Review of The Culture of Nature in Britain, 1680-1860

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P. M. Harman. The Culture of Nature in Britain, 1680–1860.
The Culture of Nature in Britain, 1680–1860 by P. M. Harman
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of Michael Ragussis in summer 2010 deprived us of a sensitive and insightful interpreter of English culture’s uses of minority stereotypes.

**Todd M. Endelman**
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The title of P. M. Harman’s sweeping survey strongly recalls that of Keith Thomas’s pioneering *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (1983). And in a sense, the two books treat the same topic, although with large differences that cannot easily be attributed either to the progress of scholarship in the last quarter century or to the fact that Harman, unlike Thomas, is a historian of science. Perhaps the explanation lies simply in Raymond Williams’s famous assertion that “nature” is one of the most complex words in the English language (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [1976]). Thomas’s nature is concrete, robustly composed of its constituent animals, vegetables, and minerals. Harman’s nature is more ethereal, embodied in the ideas of philosophers, writers, and artists.

The structure of this book is thematic, with chapters on design, exploration, landscape (two), classification, color, and vital force, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Within each chapter, the organization is roughly chronological, although not rigidly so. Harman is similarly unconstrained by the titular dates of his book, and he frequently glances back as far as Roman and Greek antiquity. The chapters are also structured to highlight the importance of aesthetics. Each begins with the discussion of an image, most often an oil painting or watercolor. Thus Thomas Gainsborough’s “Wooded Landscape with a Peasant Resting” (ca. 1747) introduces the chapter on picturesque landscape, and John Ruskin’s “Chamonix: Rocks and Vegetation” (ca. 1854) begins that on romantic landscape. It is unfortunate that in a book with fewer illustrations than might have been anticipated, the most richly detailed are small and dark.

In a sense, however, this de-emphasis of the images on the part of the book’s designer accurately reflects the inclinations of its author. Most of Harman’s discussions of the aesthetics of nature are abstract, consisting primarily of explications of canonical literary and philosophical texts. For example, after his introductory nod to Gainsborough, he goes on to quote, among others, Ruskin, Alexander Pope (from his translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*), Horace Walpole, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Virgil, John Dryden, and Joseph Addison—a constellation familiar from literary investigations of pastoral and georgic in Britain.

Despite the book’s title, naturalists occupy relatively little of Harman’s attention. Even the chapter entitled “Flora and Fauna, the Tree of Life” begins with Ruskin’s meeting with Charles Darwin at the home of the geologist William Buckland in 1837. The chapter then briefly surveys the emergence of taxonomy in the early modern period before discussing Linnaeus’s classificatory system, but mostly as refracted through the botanical poetry of Erasmus Darwin (Charles’s grandfather) and Horace Walpole’s thoughts about landscape gardening. Harman finally returns to his introductory characters with an account of Darwin’s early experiences on the *Beagle* and his subsequent development of the theory of evolution by natural selection. Although Ruskin respected Darwin personally, his theory ultimately “excited Ruskin’s contempt and hostility” (p. 196). (Ruskin was not especially fond of Linnaeus’s work either; in *Love’s Meinie: Lectures on Greek and English Birds* [1881] he urged the exclusive use of English names, on the grounds that the latinate nomenclature associated with Linnaeus was designed only to bamboozle the illiterate.) He gets the last word in the chapter: “In the face of Darwinian naturalism Ruskin asserted the primacy and uniqueness of human judgment in the aesthetic appreciation of nature” (p. 233).

This is the version of nature with which Harman is most concerned, and Ruskin is, in a sense, the hero of the book. He figures, more often as a writer than as an artist, in almost every chapter. The publication of the final part of his *Modern Painters* (1860) marks the conclusion of Harman’s periodization, as, less precisely, the career of Isaac Newton provides its beginning. Newton, whose abstraction of nature is different from that of Ruskin but nevertheless interestingly resonant with it, is Harman’s other touchstone. Indeed, a distinctive feature of this book is the prominence of physicists in contexts where botanists, zoologists, and geologists might more predictably appear. Although it is not in serious conversation with the vigorous recent scholarship on many of the topics it discusses, *The Culture of Nature in Britain* offers a useful synthesis of the thought of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

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**Andrea Geddes Poole. *Stewards of the Nation’s Art: Contested Cultural Authority, 1890–1939.* Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press. 2010. Pp. xii, 304. $65.00.**

This book is a study of early twentieth-century art museum boards in London: the National Gallery, the Wallace Collection, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Tate Gallery. It provides a compelling example of the interdisciplinary value of museum studies and of the museum’s importance as a place at which culture, history, and society intersect. The author argues that the boards were zones of conflict among four groups competing to define cultural stewardship: aristocratic amateurs whose authority flowed from their dynastic collections and whose self-image was one of public service, but who rarely donated; middle-class patrons who might collect with a view to donation but were less likely