

Review: Daybooks of Discovery: Nature Diaries in Britain 1770-1870

By Mary Ellen Bellanca

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At one level, this book is a wonderful literary review of the work of Gilbert White and some of his successors. But to probably most EGJ readers, its interest lies in the extensive discussion of the ways in which the systematic observation of natural phenomena led into modern biological theory. While White's immediate influence was upon British thought and culture, with the rise of Joseph Banks, Charles Darwin and others, this interest soon spread to the United States (think of Thoreau, Emerson, Muir and their contemporaries) and then throughout the British Empire and the rest of Europe.

By the 19th century systematic observation and recording of detail was accepted as a fundamental base, or even a prerequisite, for the new growth of knowledge. At the same time, the literary culture generated by the nature diaries led in turn to easy acceptance of the concept by explorers and researchers. But even today, I find myself disappointed by the undue neglect of observational research as a result of the emphasis upon measurability and statistical analysis.

The diary-keeping tradition was much more than recording of observation; the systematic discipline of journal-keeping led to the organization and so integration of the recorded data. In turn, White and his successors pondered the meaning of their observations and laid the basis for the evolution of theory. The very notion of evolution as expounded by Darwin, Wallace and others had its origins in field observation and consequent thought, not in any experimental or other laboratory-based research. Perhaps we too rarely recognise the extent to which the diary-writers record not only their observations, but the very nature and depth of their interactions with nature, thus giving us a basis for developing the ontology and epistemology of natural history.

Of course, writing down of observations is only one way of recording our experience of the natural world. Another genre commenced within the world of visual arts. Biological scientists soon learned to draw upon both literary and artistic means of expression, in both generating their understandings and sharing them with the world. All of this, of course, advanced hand-in-hand with and provided one of the major bases of the enlightenment with its emphasis upon notions of reason and evidence.

I think this book should be read by natural scientists with a commitment to advancing the quality of knowledge and hence of education. I have already recommended it to a small group of post-graduate students and they each found a diversity of ideas which supported them in their own personal search for a satisfying epistemology.

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