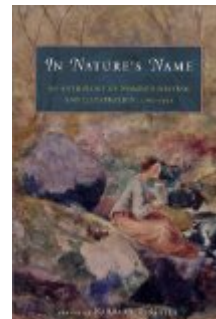


Barbara T. Gates, ed.. *In Nature's Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing and Illustration, 1780-1930*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xxvi + 673 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-28444-6.



Reviewed by Amy McCandless

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Dame Nature

The anthology *In Nature's Name* is the third of Barbara T. Gates's volumes on women and science.[1] This latest volume was envisioned as a "companion text" (p. xxi) to *Kindred Nature*. In all three works Gates, who is Alumni Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Delaware, argues that gender stereotypes affected British women's views of and participation in the world of science. The excerpts and illustrations in the anthology were chosen to "offer new insights into women's role in redefining nature, nature study, and nature writing," while illustrating "some of the difficulties women encountered when they tried to speak in nature's name" (pp. xxii and xxiv).

The book is divided into seven sections--"Speaking Out," "Protecting," "Domesticating," "Adventuring," "Appreciating," "Popularizing Science," "Amateurs or Professionals?"--and each has a short introduction highlighting the chapter themes. Sections are organized thematically and include materials from a variety of artistic genres and historic periods. The earliest is an excerpt

from Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories*, published in 1786, and the latest is a 1929 poem by Charlotte Mew. Biographical sketches and an extensive list of suggestions "For Further Reading" are included.

The Victorian gospel of self-improvement pervades the selections. As Lydia Ernestine Becker notes in a 1869 essay published in *Contemporary Review*, "Many women might be saved from the evil of the life of intellectual vacuity, to which their present position renders them so peculiarly liable, if they had a thorough training in some branch of science, and the opportunity of carrying it on as a serious pursuit, in concert with others having similar tastes" (p. 21). Women are chided for putting their own vanities before the welfare of nature. "Love of dress and fashion is leading to the extinction, complete or partial, of all the most ornamental birds in every part of the world" (p. 173), Margaretta Lemon tells the Society for the Protection of Birds in 1899.

Many of the authors invoke the doctrine of separate spheres. Given women's maternal and domestic roles, it seemed natural that they would

be interested in the domestication of animals and plants, the protection of non-human as well as human "babies," and the promotion of a clean environment. As the teachers of the young, it seemed logical that they would be the best "translators" of scientific language and theory to the next generation. Several authors ridicule the sexual essentialism of the time, especially the tendency to explain only female behavior in terms of biological determination. Rosa Frances Swiney in *The League of Isis* suggests that the truth is quite the contrary: "There is no living organism so completely under the tyranny of sex as the human male. The majority of men are utterly incapable of freeing themselves from the limitations of masculinity. They cannot view humanity whole" (p. 76). Until males learn continence, she concludes, the species will never progress. Similarly, Mona Caird ponders why, if nature intended maternity to be the chief duty of women, nature did not likewise require paternity to be the chief duty of men.

Several of the more interesting selections deal with sex and sexuality. In *Baby Buds*, published in 1895, Ellis Ethelmer (the penname of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy) uses plant analogies to discuss human reproduction with her young readers. "We shall now, darling, be more able to trace and perceive the further resemblances and differences in the method by which plants and animals (including human beings) come into existence." The exact process of fertilization, Elmy explains, "you can scarcely understand till you are older; but you may understand even now that the action of the ovules is very similar to what takes place in a flower" (p. 485). And just as the buds of flowers are very delicate and must be protected if they are to grow to maturity, so in humans the sexual organs "are as a delicate bud to the coming flower" and boys and girls need "to be most daintily cautious that no playing or meddling with them ever takes place." She concludes that this care is necessary not only for protecting the fertility of the individual but also for "continuing the life of the nation" (p. 486). But it was one thing to talk

about sex in terms of continence; quite another to encourage women to express and enjoy their sexuality. When Marie Stopes published her *Married Love* in 1918, there was a public outcry. Stopes, who held a Ph.D. in paleobotany from the University of Manchester, employs the imagery of tides to explain women's sexual ebbs and flows. Both men and women must understand women's natural rhythms if couples are to have satisfying sex lives. Both must be disabused of "the idea that sex-life is a low, physical, and degrading necessity which a pure woman is above enjoying" (p. 600), Stopes contends.

Most women writers expressed their didacticism in more oblique language than Stopes. Quite a few used humor to satirize contemporary scientific notions and practices. One of the cleverest pieces is Frances Power Cobbe's critique of vivisection. In her "Science in Excelsis: A New Vision of Judgement," the angels decide to practice the "science" of vivisection on the physiologists themselves. As the angel Raphael explains to the scientists, "You have always loudly proclaimed that theory without experiment is of little worth, so we intend to try some of your own choice examples on yourself and your friends" (p. 149). The angels announce their intention to "collect and verify as many facts as possible about [the scientists'] various organs--how they are kept alive, and how long it takes to kill them when they are dipped in boiling water, or starved, or put in an oven, and so on" (p. 147).

