

H-France Salon  
Volume 11, 15, #4

### **A Present for Natalie**

**Anthony T. Grafton**  
**Princeton University, Princeton**

Even Chicago, that gray city, blooms in May. The flowerbeds and trees in Bughouse Square, across the street from the great stone hulk of the Newberry Library, blazed with color on May 5 and 6, 1972. Inside the library, things were not so bright. An academic conference pondered the massacre of Saint Bartholomew four hundred years after the event. Learned scholars debated the politics that had led to the massacre, detail by detail. Graduate students from Chicago and Northwestern, Illinois and Michigan, did their best to concentrate.

Suddenly black and white turned to color. Natalie Davis came to the podium and began to speak. Where others had referred to documents as if we all knew them, she quoted, with thrilling emphasis, from Calvinist and Catholic sermons:

These are the statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the Lord God of thy fathers giveth thee . . . Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which he shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree:

And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. (Deuteronomy XII, 1–3)<sup>1</sup>

Where others read prosaic texts—very prosaic texts—line by line, she spoke. Where others concentrated on the maneuvers of courtly elites, she took us down into the streets and squares where killing took place. And where others described the massacre as a contingent catastrophe, perhaps the product of miscalculations, she examined the ways in which inflicting violence could seem to be a way of living one's religion. I don't know how the Good and the Great in the room felt. But the graduate students stopped breathing and forgot to blink. By recreating "The Rites of Violence," Natalie Davis had changed our lives: had given us a blazing new idea of what a historian could be and ought to be.

Natalie has been changing my life—and those of so many others—ever since. As a colleague at Princeton she taught my generation, and others after us, how to help students and junior colleagues, how to stand on principle in an official meeting without being pompous, how to make a case for teaching new subjects and new approaches. As a scholar and writer, she showed all of us that one—well, at least one Natalie—can master a seemingly endless series of new subjects, archives, languages and methods, speak and write compellingly about each in turn—

---

<sup>1</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riots in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51–91, cit. at 51.

and make it all look easy. In seminars and discussions beyond counting, her cry of “That’s so interesting” taught us that curiosity and patience are the greatest epistemic virtues a historian can have. A few years ago, Natalie came to New York to deliver a series of lectures at Columbia University. I sat with two Davis veterans, Moshe Sluhovsky and the late and much-loved Kristen Gager. We smiled happily as the students who filled the room, Natalie neophytes, stopped blinking and breathing. Then, of course, we did the same. The spell didn’t break until Natalie herself turned the last session into a lively precept with a hundred members. All those years ago, in 1972, my teacher Eric Cochrane—another true original, and a close friend of Natalie’s—had told us what to expect from her lecture. But no one could have foretold the reality of hearing, reading and learning from Natalie over a lifetime.

What to offer the historian who has done everything? Happy memories—and there will be a few more. But also a story—one that bears obliquely on her own work. Natalie dedicated one chapter of *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* to “Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors.” In it she argued that the erudite scholars who began to compile popular sayings in the early modern period “were all very poor in interpreting popular culture.”<sup>2</sup> They lacked both interest in and respect for popular culture. Hence they portrayed the very peasants whom they interviewed as stick figures, caricature yokels. Laurent Joubert, a prominent Montpellier physician, exemplified this ugly process of appropriation and dismissal: though he collected popular remedies, he treated them as evidence not of the people’s skill and experience but of their superstition and folly. Natalie’s story and analysis convinced me. When she retired, the Princeton Comedy Players staged a skit, in which the characters in her books confronted her. Glickl of Hameln (Laura Engelstein) complained that Natalie had criticized her Yiddish. Maria Sibilla Merian (Angela Creager) explained, holding a basket of huge plastic spiders, that she had always liked arachnids. Bertrande de Rois (Gyan Prakash) made clear that she had had no idea who was the real Martin, since they all had shit all over them. I, as Laurent Joubert, could only complain that a peasant village had rightly chased me away when I asked too many questions, emptying a chamber pot on my head.

