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EVST 505.01: The Literature of Natural History

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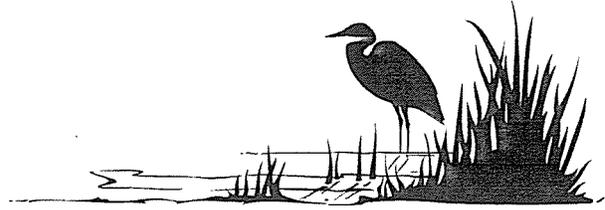
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EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Natural history has a history of its own. When this history is approached at all, it is usually in terms of the philosophy because for 2000 years natural history reflected its

etymology: *historia* meaning "inquiry"; *naturalis* meaning "to the nature of things." In the last 500 years, however, natural history has prospered in association with biology, which has emerged as a separate discipline rolling in the wake Renaissance empiricism. Following from America's peculiar status as part of a discovered "new world" in European cultural geography, natural history has achieved an eminence in America which it is not granted in other countries. One sign of this eminence is the extent to which natural history writing has penetrated the canon of American literature.



This course acknowledges the classical origins of natural history by beginning with Aristotle and Pliny the Elder. From there, it makes a large jump to modern, post-Renaissance Europe, picking up the thread with Gilbert White. After a 120 years in Europe, the course skips again, this time across the Atlantic to America, where we begin again with Thoreau and the tradition of natural history as nature writing that he established. Central to the reading for the course is the relationship of natural history to biogeography.

From its beginning, natural history has been written by amateurs. As you will quickly see from the reading, the "experts" depend upon gossipy reports from the field. Therefore, I reckon, anyone with a will or a brief to do so can write natural history. We'll have several opportunities to do this: first, in the form of class notes to supplement the reading; second, in the form of a field note for KUFM; and third, in the term project. The term project can go in one of two directions: following the field experience out with an essay of original natural history or following the reading out with an essay of original literary criticism of one of **the course texts or a text(s) of your own selection.**

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*EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

READING

- ▶ In the syllabus below, I have passed over an incredible amount of possible material. What remains represents the ways natural history has been written, with an emphasis on the how it is presently being written in America.
- ▶ I expect each person in the class to read *all* the material assigned. To keep the reading from being onerous, I've excerpted passages.
- ▶ To keep the course from degenerating into a lecture format, a different member of the class will introduce each author and some researched details about at least one of the subjects of that author's natural history. The format for the written version of this introduction is attached to this syllabus.

FIELD EXPERIENCE: WILD HORSE ISLAND

- ▶ To level the ground for students with different backgrounds in literature and science, I would like to have everyone begin with some common field experience.
- ▶ There are plenty of places within a short distance of Missoula where we might go for such an experience, but I thought it might be more rewarding in several respects to do research on Wild Horse Island in Flathead Lake, where I have a cabin. Wild Horse Island is a State Primitive Park with a resident herd of Rocky Mountain big horn sheep and many native animals and plants that can be easily observed.
- ▶ We'll spend the weekend of September 16 and 17 on Wild Horse Island. You'll need to bring a sleeping bag and food. I hope you can carpool. I'd like to get up there ahead of you, so I'll probably leave Missoula the night before. You should leave UM at 9 a.m. on Saturday and plan to return around 6 p.m. on Sunday.
- ▶ On the Island, I'll orient you geographically, politically,

Directions to Wild Horse Island dock:
Go west on I-90 for 10 miles to the Wye intersection with US 93.
Turn north on US 93 to Polson (ca. 60 miles).
Stay on US 93 north through Polson to Melita Island Road (ca. 10 miles; sign on right as you descend hill).
Turn right on Melita Island Road and about 1.2 miles (a couple hundred yards beyond a church camp on the left is a dock with around 20 slips. Park in the area fronting the dock).

*EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History*

and historically and then send you out. Your assignment will be simple: 1) settle on an individual animal or plant to observe; 2) note enough characteristics of that animal or plant to allow you later to identify the species later with certainty; 3) note a behavior or characteristic of that animal or plant; 4) note the environment as well as you can in which that behavior or characteristic occurs because the behavior will almost certainly involve some kind of interaction with it. The observation should be recorded in informal field notes.

- ▶ Upon returning to UM, you will research the observed behavior to find out whether other natural historians have also observed it or if you are the first and to account for or speculate what lies behind it. To make this research easier, I will try to schedule a meeting during normal class time with Barry Brown, the biology research librarian in the Mansfield Library.
- ▶ Once this research is complete, you will redraft your notes into script form for airing on KUFM's *Field Notes*. After the script has been approved by the Montana Natural History Center, which sponsors *Field Notes*, you will be told when to show up at the studio to record your reading.
- ▶ Due on *Tuesday, October 26* in class are the script-version of the field notes annotated with your research. I'd like you to present the citations to relevant scientific literature and the material that you didn't think fit the script in footnotes or endnotes.

