

**Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early  
Modern Britain (Book Review)**

Author

Yeo, Richard

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## BOOK REVIEW

Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain. *Elizabeth Yale*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. xii+346.

Consider this depiction of “An Antiquary” offered by John Earle (ca.1600–1665), bishop of Salisbury: “A great admirer he is of the rust of old Monuments. . . . Printed bookes he contemnes, as a novelty of this latter age; but a Manuscript he pores on everlastingly, especially if the cover be all Moth-eaten, and the dust make a Parenthesis between every Syllable.”<sup>1</sup> Written before some of the people in the book under review were born, Earle’s caricature catches aspects of their behavior, but only superficially. Men such as Elias Ashmole, John Aubrey, Anthony Wood, Edward Lhuyd, John Evelyn, and Robert Plot cannot be fully captured by the label “antiquary,” in part because their interests embraced natural history, and also because they did not work alone, as Earle implied. They were linked by correspondence in intellectual collaboration, using both manuscript and print.

In *Sociable Knowledge*, Elizabeth Yale shows in meticulous detail how a group of antiquaries and naturalists sought to advance a comprehensive “topography” of England, Scotland, and Wales. As pursued in the mid-seventeenth century, topography included monuments, megaliths, maps, manuscripts, coins, figured stones (fossils), plants, animals, dialects, chorography (the relation between health and regional climate), local customs, and folklore. Even as these inquiries were being conducted, the crystallization into new specialist subjects was apparent: for example, John Ray, Francis Willughby, and Martin Lister mainly worked on natural history—

1. John Earle, *Micro-Cosmographie; or, A peece of the world discovered; in essayes and characters* (London, 1628), sig. C2r–C3r.

on plants, insects, fish, and birds, although Ray also published on dialects and vocabularies. Readers (and reviewers) who are likely to know at most about one or two of the fields covered in this book may be challenged, but Yale also examines a set of issues recognized by scholars in intellectual history, the history of science, and the history of the book, namely, the assumptions, practices, and resources of early modern collaborative empirical inquiry.

In his *Novum organum* (1620), Francis Bacon declared that “no discovery should be sanctioned save that it be put in writing.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Bacon realized the value of manuscript notes, but his stress on writing as a way of preserving and communicating knowledge assumed that printed publications were the ideal medium. Yale’s account reveals a more complex situation in which manuscript notes and papers, objects, insects, plants, letters, conversations, and print interacted in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information and ideas. One hero of the book, John Aubrey, was caught between manuscript and print, never publishing his *Naturall Historie of Wiltshire*, a manuscript book in two volumes that circulated among friends, accruing their annotations and additions (chap. 4). Of course, Aubrey’s best-known unpublished book was *Brief Lives*.<sup>3</sup>

Bacon also invited the cooperation of many observers and collectors to promote discovery. However, he provided little detail on what this would mean outside the utopian setting of his *New Atlantis* (1627). Yale uncovers the fundamental fragility of such collective work, depending as it did on factors from the continuing good will of individuals to the vagaries of the mail services carrying irreplaceable manuscript copies. Even among a group of men sharing (at times) friendship and intellectual interests, tensions and pecking orders were evident. Among Aubrey’s correspondents, the renowned botanist John Ray was recognized as having general and systematic knowledge not possessed by others who contributed local information. Ray’s social and intellectual confidence was manifested in occasional indifference or tardy response to Aubrey’s missives, and in his low opinion of the input from his local area, which he described as “barren of Wits” (180). Nevertheless, the correspondence of this group of antiquaries and naturalists advanced Bacon’s hope for a storehouse of information. Indeed, their fact and opinion gathering was one of the early instances (see also the requests of the Royal Society of London from the early 1660s) of the use of printed sheets of “queries,” the precursor of the questionnaire.

2. Francis Bacon, *Novum organum*, in *The “Instauratio magna,” Part II: “Novum organum” and Associated Texts*, vol. 11 of *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, ed. Graham Rees (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), bk. 1, aphorism 101, p. 159.

3. See John Aubrey: *Brief Lives with an Apparatus for the Lives of Our English Mathematical Writers*, ed. Kate Bennett, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Aware of Robert Plot's "queries" in the mid-1670s regarding the natural history of Oxfordshire, the Welsh naturalist and philologist Edward Lhuyd issued his "Parochial Queries" (in 1696) about Wales, comprising thirty-one questions covering topics from antiquities to fossils. From four thousand copies circulated he received about 150 replies. Interestingly, he provided blank spaces under the questions for the responses, but most people sent replies by letter. Such behavior would have resonated with Robert Boyle and Henry Oldenburg, who had earlier issued "hints" and "directions" from the Royal Society about protocols for observation and recording of data.<sup>4</sup>

Yale succeeds admirably in explaining how collaboration by correspondence among an informal network of antiquaries and naturalists resulted in important paper records of "Britain" as a "topographical" category. Their work set up the possibility of future research in several emerging fields, but this depended on secure libraries and archives. Yale stresses that the loss or preservation of material relied on individuals—either on those who produced it or on those, such as the Prussian émigré Samuel Hartlib, who acted as a London postal address for information from various sources.<sup>5</sup> At a time when the Royal Society's "repository" was a collection of objects, not documents, even the careful efforts of Aubrey and others to find safe custody for their papers could fail. Yale makes excellent use of what has survived to offer a rich and compelling portrait of some early modern lives devoted to empirical inquiry.

Richard Yeo  
*Griffith University*

4. See Richard Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), chap. 8.

5. It is worth noting that the University of Sheffield professor who rediscovered Hartlib's papers in 1933 was George Turnbull (1879–1961), not "George Osborn" (241), although, as Yale indicates, there are papers from Hartlib's circle in the James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.