



Gianna Pomata, Nancy Siraisi, eds. *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*. Boston: MIT Press, 2005. x + 490 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-16229-6.



Reviewed by Mitchell Lewis Hammond (Department of History, University of Victoria)

Published on H-German (May, 2007)

A Natural History of *Historia*

The analysis of an elastic term or concept—for instance, the notion of “woman” or the concept of “nature”—has proven a useful tool for investigating the intellectual life of early modern Europe. The present volume, stemming from a seminar at the Max Planck Institut, assesses the role of *historia* in intellectual circles from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. The primary focus is not the Renaissance revival of antiquarian studies or the well-known civil histories of the period. Rather, the volume expands upon Arno Seifert’s characterization of *historia* as “the ‘godmother’ of early modern empiricism” (p. 31) and engages scholarship by Lorraine Daston and others on the development of the “fact.” Like the seventeenth-century *Wunderkammern*, which housed both natural and man-made curiosities, *historia* functioned as an epistemic category that allowed empirical observations to be coupled with the erudition of authoritative texts. Eleven essays and an expansive introduction investigate the role of *historia* in this “learned empiricism” (p. 17), demonstrating that the concept unified areas of inquiry that were divorced by the scholarship of later eras.

In the first of two sections, six essays investigate how authors applied descriptive or exemplary accounts of particular phenomena—medical case histories, for example—to analyses of nature and human activity. Although it is the last contribution of this section, Donald Kelley’s essay provides a helpful introductory survey of the manifold meanings of *historia* and the fluid relationship between history and philosophy between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kelley argues that an early modern attention to particulars receded as a “drive toward system” in historical writing culminated in the universal histories of Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder in the later eighteenth century. The section’s other essays deal more specifically with various fields of inquiry that accorded *historia* increased stature as an analytical tool. As Anthony Grafton’s essay illustrates, some historians demonstrated a new concern for empirical validation alongside rhetorical effectiveness. Authors such as Angelo Decembrio in the 1440s, as well as Francesco Patrizi and Jean Bodin a century later, criticized the ancient practice of composing speeches for historical figures, thus anticipating a desire for factual accuracy that characterized later historical writing. Like-

wise, Martin Mulsow suggests that some antiquarians who studied pre-Christian deities and idols downplayed allegorical or fabulous explanations in favor of eyewitness accounts or textual evidence. Eventually, these new critical methods raised fundamental questions about the relationship of pagan and Christian practices, a topic of considerable interest as the confessional gap widened between Catholics and various Protestants.

As explained in Ian Maclean's essay, an appreciation of descriptive knowledge was motivated, in part, by a reassessment of Aristotle's approach to knowledge of the natural world. In zoological works such as *De partibus animalium* and *Historia animalium*, Aristotle appeared to accept as informative a wider range of observations than was the case for more formal inquiries into physics, metaphysics, or ethics. Thus, what Maclean terms a "lower expectation of knowledge" (p. 158) led theorists such as Jacopo Zabarella to claim that knowledge of certain contingent characteristics—the *propria accidentia*—could contribute meaningfully to an understanding of a species. This shift contributed to the eventual demise of explanations in terms of Aristotelian final causes, which Francis Bacon characterized as a proper object of study for metaphysics but irrelevant to the study of nature (p. 167).

Such philosophical reflections had far-reaching implications for natural history and medicine, especially since many of the most avid practitioners of *historia* were well versed in medical theory. Gianna Pomata argues that the shift was especially important at the University of Padua, where Europe's leading anatomists progressively attached greater significance to narratives of observation and discovery. The burgeoning genre of medical *historiae*, which were synonymous with *observationes* by the first half of the seventeenth century, also facilitated the exchange of first-hand medical observations in a growing international correspondence of learned practitioners. Brian Ogilvie discusses the moral dimension of natural histories, pointing out that sixteenth-century authors, such as the botanist Leonhard Fuchs, hailed the study of nature as an illumination of God's providence. Such reverent contemplation might reveal ethical lessons but it did not necessarily entail the investigation of a plant or animal's functions. By the later seventeenth century, however, developers of a new "physico-theology"—drawing, paradoxically, upon the biological teleology of the ancient anatomist Galen—argued that only through a precise understanding of the workings of nature could one understand God's goodness in creation.

