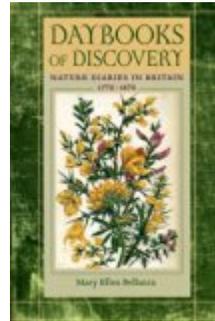


Mary Ellen Bellanca. *Daybooks of Discovery: Nature Diaries in Britain, 1770-1870*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. 296 pp. \$59.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2612-4; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2613-1.

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## A Natural History of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Nature Diaries

During a graduate seminar on Victorian prose, Mary Ellen Bellanca overheard a fellow student's comment that "everyone" in the nineteenth century wrote about nature in their journals (p. i). With something akin to the writers and thinkers she explores in her text, no doubt encouraged by the culture around her and prompted by her own sense of curiosity and desire to contribute to a new and growing field of study, from that point on Bellanca began to explore the truth behind this observation. Her *Daybooks of Discovery* is a carefully crafted manifestation resulting from years of study following that seemingly offhand and innocent observation. One cannot help but wonder, in the great cycle of cultural production, if some day in the distant future another graduate student might not comment that "everyone" in the beginning of the twenty-first century seemed to have had an interest in ecocriticism. We can look to fine examples, such as Bellanca's natural history of British nature diaries, and hope as much.

Although the book is presented as a natural history of British nature diaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, presumably limited to Victorian and Romantic literary studies, it is, in fact, much more than just a historical presentation and study of the texts of those eras. Bellanca divides her book into seven chapters. After her first chapter, "A Natural History of Nature Diaries," she dedicates the next to Gilbert White's nature journals (1767-89). Because of this eighteenth-century minister's influence over both the developing genre of the nature diary and the ever-growing popularity of amateur science,

Bellanca utilizes the subsequent chapter to chronicle and explain White's influence over his contemporaries, what she titles the nineteenth-century "cult" of White resulting from his journals' publication in the collection *Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne* (1853). Readers interested in the intersection of environmentalism and theology may well find these chapters of particular interest. In these chapters, Bellanca also includes explanations for White's far-reaching echoes on a variety of environmental writers by tracing his influences over such American writers as Henry David Thoreau and Ann Zwinger.

The chapters that follow shift between studies of lesser- and (more) well-known historical figures and their works. For instance, Bellanca includes a chapter dedicated to Dorothy Wordsworth and her *Alfoxden Journal* (1798) and *Grasmere Journal* (1991), and then one on the short life and development of lesser-known Emily Shore and her 1830 publication *Journal of Emily Shore*. The following chapter focuses on George Eliot and her "Recollections of Ilfracome" from *The Journals of Georgew ELiot* (1998). The last chapter is dedicated to a study of Gerard Manley Hopkins' journals and poetics (1959).

Bellanca's text examines how diaries and journals had the capacity, because of their very private modes of production, to allow individuals outside the public sphere to explore the natural world and their own senses of self in connection with that world and their literary creations. Throughout the detailed chapter studies, Bellanca is also careful to examine the importance of the diurnal

and sometimes banal repetitive nature of diaries. Readers interested in the critical role that diaries and journals have played and continue to play in the development of new genres will find this exploration thought provoking.

Additionally, students of ecocriticism, while reading *Daybooks of Discovery*, may find themselves reconsidering the debate over whether a sense of self emerges from the natural world, from some form of cultural production, or both. All the diaries under examination in this text have a strong sense of place—of specific locality and regionalism, whether that is White’s small village or Wordsworth’s Lake District. However, Bellanca is careful to point out how the outside world played largely in these writers’ lives and how all these diarists were deeply interested in and well read in the latest scientific books and discoveries occurring far from their homes. Scholars of postcolonial studies will find much in these pages that connect Britain’s imperialism to its scientific zeal and encouragement to all levels of its citizenry to pursue vigorous study and exploration, whether locally or abroad.

Concurrent with these detailed studies, Bellanca pinpoints a number of trends and generalizations that emerge from these critical readings. In her final chapter, “The 1870s and Beyond,” she demonstrates that the nature diary had “attained its own maturity amid the high Victorian culture of outdoor walking, observing, sketching, and journalizing” (pp. 223-224). However, she also points out that this maturity and popularity, ironically, brought on by the earnest work of enthusiastic and dedicated amateurs, was already, by this point, creating its own demise. During the later Victorian era, cultural authority for field and stream and the rest of the natural world was

“shifting from the home and garden [and woman] to the school and university, and the cultural authority of prose about nature shifted as well from the dialogues and familiar essays of naturalists—both men and women, usually self-taught—to the scientific papers and monographs of specialists—often university based and usually men” (p. 224). Feminists will find reinforcement for a trend that has been articulated many times before: of the marginalization of women and their voices with the growth of industrialization and its inevitable specializations.

From comments in her last chapter, readers find the theme that Bellanca quietly and convincingly has unfolded in the six preceding chapters. It is in this theme that contemporary ecocritical specialists and amateurs, readers and writers of the natural world, will find resonance, relevance, and warning for current concerns and debates about the environment, ecology, and role that the general public and professionals must continue to share in discovering, understanding, celebrating, and preserving the natural world. Bellanca’s careful balance between discussions of relatively obscure figures, such as Shore—a young feisty woman who took it upon herself to become a self-taught student, writer, and proponent of nature studies—vis-à-vis more prominent literary figures, such as Wordsworth and Eliot, speaks to an important subtext of this study: the question of proprietary rights in connection with environmental studies and advocacy. As ecocriticism grows in popularity and concurrently seeks legitimacy within the academy and beyond, Bellanca’s text offers a gentle warning—for us not to follow previous paths—potentially eliminating the enthusiastic amateurs from the world they too share.

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