors, is not less than sixteen thousand; but this has been, in great part, owing to the common error of mistaking varieties for species: I have, by separating these, so far as I could with any degree of certainty, reduced the number of known plants to little more than eleven thousand; and I am well assured, that future observation will yet very considerably lessen that number.

I have supposed the reader less acquainted with botany at his first entering on this work, and have therefore been more large and express, both in the characters and descriptions of the subjects; as he becomes more accustomed

customed to the terms, and familiarised to the distinctions of plants, he will find the characters more succinct, and the descriptions shorter.

The plates, though of a very limited number, will be found to contain every thing necessary to the understanding botany, as a science: the three or four first explain to the eye all the terms used in the course of the Work; and in the others there will be found one plant of every class, and a number of the flowers of the more singular among the other genera comprised under it. The descriptions are to be brought in to the assistance of these, as the characters are to that of the descriptions; and in this method, every part of the Work being subservient to every other part of it, I am not afraid to assert, that it will so far answer it's purposed end, that a man of judgment, who has not studied botany before, will, by means of it alone, without the assistance of any other work, be able to find the class, genus, and species of any plant he meets with in a perfect state, and to call it by it's proper name.

Less than this I should be sorry to have arrived at; more I would not be ambitious of doing, in a volume of this size.



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