

Elizabeth Yale. *Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain*

Elizabeth Yale. [*Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain*](#). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 360p., 9 illus. ISBN 9780812247817. US \$69.95 /£45.50 (hardback).

It is hard to imagine a life without the Internet, which only began its constant, monolithic development in the 1960s. Not only does the Internet provide a wealth of information at the click of a button, but it also has revolutionised the ways in which members of society correspond with one another. Elizabeth Yale, author of [*Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain*](#), brings her readers back to an era long before the innovations of machines facilitating rapid correspondence, such as facsimile technology and even the telephone, to one where complex and isolated social networks became synonymous with success and prosperity. Yale's muse: Great Britain of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Fearlessly tackling the dilemma of identity that still manifests itself in the United Kingdom to this day, Yale reigns victorious in presenting the multiple ways in which the British population defined itself during this period, referring to the reasoning of many naturalists of the day, such as Edward Lhuyd, John Evelyn, and John Aubrey. With topics ranging from theories anchored in Antiquity to the unique identity of various counties, Yale's monograph provides a comprehensive and fascinating analysis of what it means to be *British*. In order to achieve this, the medium of communication and its role in British society during the early modern period are examined at length.

Though general readers will find themselves thrown into the middle of a Britain no longer in existence, Yale acts as their guide, much like Virgil who guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*. Each chapter of Yale's work introduces the reader to a vital concept of British correspondence, save the introduction and first chapter, which are used to ease the transition from the twenty-first century to the seventeenth. Following this transition, the subsequent chapters of *Sociable Knowledge* are devoted to explaining and shedding light on British institutions, such as the Royal Society and the Bodleian Library, as well as the multiple methods of correspondence, including the development of the postal system and the social coffee shop culture of imperial London.

More specifically, the second and third chapters describe the social methods that were utilised in the gathering of information and the publishing of scholarly materials. For example, in her second chapter, entitled "Putting Texts, Things, and People in Motion: Learned Correspondence in Action," Yale provides a humorous account of the early days of the postal system in Great Britain, citing the pitiful infrastructure, the common and unexplained loss of parcels, and the scholars' lack of trust towards mail workers. Moving forward from the material acquisition of information during this era, she discusses face-to-face interactions in the third chapter, "Natural Hardly Can Bee Done by Letters": Conversation, Writing and the Making of Natural Knowledge. In this section, the reader learns about the voyages on which early modern naturalists embarked and the extensive social networks of which they were an important part. Trips, such as Lhuyd's odyssey through Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and Brittany, are explained in great detail, allowing a true understanding of the great importance of personal contact during this period. The absolute apogee of Yale's work is the fourth chapter,

entitled “John Aubrey’s *Naturall Historie of Wiltshire*: A Case Study in Scribal Collaboration.” The reason for which this chapter is to be considered the climax of the work is due to the ways in which it exemplifies how the concepts examined in previous chapters were applied in actual society. With this objective in mind, Yale writes a forty-two page *magnum opus* describing how naturalist John Aubrey constructed his *Naturall Historie of Wiltshire*, guiding her readers from its initial planning stages, to the naturalist-author’s fear and definition of plagiarism, to his financial woes in regard to its printing.

Yale’s comprehensive and enlightening study, which takes into account important aspects of the history of the book and print culture in Great Britain, is an essential contribution to scholarship. For its content and beautiful material presentation, one which makes the readers feel as if they were opening a first edition of Lhuyd’s *Archaeologia Britannica* or Aubrey’s *Monumenta Britannica*, Yale’s work deserves a place in private and public collections worldwide.

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