


complexity drove him to the most significant ethno-linguistic investigation of Celtic languages hitherto undertaken. He completed intense journeys through Wales, Ireland, western Scotland, Cornwall, and Brittany over four years (1697–1701). He tracked the migrations of peoples across these regions and the linguistic and cultural exchanges that shaped their respective languages. Roberts’s reconstruction of these journeys is a masterclass in stitching together disparate archival fragments to substantiate and illustrate Lhwyd’s multifaceted interests with ground-level immediacy. For example, we witness Lhwyd comb Ireland, Scotland, and Cornwall for authentic speakers or bards, scramble to preserve Gaelic manuscripts, transit the Giant’s Causeway and identify its basalt columns with the like atop Cader Idris, compose the first “modern” description of New Grange, and everywhere indulge his curiosity for customs and manners. Sadly, Lhwyd lived only long enough to publish the first volume of the *Archaeologia*, the *Glossography* (1707). It contained Breton, Cornish, and Irish grammars, packed with innovative etymological analysis. It gave analytical order to the linguistic relationships and parallels Lhwyd’s investigations uncovered. Roberts neatly tracks the afterlives of the unfinished project but leaves us in no doubt that the dispersal of Lhwyd’s collections and papers robbed posterity of much.

Lhwyd resolutely committed his life to “careful observation, preferably in person or by a reliable witness; meticulous description; systemic organisation of evidence; separation where possible of description and explanation”; and rejection of supernatural, non-empirical causation (5). The uncommon industry of Lhwyd and so many partners in pursuing this ideal—beset by obstacles, dead-ends, angry disputations, and perplexing discoveries—offers a timely lesson in the long, difficult, and fragile history of establishing evidence-based realities. Roberts’s learned and readable account belongs everywhere from undergraduate history of science courses to methods seminars and the desks of specialists. In Roberts’s hands, Edward Lhwyd is simply too important and interesting a figure to ignore.

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DONNA SEGER. *The Practical Renaissance: Information Culture and the Quest for Knowledge in Early Modern England, 1500–1640*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 231. \$100 (cloth).

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The how-to literature of early modern England has long been an essential source for scholars of the period’s culture, though more often scavenged for evidence of practice rather than considered in its own right. Donna Seger offers a powerful corrective to this history, showing with ample and lively evidence the significance of “useful books” to the history of early modern England. Powered by humanist paradigms of usefulness and continental traditions of books of secrets, the “practical Renaissance” identified by Seger’s title played out in handbooks on agriculture, mathematics, mechanics, medicine, navigation, and myriad other dimensions of everyday life. Part of what Seger calls the period’s “information culture,” how-to books reflected early modern readers’ valuation of practical knowledge and appetite for improvement—whether of self, farm, household, or commonwealth. Embedded in the period’s social and economic transformations, these books also drove those developments, as—by the end of the century and a half under investigation—they posited useful knowledge as something itself merchandisable in a growing English empire and global economy. Among the monograph’s important contributions is Seger’s persuasive presentation of the period’s

diverse practical books as a coherent genre, which enables the author to identify trends that reach across the period and across distinct classes of expertise – most notably, perhaps, a shift beginning under Elizabeth from a practical focus on farm, household, and workshop, to the more expansive ambitions of kingdom and empire.

The number of such titles, many of them republished and revised over the course of decades, poses a challenge to historical chronology and bibliographic order. However, Seger organizes her material sensibly and accessibly, classifying early modern England's practical literature into three periods, each characterized by a distinctive approach to useful knowledge. The monograph's first two chapters cover the first, between 1500 and 1550, an era when many of these texts were translations from Latin or updates to already-circulating manuscripts; the third and fourth chapters address the second half of the sixteenth century, an Elizabethan Renaissance in the publication and circulation of useful knowledge; and the final two chapters cover the transformative first forty years of the seventeenth century, decades in which approaches to useful knowledge were increasingly geared towards the public good and towards national and colonial ends.

With a dual focus on medicine and farming, Seger's first chapter takes as its focus two influential titles of the early Tudor period, showing the importance of regime, routine, and daily practice to the period's advice: Thomas Elyot's *Castle of Health* and John Fitzherbert's husbandry. Even in an era in which gathering and "Englishing" were more important activities than authorial innovation, Seger identifies a distinction between received authority and the claims of firsthand experience, a split that will emerge as a theme throughout the following chapters. The second chapter addresses mathematics and measurement, fields of inquiry driven by growth in commerce and transfers of land in the first half of the sixteenth century. Mathematics were (in the title of Robert Recorde's influential handbook) the "*ground of arts*," and, though long a subject of abstract university study, newly taken up in the sixteenth century as a foundational piece of craft knowledge, profitably brought to bear on everyday work.

