Brian W. Ogilvie. *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. 385. Paper $27.00.

The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe by Brian Ogilvie examines the development of natural history as a science, and argues that it was invented in the Renaissance. Ogilvie, an Associate Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, focuses on the cultural origins of this field to determine what sparked the wide interest in natural history, arguing that what emerged during the Renaissance was a discipline altogether distinct from natural philosophy and medicine that it grew out of. Natural history was not something that was self-evident, but rather a discipline that was laboriously invented, through intense intellectual efforts. By paying special attention to the Republic of Letters, a community of scholars scattered across the continent of Europe, Ogilvie shows how the creation of the science of natural history was truly a collaborative effort.

Ogilvie draws on sources from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, including manuscripts and letters, garden plans, drawings and watercolors, as well as early printed books, consisting primarily of natural histories, botanicals and herbals. He uses first editions of these printed books when available, and reprints when (apparently) not. Focusing on the field of botany, Ogilvie examines four generations of scholars to show how the science developed over time and how each generation influenced its successor. He examines ancient and medieval beliefs about natural history, beginning with the debate over Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* at the end of the fifteenth century to the height of humanistic natural history in the 1520s, and analyzes humanist response to these beliefs. Turning then to the mid-sixteenth through early seventeenth centuries, he argues that scholarly interest had shifted from trying to understand ancient and medieval descriptions of natural history to what he calls the "science of describing," in which scholars focused on techniques of cataloguing the natural world. Ogilvie then explores how natural history in the seventeenth century grew from this "science of describing" based on personal experience and fieldwork, into a science more focused on accurate descriptions and classifications. By examining these scholars, Ogilvie shows that it was due to their "novel empiricism," their ardent desire to faithfully and accurately describe the world around them that later natural history, with its classifications and categories came about at all.

While Ogilvie's work claims to treat Renaissance Europe, he limits his focus to Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, mentioning countries such as France, Spain, and England only in passing. His explanation could have been more developed, and he might have pointed to the fact that these countries were not great printing centers in order to help explain the lack of source material from these areas. A major focus of this work is early printed books, which makes the fact that Ogilvie includes modern reprints of certain books among his primary sources somewhat troublesome, as vast amounts of historical data are missed when treating the book as a mere receptacle of data, rather than objects of historical interest in their own right. While *The*

Science of Describing was very well written, the structure could have been more fluid. While all of the chapters advance important arguments, the non-chronological sequence of chapters two and three, coupled with the fact that Ogilvie does not actually get to his main argument until chapter four is confusing, and at times leads to some repetitions.

Despite these minor detractions, this book is well researched, enjoyable to read, and makes a valuable contribution to the study of natural history. Ogilvie convincingly explains why natural history developed as a distinct discipline over time, and admirably demonstrates how the Republic of Letters helped to shape it into something more than just an amalgamation of the various classical disciplines. It holds a broad range of appeal not only to those interested in the history of science and early modern Europe, but also the history of ideas, and the history of the book.

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