Richard Yeo


This detailed and stimulating study, drawing on an impressive array of manuscript material, will be essential reading for anyone interested in note-taking, memory, or English science in the early modern period. It does warrant further questions, however, particularly in regard to its geographic and chronological scope. Addressing these would strengthen the central argument of the book.

Yeo describes the English effort to develop long-term empirical collections in the manner of Francis Bacon's natural history. This involved an 'interplay between individual memory and externalized record', as individuals needed to contribute empirical particulars toward a collective memory stretching far beyond any single person's experience or lifetime. Building such an external record depended on shared note-taking practices and their transformation. If practices were not shared, they could not serve as the basis for collective endeavours. At the same time, the individuals studied here continually sought to innovate in order to refine empirical practices. The case studies analysed in this book, thus perforce involved dialogues between both individuals and groups as well as between tradition and innovation.

Widespread note-taking conventions offered the shared assumptions and techniques upon which individual Englishmen developed their own variations. In beautiful detail, Yeo explores the techniques of Samuel Hartlib, John Beale, Robert Boyle, John Locke, Robert Hooke, and many related figures. What remains somewhat unexplored is the precise balance between the innovation of these English figures and the wider European traditions upon which they drew. Yeo concludes that the practices — and, importantly, the reflections upon these practices — of such figures helped to establish 'an early and crucial part of the modern scientific ethos' (260). What is at stake, therefore, is the role played by Francis Bacon and his English followers in developing norms for long-term, and collective, empiricism. Counter examples of other figures, in other times and places, who also developed and reflected upon techniques for long-term, collective note-taking spring to mind. A more thorough explanation for the particular scope of this work would help to support the argument made for the wider significance both of Bacon and of this particular cast of characters.

Pertinent questions of scope involve gender, discipline, geography and chronology. Yeo notes the period categories of 'Virtuosa' and 'Virtuoso Ladys' (7 and note 23). Although several women, such as Lady Katherine Ranelagh and Damaris Masham, appear, none are a central focus. In view of recent work on
heterosocial note-taking cultures in the recipe tradition and in the Hartlib circle, it would be helpful to hear more about this. Would Yeo agree with Ann Moss that commonplacing was almost always gendered male? Or with Heidi Brayman Hackel that it was not? Another question of scope relates to discipline. Yeo addresses the issues with the term ‘science’ in the title, pointing out that his main focus, natural history, would not have fallen under that rubric for many of his historical actors (5). He also draws attention to the relationship between empiricism in natural knowledge and in other disciplines. Did the individuals studied in depth here utilize the same, or different, techniques for their investigations in other arenas — such as philology, theology, or the study of antiquities? Were their techniques for natural history distinctive?

The most pressing question involves geographic and chronological scope. Yeo notes (xv) that ‘English virtuosi drew on the practices of traditional pedagogy that they often attacked; they also made what they considered to be innovations, albeit not realizing that some scholars before them had made similar moves’. Thus, Yeo defends, not the innovation of these techniques, but only the virtuosi’s sense that they were innovating. He argues that they were not aware of continental precedents because ‘their sense of what was standard in earlier note-taking relied on published tips and precepts . . . rather than on close acquaintance with the private notes of individuals’. Yet, he describes the extensive continental travels of several of his actors (231-2). It would have been strange if both they and continentally educated figures such as Samuel Hartlib, John Dury, Theodore Haak, and Henry Oldenburg were unfamiliar with scribal practices abroad. Continental diasporas in England brought diverse note-taking techniques to London and to the attention of founding Fellows of the Royal Society. In order to defend the agency of Baconian collective empiricism against claims, such as the one levelled by Deborah Harkness — that it was no different from any practiced by the émigré naturalists of Lime Street — a more rigorous comparison between the techniques of English virtuosi and of others would be useful.

In some cases, it would seem prima facie that the techniques of the English virtuosi were not particularly innovative. For instance, in describing the natural history questionnaires of the Royal Society, Yeo argues: ‘These calls for information show how the Heads of the commonplace tradition could become questions in natural history and experimental inquiry’ (225). This would appear to be a claim for an innovative shift from commonplaces to queries. However, Yeo himself points to the precedent of Samuel Hartlib’s ‘interrogatories’ (221, 224). For his part, Justin Stagl had traced in his History of Curiosity the still earlier use of query lists in the Spanish exploration of the Americas and in Central European methodical travel (ars apodemica). Yeo refers to Stagl (18) for the