Turning to the "Elizabethan Renaissance" in practical knowledge, chapters 3 and 4 identify the later sixteenth century as a time of transition for practical knowledge, reflecting a greater interest in invention, in the artificial alteration of nature, and in the correction of inherited wisdom. This period also witnesses the increasing significance of a national frame for gauging the utility of knowledge and practice. Chapter 3 covers an especially wide range of fields of knowledge, including New World *materia medica*, the role of women as readers and practitioners, and the significance of the economic and political crises of the 1590s in shaping the market for practical knowledge. Here, Seger situates Elizabethan practical writing in the context of historical transformations in medical practice, including those fueled by the importation of new plants to England and by developments in alchemical medicine. Chapter 4 turns specifically to maritime contexts, a setting that, Seger suggests, reshaped practical mathematics. Some of the same trends discussed in chapter 3 fueled the "mathematization of navigation" (97) undertaken during Elizabeth's reign, especially in the contexts of mathematical education and navigational instruments, as both developed in concert with a growing British empire.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to developments in the Stuart period, showing how titles during the first decades of the seventeenth century turn even further from classical authority as they advance public debates advertising contributions to the public good. Here, Seger returns to several topics familiar from earlier periods, including public health and medical practice, agriculture and the cultivation of land, and the arts of measurement. Placing the era's repeated outbreaks of plague in the context of professional disputes among physicians, barber-surgeons, and apothecaries, chapter 5 examines vocal concern for the public good alongside the growing commercialization of useful knowledge in the form of printed texts and in remedies offered by healers and apothecaries. Chapter 6, "The Knowledge-Mongers," serves also as a forward-looking conclusion. Taking its title from a phrase used by Gabriel Plattes, the seventeenth-century proponent of improvement, Seger shows how a

commitment to the public good assertively took center stage during these decades. Seger concludes with a discussion of advice for merchants, multidisciplinary thinkers, and mechanics whose “assertive empiricism” (163) qualify them as the culminating “Renaissance men” of Seger’s analysis.

Across the longer period addressed in the book’s chapters, Seger identifies several overall trends: most significantly, the growing force of national identity and empire alongside an increasing respect for first-hand knowledge over prior written authority. Seger’s accessible and readable introduction will surely inspire further work: book historians might look more closely at patterns of reprinting and circulation, including the role of particular printers (rather than named authors, for example) in shaping the contours of print popularity; literary or textual scholars might look further into the long life of the regimen form, which persisted even as other paradigms of health-care took hold. By bringing together this range of sources, and decisively defining “useful books” as a distinctive genre in print, Seger offers a helpful contribution to an expanded view of early modern literary and scientific cultures. Part of what makes how-to books so fascinating is their location at the perpetually contested boundary between theory and practice, where they bridge the ideal form of prescription with the messy unfolding of everyday life. A persuasive case for the importance of “useful books” and the knowledge they imparted to the culture and history of the English Renaissance, Seger provides evidence not only for early modern practices but for the fantasy and ambition that made the world (and oneself) seem eligible for improvement in the first place.

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WILLIAM R. SMITH. *Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World, 1688–1755: Networking in the Dissenting Atlantic*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. 284. \$119.00 (cloth).
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Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World, 1688–1755: Networking in the Dissenting Atlantic is an interesting book. Much of its interest lies in its distinctiveness, both in terms of its subject matter and its approach. The danger that accompanies this distinctiveness is the possibility for unmet readerly expectations. The reader seeking a biography of Benjamin Colman may be disappointed with the text. So too the reader anticipating a documentary history of Colman’s letters. For the book, in the end, is neither a story of Colman’s life nor his letters, but rather is, as the title claims, the story of Colman’s epistolary world. Another way of saying this is that the goal of the book is to construct this world on the basis of Colman’s letters.

In Smith’s book, Colman can be described as a docent, leading the reader by the hand. Like any good docent, he at times takes center stage, but his goal is always to draw attention away from himself to the artifacts he has been commissioned to describe. Each chapter presents overlapping narratives of particular aspects of dissenting experience, and Colman sometimes seems to play only bit parts as he enters and exits the stage. Without a more focused narrative engagement with his life and letters, uninitiated readers may struggle to appreciate just how influential Colman was within these narrative frameworks, though he rightly deserves to be recognized alongside more well-known figures such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. What is more, the book lacks the apparatus to guide the curious reader towards further study of Colman’s life and letters. Smith has consulted a number of archives, whose abbreviations are quietly noted shorthand at the outset, but these sources are not detailed in the chapter bibliographies.

Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World might arguably be more accurately described as the story of his epistolary worlds, for while Colman himself of course inhabited but a single world, the book