TERM PROJECT: TWO POSSIBILITIES

1. A WORK OF ORIGINAL NATURAL HISTORY

- ▶ The "original natural history" mentioned in the Course Description can be first or third person non-fiction based on some previous experience in the field or intimate acquaintance with another place. It should emphasize natural history, but that doesn't mean it has to exclude other people.

2. A WORK OF LITERARY CRITICISM

- ▶ "Original literary criticism" can be close reading and analysis of a individual text, theoretical treatment of themes, images, plants, or animals stretching across several texts, or explication of historical connections between natural history writers. The literary criticism can be about writers studied in the course or other writers.
- ▶ Because I have assigned only two sections of Quammen's *A Song of the Dodo*, the most important text of the course, in my opinion, it would be great if one or two members of the class would take on the rest of the book and be prepared to

*EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History*

present it in note form *by the second week of October*, when we will be discussing the book. (This option could be important for those of you who need to depart from Missoula early in Finals' Week.)

- ▶ Except for the Quammen option, the term projects must be prepared in time to present to the class in the last two weeks of the course (three, including final exam week, if necessary). The presentations will be around fifteen minutes long and can include handouts and graphic materials that illustrate clarify your topic. These presentations should be well rehearsed for concision and interest.

SYLLABUS

Tuesday, September 5: Housekeeping

Thursday, September 7: Introduction--Arjuna's Penance and Harrington, "*Looking at the Desert Bighorn: The Gaze in Nature Writing*" (FACPAC 484-493)

Tuesday, September 12: Aristotle, Book IX of *Historia Animalium* and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, "Zoology" (FACPAC 1-58)

Thursday, September 14: Gilbert White, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (FACPAC 59-99)

Saturday and Sunday, September
16 and 17: Wild Horse Island Field
Trip.

Tuesday, September 19: Joseph Banks, *Journal of the Endeavor Voyage* (FACPAC 101-122)

Thursday, September 21: Meet with Barry Brown in Mansfield Library for an introduction to researching the data bases in the biological sciences.

Tuesday, September 26: Erasmus Darwin, *Botanic Garden*

Thursday, September 28: Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, (FACPAC 173-194)

Tuesday, October 3: Charles Darwin, *Origin of the Species* (FACPAC 195-260) and (for fun) Julian Barnes, "The Stowaway" from *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (FACPAC 149-153)

Thursday, October 5: Darwin, *Origin* (cont.)

Tuesday, October 10: Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo, So Huge a Bigness*

*EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History*

Thursday, October 12: Quammet, *The Song of the Dodo*, *The Man Who Knew Islands*

Tuesday, October 17: Stephen Jay Gould, *Eight Little Piggies* (FACPAC 569-594)

Thursday, October 19: Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," "Wild Apples,"
"Huckleberries" (FACPAC 275-336).

Tuesday, October 24: Field Notes readings. One by one, each person will read a Field Note while the rest of us act as intelligent listeners, recording our impressions, which we'll pass on to help the author with a final revision.

Thursday, October 26: Borroughs, *Deep Woods*, "The Snow Walkers" (FACPAC 337-354), Seton, *Wild Animals I Have Known* (FACPAC 355-378), and Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse" (FACPAC 606-626)

Due Thursday, October 26: Final
Draft: Annotated Field Notes from
Wild Horse Island

Tuesday, October 31: Muir, *Stickeen* (FACPAC 154-170)

Thursday, November 2: Ernest Neal, *Badgers* (FACPAC 479-483) and Ferris, *The Darkness is Light Enough* (FACPAC 497-568)

Tuesday, November 7: HOLIDAY

Thursday, November 9: Hubbell, *Broadsides from the Other Orders*, (FACPAC 455-476)

Tuesday, November 14: Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, Part 1

Thursday, November 16: Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, "Thinking Like a Mountain" and "The Land Ethic"

Tuesday, November 21: Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Thursday, November 23: HOLIDAY

Tuesday, November 28: Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (cont.)

Thursday, November 30: Williams, *Refuge*, pp. 1-140. Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America* (FACPAC 595-606),

Tuesday, December 5: Williams, *Refuge*, pp. 140-end.

Thursday, December 7: Presentation of Class Projects

*EVST 505/ENLT 523:
The Literature of Natural History*

Tuesday, December 12: Presentation of Class Projects
Thursday, December 14: Presentation of Class Projects

Tuesday, December 19: Presentation of Class Projects
Tuesday, December 21: Final Project due

Due Thursday, December 21: Final
Draft of Class Project
Warning: No "Incompletes"