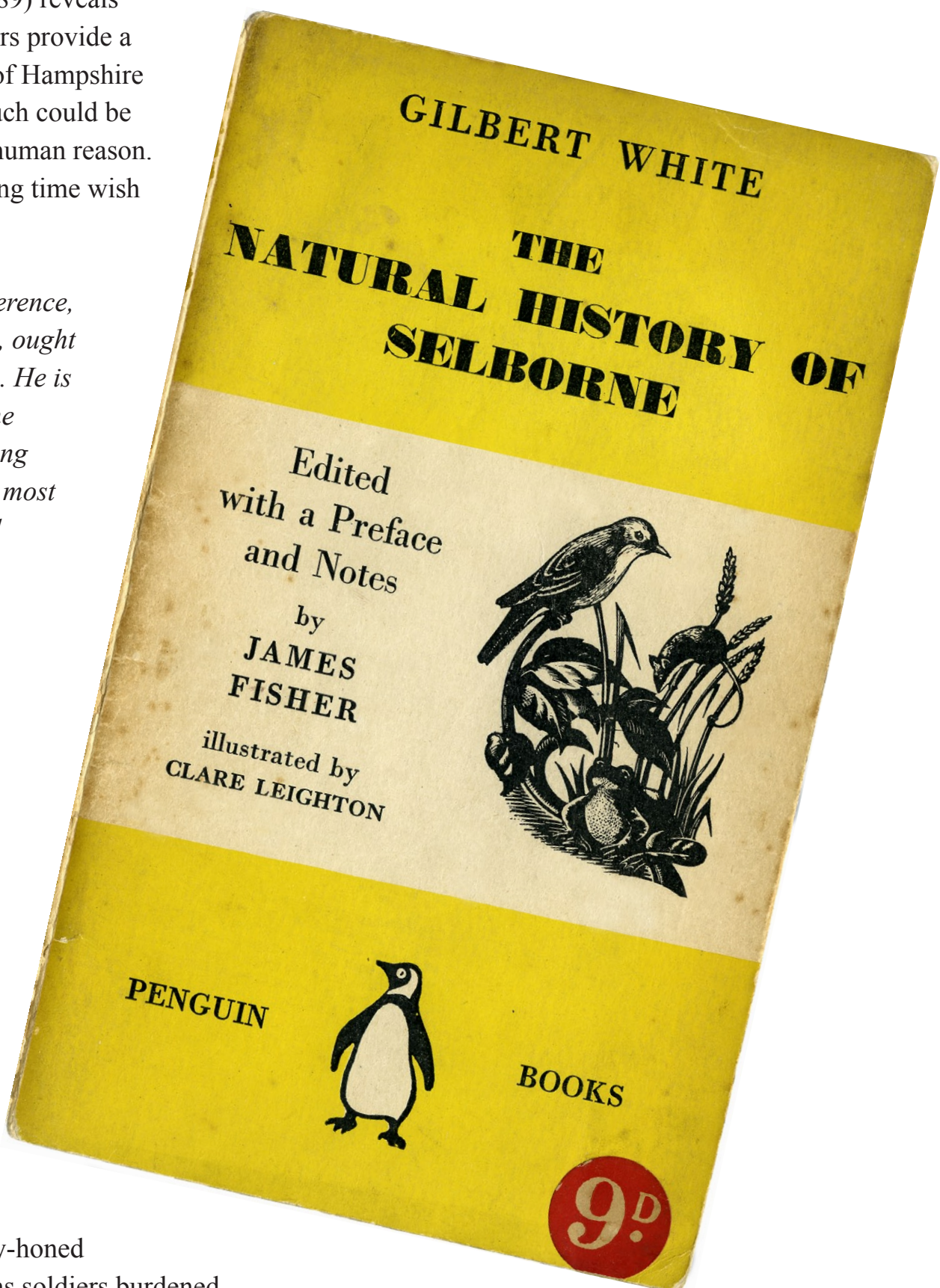


Takhini River throwing ice into the Yukon in late October, 2012.

Gilbert White’s introduction to his *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) reveals the benefits of careful observation of the world about us. His letters provide a collection of lyrical epistles on the natural landscape of a small corner of Hampshire in central England. White, a product of the Enlightenment, was sure much could be learned from nature through simple observation and the application of human reason. He also sounds, from the eighteenth century, a clarion call to fulfill a long time wish of mine: an examination of the freeze-up of the Yukon River.