Every story and every analysis is the product of its time, as Natalie taught us, better than anyone else—most recently in her essay on “Writing ‘The Rites of Violence’ and Afterward.”<sup>3</sup> New tellers take the stage, new sources emerge from archives, and gradually the story evolves. What I have to offer Natalie, and you, besides a lifetime of memories, is a sketch of one direction in which Natalie’s story of scholarly pride and prejudice lead us, guided by an informant from the early modern world of learning. On first acquaintance, John Caius (1510–73) looks very much like Laurent Joubert. Though he began academic life as an insignificant scholarship boy whose Cambridge College could not decide how to spell his name, he graduated at the top of his year, studied medicine in Padua, where he roomed with Vesalius, and became a rich, traditionalist doctor in London. President many times of the College of Physicians, he defended Galenic medicine against the empirical practitioners, the denizens of Deborah Harkness’s Lime Street, who offered cheaper (and probably better) cures. Caius consistently portrayed himself as a defender of traditional learning. In 1555, Oxford gave David Laweton, a brazier, a doctorate in

---

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 266 (italics in the original).

<sup>3</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Writing ‘The Rites of Violence’ and Afterward,” *Past & Present* 214, Suppl. 7 (2012): 8–29.

medicine. The College of Physicians called the man in for an examination, during which he was asked to decline the word corpus. He failed pitifully. As Caius informed the Oxonians, “he answered hic, haec and hoc corpus, and corporem in the accusative: what a splendid university-trained doctor, to be entrusted with human lives!”<sup>4</sup>

Caius rebuilt his old Cambridge College, Gonville Hall, and renamed it (after himself). There, too, he defended the old world of humanistic learning against all challenges—when young fellows disagreed with him, he put them in the stocks and beat them until they surrendered. He regularly and cheerfully revealed his disdain for working people. In his history of Cambridge, he reflected: “In this city there are two estates: scholars and mechanicals, that is, the sun and the shadows. The Chancellor rules over the scholars, the mayor over the mechanicals and their dependents. The realm of the scholars is called the university, that of the craftsmen the town.”<sup>5</sup> In his account of the 1381 Peasants’ War, Caius described with palpable horror the terrible day when a mob had burnt the university’s precious charters. “A mad old woman, Margaret Sterre, gathered the ashes and scattered them to the winds. She cried out ‘Away with the tricks of the clerics, away with them.’ Such is the madness of the crowd.”<sup>6</sup> Caius looks like one of the traditional scholars that Paracelsus had condemned in the early sixteenth century, and Francis Bacon would condemn again in the early seventeenth: those who sought knowledge, for preference, in old books, rather than from the old women who really knew the secrets of nature.

Yet there was another side to Caius. In the 1550s and 1560s, he corresponded at length with the greatest naturalist of the day, the Swiss Pliny, Conrad Gessner, who was then composing his massive, magnificently illustrated histories of animals, fish, birds and insects. An older generation of historians made fun of Gessner for his credulity, as evidenced by the pictures of imaginary monsters that appear from time to time in his work. In the 1980s, William Ashworth argued that there was method in Gessner’s credulity.<sup>7</sup> His view of nature was not empirical but emblematic: he embedded his findings about actual animals’ bodies and habits in vast Mannerist frames of textual citations, which imbued them with allegorical and philological meanings that mattered more to him than the details of natural history.

More recently, though, a new generation of historians of science have begun to concentrate on the practices of their subjects: the ways in which they actually built their works. Brian Ogilvie, Sachiko Kusukawa, Florike Egmond, and others have taught us that Gessner was an empiricist, on a massive, even flamboyant scale.<sup>8</sup> When he printed a poorly attested image of a monster, he

---

<sup>4</sup> John Caius, “The First Book of the Annals of the Royal College of Physicians, London,” in *The Works of John Caius, M.D.*, ed. E. S. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 28. Late in life Caius singled out as his own greatest accomplishment his collection of variant readings in Galen, which might someday form the basis of a new edition. See Caius, ‘De libris suis,’ in *Ibid.*, pp. 100–102.

