important book if for no other reason than it is the first collection in our field to focus with a significantly critical eye on the two interrelated issues of technology and literacy.

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A Natural History of Nature Writing—Frank Stewart; Shearwater; 1995; 279 pp. ISBN 1-5596-3279-8

The appeal of nature writing is the double pull of all things natural. On the one hand, we are desperate to connect with the land around us and our fellow creatures, to be part of this huge living cell we call Earth, to live in harmony if not symbiosis with the other residents, and to hear singing in our blood our relatedness to everything that shapes us. On the other hand, we struggle to detach ourselves, to ride this spinning ball as its only self-conscious passenger, to understand its workings with the hard-boiled otherness of the scientist or engineer who can analyze what swims beneath the microscope without magic or paranoia.

How we see the world and our role in it changes as we change. The Western notion that human beings should have dominion over God’s creation went unchallenged from ancient times through the “Dark Ages.” Our faith that the world was our garden—however overgrown—persisted beyond the rise of science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It outlasted even the Darwinian revolution, reformed as a belief that the human species was God’s ultimate goal or at least the highest rung on life’s ladder. And until the twentieth century we believed that nature’s riches were inexhaustible, fully infinite. Even Thoreau, who believed, “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” and who bristled at the incursions of civilizations, was pleased that within half an hour’s walk from Concord he could find a portion of earth not contaminated by human development.

The record of how we examine nature and how our relation to the natural world has changed is preserved by nature writers, those who have kept the ship’s log for centuries. The term “natural history” has been used to describe the writing of close observers of nature since before Gilbert White
used the term for the title of *The Natural History of Selborne* in 1789. Applied
to a genre of writing, the phrase has built into it the profound truth that in
following the work of those who write about nature, we trace the history of
nature itself, that is, the construct of the world our civilization has built and
modified and remodeled bit by bit over our long intellectual history.

As Richard Mabey points out, in *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing*,
natural history has traditionally been the domain of amateurs. It has found its
expressions in the journals and letters of country curates such as Gilbert
White and others whose lives provided the leisure to putter, to observe, and to
cultivate wonder. It provided an outlet, Mabey suggests, for Victorian
women such as Margaret Plue and Anne Pratt, who found in nature writing
an arena not wholly dominated by men. In North America, however, the
flourishing of natural science and the emergence of writing as a profession
came while enough wilderness was still available to liberate writers from “the
over-tidy categories and conventions of European nature writing.” As a
consequence, Mabey says with some surprise, “In the United States, the best
nature writers are regarded simply as writers” (ix).

Two recent books present themselves as surveys of nature writing. Mabey’s *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* is an anthology that ranges from
Aesop and Aristotle to Annie Dillard, E. O. Wilson, and Bill McKibben.
Although the editor is British and the selections are predominantly British,
the work offers samplings from French, Russian, Swedish, and American
writers. Mabey has strung through the selections a latticework of headnotes
and commentaries, brief but well informed, that trace the intellectual shifts
from period to period. As he introduces selections from the Enlightenment,
Mabey points out a change in the philosophical perspective, “the great
admission . . . that nature mattered, that it was worth attention” (25). In
introducing the Romantics, he confronts the paradox of a time simultaneously
“of a heightened sense of self, and of a heightened sympathy with the
‘otherness’ of the natural world” (63) and resolves the contradiction by citing
authors who celebrate wilderness and the individuality of all living things.

The most useful and interesting aspect of this anthology is the range
of its selections. In a piece from Swedish writer Isaac Biberg, *The Oeconomy
of Nature* (1749), we get an early account of the interdependence of species
and the recycling of nature:

The whole earth wold be overwhelmed with carcasses, and
stinking bodies, if some animals did not delight to feed upon
them. Therefore when an animal dies, bears, wolves, foxes,
raven, &c, do not lose a moment till they have taken all away. But if a horse e.g. dies near the public road, you will find him, after a few days, swollen, burst, and at last filled with innumerable grubs of carnivorous flies, by which he is entirely consumed, and removed out of the way, that he may not become a nuisance to passengers by his poisonous stench. (50)

We get brief clips from such giants as Carl Linnaeus, Alexander von Humboldt, and Charles Darwin. We even get samplings from poets and fiction writers familiar from our literature surveys: Wordsworth and Coleridge, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the French fiction writer Colette.

I would find *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* impossible to use for a classroom text. I find it frustrating even to read. The selections are brief. Some of the longer pieces are an essay by Lewis Thomas, “The Music of the Spheres,” which occupies four pages in this edition, and a selection from Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* that runs to five. Charles Darwin is present in two selections that together take up nine pages, and Thoreau is represented by three snippets totaling six pages. Further irritating is Mabey’s practice of identifying the author and the source at the end of each selection. I find myself flipping pages to find the author’s name before I begin a selection.

