Francis Willughby

A Natural Historian and his Collections

Fieldwork

The motto of the Royal Society, Nullius in Verba (Take nobody's word for it), illustrates a new attitude to learning in the 17th century, replacing a dependence on traditional authorities with observation, collection of facts and experiments. No aspect of the natural world or human activity was excluded. In this spirit, Willughby tackled many subjects, including mathematics and language, alongside the natural world.

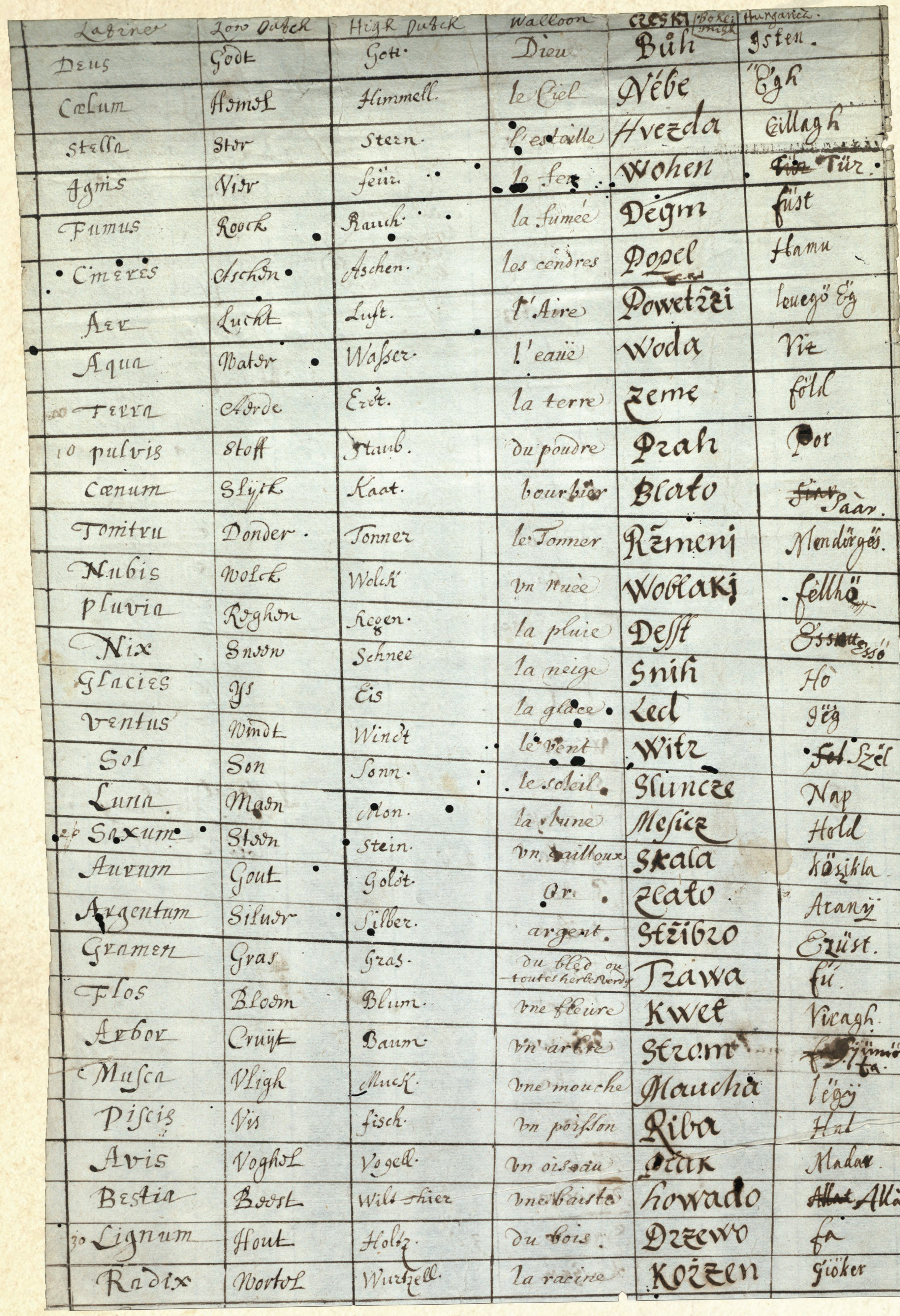
This approach meant leaving the library and accessing nature directly. Ray encouraged his protégés to make field trips, observing and describing specimens in their native habitat and collecting examples for later comparison. Few of these survive, and still fewer have the details of date and location that modern scientists would want.