The Author of the following Letters takes the liberty, with all proper deference, of laying before the public his idea of parochial history; which he thinks, ought to consist of natural productions and occurrences as well as antiquities. He is also of the opinion that if stationary men would pay some attention to the districts on which they reside, and would publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them, from such materials might be drawn the most complete county histories.... If the writer should appear to have induced any of his readers to pay a more ready attention to the wonders of the Creation, too frequently overlooked as common occurrences; or if he should by any means, through his researches, have lent a helping hand towards the enlargement of the boundaries of historical and topographical knowledge... his purpose will be fully answered.
Advertisement. Gil. White. Selborne, January 1st, 1788.

I have two copies of White’s book. My second is a lovely illustrated version of the letters, published in 1993 - which I like on the shelf but rarely look at. In fact, in looking for the book while preparing this note I couldn’t find it. My first copy – picked up for a at a book table outside the Barnet shopping centre in north London –contributed to my 2004 sabbatical study of the 18th century origins of Western taxonomy. Clare Leighton’s discrete and nostalgic wood engravings of the pre-war English countryside grace this well worn and much thumbbed through copy. A soldier’s edition published by Penguin in the early days of the Second World War. Apparently, the British Army was convinced that troops imbued with rational thought, cogent powers of observation and sharply-honed deductive capabilities would be more than a match for the poor Germans soldiers burdened with *Mein Kampf*.



Having retired from full time work – that is, I was now a “stationary man” – I felt I ought to approach my district and publish thoughts respecting the objects that have long surrounded me. Under White’s guidance I spent a fortnight observing the freeze-up of the Yukon River just north of Whitehorse in fall of 2012. I purposefully did not talk to my hydrologist friend, nor did I check the internet for background. I would join Gilbert in spirit and the two of us would wander the river bank to watch the water, rising and falling, flowing and foaming, and stiffening into the ice which will stay until spring.



The Takhini joins the Yukon about three quarters of the way between the Southern lakes and Lake Laberge. Until 1949 Settlers knew this stretch as the Fifty Mile River when Whitehorse successfully petitioned the place name board to have the Yukon extended through their community. Yukon First Nation peoples however have always known the world, and the Yukon River, began in the Southern lakes. Long ago, Tachokaii, *The Traveller*, made his way down the valley, setting the rules of right relations that “make the world safe for baby”. Just ten kilometres down river from the Takhini confluence, Tachokaii dreamed the canoe into existence to speed his journey down the Yukon.

In June the twenty hours a day of warm sunshine melt the heavy banks of snow of the coastal mountains, sluicing fresh water into the origin lakes for both rivers. In autumn the days shorten quickly – an hour and half each fortnight. Late October sunshine offers only six hours of low, pale light and perhaps two matches worth of heat. The widening river banks mark the drop from summer high water, and the resulting tempestuous rapids break up the moving sheets of ice. A seasonal sandbar on the south side of the Takhini re-emerges, making a pleasant place to watch the changes.

From this vantage point I watch the passage of rounded pans of ice. Upstream in mountain-surrounded Kusawa Lake large sheets of ice enter the river. In the narrow confines of the Takhini the ice crashes together and the sheets are tinkered into round fan pans. With raised edges of crushed ice, they spin crazily in the current.

