This chapter looks at the early reception of the *Natural History* in the *Letters* of Pliny’s nephew and adopted son, and tackles two main issues. First, I offer evidence against the assumption that the Younger Pliny cared little about or had scant knowledge of the actual contents of the *Natural History* and, more importantly, argue that the Younger expected his readers to be familiar with the text of that work. That is to say, the Younger’s pride in his uncle’s monumental work was not meant to be an abstract or purely family affair, but was an occasion which demanded textual engagement from his own readership. Secondly, I look at the puzzle of the Younger’s own placement of the *Natural History* in final position as the crowning *opus* of Pliny’s literary career (in *Ep. 3.5*), in direct contravention of the latter’s estimate of the relative value of his final works in the preface to the *Natural History*.

*The Natural History of Pliny the Younger*

It may seem obvious to begin a study of the *Natural History* in the *Letters* by looking at the Younger’s description of natural phenomena in his correspondence. In his standard commentary on the Younger, Sherwin-White points the way in his retrospective summary comments on a letter late in the collection (*Ep. 8.20*), where the remarkable floating islands of Lake Vadimon in Umbria are described by the Younger in detail ((1966) 473):
This taste for natural wonders, which Pliny shared with his uncle, produced Seneca’s *Natural Questions* and his uncle’s *Natural History*. Pliny contributes 4.30 Larium, 6.16, 6.20 Vesuvius, 7.27 ghosts, and 9.33 the dolphin of Hippo, as well as this letter and 8.8, the fountain of Clitumnus. In these Pliny shows himself exact as an observer and recorder, and cautious and unexaggerated according to his lights. His speculations are seldom silly …

Sherwin-White conveniently constructs for the reader a kind of Pliny the Younger’s *Natural History*—somewhat ironically, through the Elder’s characteristic method of excerption (*Ep*. 3.5.10)—and hints at his view of the Younger as often a more trustworthy recorder of natural phenomena than his uncle. Certainly, if the letters listed here by Sherwin-White are studied through the prism of his commentary, then an interesting narrative begins to emerge. For example, on the Younger’s description of a miraculous spring on the shores of his native Lake Como (*Ep*. 7.63), Sherwin-White (1966) 310 comments, ‘Its characteristics are described less accurately by the Elder Pliny, in *NH* 2.232 …’; although he goes on to note that the Younger’s explanation of the phenomenon (as opposed to his description of it) is heavily dependent on Pliny’s theory ‘that the world has its own breath, which causes natural phenomena: *NH* 2.102 ff.’

More germane to present purposes, however, are Sherwin-White’s further comments on the Lake Vadimon letter: ‘[Vadimon] is mentioned by the Elder Pliny, *NH* 2.209, and by Seneca, Q.*Nat.* 3.25.8, in discussions of floating islands … though neither had visited it. It is noteworthy that Pliny … is not acquainted with his uncle’s description of such islets.’ 3 That the Elder Pliny had not visited the floating islands of Lake Vadimon is not a necessary inference from their description in the *Natural History*; 4 no doubt this is Sherwin-White’s way of throwing emphasis on the fact that the Younger bases his own account of the lake on a personal visit: *ipse certe nuper, quod nec audieram ante nec uideram, audii pariter et uidi …* ‘I myself quite recently heard of and witnessed something I had never heard of nor seen before’ (*Ep*. 8.20.3). At any rate, Sherwin-White also draws the reader’s attention to the Younger’s apparent ignorance of the relevant passage of Book 2 of the *Natural History* on the many floating

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3 (1966) 472 (emphasis added).
4 *HN*. 2.209 *quaedam insulae semper fluctuantur, sicut in agro Caecubum et eodem Reatino, Mutinensi, Statonensi, in Vadimonis lacu …*, ‘certain islands are always afloat, as in the districts of Caecubum and Reate mentioned above and Modena and Statonium, and in lake Vadimo …’