

"Good Observers of Nature": American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820-1885. Tina Gianquitto. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007; illustrations; xii + 216 pages; ISBN 0820329193; \$19.95US (paper).

In her examination of books by Almira Phelps, Margaret Fuller, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Mary Treat, Tina Gianquitto charts the intersections of scientific developments from the Enlightenment through the advent of evolutionary biology and the changing representations of the natural world in women's texts from the 1820s to the 1880s. *"Good Observers of Nature"* considers some of the ways in which these authors used new scientific knowledge to challenge and renovate the traditional narrative modes by and through which women wrote about the natural world, including the sentimental "flower language" books. This volume offers a chronological look at contemporaneous scientific advances and women's writing. It benefits from the inclusion of illustrations, but suffers from a sparse discussion of women's narratives, and could have used even a cursory discussion of the flower language books from which its subjects depart.

Chapter One's discussion of Phelps and Enlightenment science makes clear how Phelps's botanical text, *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1829), combines Linnaean botany and Lockean empirical philosophy with moral lessons. However, if Phelps is the focus of this chapter, Gianquitto takes far too long to get to her. The opening discussions of botanist Jane Colden and fiction writer Catherine Maria Sedgwick are interesting and certainly set Phelps in her cultural milieu (even as they offer the book's only discussion of women's fiction), but they set out expectations that the chapter's discussion of Phelps's botany textbook does not fulfill. The second chapter, focusing on Margaret Fuller's travel narrative, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* and her use of Goethe's Theory of Colors, is better focused and developed. Gianquitto's discussion of Fuller's meditations on nature, gender, and the nation make clear how Fuller's progressive thought adumbrates today's ecofeminisms.

After Fuller, Gianquitto takes up Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850), and argues that Cooper draws on both Phelps's consideration of the natural world as a model for moral behavior and Fuller's belief that the natural world presented a means of understanding society and its transformations. A writer of fiction as well as known for her popular nature journal, Cooper drew from literary sources as well as Audubon and Lyell to ground in scientific discourse a discussion of the moral relationships that govern the natural world. Gianquitto's final subject, Mary Treat's *Home Studies in Nature* (1885), departs from Cooper's domestic concerns to fully embrace professional science. A participating member of a circle of controversial scientists that included Charles Darwin and Asa Gray, Treat was a self-supporting nature essayist with a particular interest in spiders. Like these other observers and writers of nature, she was an environmentalist. Overall, *Good Observers* is most interesting for tracing the changes that occurred while nineteenth-century American

understandings of nature, as ordered by the laws of natural theology and thus discussed in the language of Christian morality, became a conception of nature organized by the rubrics of evolution, and thus discussed in discourses of literary realism, scientific professionalism, and social and environmental change.

Roxanne Harde
University of Alberta - Augustana