<sup>5</sup> John Caius, “Historiæ Cantebriensis Academiae,” in *The Works of John Caius*, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> William Ashworth, “Natural History and the Emblematic World View,” in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, eds. David Lindberg and Robert Westman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 303–32.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Sachiko Kusukawa, *Picturing the Book of Nature: Image, Text, and Argument in Sixteenth-Century Human Anatomy and Medical Botany* (Chicago:

made clear that he knew what he was doing. He collected images of animals and plants from friends across Europe, corrected his first published images against new and better ones when he received them, and became himself a skilled artist, who drew hundreds of his own images of plants. Working in his top-floor study in Zurich, its windows engraved with images of fish, Gessner slowly changed his practices as an author. His later books abandoned philology and etymology, replacing the endless quotations with firsthand images of animals and descriptions of their behavior. In the paratexts that prefaced his volumes, as Ann Blair has shown, he celebrated not only the learned friends who helped him, but the unlearned experts on whose knowledge he had often relied.<sup>9</sup>

No one did more to push Gessner in this direction than Caius. He directed a flood of materials at Zurich: pictures and descriptions of animals, bones, and other specimens, and continual corrections of his and Gessner's errors. Few of these communications survive in their original form. But Caius kept the core, factual parts of many of his letters to Gessner and printed them after Gessner died in 1565. He did the same with a treatise on English dogs that he wrote for his Swiss friend, and accompanied with many illustrations. Gessner incorporated not only the pictures, but also parts of Caius's letters into his own books—sometimes forgetting to excise materials irrelevant to his readers. In his last years, Gessner still took notes on Caius's latest communications in the margins of one of his own books. Once all of these materials are pieced together, they make up an archive of Caius's observations.

Caius regularly told Gessner where he had worked, and with whom. Pamela Long and Pamela Smith have taught us that early modern cities had many "trading zones": sites like the printing house and the artist's atelier, where people of different social orders met, talked and exchanged information.<sup>10</sup> Caius frequented these lively places. Unlike his Swiss friend, he lived in a port where ships from Scandinavia, the Barbary Coast, and all points between regularly landed. Caius frequented the docks, where he could buy animals from merchants. There he also talked to sailors, who told him what long-tailed sheep from Arabia eat: "grass, meat, fish, bread, cheese and anything else."<sup>11</sup> He examined a fresh-caught saltwater fish rather like a perch while riding in a fishing boat, and discussed the identity of a large spotted whale with fishermen on land at

---

University of Chicago Press, 2011); Florike Egmond, *Eye for Detail: Images of Plants and Animals in Art and Science, 1500–1630* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Ann Blair, "The Dedication Strategies of Conrad Gessner," in *Professors, Physicians and Practices in the History of Medicine: Essays in Honor of Nancy Siraisi*, ed. Gideon Manning and Cynthia Klestinec (Cham: Springer, 2017), pp. 169–209, esp. 176–78 and appendix, and "Printing and Humanism in the Work of Conrad Gessner," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 70, no. 1 (2017): 1–43, esp. 12–16.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela O. Long, "Trading Zones in Early Modern Europe," *Isis*, 106, no. 4 (2015): 840–47. See also Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and, on trading zones, Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Conrad Gessner, *Icones animalium*, 2nd ed. (Zurich: Froschauer, 1560), pp. 112, 15.

King's Lynn. They must have provided him with the swordfish of which—as Egmond and Kusukawa have discovered—he sent an image to Gessner.<sup>12</sup>

In his letters Caius revealed that he was a habitu  of another trading zone, one even more exciting than the docks: the Royal Menagerie in the Tower of London. This very durable institution, created under King John in the early thirteenth century, would become the London Zoo in the 1830s.<sup>13</sup> Caius located his descriptions of several animals “In the Tower.” In one case in particular, he made clear how well he knew the staff, and how much detail they willingly confided in him. Describing the “Ounce,” probably a cheetah, Caius drew a sharp contrast with another fierce beast:

Lions can be tamed. I gather this from the fact that in the City of London and in the Tower of London lions allow their keepers to kiss them, permit them to touch them and play with them. I have seen this myself... [The Ounces] are so fierce that the keeper, when he first wanted to move one of them from place to place, was forced to strike them on the head with a cudgel, to make them half-dead, as they say, and then to put them in a wooden crate specially made for this, and perforated to allow them to breath, and then to move them. They became conscious again after an hour, like cats, which die only from the most serious wounds. The keeper followed the same routine when taking them out of the crate.<sup>14</sup>

The proudly erudite Caius recorded the practices of zookeepers.<sup>15</sup> Gessner found these distant conversations so gripping that he incorporated them into his books.