Although the book is arranged to trace, in broad terms, the history of nature writing from the ancients to the day before yesterday, a separate organizing pattern is laid over the chronological. The pattern is neither national nor geographical. For example, in a chapter called “Weeds and Wilderness,” Mabey skips from Barbellion’s *Journal of a Disappointed Man*, 1919, to Margaret Plues, *Rambles in Search of Wild Flowers*, 1863 and Mary Roberts, *Flowers of the Matin and Evensong*, 1845. These are all English writers, I think, although Mabey does not say so. We get, in order, Charles Darwin (English) 855, Peter Kropotkin (Russian) 1902, Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalist Field Club (English) 1869, and others similarly scattered as to date and nationality. The chapter includes John Muir and Loren Eiseley, both American but separated by sixty years, and ends with a selection of Barry Lopez, from *Arctic Dreams*, 1986.

I am glad to encounter names and titles I have not read before yet stymied by having so little of each to read and annoyed that the text provides no map or guide for locating the authors other than a gaunt index of authors at the back.
Frustrated by Mabey’s text—too many selections, too eclectic, not enough of any writer to fill one pocket—I turn to Frank Stewart’s recent offering, *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (Shearwater, 1995). Here I expect to be frustrated by the opposite problem. The introduction makes clear that the book covers essentially six American writers—Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir, Leopold, Carson, and Abbey—and one British writer Gilbert White. Even the British anthologist includes Eiseley and Dillard and Hoagland and Lopez. How can this book be a natural history without including my favorites? Moreover, it is not an anthology. A natural history without specimens. I am cautious.

The 18th century British writer Gilbert White is credited, by Frank Stewart and by others, with setting the pattern of natural history. A clergyman rather than a scientist, an amateur not a professional, Gilbert White has modest ambitions. He restricted his focus to the village of Selborne and he sought to make a legitimate scientific contribution. “For, as no man can alone investigate all the works of nature, these partial writers may, each in their department, be more accurate in their discoveries, and freer from errors, than more general writers, and so by degrees may pave the road to a correct universal natural history” (qtd. by Stewart 20). White antedates Thoreau and most of American nature writing. Thoreau knew his work and may have been influenced by White.

White followed a pastoral tradition that reached back to the Eclogues of Virgil and set a pattern that would reach forward at least to Edward Abbey. While his eye was keen and his observations precise, his interests were more than the description of flora and fauna. He wrote with gentle humor and he commented on his neighbors as well as the plants and animals. He combined deft narrative with evocative description in a form of presentation we would call essay rather than scientific treatise. In short White developed both a philosophy and a writing style based on close observation and reverence for natural things.

Frank Stewart’s *Natural History* imitates the tradition of the nature writing he chronicles. His scope is narrow and his observations keen. As he tells the stories of the seven major figures, he spins an interesting narrative. He follows John Burroughs from Upstate New York to Washington, DC, and describes meetings between Burroughs and Walt Whitman—the two later joined by H. D. Thoreau—that shed useful light on Burroughs’ first struggles as a writer. Stewart tracks John Muir on his journey from Wisconsin through Canada, evading the draft for the Union Army, along his 1,000 mile walk to
Florida, and eventually to California and Yosemite. He traces the slowly developing career of Rachel Carson and credits her book, *The Silent Spring*, with causing a major shift in the nation’s temper and policies regarding the environmental damage of economic exploitation.

The stories Stewart tells are valuable simply as history, documenting the emergence and evolution of a major writing genre and its touchstone practitioners. This genre, nature writing, is not uniquely American as Stewart makes clear. But it has seen fuller development and has had greater influence in this country than in others. Indeed as Richard Mabey points out and Stewart reinforces, in the United States nature writers are just writers, part of the mainstream literary tradition since the critics first discovered Thoreau, a group of literary artists with increasing influence in the late twentieth century.

Approaching the work of nature writers, Stewart is more than a historian. He is a literary critic as well. Early in the book Stewart interprets Thoreau’s perplexing metaphor of the hound, the bay horse and the turtledove. In the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau wrote, “I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove, and am still on their trail” (qtd. in Stewart 1). The passage stumped the readers of Thoreau’s time and has occupied countless critics since. Stewart interprets the three creatures as aspects of the writers’ craft and spirit. The hound has a kind of wildness, an instinct for pursuit. The horse is less wild yet has the ability to wander wide. The turtledove stands for any bird, but especially the hawk, free and inventive, unrestrained.

At the end of the book Stewart comes back to Thoreau’s fable by way of Edward Abbey. In the eleventh chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey’s best known work, Abbey tells a related parable about a supernatural horse named Old Moon-Eye. The styles and the methods of the two nature writers are quite different, and Abbey’s supernatural horse is not accompanied by a dog or bird, but Stewart urges us to see the connection. No one doubts that Abbey read and admired the work of Thoreau, yet Abbey leaves no clue about the meaning of Old Moon-Eye that would tie his story to that of Thoreau. Stewart calls Abbey’s parable a parallel or a similitude rather than an allegory (205).

By the time I get to Stewart’s final chapter I have forgotten that I was looking for something else, a compendium of nature writings or an exhaustive account of the genre’s key monuments. I have been absorbed in the story, a detailed narrative of some half dozen of my personal heroes. I have in addition accepted that by keeping his scope narrow; by observing keenly, and by presenting his observations in a personal and engaging style,
Stewart has been true to the literary genre he follows. To the extent that nature writing is a serious literary genre, Frank Stewart’s *Natural History of Nature Writing* is an important work of literary criticism. I see no need to ask for more.

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