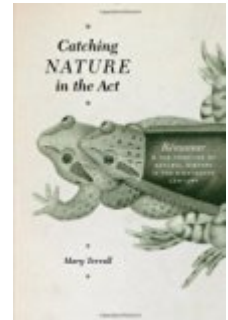


**Mary Terrall.** *Catching Nature in the Act: Natural History in the Eighteenth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-08860-0.



**Reviewed by** Elizabeth Nielsen

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**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Mary Terrall's *Catching Nature in the Act: Réaumur and the Practice of Natural History in the Eighteenth Century* is a delightfully detailed account of French natural history in the decades before Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*. Focusing primarily on the life and work of René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683-1757), Terrall weaves a story of his correspondents, colleagues, and other French philosophers, explorers, and naturalists in the same period.

Terrall's stated goal for this monograph was to "show how observing, collecting, and experimenting fit into the daily lives of a diverse array of people in the mid-eighteenth century," and she largely accomplishes this (p. 19). Her chapters focus on ways in which natural history was done, particularly emphasizing empirical observation and experimentation, arguing that "natural philosophy and experimental physics both entered crucially into natural history" during this period (p. 5). Her assertion complicates the historiographical distinction between natural philosophy and natural history, and makes for a richer ac-

count of eighteenth-century science. Spending time primarily discussing the practices of Réaumur and his colleagues, as Terrall does, also shows the diversity in practice across the Franco-phone world.

Chapter 1 sets out Terrall's goals and emphasizes the importance of experiment in this era of natural history. Addressing Jacques Roger's interpretation of natural history before Buffon as the mere collection of facts and specimens, Terrall shows how concepts of cause were incorporated into natural historical research. Chapter 2, "Catching Nature in the Act," emphasizes the ways in which naturalists accumulated details of their (live) specimens in hopes of discovering surprising or new behaviors or activities. Chapter 3, "Seeing Again and Again," highlights two of the most prominent of the book's themes: the work of illustrators and their illustrations in the work of natural history, as well as the role of the household (both the physical space and personnel involved) in cultivating the practices of natural history. For Réaumur, these two spheres were intimately con-

nected: one member of his household, the mysterious Mademoiselle Hélène Dumoustier, did some of the illustrations for his work. One of Terrall's clearest points is made here: Mme. Dumoustier's illustrations *also* stemmed from her work as a naturalist; Réaumur acknowledged her contributions to his own observations.

The next few chapters follow Réaumur's work, conversations, and correspondence with other naturalists, as well as a dispute with the views on spontaneous generation of Athanasius Kircher, a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest. In fact, a large part of Réaumur's work was focused on articulating his opposition to spontaneous generation, as he and his students continued to study silkworms, lice, and other insects. In chapters 4 and 5, for example, Terrall devotes time to explaining the debate over spontaneous generation and the grounds on which it was fought: in illustrated works, in Réaumur's own collection at his home, and in Buffon's curated . Terrall follows Réaumur as he investigates Trembley's polyps, creating illustrations and demonstrations in his own kitchen and garden. Her argument about the practice of natural history hinges on her reading of Réaumur's extensive correspondence , and it works effectively. In chapter 6, Terrall's turn to "Natural History on Display" once again returns to the site of the home as a scientific institution and natural history as a public spectacle in eighteenth-century Paris.

*Catching Nature in the Act* also strongly emphasizes the ways in which scientific knowledge was communicated during the early eighteenth century. By focusing her narrative on Réaumur's world, including his correspondents and household staff, Terrall is able to navigate the terrain beyond the Parisian focus, extending her narrative outward to correspondents in Geneva, Amsterdam, and Marseilles. This adds to the more complete picture of Francophone natural history, as well as engages the reader to think about

boundaries of knowledge in the eighteenth century.

The sources Terrall has managed to gather and marshal for her work are impressive. Many of her archival sources, as she notes, are Réaumur's manuscripts, illustrations, and correspondence with others on the borders of France. As these are often one-sided (one letter, for example), Terrall has amassed a large amount of additional data to demonstrate the ways in which Réaumur and his contemporaries thought about their work as naturalists.

This book will appeal to historians generally, but specifically to those interested in questions of scientific illustration, sites of experiment and observation, natural history, and Enlightenment science. While focused in a French context, Terrall's conclusions connect to major themes in the history of science across Europe during the eighteenth century. Those interested in the French *Académie*, quasi-professional gentlemen (and women), as well as in natural philosophy on the peripheries of French culture will find Terrall's work helpful and interesting. One of the book's many strengths is Terrall's focus on readers and the reception of Réaumur's illustrations, rather than on the minutiae of his ideas.

While *Catching Nature in the Act* is a story with one man at the center, it is not a biography, and therefore Terrall does assume a great deal of knowledge about Réaumur and the society in which he lived. And while she does emphasize her place in the historiography of natural history, a familiarity with eighteenth-century French culture and science will be helpful in tracing her argument within the wider historiographical debate. Overall, however, Terrall does an excellent job in articulating and demonstrating different ways of doing natural history in the early to mid-eighteenth century. Terrall also captures the thrill of doing natural history, of catching nature in the act.

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