

BOOK REVIEW

Leonie Hannan, *A Culture of Curiosity: Science in the Eighteenth-Century Home*

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Towards the end of Leonie Hannan's book, she references a publication by the Kentish postmistress and silkworm experimenter Ann Williams, who, Hannan claims, 'realised and described an eighteenth-century culture of curiosity that has traditionally fallen below the radar, a culture embedded in the everyday and the home' (p. 205). Historians have been divided over the status of curiosity in relation to the sciences. By the eighteenth century, the term certainly had plenty of negative connotations. In works such as the 1798 'dramatick Romance' *Blue-Beard; or Female Curiosity!*, curiosity often applied to efforts, specifically by women, to procure knowledge illicitly and for malign ends. Williams might thus herself have resisted this appellation as one that specifically antagonized her self-presentation as a participant in a nationwide project of industrialization and improvement. Indeed, not once does the term 'curiosity' appear in her book.

In some ways, Hannan's book is best read backwards. In the final chapter, the author sets out a promising methodological agenda largely implicit up to that point in the volume. Her methodology as here articulated has profound consequences for how the history of the sciences should be written. It builds upon her earlier work on gender and material culture in eighteenth-century England, and upon parallel trends within the history of the sciences that have attended closely to the household as a space for producing scientific knowledge. Collectively, Hannan's richly documented case studies pose important questions about the implications of encompassing domestic space and mundane labour within a history of knowledge making. Foremost among these is a political question: if we take seriously the overlap between the home's role as a place for ordinary domestic production and its role as a site for producing scientific knowledge claims, what other dichotomies must be abandoned in consequence? Hannan views the 'particular and the local in all their messy abundance' (p. 27) as the antidote to histories that treat intellectual endeavour as an object of study in its own right. Distinctions between scholar and artisan, theory and practice, mind and hand should not, she argues, be treated as fixed dichotomies. The book showcases Hannan's impressive range and versatility as a researcher, identifying thought-provoking case studies from many social levels, using personal correspondence and household records. Her case studies, often distributed over several chapters, have three main foci: astronomy, improvement (exemplified by silkworm rearing) and collecting.

Although individual chapters possess titles such as 'Observation' or 'Collecting', the author does not undertake a critical assessment of these themes in their own right,

but rather discusses how such forms of scientific practice were undertaken by individuals outside the usual remit of histories of the sciences. This agenda, probably inherited from social-historical concerns with ‘restoring lost voices’, at times overwhelms the theme of the ‘domestic’ which is the ostensible *raison d’être* of the book, as, for example, when the author discusses a journal of observations from the Isle of Man (pp. 79–82), the naturalist Gilbert White (pp. 122–3) or the anthropomorphization of silkworm behaviour (pp. 160–3, 188–9).

Female gender and non-elite social status operate as the criteria for selecting the case studies, and give the book broad relevance for all historians of the sciences working on the eighteenth century. Under-studied figures abound in its pages. Margaret Clive, sister of Nevil Maskelyne, the Astronomer Royal, provides a high point in an extended discussion of her use of globes as household ornaments, affective objects and scientific instruments, and of her four-decade correspondence with her niece over newly discovered celestial bodies, which they sometimes viewed in separate houses but on the same night – a discussion that nicely complements recent research on Caroline Herschel.

This notion of scientific endeavour as collective participation in something greater than the individual proves fruitful elsewhere in the volume too. Hannan recurrently revisits a body of correspondence with the Royal Society of Arts on silkworm rearing, noting gender differences in the extent to which the home setting was referenced in experimental reports. Insofar as there is an explicit discussion of what it meant to individuals to practise the sciences, it emerges more as an argument about the participatory character of industrialization, slightly marred by a rather thin knowledge of recent literature on the useful arts – some of which might have underscored that gathering information on and ‘improving’ technical practices could also be political moves that aided attempts to rein in artisanal autonomy.

At other points, the question of why an individual might choose to practise the sciences often remains tacit. It is here that a close reading discloses problems with the work’s explanatory framework. Many of Hannan’s conclusions are valuable, casting a new light upon participation in the sciences outside better-studied institutional settings. The author’s decision to approach participation via material culture allows the common ground between scientific practice and ordinary action to be teased out. Nonetheless, in some places, for example in suggesting that brewing and natural history are indistinguishable (p. 217), this argument seems to be extended beyond what even Hannan’s own protagonists themselves might have supported. Where Hannan advocates for the abolition of hierarchies between ‘the cerebral and the rest’ within histories of scientific practice (p. 214), her own evidence sometimes ploughs a different furrow. In a fascinating exchange between two apprentices in 1760s Dublin over their astronomical observations, Hannan’s quotes show these two young men figuratively titling themselves ‘Astronomer-Royal’, ‘Philalethes’ and other names deriving from elite learning and institutional scientific practice (pp. 127–9). When historians ask why past individuals practised the sciences, one answer has to be: because scientific knowledge conferred superior status, both social and intellectual. Hierarchies matter – and precisely because it was during the eighteenth century that certain enduring hierarchies between spaces of scientific practice, and categories of scientific practitioner, were generated or entrenched, the historian cannot afford to ignore them.