The book's second section presents more focused case

studies of works or individuals who embody a working practice of learned empiricism. These essays demonstrate the remarkable diversity and flexibility of the *historia* concept as it evolved in different practices over time. Chiara Crisciani offers a fifteenth-century example, the varied works of the Ferrara physician Michele Savonarola. Although he did not use the Latin term *historia*, Savonarola referred to everyday experiences, drawn from memories, proverbs, and *exempla*, to illuminate more theoretical claims. A century later, what Crisciani terms an "empirical epistemology" had been appropriated to various contexts and uses, particularly as the terms *historia* and *observationes* came into vogue in medicine. The medical interest in individual case studies probably owed something to renewed appreciation of the Hippocratic *Epidemics*, as Italian physicians moved away from the Scholastic tradition of emphasizing a disorder's general characteristics (pp. 128-130). Nancy Siraisi's survey of several Roman physicians indicates that the practices of *historia* embraced varied short narratives and descriptions that could inform discussions of public health. For Marsilio Cagnati (d. 1612), the term *historia* applied to accounts of epidemic diseases and to individual case studies, both of which he used to argue that the flooding of the Tiber River did not have harmful health effects. In contrast, Andrea Bacci (d. 1600), combined evidence from classical texts and ruins of engineering projects to argue for improved flood control along ancient models.

For early modern authors with wide-ranging interests, a primary challenge of the volume was devising a method for assembling disparate anecdotes and bits of information into a meaningful, accessible work. Anne Blair examines Theodore Zwinger's massive *Theatrum humanae vitae*, an influential example of Renaissance compendia, and the *ars excerpendi* upon which they were based. In his 1565 preface Zwinger distinguished his work, which was organized by commonplace headings rather than by chronology, as a "rhapsody of examples," rather than a narrative of events, *res gestae*. Blair suggests that the work bridges the antique and medieval tradition of exemplar history and the enumeration of particular "facts" in later works such as Francis Bacon's *Sylva sylvarum* (1627). Zwinger and other authors were primarily concerned with the application of *historia* to contemporary life rather than the presentation of things past. In consequence, the *Theatrum* and other compendia did not always comment on the veracity of the information presented. Laurent Pinon addresses this issue in reference to Conrad Gessner's *Historia animalium* (1551), a work sometimes faulted by modern scholars for uncrit-

ically repeating accounts of mythic animals such as the unicorn. Pinon, however, points out that Gessner's goal was not to discount apparently implausible legends, but rather to provide a sweeping compilation of the recorded knowledge of every animal. Thus, the practical goal of providing information useful for cooking or medicine was wedded to the names and textual references through which animals were known both in the past and Gessner's present.

In a different context, Peter Miller examines the assumptions at work in the voluminous notes of the French polymath Nicolas de Peiresc, whose catholic interests included astronomy, ancient coins, the visual effects of mirrors, and animal dissection. In all of these pursuits, Peiresc strove to provide complete description, approximating as closely as possible a first-hand observation. Remarkably, Peiresc's attention to spatial location and movements, even to the point of sketching a session of

the English House of Commons, demonstrated his belief that such behaviors were a cipher for the historical development of institutions. Miller suggests that Peiresc's setting aside of predetermined criteria for "relevance" anticipated later efforts, by Robert Boyle and others, to provide full and complete descriptions of experimental results.

As a whole, this learned volume demonstrates how a relatively tight conceptual focus can unify wide-ranging individual contributions. Alongside its analysis of early scientific knowledge, in the broadest sense, the work renders the large literature of Renaissance compilers much more accessible by illuminating their varied rationales. Attractively formatted, with extensive notes and a complete bibliography, this volume will be of great value for anyone investigating the early modern intellectual milieu and particularly those focused upon medicine or natural history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Mitchell Lewis Hammond. Review of Pomata, Gianna; Siraisi, Nancy, eds., *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13215>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.