In a chapter titled ‘Three around Farnham’ in The Country and the City (1973), Raymond Williams draws an exquisite map of three versions of rural society represented in the works of William Cobbett, Jane Austen, and Gilbert White, who lived near Farnham almost in the same era. The present essay focuses on the interrelation or figurative encounter of three writers, beyond time and genre, in a particular local space of the Hampshire village of Selborne: Gilbert White (a clergyman-naturalist of the eighteenth century), Mary Kelly (an amateur pageant writer of the interwar period) and Virginia Woolf.

In 1938, Mary Kelly directed a local historical pageant in the village of Selborne. The pageant was her adaptation of the famous book, The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (1789), by Gilbert White, who loved his native village throughout his life and wrote the local natural history of the region. Mary Kelly, who was born and lived in a village in Devon, was at that time very active in producing local historical pageants in several places in Britain. The pageant of 1938 was the revival of a 1926 version. In the village of Selborne in July 1938, a century and a half after the publication of The Natural History of Selborne, Mary Kelly launched the second production of her pageant titled The Antiquities of Selborne. Meanwhile, in March 1937, Virginia Woolf had re-read The Natural History of Selborne, which had been one of her favourite books in her girlhood. Moreover, in September 1939, one year and two months after Mary Kelly’s production, Woolf was writing an essay, ‘White’s Selborne’, in the Sussex village of Rodmell, not far away, just across the South Downs from Selborne, Hampshire. How should we interpret this coincidence that two artists, Virginia Woolf and Mary Kelly, who had no personal contact, were both inspired by the eighteenth-century naturalist almost simultaneously? This question is the starting point of my discussion.
Though modernist literature is often associated with the city or urban space, the country or rural space is also an important topos in Woolf's writings. Woolf was interested in naturalist writing by Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson as well as Gilbert White. Woolf was a great lover of rambling in the country and was an ardent bug-hunter and butterfly collector. Virginia and the Stephen family often stayed at manor houses or rectories in the countryside. In her early diaries, Woolf describes several villages such as Blo'Norton (Norfolk), Hopton (West Suffolk), and a fenland village in Huntingdonshire. There is no doubt that her early experience of nature – crab-catching in St Ives, moth-hunting or butterfly-collecting on the South Downs or on a Gloucestershire hill (PA 117) – provides direct sources for novels such as *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Furthermore, in her posthumously published novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), nature evolves into something more than a direct description. The last years of Woolf's career were a period when romantic perceptions of nature were sublimated into a representation of England itself, as Alun Howkins argues in his cultural geographical study of the English countryside. Although Woolf's perception of nature and nation is generally Darwinistic rather than 'romantic', such a cultural context still forms part of her novel. By analyzing the evolution of Woolf's nature writing in her essays, diaries, and novels, I would like to locate Woolf at the crossing point of two different, but interrelated, trends of culture in Britain: the amateur drama movements in the twentieth century and the amateur fashion for natural history, which had been popular since the Victorian era.

### The Victorian fashion for natural history

According to Lynn Barber, the Victorian era was the heyday of natural history. Barber tells us (possibly with some exaggeration) that 'every Victorian lady could reel off the names of twenty different kinds of ferns or fungus' (13). It is certainly the case that fern gathering was in great vogue and books of natural history sold almost as well as Dickens' novels. A lady's chamber would be decorated with collections of shells, stuffed birds, and paintings of seaweeds. In drawing rooms where 'Wardian Cases' (fern-cases) and 'Warrington Cases' (parlour aquariums) were displayed, people discussed whether swallows migrate or hibernate. Correspondence columns in newspapers were also full of such debates. There were many female artists like Beatrix Potter, Anne Pratt, Marianne North, and Mrs John Gould who made illustrations of