

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Borlik, Todd Andrew, ed. Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070188ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34104>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stanivukovic, G. (2020). Compte rendu de [Borlik, Todd Andrew, ed. Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 212–214.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34104>

Montaigne's work becomes above all in Balsamo's reading an expression of humaneness—by which he means the interiorization of classical virtues, adapted to the values and hierarchies of Montaigne's own social world and conducted in the spirit of skeptical-Christian humility. Hugo Friedrich's 1949 *Montaigne* has long and justifiably reigned as the best single-volume study of Montaigne. Balsamo's book now replaces it.

GEORGE HOFFMANN

University of Michigan

Borlik, Todd Andrew, ed.

Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 602. ISBN 978-1-316-51015-5 (hardcover) US\$110.

This comprehensive and scrupulously edited anthology of early modern writing about the natural environment covers writing from “The Creation of the World” taken from *Genesis* to the “Noah’s Flood” excerpt from Michael Drayton’s 1630 *Poly-Olbion*. It is a ground-breaking contribution to the burgeoning field of early modern ecocriticism—or, “early modern natural history” (6)—as Todd Borlik describes it ambitiously and accurately. The publication of this book is a significant achievement, both because of the sizeable body of primary texts assembled and because of the depth of the editorial principles, the comprehensive explanatory notes, and a fresh critical framing of the texts, offered in a detailed and engagingly written introduction full of original insights based on extensive scholarship. The main idea that governs the principle of selection, and that underpins the anthology, is that early modern writing on nature was both complex and diverse, and reveals a kind of ecological and environmental cultural subconscious of a society so “enamored” (5) intimately with its natural environment, and which transformed it regularly so that the environment significantly shaped the vocabulary and literary expression of the period. The book’s offerings are bountiful and full of lexical and stylistic innovations, which attune the modern reader’s awareness to the possibility that early modern nature writing was a project of cultural imagination, responding to the notion of nature being God’s creation swelling

with chaos and peril, elements that ecological literature attempts to “subdue” (7) with lively energy.

With spelling modernized throughout, according to the most rigorous principles of new bibliography, and bringing together both canonical and non-canonical writers and texts, including a few anonymous works, this anthology of whole texts is helpfully organized into six parts, each of which employs rubrics that map all the constitutive elements of the natural world as it is constructed at the crossroads of humanities, geography, cultural history, and environmental research—in a hierarchical categorization of animals, the inanimate natural world, humans and their constructions, culture, climate and weather, biosphere and topography, Anthropocene, pastime involving the natural world (like hunting, hawking, fishing), and the everyday as the natural.

Thus, the opening part “Cosmologies” collects some of the fictions of the creation and the state of the natural world. This leads to the next rubric—collecting texts on “natural theologies”—where theology and environmental poetry cross. The third part, “The Tangled Chain,” assembles work on the “Human Animal” and shows how broadly invested early modern writing was in capturing different kinds of the natural world. “Time and Place,” the third part, gathers together a selection of texts fictionalizing seasons and oceans, gardens and country houses, forests and parks, fields and farms, heathers and moors, the pastoral, mountains, and vales. In the fourth part, on “Interactions,” the human and the natural are brought together in texts, among other topics, about pet-keeping, hawking, cooking, and healing. Human impact on the environment is the subject of the fifth part, “Environmental Problems in Early Modern England,” in which population, deforestation, the draining of the fens, and pollution are the main literary topics that are represented in literature. The book ends with temporality and with a nod to futurity. In the sixth part, “Disaster and Resilience in the Little Ice Age,” it is the disturbance of the order of natural history that is the subject in texts about extreme weather, decay, and resilience. These are not merely convenient categories with which to capture the multifariousness of themes and “espousing viewpoints” (7) about the natural world; they “encapsulate the era’s complexities” (7), especially in interpreting nature.

In his densely researched and beautifully and clearly written introduction, Borlik makes the compelling argument that the Tudor era was not a time in which the human and the natural world existed in harmony but rather a period

of “de-wilding” (6). This was a moment in which pragmatic and exploitative engagement with nature was a response to nature’s powerful hostility mediated through Christian narratives. Without ever becoming enclaved with jargon, the Introduction uses the lexicon of modern environmental humanities and science in, for instance, looking for the signs of biodiversity or footprints in the writing of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Starting with the Bible and neoclassical writers like Ovid and Lucretius, the anthology also includes the writings of Philip Sidney, Walter Raleigh, Margaret Cavendish, William Baldwin, Edmund Spenser, and Kennelm Digby, as well as Richard Brathwaite, Thomas Moffett, Ben Jonson, Aemelia Lanyer, Ben Jonson, Andrew Marwell, Anne Bradstreet, and Gerrard Winstanley, the breadth of the collection’s coverage brings together the whole of the Renaissance culture of letters, and looks at the Renaissance anew: a period invested as much in the organic as in the aesthetic dimensions of the world.

This is a book that a reviewer can comfortably say has the potential to shape the curriculum and research. It helpfully assembles documents so that anyone planning to teach a course on the topic would have no need to look elsewhere. It will also be of use to anyone writing about the subject of nature in the pre-industrial world, as well as to curious general readers—or anyone ready to think about geography, topography, biology, material culture, and sports and pastime from the historical perspective of nature writing. Borlik has not only collected an indispensable repository of texts on literary and cultural environmental history; he has also provided a timely scholarly tool that will be indispensable to any new research on nature in early modern English writing.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary’s University, Halifax