Animal stories were also a popular means of teaching the moral implications of nature study. Gates includes several selections from Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty*. This children's favorite, first published in 1877, provides examples of the mistreatment of domestic and wild animals. In his musings on the world around him, *Black Beauty* stresses the importance of kindness and consideration for all of nature's creatures. Similar lessons could be also learned from studying the world of plants. In "A Few Words about Window-Gardens,"

Elizabeth Twining informs readers that: "Cleanliness, fresh air, and pure water, are three remedies both for plants and for ourselves" (p. 293). These lessons could be spiritual as well as material. Jane Loudon in *The Young Naturalist; or, The Travels of Agnes Merton and Her Mamma* (1863) explains that "Natural history has always appeared to me a particularly suitable study for young people; as it excites the youthful mind to the contemplation of the infinite wisdom which has been shown in making all creatures form one vast whole.... Nothing has been made in vain" (p. 466). Margaret Gatty offers similar "Parables from Nature." After observing the effect of a winter wind that tore the garden plants from "their fastenings," a young girl tells her mamma, "at last I understand what you say about the necessity of training, and restraint, and culture, for us as well as for flowers" (p. 273). But children's nature books could be quite whimsical as well. Gertrude Jekyll illustrates her "Pussies in the Garden" (From *Children and Gardens*, 1908) with architectural labels; e.g., "Pinkie, West Elevation; East Elevation" (p. 265) and entitles a sketch of three cats feeding at a dish "An Equicateral Triangle" (p. 267).

A number of the selections describe women's explorations of the natural world outside the British Isles. Eliza Brightwen relates her excitement upon obtaining an Indian fruit-eating bat (despite the fact that it sickened in captivity and had to be chloroformed). Louisa Anne Meredith describes the birds, kangaroos, porcupines, and wombats she encounters during her nine-year sojourn in Tasmania. Isabel Savory recounts a tiger-shooting party in India. Nina Mazuchelli tells of crossing the Indian Alps when her husband, an army chaplain, is stationed at Darjeeling. Elizabeth Gould spends her years in the colonies helping her husband illustrate his book on birds of Australia. Annie Martin writes of "Home Life on an Ostrich Farm" (1890) in South Africa. No doubt the readers back in Britain were enamored with her details of feeding the offspring of the "super-

fluous progeny" of "several prolific cats" to her ostrich Jacob (p. 255). Two of the most interesting women profiled in "Adventuring" were Mary Kingsley and Marianne North, who both traveled solo throughout the Empire. North's autobiography recalled her days observing, collecting, and sketching in the far-flung corners of the world. She later helped create the Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens to house her drawings. Kingsley collected fish specimens for the British Museum of Natural History in West Africa and subsequently wrote two books describing her collecting adventures.

Generally speaking, *In Nature's Name* does not compare female collectors or commentators, either in approach or interpretation, to their male counterparts. In "Appreciating," however, Gates contends that late-nineteenth century aestheticism looks quite different when women's nature writing is considered. "Victorian women," she argues, "perceived sublimity differently from men.... [I]f looked at from a female perspective, aestheticism was not anti-nature, but in part a continuation of the romanticism of nature.... Dorothy Wordsworth...forces us to redefine the idea of the early romantic movement as characterized by the ego of the male poet" (p. 382). Indeed, Gates feels that an examination of women's nature writing "illustrates how deeply what we have come to identify as romantic attitudes toward nature ... were embedded in women's writing throughout the period covered in this anthology" (p. 383). "What a charming beautifier Dame Nature is!" (p. 399) Eliza Brightwen exclaims, and from the writings of other women Gates cites, it is apparent she was not alone in her celebration of the sublimity of nature.

The variety of formats and styles employed by women nature writers is indeed impressive. Women confront the natural world in poems, short stories, speeches, autobiographies, adventure tales, scientific essays, and illustrations. Their subject matter is equally diverse. The authors

write about natural selection, optics, hedgehogs, taxidermy, algae, entomology, gymnosperms, and reproduction. This variety is both the strength and weakness of *In Nature's Name*. On the one hand, Gates presents works that would not be found in standard literary anthologies or historical collections. On the other hand, it is unclear what to conclude from such a disparate array of materials. Gates is familiar with the historiography of the "long nineteenth century," but she chooses to organize her selections "by theme and subject rather than by type or chronological order" (p. xxiv). This may be aesthetically more pleasing, but it is difficult as a consequence for the reader to see how attitudes toward women and toward women in science changed (or did not change) over time. Unless one has read *Kindred Nature*, there is not enough background information in the section introductions to provide context for the excerpts. For those familiar with the history and literature of the period, the chronology at the back is helpful in this regard, but it would not be sufficient for most undergraduate students or for a general audience. The anthology is a good reference source for those in the history of science, women's studies, and literary studies; its classroom use would be more problematic.

Note

[1]. Along with *Natural Eloquence: Women Reinscribe Science*, ed. with Ann Shteir (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); and *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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