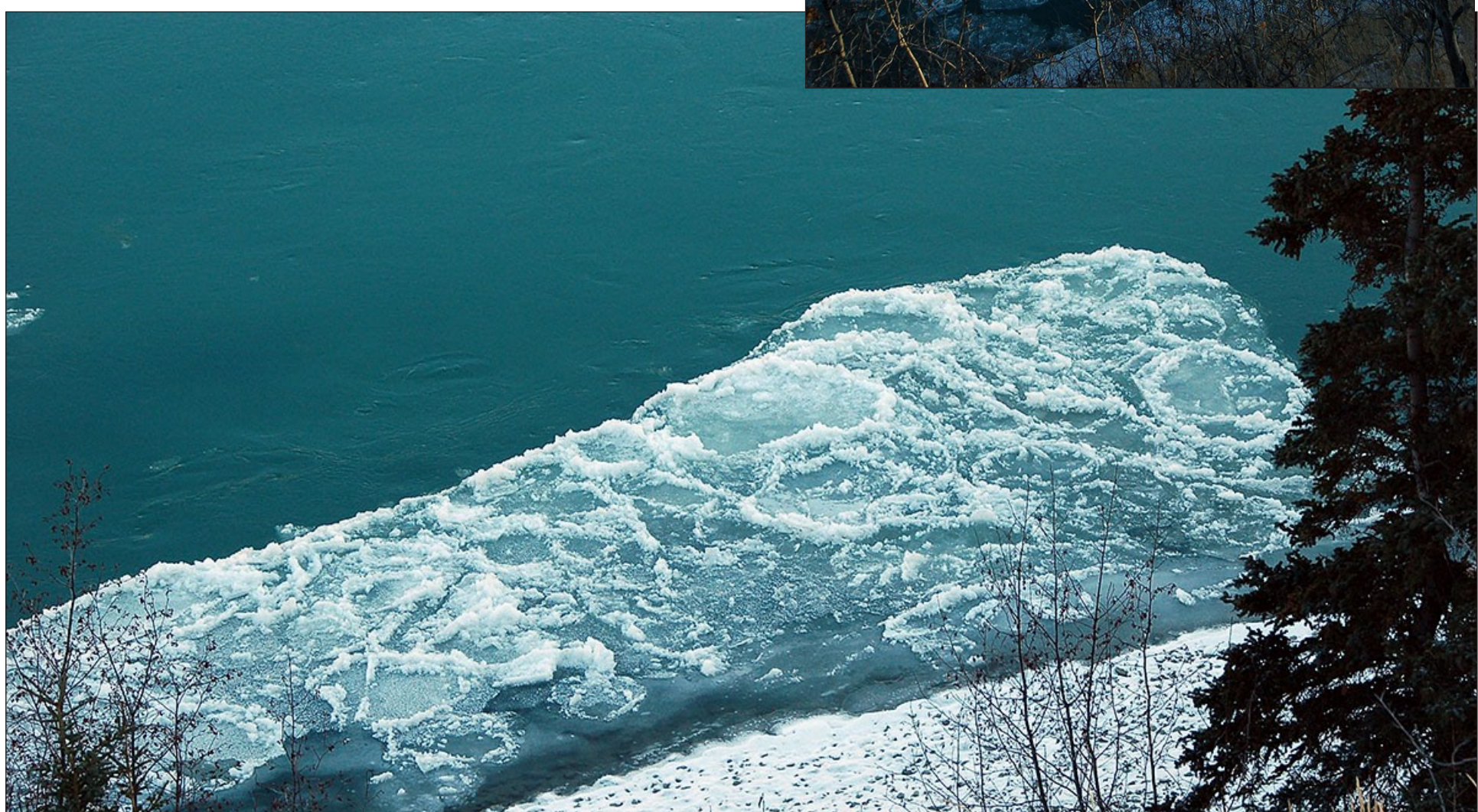


The Yukon River is free of ice. The hydro-electric dam at Whitehorse – paradoxically – both stops the ice and through the friction of the water blasting through turbines, slightly raises the temperature of the river, keeping ice from forming.

Below the confluence the Takhini ice pans trace a river in a river as the cooler waters of the Takhini swing back and forth across the Yukon River around it.