Caius drew more than information from the practitioners with whom he chatted. As Marcy Norton has taught us, early modern cities and towns swarmed with animals—animals that worked, animals that entertained, animals that hunted, animals that were eaten—as well as the humans who raised, trained, exhibited, and slaughtered them.<sup>16</sup> In his letters to Gessner, Caius made clear that he talked with all of them. A “market performer” who exhibited an elk, for example, gave Caius a picture of the animal that he used in advertising. It may have been this same performer whom Caius saw, in 1564, exhibiting a rabbit that danced, played the drum as rhythmically as a drummer with its front feet, and attacked dogs with its teeth and claws. But he

---

<sup>12</sup> Florike Egmond and Sachiko Kusukawa, “Circulation of Images and Graphic Practices in Renaissance Natural History: The Example of Conrad Gessner,” *Gesnerus: Swiss Journal of the History of Medicine and Sciences*, 73, no. 1 (2016): 29–72, at 37.

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: The History of Exotic Animals in England, 1100–1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Gessner, *Icones animalium*, p. 70. On the identity of the Uncia I, follow Holger Funk, “John Caius’s Contributions to Conrad Gessner’s *Historia animalium* and ‘*Historia plantarum*’: A Survey with Commentaries,” *Archives of Natural History*, 44, no. 2 (2017): 334–51. Other authorities take it as a snow leopard.

<sup>15</sup> Happily, Caius noted that the keepers had recently begun to use a less brutal method, involving ropes.

<sup>16</sup> Marcy Norton, “Going to the Birds: Animals as Things and Beings in Early Modernity,” in *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 52–83; Norton, “The Chicken or the Iegue: Human-Animal Relations and the Columbia Exchange,” *American Historical Review*, 120, no. 1 (2015), 28–60.

also talked to the real experts. Gessner published a report of the Scottish humanist Hector Boece about Scottish water dogs who “hunted fish by scent among the rocks.” Caius explained in a letter that “I worked very hard at learning about this from fishermen and hunters,” before dismissing the story as a myth. He took a special interest in English sheep dogs. Their shepherd needed only to whistle, using his fist to amplify the sound, and these skilled dogs would round up an entire flock. In his travels, Caius explained, he reined in his horse whenever he heard a shepherd’s whistle, so that he could see another “trial” (*experimentum*).

Caius described animal behavior with striking precision, in lively passages that leap from otherwise sedate pages. In a letter to Gessner on the Barbary ground squirrel, for example, he wrote:

Some of them were brought to us alive by a merchant from Getulia, which we now call Barbary. We kept them alive and fed them for the sheer pleasure of it, and they are certainly squirrels. For their behavior, and size, and way of life, and voice, and agility, and the way they use their tails, and their manner of sitting upright, and everything else matches.<sup>17</sup>

Even more vivid is the passage in which Caius described how he had turned a puffin into a household pet:

When there was nothing for it to eat, it would beg for food with a natural word that it repeated, in a humble tone: pupin, pupin. I kept one at my house for eight months. It enthusiastically bit anyone who gave it food or touched it, but in a gentle and innocent way. A very small amount of food was enough to satisfy it.<sup>18</sup>

Caius’s affection for the animals he kept was matched only by his ability to describe their conduct vividly in Latin. This was a special descriptive language, infused with the minute attention to detail developed by Caius’s informants, who lived with animals. It was the language of huntsmen and falconers, zookeepers and fishermen that Caius adapted in his letters: one sign, and one early cause, of a long-term transformation in the language of natural history.

Natalie was right, of course: learned humanists were not ethnographers, and they ripped popular proverbs from their local contexts. They were not historians either, and treated classical proverbs just as roughly when they gave them Christian meanings. But when they hoped to gain expert, powerful knowledge, they were more curious than their rhetoric would suggest, and their own ways of observing and recording what they saw were changed by their discussions with “the people.” Does this surprise our honoree? Certainly not, though I hope the new details interest her. At the end of her article, in an imagined conversation with Laurent Joubert, Natalie notes his strong interest in the teaching of a skillful midwife. This was the suggestion that set me thinking, and it exemplifies Natalie’s most powerful magic. Everything she has written still challenges us, still provokes us—and often suggests the answer long before we toil our way to it.

---

<sup>17</sup> Gessner, *Icones animalium*, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Caius, “De rariorum animalium historia,” in *The Works of John Caius*, ed. E. S. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 53.

Anthony T. Grafton  
Princeton University, Princeton

*H-France Salon*

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2019 by the H-France, all rights reserved.