



Elizabeth Yale, *Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Print, 346 pp., US\$69.95/£56.00, ISBN: 9780812247817.

Review

Sociable Knowledge is an excellent addition to the burgeoning literature on scholarly communication in Europe's republic of letters. In an engaging study, Elizabeth Yale examines the emergence of natural history as a scholarly endeavour in seventeenth-century Britain, detailing the networks of commerce and sociability that facilitated the discipline's expansion. Early modern naturalists, Yale argues, sought to articulate a 'vision of Britain that could serve as a foundation for political and cultural unity' (p. 2), and from a close study of the surviving papers of numerous Restoration virtuosi, she demonstrates that scholarly correspondence was the medium by which this national imagining was achieved.

'Correspondence', here, is broadly construed as the letters, manuscript papers, questionnaires, subscription lists, and printed advertisements that facilitated the dissemination of topographical knowledge. Taking cues from studies into material culture, Yale shows how such ephemera reflected and reinforced the personal and professional attachments that enabled the financing, production, marketing, and distribution of scientific texts. The resulting study provides an illuminating account of the life-cycle of manuscript topographical texts: from the collection and collation of relevant specimens and data; through scribal collaboration and publication; and concluding with their deposit in secure repositories for future generations of antiquaries.

'Topographical Britain', in this period, was a contested concept. As Yale contends: 'Early modern naturalists and antiquaries united a boundless enthusiasm

for local particularities – a hyperlocalism – with a desire to understand and represent Britain as a unified historical and geographical space, though they disagreed on the boundaries and configuration of that space.’ (p. 4) Local perspectives invariably shaped conceptions of the national, and the first chapter outlines the often contested ‘boundaries’ of Britain as a topographical (and political) object. Depending on their approach to the nation – that is, as a geographical, cultural or linguistic entity – as well as their distinctive political and economic interests, topographical writers from across the kingdoms proffered conflicting interpretations of Britain or Britishness. This was a tension that could not be reconciled by these, or indeed subsequent writers, however it did produce the wide-ranging scientific correspondence that forms the basis of this book.

The naturalists’ topographical project required large-scale support, and subsequent chapters examine the financial and intellectual networks that enabled natural history to flourish. Chapter 2 provides a fascinating study of the material history of the virtuosi’s correspondence. The antiquarians’ republic of letters relied on an extensive network of agents and carriers, and Yale brings into focus the vagaries of scholarly exchange in the period before reliable transport and communication systems. Lost or stolen post was just one prominent concern facing the early modern naturalist; equally taxing for the amateur scholar was the transport of scientific specimens, unspoiled, over long land journeys, and the delicate negotiation of local customs and laws by the researcher in the field. In examining these issues Yale neatly displays the relationships that underpinned the topographical endeavour, while also highlighting the army of intermediaries that made scholarly exchanges possible.

Social networks are also the focus of Chapter 3, which centres conversation in the correspondence of early modern scholars. Whether amongst learned company in provincial country houses, or more animated audiences in urban public houses,

naturalists found regular occasion for conversation and scholarly debate, believing it essential for the production of natural historical knowledge. However, as Yale shows, such sociability did have its pitfalls, with many commentators contending that the ‘free-wheeling, combative, and raucous’ environment of the coffeehouses was unfit for philosophical debate (p. 103), thus prompting the more systematic transcription and dissemination of knowledge promoted by the Royal Society. Though this discussion departs at times from the book’s core focus on natural history, the chapter neatly illustrates the evolution of an ideal of learned scholarship as an urbane and (theoretically) open endeavour, while also outlining the close links between conversation and scribal and print culture in the seventeenth-century sciences.

The next two chapters concern the production and distribution of natural history texts. Chapter 4 offers a case study in the material processes of manuscript creation and dissemination, through an examination of the production and circulation of John Aubrey’s *Naturall Historie of Wiltshire*. Despite Aubrey’s desire to commit his works to print, ‘economic, social and temporal realities’ (p. 129) consigned them to manuscript publication. Yet the very impermanence of the manuscript form enabled a process of scribal collaboration, and in an illuminating study of surviving copies of Aubrey’s books, Yale highlights the contribution that circulated manuscripts made to the construction of topographical knowledge, either as loci of scholarly conversations, or as sources of material for appropriation or repurposing. The fifth chapter examines the financing and marketing of early print works of natural history: invariably a process of collaboration. Yale describes authors-undertakers and booksellers as assembling ‘readerships letter by letter and contact by contact’ (p. 170), arguing for the public benefit of prospective publications, and using the support of eminent persons as leverage with prospective printers and subscribers.

The final chapter makes use of surviving manuscript collections to study the antiquaries' construction of physical (and figurative) archives. Central to this development was the evolution of attitudes towards record keeping, and the concomitant articulation of a forward-thinking historical consciousness: shifts in collective *mentalité* which highlighted for contemporaries the 'impoverishment' of manuscript holdings, thus prompting their collection and preservation in public repositories. As Yale shows, antiquaries and naturalists employed such institutions as safe storing houses, both to secure their valuable works from theft or destruction during their lifetime, and to protect their legacy in death. Both ideals worked better in theory than practice, however the new mindset did manufacture an ideal of the archive as a pool of knowledge for future generations of naturalists – 'a kind of correspondence in perpetuity.' (p. 230) Yet it also gave rise to 'a form of archival ideology' that, in various ways, enabled the consolidation of institutional and imperial power, and Yale closes with some apt remarks on the wider political implications of the archivists' project.

This is a sprawling study, and at times certain strands of the argument are a bit laboured, and lack some clarity. However, in utilising novel material approaches, Yale provides singular insights into the reception of the early modern archive, and *Sociable Knowledge* stands as a powerful model for a new history of science, worthy of emulation. I certainly recommend it.

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