Charles Waterton's place in the history of anaesthesia is assured because of his interest in South American arrow poison and the pioneering animal experiments in which he participated. In view of his status as a Yorkshire “Squire” the Yorkshire Society of Anaesthetists, responding to an enquiry from Dr J. R. Maltby of Calgary, Canada, felt it was appropriate to celebrate the bicentenary of his birth by holding a symposium at his birthplace, Walton Hall, on June 5, 1982.

In planning this symposium it became evident that Charles Waterton was a man with wide interests within the field of natural history and, if the bicentenary celebration was to mean anything more than to record his involvement with wourali (curare), his other contributions would need to be discussed. What emerged was a collage of a fascinating person who had fully used his bountiful energies to become an amateur natural historian with interests in taxidermy, ornithology, conservation, etc. Although he received little formal training in these subjects he was, and still is, taken seriously by professionals. His skill in taxidermy was such as to justify another bicentenary symposium at Walton Hall, confined to that topic, two days previously.

Until now, Waterton has appeared to many of us as a talented eccentric. It is hoped the Proceedings of this event will help to define more clearly what he achieved and how those achievements relate to current attitudes.

Most of the contributions to the Symposium are presented in abstract form in this issue of the British Journal of Anaesthesia. However, the first paper, which describes Waterton’s specific interests in wourali, is presented as an abridged version as it was felt that most anaesthetists would wish to have an easily available account of Waterton’s contribution to their speciality.

F. Richard Ellis

CHARLES WATERTON (1782–1865)

WATERTON AND WOURALI

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Charles Waterton’s Wanderings in South America (1825) began: “In April, 1812, I left Stabroek to travel through the wilds of Demerara and Essequibo ... to collect a quantity of the strongest wourali poison ...”. Stabroek is now Georgetown. Waterton travelled at least 400 miles, barefooted, mainly by canoe in the rainy season, to Fort St Joachim. Parts of his route (fig. 1) have been retraced by Dr R. J. Lee, who confirms the aptness of Waterton’s topographical descriptions (personal communication). Waterton purchased samples of wourali at three locations, the last two being in Macoushi country. The Macoushi Indians were renowned for their preparation and use of the poison. Waterton proved the first sample in a dog, wounded in the thigh: “In three or four minutes he smelled at every little thing ... looked wistfully at the wounded part ... staggered, laid himself down and never rose more. He barked once, though not as if in pain. His voice was low and weak ... in the second attempt it quite failed him. He put his head between his forelegs and raising it slowly again he fell over on his side. His eye became fixed though his extremities ... now and then started convulsively ... His heart fluttered much from the time he laid down ... at intervals beat very strong, then stopped ... then beat again and continued faintly ... several minutes after every other part of his body seemed dead. In a quarter of an hour he was quite motionless.”

Waterton portaged between the Demerara and Essequibo rivers, hauled up rapids and ascended the Burro-burro river to where a path led south to open savannas. Here he left his canoe and took a circuitous route to avoid the worst of the floods. He crossed one creek which was deep, swift and infested with alligators. (He conjectured that this seasonal flood-