Amateur sketches made on site – like Jessop's whale in Greenwich – rarely survive.

More commonly, we know of the discovery of notable specimens through published descriptions, giving details of weight, sizes and other features. Travel accounts often noted the location of plant finds. In letters, friends reported exciting discoveries and sought advice about identifications.

Willughby's surviving manuscripts show how he approached some subjects of research. On his travels, for example, he collected language samples, first in Wales and Cornwall. Lists made on the Continent, where he used a Latin prompt list to obtain translations from local informants, provide some of the earliest recorded examples of systematic dialect sampling.

An intriguing survival is Willughby's description of the playing of games, drawing on personal experience and direct observation. His friend Philip Skippon contributed a first-hand account of Real Tennis, an early form of modern tennis. *The Book of Games* is an informative example of his method of data collection, accompanied by speculation about the development and application of rules.



Latine	Low Dutch	High Dutch	Walloon	Czeski (Bohemish)	Hungarick
Deus	Godt	Gott.	Dieu	Bůh	Isten.
Cœlum	Hemel	Himmell.	le Ciel	Nébe	Egh
Stella	Star	Stern.	l'estoille	Hvezda	Csillagh
Ignis	Vier	feür.	le feu	Wohen	~~Tüz~~ Tüz.
Fumus	Roock	Rauch.	la fumée	Degm	füst
Cineres	Asschen	Aschen.	les cendres	Popel	Hamu
Aer	Lucht	Luft.	l'Aire	Powetřzi	leuegö Ég
Aqua	Water	Wasser.	l'eaüe	Woda	Viz
Terra	Aerde	Erd.	la terre	Zeme	föld
10 pulvis	Stoff	Staub.	du poudre	Prah	Por
Cœnum	Slijck	Kaat.	bourbier	Blato	~~Sar~~ Saar.
Tonitru	Donder.	Tonner	le Tonner	Rzmenj	Mendörgés.
Nubis	Wolck	Wolck	vn nuée	Woblakj	fellhö
pluvia	Reghen	Regen.	la pluie	Desst	Esső
Nix	Snow	Schnee	la neige	Snih	Hó
Glacies	Ys	Eis	la glace	Led	Jég
Ventus	Windt	Windt	le vent	Witr	~~Fel~~ Szél
Sol	Son	Sonn.	le soleil	Sluncze	Nap
Luna	Maen	Mon.	la lune	Mesicz	Hold
20 Saxum	Steen	Stein.	vn caillou	Skala	kőszikla
Aurum	Gout	Goldt.	or.	Zlato	Arany
Argentum	Siluer	Silber.	argent.	Stříbro	Ezüst.
Gramen	Gras	Gras.	du bled ou toutes herbes verds	Trawa	fű.
Flos	Bloem	Blum.	vne fleure	Kwet	Viragh.
Arbor	Cruyt	Baum	vn arbre	Strom	Gyümölcsfa.
Musca	Vligh	Muck.	vne mouche	Maucha	légy
Piscis	Vis	fisch.	vn poisson	Riba	Hal
Avis	Voghel	Vogell.	vn oiseau	Ptak	Madar.
Bestia	Beest	Wilt thier	vne baiste	howado	~~Allat~~ Allat
30 Lignum	Hout	Holtz.	du bois.	Drzewo	fa
Radix	Wortel	Wurtzell.	la racine	Kořzen	gyöker

Latin prompt list, with equivalent words in Dutch, German, Walloon, Hungarian and Polish. Willughby provides the names of the languages. Middleton Collection, Mi 4/149/2/3/1/1

A black kite was the subject of one of the German illustrations dating from the 1640s purchased by Willughby. The circumstances of its death, and its measurements, are translated in broken English: "This bird I have Catch in Dallsalgen the 27 Aprill 1645." Middleton Collection, Mi LM 24/31

Francis Jessop, who became a close friend of Willughby's, created this rough sketch of a whale that had been stranded at Greenwich in June 1658. Middleton Collection, Mi LM 25/16

'Real Tennis' is played on an enclosed court. Skippon's description included an illustration of a racquet. Willughby speculated about the scoring system. Middleton Collection, Mi LM 14, p.15

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