

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

Material Texts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. xi + 346 pp.
\$69.95.

Elizabeth Yales's book is tightly focused on late seventeenth century Britain, but Brexit gives it an unexpected contemporary relevance. The United Kingdom's 2016 vote to leave the European Union and the 2014 Scottish Referendum before that revealed cracks in the structure of British identity that had long been papered over. *Paper* is the operative word here. Yale argues that it was through the great heaps of papers—letters, notes, manuscripts, maps, broadsides, circulars, books, journals, archives—produced and shared by late seventeenth-century antiquaries that Britain came to be understood as “a topographical object” (12). In seeking to define the general character of Britannia as a whole, these men took a naturalist's approach, describing the specific differences and commonalities of the nation's constituent regions.

The Britannic endeavors of two men dominate the book: John Aubrey (1626–97) and Edward Lhuyd (1660–1709). Today Aubrey is the better known, thanks chiefly to his entertaining *Brief Lives* (not fully published until 1898). Here it is his unpublished project of four decades, *The Naturall Historie of Wiltshire*, that attracts Yale's close attention (Aubrey's rough draft and fair copy survive). Its scope was much broader than the title implies. Aubrey incorporated notes on Ireland and most of the English counties (largely omitted from the Wiltshire Topographical Society's 1847 edition), and he devoted nearly as much space to human affairs and antiquities as to natural history curiosities.

For Lhuyd, a proud Welshman, *Britannica* signified anything Celtic and nothing English. While his curatorial position at the Ashmolean Museum gave him a base in Oxford, Lhuyd traveled extensively in Ireland, Cornwall, Scotland, Brittany, and Wales. He collected fossils for his illustrated catalogue, *Lithophylacii Britannicae ichnographia* (1699).

For *Archaeologia Britannica*, his planned massive geographical dictionary of Wales, he augmented his own experience by sending out four thousand printed questionnaires that requested not only detailed information on a wide range of antiquarian topics, but plant, animal, and geological specimens as well. The only volume to make it into print, *Glossography* (1707), was written mostly in Welsh and drew heavily on this first linguistic survey of Wales.

Yale's subtitle invokes natural history as a central theme, and its actors are often collectively tagged as naturalists. However, reading this book as a history of natural history would be unfair to Yale's intentions and achievement. Yale is not particularly interested in the actual content of their work. There is no attempt, for example, to identify the botanical samples pressed in the pages of Aubrey's rough draft of his *Naturall Historie*. Nor does she compare Lhuyd's and Aubrey's accounts of fossils, although that would underscore her valuable point about two different, coexisting models for writing natural and topographical history: Aubrey looking back to Pliny the Elder and Lhuyd to the Royal Society's eminent systematists John Ray and Martin Lister.

Instead, Yale's real subject is indeed the "sociable knowledge" of her title. To her wonderfully fine-grained analysis of the personal correspondence (wittily captured in James Hubbard's jacket design) and collaborations that generated the materials of Britain's natural and national history, she adds thought-provoking reflections on the nature of archives more generally.

Yale's readers should find it impossible to use any scribal archive without following her lead in resurrecting the human connections that allowed its physical survival. Through example after engaging example, she invites us to find out: Where did this scrap of paper start out? How many hands did it pass through? What favors were exchanged? Who tinkered with its form and content? How did it escape lining a pie tin, binding an account book, fueling a zealot's fire, or all the other dismal fates of countless manuscripts? And how did it reach its present home? Whatever happens to Britannia post-Brexit, may her archives at least rest in peace.

Karen Reeds, *Princeton Research Forum*