CHARLES Waterton was one of England's great eccentrics, but he was also one of her finest naturalists. His passion for natural history developed at an early age. At his first school at Tudhoe, near Durham, he became as he puts it 'vastly proficient in birdnesting'. This proficiency worried his schoolmaster who tried to flog a more sober approach to learning into young Waterton. But he was not without defence and on one occasion records that he bit the unfortunate master's leg while he was in the process of being beaten.

Fortunately for all concerned, Waterton did not stay long at Tudhoe and equally fortunately found his new school, Stonyhurst, more tolerant of his interests. There they made him 'rat-catcher and fox-taker' and master and pupil seemed to have arrived at a satisfactory arrangement.

Charles Waterton was born into a distinguished