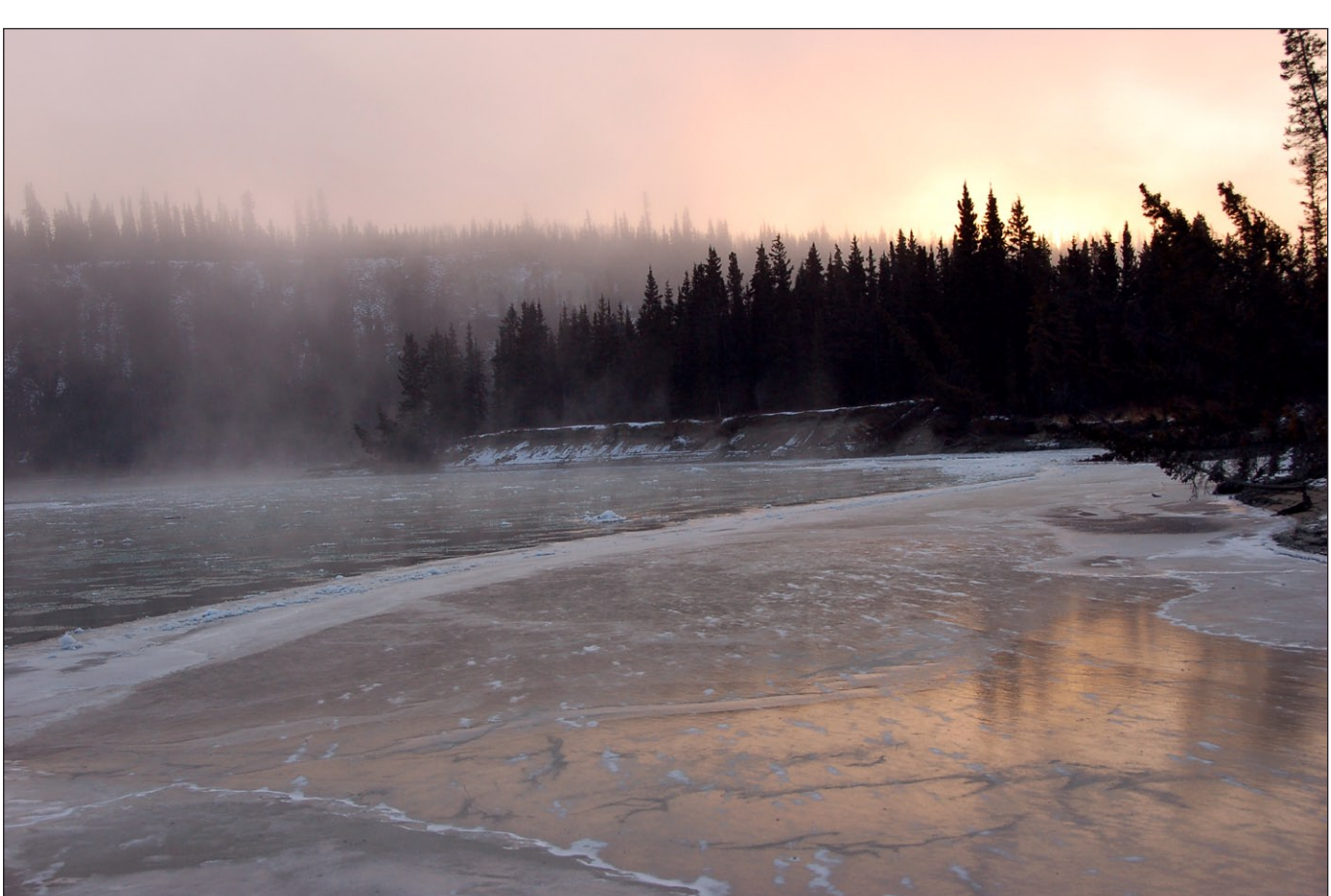
Just downstream the Yukon River curves north and a large back eddy – a First Nation family’s late summer salmon hole – collects ice pans drifting out of the current. These gradually coalesce into a knobbly ice sheet lightly attached to a small shelf of shore ice. The current line is clearly marked by the smooth edge of the ice sheet.



Getting close to the shore ice shows its very different patterns of crystallization. The ice below is black, lacking the air which has been absorbed by the pans during their journey. But the ice crystals are clearly visible in three dimensions, imperfections on the ice surface acting as anchors for the condensation of the moist river air as it passes over the shore ice. Each intricate and delicate, the feather-like structures rise a centimetre into the air.

Standing on the spruce and poplar-strewn river bluff above the fish camp, the cold wind mournfully sighing through the branches, I can just hear the gentle crushing of ice crystals as floes gently spin into contact with the shore ice. Some leave a small deposit and spin back into the current, others become stationary extensions of a spreading sheet of ice. Above me, Crow, another creation figure of the Yukon River, gives a raucous caw and I hear as well the rush of air made by his wings in the wind.

The days shorten, the temperature drops sharply and, in just a few days, hard shelves of ice reach far into the current.



White speaks of the hard frosts of January 1776, in the midst of the Little Ice Age. *I had occasion to go to London through a sort of Laplandian scene, very wild and grotesque indeed. But the metropolis itself exhibited a still more singular appearance than the country; for, being bedded deep in snow, the pavement of the streets could not be touched by the wheels of the horse’s feet, so that the carriages ran about without the least noise. Such an exemption from din and clatter was strange, but not pleasant; it seemed to convey an uncomfortable idea of desolation: - Ipsa silentia terrent. ... The Thames was at once so frozen over both above and below bridge that crowds ran about on the ice.* (Leter LXII)

A frigid week passes, only frozen traces of the river’s flow remain. No longer in the Little Ice Age, I am a little more circumspect in leaving my footprints on the ice until later in the winter.

